Best Practices for Organizational Design of Communications Teams

RESULTS MAP®

Best Practices for Organizational Design of Communications Teams

This paper seeks to identify the most significant current best practices for communications functions with a view to providing insights into organizational design. It presents a thematic summary of a scan of current and emerging best practices, with a focus on literature from the public and para-public sectors.

The research points to the following five key themes guiding communications practices to meet the current and expected needs of organizations and the audiences they serve:

DIGITAL BY DEFAULT

The most striking shift in communications strategy and the organizational approach to designing the function is the concept of “digital by default”. This emerging best practice is in sharp contrast to traditional approaches to communications and marketing in which the web was often an after-thought, for example, a news release would be posted to the web, or a brochure would be posted on the site in a PDF format as “brochureware”.

The “digital by default” model puts digital at the centre of a communications strategy and tactical mix. This is consistent with the general principle that communicators have to go where their audiences are, and is a recognition of the inter-mediation of communications channels. For example, today, the line between media relations and social media are blurred as media relations practitioners engage with reporters through Twitter more commonly than by the telephone. The standard is to create a compelling, coherent communications experience across channels, in which digital platforms play a foundational role.

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.

In reaching millennials, digital and mobile platforms designed around video content have become the established standard which is triggering a fundamental re-thinking of the way in which communications teams consider their content and invest their resources. [1][2][3]

The move toward "digital by default" as a best practice among public and para-public organizations was led by the U.K. Government's Communications Service[4] which has been used as a model by the Government of Canada as well as leading Canadian institutes and research organizations.[5]

The UK Digital Service Standard[6] has identified key criteria to support strong digital services which include a focus on ongoing research, testing and evaluation and a focus on multidisciplinary and agile teams.

Implications for Organizational Design of Communications Functions	• Communications teams are now being organized around content creation • Websites and social media accounts are treated as valuable communications assets under the leadership and governance of communications • Digital storytelling is a core competency for communicators across the function, rather than being a specialization for a select group • There is a requirement to streamline decision-making and approvals to enable effective digital production and responsiveness • Core competency is digital media buys and analytics • Communications functions are creating internal production houses or centres of excellence to facilitate the cost-effective production of digital assets such as videos and infographics internally • There is an increased focus on real-time measurement to refine strategy, messaging and campaigns

[1] "Recent statistics show that 16 – 24 year olds now spend an average of 2 hours and 26 minutes on social media each day", OfCom https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/cmr/cmr16

[2] "46% of marketers plan to add Facebook video to their content strategy in the next 12 months", State of Inbound http://www.stateofinbound.com/?__hstc=20629287.adfbde9f812796f4cfb5b9500cf19037.1522873290320.1522873290320.1522873290320.1&__hssc=20629287.1.1522873290320&__hsfp=2272831148

[3] "Content preferences show that millennial respondents show the strongest preference for video and social content", Hubspot https://research.hubspot.com/charts/content-preferences-by-age

[4] https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/

[5] This observation is based on Ingenium Communications' experience working with national clients in the public and para-public sectors.

[6] UK Digital Service Standard https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/service-standard

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.

STORYTELLING & CONTENT STRATEGY

Connected to the evolution toward "digital by default" is the dramatic rise of storytelling and the use of content strategy in communications. This is in response to the challenges faced by communicators working in today's "attention economy" – a saturated media landscape in which the biggest challenge is to capture the audience's attention and mindshare.

The move to storytelling and content strategy requires a fundamental shift in mindset and skill set for communicators. The focus is on going beyond information dissemination and working on sense-making – that is, creatively clustering information into compelling themes and stories that resonate with audiences.[7][8]

A content strategy approach is a fundamental shift from traditional models of communications which were based on a tactic-first approach. Instead of a model designed around tactics or channels (for example, a media relations team, a speechwriting group, an events unit), the current best practice orientation is to be "tactic agnostic". That is, teams prioritize and organize around stories first, which are then brought to life through various channels.

This evolution has put pressure on communicators and organizations as it requires a much more disciplined approach to messaging – recognizing that to communicate everything is to communicate nothing, communications leaders are required to make difficult decisions in terms or prioritizing and pacing messaging.

Implications for Organizational Design of Communications Functions	• There is additional pressure to plan communications proactively, with a disciplined focus on priority themes and content • Storytelling and the ability to work across channels becomes a core competency • Communicators are required to develop deeper subject matter knowledge and expertise, as opposed to cultivating niche tactical knowledge • There is a heightened requirement for visual communications and digital literacy in creating effective stories and content strategies • There is greater integration between content and channel, requiring collaboration between content developers and digital experts managing websites and social channels • Internal and external communicators need to better collaborate and share content

[7] The Global Standard of the Communications Profession, International Association of Business Communicators https://www.iabc.com/global-standard-2/
[8] Shawn Callahan, Putting Stories to Work

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.

AGILE TEAMS

The organizational structures of communications teams have transformed dramatically in recent years in response to the accelerating digitization and democratization of information[9]. In an environment of digital communications and unprecedented integration of channels, traditional siloed structures have been replaced with what's often referred to as a "trading floor" model[10], in which communicators are deployed based on talent mobility.

The approach is highly responsive and flexible, which is increasingly necessary as the communications discipline rapidly evolves based on the changing and rising expectations of audiences. This is what Deloitte University Press describes as "a network of teams"[11] with a high degree of empowerment, strong communication, and rapid information flow. A commitment to working as an agile team requires transparency, willingness to share information, and a regular cadence of meeting opportunities[12]. An agile team emphasizes verbal communication and interaction rather than documentation, helping members of the team understand each other better. The value of an organization's agile communications function comes from its ability to anticipate needs proactively, engage rather than merely inform, and help shape strategic priorities based on contributing a unique understanding of audiences and stakeholders.

Implications for Organizational Design of Communications Functions	• Communications teams are increasingly organized around "squads" or a matrix model in which practitioners can be assigned to various roles or files quickly and contribute expertise where and when it's needed • Given the high mobility of communicators, there is a need for level-setting skills and core competencies in order to enable the flow of talent to various settings or projects • Communicators regularly take on "micro-missions" and operate along the principles of the "gig economy", being assigned to various project teams that are readily assembled and disassembled • There is an emphasis on project execution and working in short sprints of activity. Practitioners are less tolerant of the traditionally heavy "churn" of the communications business such as approvals and bureaucratic hierarchies

[9] The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations, McKinsey https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations?cid=other-eml-alt-mip-mck-oth-1804&hlkid=c39c69ead1e84302862dffc07b97223a&hctky=9430778&hdpid=9a62de33-9c77-4300-bbb9-bdcb3109ef73

[10] Navigating the World's Social Geology, Medium https://medium.com/the-new-cco/navigating-the-worlds-geology-b102d1454338

[11] Organizational Design, The Rise of Teams, Deloitte Insights https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/focus/human-capital-trends/2016/organizational-models-network-of-teams.html

[12] The Real Key to Agile Success: Communication, Agile Connection https://www.agileconnection.com/article/real-key-agile-success-communication

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS FUELS EXTERNAL

In today's information saturated era, it's becoming increasingly important to craft specialized strategies, approaches and messages for employee communications. These needs are unique, and cannot be effectively addressed exclusively through external communication channels like social media. Internal and external communications must be integrated so that employees are equipped and enabled to be effective ambassadors of organizational messages. As Katie Macauley states: "Exceptional organizational performance is rooted in exceptional internal communications."[13]

By building support internally, employees are more likely to invest discretionary effort into the organization's success and are enrolled in achieving the organization's strategic plan.[14] Through building shared meaning and a sense of community, organizations benefit from solidarity of intent, thereby maximizing business results and mitigating the operational risks associated with internal mis-alignment and disconnects.[15] The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that employee's level of trust has plummeted dramatically[16], and this downward shift points to an enhanced need for organizations to reinvigorate and reinvest in employee communication[17].

Implications for Organizational Design of Communications Functions	• Internal communication can no longer be the poor cousin of external communication. It is a vital enabler of business performance which requires appropriate investments of budget and staff resources. • Care must be taken to integrate internal and external messages and tactics. • There are opportunities for organizations to use content strategy as a means of creatively connecting internal and external communications for maximum impact. • While historically internal communications was often housed as part of Human Resources functions, it is now recognized as a specialized skill set which should be under the functional purview of the communications function.

[13] Katie Macauley, From Cascade to Conversation

[14] What Does it Take to Get Employees To Keep Coming Back To Your Communication App? Shel Holtz http://holtz.com/blog/employee-engagement/what-does-it-take-to-get-employees-to-keep-coming-back-to-your-communicatio/4726

[15] Employee / Organizational Communications, Institute for PR https://instituteforpr.org/employee-organizational-communications/

[16] 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer https://www.edelman.com/trust2017/

[17] Richard Edelman Urges CEOs to Win Back Trust by Focusing on Employees, PR Week https://www.prweek.com/article/1421092/richard-edelman-urges-ceos-win-back-trust-focusing-employees

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.

RESULTS-BASED

Management practice generally, and communication specifically, is shifting toward an increased focus on measurement and results. As expectations in terms of accountability and transparency reach new heights, there is an imperative for all functional groups to demonstrate return on investment and outcomes.

The move toward a results-based mindset to communications has been challenging, as the function has historically been culturally and structurally positioned to be highly reactive. It's now clear that the function has outgrown that default position, and the ability to measure and make evidence-based decisions has become *de rigueur.* What's more, communications professionals are required to measure their work in real-time in order to make course corrections on messages and tactics, for example in the widespread use of "A-B testing" for the creation of digital assets such as websites.

The International Association of Business Communicators' (IABC) new Global Standard for the Communication Profession identifies as a core principle that all communication professionals "research and evaluate how to serve and promote the organization most effectively and then offer recommendations supported by direct and secondary evidence. [and that] they develop and implement communication plans and gauge their results using clear, qualitative and quantitative measures that can be duplicated. "[18] IABC's 2016-17 Internal Communication Survey Report indicates that measurement is a growing priority, especially measuring communications efforts[19]. It was reported that measurement yielded better communication decisions, with the vast majority (83%) of survey respondents seeing measurement as a way to make better decisions, and 79% believing data will help them improve their communications efforts[20].

[18] The Global Standard of the Communication Profession, IABC https://www.iabc.com/global-standard-2/

[19] "More than half of communicators (60%) measure at least some of their work", 2016-17 IABC Internal Communications Survey Results

[20] "76% believed measurement helps them engage employees more effectively", 2016-17 IABC Internal Communications Survey Results

©2023 Results Map® – All rights reserved. Results Map® is a trademark of Results Map Inc. registered in Canada.