



# Passnotes

## Best Practice in PR and Marketing



THE HENLEY GROUP INTERNATIONAL

### **Talking Loud and Clear:** Why corporate communications remains essential in today's connected world

For many years, successful organisations have recognised the need for coherent and coordinated communications with audiences such as customers, prospects, investors, employees or regulatory bodies.

They have therefore undertaken corporate communications activity to build awareness of their products and services, enhance their reputation in the marketplace and reinforce credibility. It has helped them manage contentious issues, influence debates and handle crises when they emerge.

**Yet while corporate communications remains a staple in the PR toolkit, today's connected world poses new and considerable challenges. In our 24/7 "always on" environment, many organisations find it increasingly difficult to communicate with key audiences, guard their reputations and protect their brands. This edition of Passnotes considers why this is the case, and shows how a fresh approach to corporate communications is needed.**

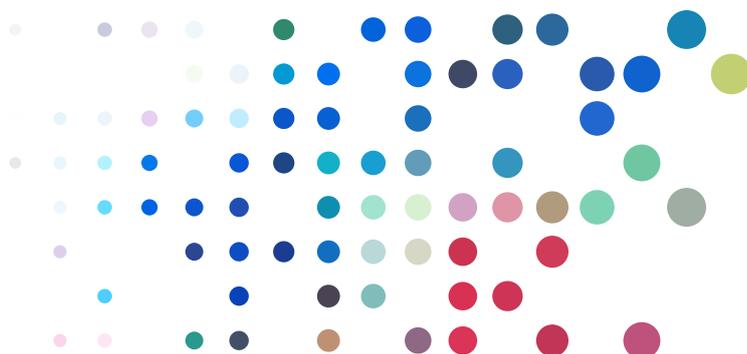
## WHAT IS CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS?

Historically, organisations have undertaken corporate communications to better target internal and external audiences. They have employed a range of strategic communications activities to establish industry leadership, build brand equity and influence the debates that are key to the success of their businesses. Corporate communications has helped defend their reputations in the event of product recalls, labour disputes or cyberattacks, and it has developed the profiles of their senior executives.

On a day to day basis, corporate communications activity involves monitoring for opportunities to demonstrate leadership and influence target audiences. These activities might include interviews with key journalists, letters to newspaper editors, the submission of entries for award schemes or securing speaking platforms for executives.

Corporate communications might involve promoting an organisation's corporate social responsibility initiative, diversity programme or environmental commitments. It includes monitoring for opportunities to gain influence and share news, as well as events and initiatives that have the potential to damage an organisation's brand.

There is a common misconception that corporate communications is the preserve of only the largest organisations. Perhaps it's the 'Corporate' label that is misleading, but experience shows that smaller businesses that undertake corporate communications often reap far greater benefits than their larger counterparts. In fact, the boost to brand awareness that corporate communications provides to smaller businesses often has an exponential effect, resulting in a considerable impact on sales.



# Common Corporate Communications Activity



**Award Schemes**



**Blog Posts**



**Crisis Handling**



**Editor Interviews**



**Executive Profiles**



**Issue Management**



**Letters to Editors**



**Media Outreach**



**Newsletters**



**Opinion Pieces**



**Panel Contributions**



**Press Briefings**



**Research Initiatives**



**Roadshows  
and Events**



**Roundtables  
and Debates**



**Speaking Platforms**



**Sponsorship Initiatives**



**Strategic Social  
Media**



**Video Interviews  
and Presentations**



**White Papers**

# A NEW COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE

**While organisations clearly benefit from strategic communications many find it increasingly difficult to communicate effectively with key audiences. As a result it's becoming harder for them to guard their reputations and protect their brands. Why is this?**

## 1. Shouting to be heard

The number of communications channels now available, and the huge volumes of traffic that travel across these networks, make it difficult for organisations to get their messages heard clearly by the right audiences. Whether in the mainstream print, broadcast and online media, or on forums, groups or social media, it's getting harder for businesses to make their voices heard above the noise created by millions of simultaneous and often conflicting conversations.

What's more, the democratisation of online space makes it difficult for organisations to maintain ownership of issues that were, at one time, perhaps theirs alone. In a connected world where all voices are 'equal', comment and opinion is so widely shared across social media networks that making an organisation's voice heard is difficult. In such an environment, it's now much harder for them to establish their expertise, demonstrate their experience and differentiate themselves from the competition.

## 2. The customer has changed

Aided by online research and peer reviews, customers now have an excess of choice and don't demonstrate the same loyalty to brands they once had. And, while we might more readily think of consumer behaviour in these terms, it is also increasingly true of purchasers in business to business environments. Even some of the most technologically advanced products are now being reduced to commodity status, while rapid product development means that a wealth of 'me-too' products closely follow the launch of any real product innovation. As a result, buyers now look for service, support and other 'softer' values when making purchasing decisions. Many businesses find these types of benefits harder to demonstrate.

Furthermore, today's customer is immensely powerful. A single tweet from an unhappy customer can go viral and be seen by millions. Online reviews carry real weight and influence. The critical comments of a product's user on a closed industry forum or LinkedIn group resonate with their peers. Social media and online platforms don't just allow dissent and misinformation to spread more easily: they ensure that now even the smallest complaint can be heard. In the same way, news of a corporate crisis – a labour dispute, regulatory issue or product recall, for example - now reaches a much wider audience, sometimes at lightning speed.

## 3. Greater pressure from outside, and within

Financial markets now react to business news almost instantaneously and demand more frequent and more detailed financial information from publically traded organisations. Businesses have found investor communities more difficult to influence as a new breed of activist investor has emerged, while institutional investors have grown more demanding for information.

Separately, the number and ambitions of campaign and pressure groups have grown considerably. Whether these groups press for change around issues such as the environment, workplace equality, fair pay or data privacy, many organisations now find themselves under pressure. And, even if businesses are not directly targeted by this type of campaigning, nearly all must now demonstrate their adherence to standards, compliance to regulations and commitment to the same issues as their customers, if only to meet the requirements of purchasing departments.

# WHERE NEXT FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS?

**Despite these seismic changes, the need for clear and coordinated communications remains. Indeed, if anything it is more important than ever – in fact, well-coordinated Corporate Communications activity is essential if an organisation is to control its messages to the market.**

Clearly, however, those that undertake corporate communications need to recognise that the climate they operate in has changed. To be successful they need to remind themselves of the basics, adopt new stances and embrace new tools. These may be summed up as follows.

## 1. Keep it together

Messages may struggle to gain traction in the complex and fast-moving communications environment outlined above, but this is no reason to only undertake corporate communications activity in emergencies or, worse, dispense with it altogether.

Indeed, it is precisely because the tectonic plates have shifted so dramatically that a strategic communications plan remains so important. PR professionals used to talk of the need to ‘get ahead of the conversation’, and urged businesses to ‘set the tone of the debate’. In some respects this is more difficult than ever and, as a result, a great deal of corporate communications activity is now focused on reacting to opportunities as they emerge and handling issues as they arise.

While this of course makes proactive work difficult, the need to respond swiftly and decisively to any opportunities that emerge only serves to make corporate communications more important. Yet this places significant demands on organisations: activity must be coordinated from the centre, be connected to every level of the organisation, and communicators must be given clear strategic direction and the freedom within which to act.

## 2. Refresh the toolkit

Of course, the very same social media and communications tools that have empowered consumers and created so much noise also give organisations the ability to easily share information and drive home nuanced messages to target audiences. For example, many organisations rely on a regularly-updated and widely shared blog as a means of presenting themselves and their messages in an unmediated and highly immediate manner.

A blog provides a platform to share opinion and initiate debate, and allows a business to put its case on its own terms. And while maintaining a Twitter feed takes sustained effort and a constant supply of fresh content, the channel provides customers with a direct means of engaging with a business. A well-populated corporate LinkedIn page, meanwhile, allows them to share success stories, target new customers and attract talent into their organisation. YouTube allows businesses to share case studies and customer testimonials, while new tools such as infographics and data visualisations present information in a visual way that is both easy to consume and share.

## 3. Project a personality

Finally, effective corporate communications today requires a new outlook and tone of voice. Research suggests that many audiences now expect a higher level of immediacy and engagement than before.

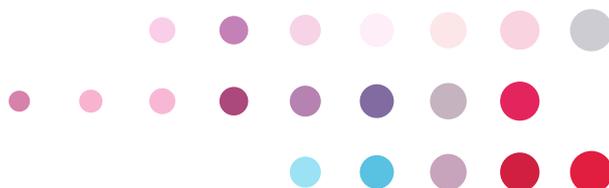
Customers look for authenticity in their relationships with brands, while financial analysts want greater transparency from businesses. Internal audiences value openness and engagement, while the media prizes candour and responsiveness.

This all points to the need for organisations to develop and project an amenable and open personality; moving from a faceless organisation to one that is approachable and easy to engage with.

This is by no means to suggest that businesses 'dumb down' their propositions or avoid tough conversations around the issues that affect them. It simply means engaging with audiences on the same terms, adopting a clear and consistent voice and encouraging conversations with customers.

For businesses used to a more traditional 'command and control' approach to communications, the level of openness this requires may not come naturally.

External audiences aside, organisations also face communications challenges much closer to home. Employee expectations have altered as notions around job security have been transformed by globalisation and automation. A new, digitally skilled, millennial workforce has different expectations from a working life. As a result, many organisations find it difficult to reinforce messages with internal audiences, motivate their workforces, and drive innovation.



## CONCLUSION

Organisations that need to communicate with key audiences undoubtedly face new challenges, and many of the tools and techniques employed in the past now longer work as they once did. Businesses have less control over how their communications are now received, but disengaging from strategic communications is not the answer. Instead of viewing the current communications climate as a hindrance, organisations need to recognise the opportunities it provides to engage in more meaningful and profitable conversations with key audiences, especially customers.

**Great things await those that do so.**

Copies of other Passnotes, the Henley Group's guides to best practice in PR and marketing, can be downloaded at [www.henley.co.uk](http://www.henley.co.uk)



**The Henley Group** is a specialist PR agency with over thirty years' experience helping mainly B2B organisations realise their PR and marketing goals. Client experience includes work for some of the best known technology and industrial brands, as well as high-tech start-ups, not-for-profits and businesses seeking to secure a foothold in the UK.

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