



Resilience and Transformation in a Time of Change

Research Findings on the Transformed Role of Communications

September 2020

Is 2020 the year that cemented the essential value of Corporate Communications?

The COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent global societal unrest have caused a massive shift in how organizations operate and serve their stakeholders. Businesses are left to determine - without hesitation - how to survive and flourish amid the realities of our collective new normal. For communications professionals, this is both an enormous challenge and opportunity.

Communicators have adapted to an environment that requires more frequent and transparent information-sharing and embraced the role of helping their organizations create clarity, alignment and security for all stakeholders.

At the same time, communicators must also embrace transformation by rapidly deploying digital technologies at scale to measure impact, recalibrate messaging and anticipate or mitigate potential risks. And finally, communicators must reinforce and amplify their organization's corporate stewardship and continuously "do the right thing" while being responsive to, and engaging with, the diverse views of stakeholders.

The world is filled with risk and rewards. The communications profession increasingly finds itself at the center as corporate leaders tackle the realities of running a business in an era of historic transformation.

In this research we sought to understand:

- The role Communications is playing amid the day-to-day uncertainty of the pandemic and its impact on their organization's operations, employees and how it serves customers and other stakeholders
- How Communications has evolved in helping organizations define, reinforce and recalibrate their corporate narratives
- The role that existing and new data, tools and technology have played and how will it continue to transform the function going forward
- How the issues environment and experiences have shaped how communicators will manage their responsibilities in the future in light of the short-term challenges and long-term opportunities

Methodology

TRUE Global Intelligence, the in-house research practice of FleishmanHillard, conducted 30-minute telephone interviews with 11 Page Up members across a variety of industries. These conversations took place in the summer of 2020.

All respondents and results are reported in aggregate and on an anonymous basis.



What we learned

Since March, companies have had to transform their business while communicating impactfully with internal and external stakeholders.

This has required adaptation, embracing a new normal, an unprecedented transformation in communications and re-evaluation and recalibration of the foundational strength of a company's corporate character.

As many turn their attention to planning for 2021, these are the forces that Page Up members anticipate will shape and change their functions in the months to come.

Adaptation

Communicators have had to adapt to a remote working environment overnight, knowing that tomorrow will never be the same as yesterday.

They needed to be as knowledgeable as possible on all current issues. They needed to move quickly with the proper communication as well as connect differently (digitally) with clients and employees. There continues to be a need for more frequent, constant, transparent information being shared. This requires a strong ability to adapt.

The next normal

Communicators see the new normal as a kaleidoscope of ever-changing issues and uncertainty.

The goal of having a “seat at the table” became having a seat at many tables - the C-Suite, Operations, HR and Marketing to name a few. Resources and combating fatigue will continue to be challenges during this relentless change.

Communicators see that having frequent, open dialogues between all levels and stakeholders will help create a sense of security and comfort.

Transformation

Communicators quickly embraced new ways of communicating with a shift to digital taking center stage, leaving behind slower and less frequent engagement.

Companies have had to leverage the technology they have to increase collaboration and engagement. Town halls, microsites, Q&A sessions, employee surveys, virtual concerts and daily online meet ups have been increased to keep employees motivated and morale high during difficult times.

Data and AI will increasingly be used to measure impact and allow communicators to recalibrate messaging and media planning.

Corporate Character

Communicators will increasingly be responsible for reinforcing and amplifying their organization's corporate stewardship.

Companies are leaning into their communication efforts, reinforcing their company narrative while monitoring and measuring the complex and often divergent views of multiple stakeholders. Employee engagement, doing the right thing and knowing when to take a stand will continue to be constant challenges and opportunities.

Detailed Findings

The issues of today have shaped the communications role of tomorrow

“...it’s a communicator’s role to be part of the conversation with leadership about what’s happening in our society and in our nation.”

“...the issues management side has exacerbated the need for data and the need for understanding the environment in a much more rapid way...I was relying on [my crisis and issues team] relaying to the executive team social media monitoring, analytics and real time issues management to guide our decisions around strategy and communications.”

“...to start doing weekly social listening reports around our brand.”

“We started some months ago, updating the value proposition or the language that explains our value proposition and that process continues.”

- Communicators agree that they need to be very aware of and knowledgeable about everything happening in the country at all times.
- Consumers are putting more of a priority on partnerships and are looking more at a company’s value proposition and narrative.
- Many companies are starting to use and rely on data more to guide their decisions and understand the environment.
 - Getting feedback is critical to make sure what you’re doing is resonating or if not, be able to quickly pivot.
- Having insights, especially social listening data, allows organizations to have more action-oriented messaging.

The issues of today have shaped the communications role of tomorrow

“Sometimes our executive committee had to get on the same page before we could develop effective communication, and we would sometimes get caught up in the whiplash of that.”

“...I think customers are really just demanding to know what a company’s position is on these issues such as racial inequality before they buy your products.”

“They’re meeting daily now, whereas I don’t think that was happening before, and all sides are sharing their experiences and everybody’s listening to that...”

- Companies can no longer be silent regarding important issues and they need to move quickly with their communications.
- Many are now meeting more frequently to share experiences and challenges and work together to solve them.

New Practices: Communication

“...our head of HR emerged as a trusted communicator and visible spokesperson to the company, which was not really a role that he had held previously.”

“One of the things that’s really been helpful for our team is daily standups.”

“The shift required us to really focus first on internal communications. Employees needed to know what was going on, and this was one of the few occasions in memory where communications got a seat at the table with operations.”

“I think the daily, heartfelt, honest communications from leadership, the CEO, directly from the top, has been the most effective channel of communication during this pandemic.”

- Internal and external communication had to change as everyone began working remotely.
- By having more communication internally, it has led to increased collaboration as well as creating a new type of connection among employees even when they are located remotely.
- Transparency is vital within a company, so many began hosting frequent town halls, Q&A sessions, sending out employee surveys to assess how employees felt the company was doing to ensure they were safe, supported and comfortable.

New Practices: Communication

“...team members all call in at noon if they’re available, to reconnect with each other and reconnect with the company and talk about just all kinds of different things from yoga and breathing exercises to calm down to how you’re doing gardening to our brand managers launching new products or new marketing campaigns...”

“A couple of times we hosted concerts on Friday evening where more people from across our global workforce could tune into a concert that was just for us.”

“I think the podcasts have been very effective. We’ve gotten good feedback from employees who say that they feel not only informed about what’s going on with the company but the approach that we’ve taken, that the CEO has taken has been transparent, and they appreciate that.”

“One of the things we did recently was provide an email mailbox directly to the CEO.”

- Hosting open sessions among employees helps to strengthen alignment and support the company culture.
 - It’s an important way to connect and many have found them to have strong engagement.
- Organizations that have been investing in their employees’ health and happiness during these trying times are seen in a very positive light.
- Most communicators do not see these new practices going away.

New Practices: Technology

“...we had to develop micro sites in all of our web channels...”

“Electronically we had a dedicated page on our external website, of all COVID related alerts, about what was going on with our workforce and our projects and our offices. But we also set up an internal page on our intranet for our employees.”

“We were able to use data and tools and technology to fast track decisions and monitoring that would’ve been done previously in a more manual form.”

“...things that we leaned into much more than we have in the past has been our intranet, and we developed a COVID resource site for employees and that’s been really successful.”

“There was nothing like having to work from home that forced us to use that collaboration technology [Microsoft Teams] more and more effectively.”

- All organizations had to ramp up communication not only to reach employees, but stakeholders and customers as well since everyone was being impacted by the pandemic and other societal changes.
- Many developed microsites to effectively communicate to those all around the globe.
- Digital has been accepted as the most effective way to communicate, so companies leveraged Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom and other tools to enable employees to communicate and collaborate with one another.
- Most companies had the technology but did not use it. How to leverage the tools has been important in learning to work virtually.

Challenges

“I think there’s going to be fatigue at some point from working from home...”

“I think the challenge for our communicators, both in the corporate offices but also in our business units will be to continue to communicate effectively to our workforce about the state of the business and to help them navigate different opportunities that may exist on different jobs...”

“A challenge that we’ve now been dealing with for the past several months as well is that there’s a lot of uncertainty.”

“... how do you plan from a marketing communications business standpoint when the world is so uncertain?”

“We’ve got to look at the competencies and resources that we have on our team and figure out what changes we need to make to have a more sustainable way of working and better position our company to be resourced to meet those needs and not burn people out.”

- Resources are a challenge for some organizations as many are experiencing increased responsibilities and demands.
 - Communicators are enduring massive demands and are burning out. They are trying to figure out how to shift things around and manage everything while learning to work in a new environment.
- Continuing to keep momentum, morale and engagement with employees will be difficult. Many are noticing fatigue among colleagues and the struggle to understand the new normal.
 - Companies will need to set expectations as remote working continues.
 - Continuing to communicate about the state of the business and what the next steps are will also be a challenge for some.
- Others are struggling to have a profitable business that serves customers and meets all their needs.

Corporate Character

“...I think that it’s going to make companies rethink what purpose means in today’s world in 2020 verses what it meant even in 2019, so I think it’s going to raise the bar.”

“I think we learned a lot about how to bring together public and private resources and also how to leverage our strengths in the supply chain.”

“Our corporate narrative won’t change, but it will be emphasized and reinforced.”

“I’d say our biggest communications risk is not communicating at all.”

“We’re using it (technology) to monitor, to measure, to understand our shared voice, our sentiment, if it’s resonating. We are constantly looking at different tools.”

“I think the pandemic has proven that our priorities and strategy are spot on.”

- Organizations are leaning into their communication efforts much more. Many do not believe their corporate narrative will completely change, but it will be reframed, emphasized and reinforced moving forward.
- Using communication to more effectively build relationships and being proactive in talking about your value proposition will be key to moving forward and strengthening the brand.
- Many communicators see the pandemic as reinforcing the strength of their narrative; lessons are being learned and the commitment to helping others is being prioritized regardless of industry.

Keeping them up at night

“I think just getting our message right, the tone and tenor right. And just being on top of every emerging issue and piece of news.”

“I want to make sure that we are actually acting on those good intentions.”

“I think what keeps me up right now is just trying to keep my team motivated and confident and feeling good about the role that they’re playing and addressing their personal needs as much as their professional needs.”

“How do we continue to protect the brand? But protecting the brand sometimes requires taking action, sometimes requires doing nothing.”

“...when I look at the overarching ability for the business to adapt. The communications needs to follow the business strategy, not the other way around.”

“If they [brands] don’t actually match those words with true actions over time.”

- Knowing what to do and when to do it is something that keeps communicators up at night. The fear of the unknown, of saying the right thing, of doing nothing at all are constantly on the minds of company leaders.
- Employee engagement causes unrest. Communicators are constantly questioning if they are being good leaders and mindful of their employees.
- Doing the right thing. You have to do the right thing for your company, your employees, your clients and yourself. Communicators feel that staying true to your purpose and values will go a long way.

What comes next

The realities revealed in this research will have a persistent affect on our roles and our organizations. Page Up members will continue to have opportunities to discuss the evolution of their work as we move through the pandemic and into what comes after.

Think Thursday conversation on September 17, 2020 at 12:30 p.m. ET

Discussion on the [Page Up Facebook group](#)

Exploration at the [Page Up Annual Conference](#) (December 2-4, 2020)

Special Thanks



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