

**CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS IN PRACTICE:
THE PROFILE OF PR DIRECTORS IN THE BRITISH COMPANIES**

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ABSTRACT

In spite of being seen as an increasingly important function of management, public relations (PR) or corporate communications (as is called in this paper) remains a subject which is seriously under-researched. This paper reports an empirical study conducted in 20 British organisations with a focus on the director of corporate communications. It examines the origin and role of corporate communication executives and identifies those essential characteristics that constitute the most successful communication practitioners.

KEY WORDS: corporate communications, public relations, PR, British companies.

Corporate Communications in Practice: The Profile of PR Directors in the British Companies

INTRODUCTION

Corporate communications is no longer an amateur game (Winner, 1993) but has become a key management function. Those practising the craft have many different titles; some reflect positions of real difference; some apply to positions of no influence at all. The original styling 'PR director' has almost disappeared at the highest level, for PR itself has been discredited. It has been replaced by an entirely different nomenclature. No one term is adopted broadly everywhere as a whole plethora of different titles are in use, all boil down to what used to be known as 'PR'. Many practitioners have looked at the role and have tried to give it a name more appropriate to a) that which the job entails; b) the weight that organisations attach to it; for it is now recognised as a resource. This area is of interest to both academic and practitioners alike.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic literature refers to *PR* and *corporate communications* in changing terminology. Similarly, emphasis of nomenclature varies with the country of origin. This study concerns the role and function of what previously was known as the PR director. In the United Kingdom, but not in the US, PR has become debased. What used to trade under the name of PR is now known variously as: corporate affairs, corporate communications, and public affairs. Correspondingly there are different job titles to the executives holding the office.

The role of the communication director is still embryonic as an established function (White and Mazur, 1995). It is misunderstood in many organisations. This makes the

task less clear cut. Yet Moore et al (Quoted by Kitchen, 1993) suggest that it is one of the most essential. Its importance as an early warning system is beyond dispute (Lauzen,1995). However, empirical research into the work of the director of communications is painfully limited. Wright (1995:185) confirms this in producing his concept of the communication executive. His opinion is echoed by other authors: Broom et al (1986), Grunig (1992) and Pavlik (1996); and by the enquiries made by authors to professional bodies, among whom the Institute of Public Relations (of UK), American Marketing Association and the Arthur Page Society.

There has been little investigation into what the practitioner does, and the background from which the communication director emerges. Indeed, the role itself is unclear as are the origins. In addition to his origin, does the communication director require specific personal characteristics? Is he one of the type? White and Mazur (1995:36) think that his position requires a mix of functional, managerial, organisational and negotiating abilities. Perhaps some personalities are not suited to the demands of corporate communications. Cook was quoted saying () that typically the practitioner may be in his mid-forties, a professional communicator who has done something else, probably one who has enjoyed a spell in line management, not necessarily one who comes from a more traditional background like journalism. Winner (1993) considers that some people have a natural flair for the work displaying empathetic qualities, an interest in people, positive attitudes and, perhaps, butterfly minds. While White and Mazur (1995) suggest that analytical and well-developed communications skills added to business management and political /diplomatic skills are all important. This begs a question of what background best prepares what Wright (1995) styles a

communication executive. Are advertising, marketing or journalism useful backgrounds; or for that matter is a legal or secretarial background more suitable?

Winner (1993) finds that many former marketing executives direct the communication function. He ponders whether this suggests a perceived similarity between the two disciplines. Kotler (1996) regards PR as a part of marketing and views it mainly as a support activity for it. Are the personal traits similar to both disciplines? Certainly there is a perceived connection between marketing and PR. Advertising might be a more creative background, is communications more of a craft than an art? Winner (1993) notes that there are sound theoretical reasons for concluding that a generalist approach may be preferred. Perhaps, he argues, the generalist who has subsequently specialised may well have a better grasp of the corporate nature of his organisation. A generalist background brings wide perspective and broad skills into the communication area.

THE RESEARCH

There can be little debate that corporate branding has become a key competitive weapon. Organisations -whether in the public or private sectors -can gain and sustain competitive advantage from communicating successfully with their key audiences. Although much has been written on the subject, with one recent exception (Marion, 1998), no empirical study on the role and tasks of the director of corporate communications has been found after an extensive research. There is still no universally accepted definition of the concept, nor a unified title for the person who holds the office. What used to trade under the name of PR is now known variously as:

corporate affairs, corporate communications, and public affairs. In this research, a working definition is given as follows:

Corporate communications is the strategic management process by which an organisation communicates with its various audiences to the mutual benefits of both and to its improved competitive advantage.

Although much has been written on the subject, no empirical research on the communication director has been found after an extensive research. This paper intends to address the balance and to improve the current understanding of the area in the British corporate context. This investigation probes previously unexplored territory with a focus on the communication director, his background and his training. The research seeks to identify the characteristics frequently found in a practitioner at the top of his profession; to discover whether he originates from the generalist route; whether he has a marketing or journalist background; and whether any organisations practice encroachment, i.e. those not qualified or trained to do the job (Lauzen1995:288). It is beyond the scope of one single study to test every diverse issue. In the remainder of the paper, the methods employed in the field work is first discussed. This is followed by the findings derived from the research. Finally there is a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings as well as the suggestions for future research.

24 organisations were approached through either personal contacts or direct written request. 20 (83%) agreed to participate in the research. The name of these organisations and titles of respondents are given in Table 1. Of these participants, eighteen were with communication directors at the apex of British industry. To give the investigation some breadth, two organisations in the public sector were also

interviewed. These organisations were selected because they appealed to the researchers and came from a broad spectrum across the British industry. All of them are respected names in their own sectors -some of them major global organisations. It was not a random sample and therefore must not be relied upon as a source of statistical inference.

Empirical investigation was divided into two stages: questionnaire survey and personal interview. It was carried out in 1996. A questionnaire was developed consisting of a total of 50 questions in eight sections which aimed to find out how respondents felt about their job and its importance to their organisation. The questionnaire was tested in draft form with one organisation and subsequently revised three times. All questionnaires sent were returned; and all were useable. Areas explored included:

- the concept of corporate communications,
- the background and role of the communication director,
- the status of the director within an organisation.

The interviews were conducted in an unstructured way, allowing a greater depth of enquiry and response level than can be gained from a more formalised interview. Anecdotal comments are used when they are clearly reflective of a general view. The interview took place at the corporate headquarters of each company visited and lasted on average 111 minutes (the range being from one to three hours). The method employed in this research was proved to be quite effective, evidenced by the fact that 83 percent of organisations contacted participated in the survey and interview, 62 percent of interviewees gave more than two hours of their time, and one third asked to see the results. Due to time and finance constraints, it would have been impossible to

visit a larger sample spread across the length and breadth of the UK. A larger sample would have undoubtedly given greater breadth to the sample being investigated.

FINDINGS

The small amount of existent academic work does not suggest the origins or pedigree of the communication director. Does the director have a university education or a PR professional qualification? Perhaps the director comes from a marketing, journalist or advertising background? Some academics consider them related disciplines. Possibly he or she has progressed through the PR ranks? The research attempted to find answers to these questions and to find what characteristics are necessary to make a successful communications executive.

Education

Of those interviewed 60 percent had university degrees; but in no cases had the respondents read Communications; only two had master's degrees - only one of those an MBA. Whilst 25 percent had degrees in English others had degrees in subjects as diverse as physiology, pharmacy and chemistry.

Career Background

A quarter of respondents came from a generalist background. Only 35 percent had a journalist background (often referred to as the traditional route). In fact the researchers found that in a majority of cases the director had entered corporate communications by chance. Interestingly, of all respondents 25 percent had experience in consultancy.

Essential Qualities

Whilst half of those interviewed had applied for their jobs, many of the most senior positions were headhunted and in fact this applied to 36 percent of the interviewees. Pointing out that different organisations required different skills, respondents had a clear perception of the essential qualities required of communication executives:

- good communication skills
- judgement
- listening skills
- common sense
- integrity
- the ability to get on well with other people

All those interviewed stressed the importance of having an intimate knowledge of their organisation (Simon,1986) whilst at the same time 22 percent admitted that they do not yet have it. Beyond that, good communication skills were much stressed by all the directors interviewed taken with the ability to communicate right across organisations so that all the audiences heard what the specific organisation had to say. One communication skill much stressed is the ability to *write well*. At least one director interviewed wrote his company's annual report; at least one other wrote his Chairman's speeches.

Judgement was then referred to as a top quality because if an organisation was thinking of doing something it was important to know what the target audience might think about it. Many communication directors stressed that an essential component of communications was the ability to *listen*; only by doing this did an organisation understand what its organisation was asking. Much stress was placed on *common sense* and *integrity* and a high number of respondents spoke of the essentiality of being trusted by their audiences - without trust there was no credibility. All those

interviewed underscored the importance of being able to get on with people and to enjoy the company of their fellow men.

10 percent of interviewees emphasised the importance of *creative imagination* confirming the view of Jackson (1995). One very senior respondent believed that without these qualities a communication director would not succeed whilst another referred to the need to allow space for creativity to happen in others. Other characteristics featuring strongly were moral courage (the need to tell the CEO to do certain things, the need to tell the chairman that he had come across badly in the media), an ability to work fast and energetically, and abilities to grasp issues. Two respondents referred to the need for brainpower; one of whom clearly felt that he had it himself in abundance.

The Role of the Director

The role of the director is the core of this research. Guth (1995) suggests that it varies between organisations. The researchers found many different approaches to the role. Some directors felt that the role was peculiar to an organisation, others felt that it varied little; some argued that it would change with organisational culture. In 95 percent of organisations visited the role was a full time job. Equally firm a finding was the enormous variance of the role; described variously as unlimited in its potential and quite a maverick role. One director spoke of the time spent ensuring the consistency of the message; another of the importance of advising top management on how to enhance corporate reputation. An aberration was one Northern supermarket chain which regarded PR so low on its priorities that it had only just appointed a manager to handle PR at junior level. In contrast, one brewer believed that PR was much the

senior of the skills compared with marketing or advertising, while a national supermarket chain and a rubber company regarded communications and marketing as very much entwined.

The Function of Corporate Communications

In a group the role was extra dimensional; summed up by an international bank as advising the CEO on the direction of the group. A global airline saw the role as ensuring that corporate personality was conveyed to all interested audiences. Most companies perceived the function of corporate communications as raising corporate profile and reputation both internally and externally. A supermarket commented that communications gave directions to individual departments within an organisation. One television company commented that in his businesses the message itself changed from week to week. The role appeared to have few boundaries although in multinational groups some in-house managers report to corporate HQ. The researchers found a spirit of elation among their respondents. Many spoke of the wonderful job, although much of the work was routine (vast amounts of unsolicited mail) and at times tiresome. It can be summed up that the role was located near the summit of organisations; and that the directors were responsible for managing the reputations of their organisations. Most directors saw a critical function advising and guiding their senior officers on the effectiveness and impact of communications strategy - this being a potentially fruitful area for further research.

The Status of the Director

Earlier research (White and Mazur, 1994) stresses that reporting relationships impact on the effectiveness of PR practice. The finding was that 70 percent of directors

interviewed reported to the CEO or chairman; 10 percent reported at the next level. A pharmaceutical company commented that the function was undervalued in the British industry. Communications was certainly represented at board level only in two major British organisations. In no instance was this the case at any organisation visited. In 10 percent of the companies the director was one level below the board. In these instances the directors had direct impact on corporate strategy; one major brewer sitting on his company's strategic committee.

The findings were that in major British organisations, corporate communications was placed in the third management layer -below the executive committee. Only 20 percent of respondents felt that it should be higher. As one director at a tobacco company remarked you did not need to sit on the executive committee to know what it was thinking. Typically all directors had direct access both to their CEO and to their chairman. An earlier study (Van Riel, 1992) indicates that communication executives report to top management. The researchers confirm this and note that many in group situations the director also sits on divisional boards; very much in a helicopter role enabling involvement at every level and permitting them to react over a wide management area.

The findings suggest that communications was on their way to the board room but was as yet some way off. Nevertheless in major organisations the view expressed by a northern brewer that PR needed to report to a high level was already the common place. Few directors expressed much concern about status although 10 percent felt that they should be placed higher in their corporate hierarchy. One remarked it would

complete the recognition that the role had grown. All agreed that what mattered was access and being on the inside of the information flow.

DISCUSSION

Corporate communications is a much enhanced management tool; and the communication director is now a very senior management figure; and yet the existent research into his background and origins is slender. This is not least because Wright (1995) has identified that although there are more than 250 communication executives in the US they are busy individuals paid very large salaries and are not noted for filling out questionnaires or otherwise participating in academic research. So this research, which succeeded in interviewing twenty senior executives in British organisations has attempted to explore the background of - and to identify the characteristics of - a successful practitioner and to identify what essential qualities are required to perform effectively.

The researchers found that there was no favoured background. They discovered a fair smattering of journalists (the traditional background) so the practitioner's background might be journalism; but he was a more likely to be a generalist. Among those they interviewed, there were a former MP, a former assistant professor and a former teacher. The communication director may have a first degree (but it would not be in communications!) and normally would not have a second - certainly not an MBA. The conclusion is that anyone with the necessary drive and talent can make it to the top. A retailer summed it up - there had to be strengths in certain areas but a broad classic senior management training was the best thing.

The survey suggested that the practitioner was seen to be a very sociable person. Amongst a whole plethora of talents he would display the critical qualities were communication skills, sound judgement, an ability to listen and common sense. He would show the demonstrable integrity that Newsom and Scott (1976) consider the only criteria by which he should be judged. The director would prove to be an individual of obvious warmth and visible intelligence; he would clearly be someone who counted. The research found that most of the qualities were displayed by most of those interviewed and a number demonstrated the mental firepower which two respondents thought essential. The director did not perceive his craft to be a branch of marketing and this was not a background from which the communications director emerged. Marketing is thus a discipline with which the relationship is found to be slender. Interestingly Nessman (1995) finds that too frequently the PR function is seen as an appendage of marketing.

It was discovered that save for two organisations not visited there was no evidence of Board recognition. Yet White and Mazur (1994) confirm that communications must be driven from the top and Broom and Dozier (1986) suggest that perceived involvement in the decision making process is more important to communication executives than any other professional measure. There was ample evidence that they were so involved and that the director reported to his CEO and he saw it as his function to support him. Typically he would be found in the third layer of management though the research posits that he should be one tier higher. Guth (1995) suggests that misplacement of the role undermines the organisation's ability to achieve its strategic goals and undermines competitive advantage; the authors concur.

Although the director may have a seat at divisional board level apart from two national companies there is no evidence to support Wright's (1995) opinion that the director has as much power as board members. Indeed one director remarked that he had no power; whilst another remarked that he would not mind having it. It was the conclusive finding of Ryan and Martinson (1985) that typically practitioners are not satisfied with acting as representatives of their management and putting into place decisions made by others. In fact, it is surprising how little power the director had. Guth (1995) observes that PR can be a catalyst for change; this can only be enabled when the communication director has input into the organisation's most important policy making machine. On the other hand enhanced status might only be significant if the director was perceived as lacking clout and none of those interviewed would be so perceived. Arnold (1988) argues that the practitioner needs to think like a CEO and be able to converse in management language. There was the clearest evidence that top executives in the UK were so qualified. The authors sense that the influence of several practitioners would be enhanced considerably by raising the position by at least one management level although they recognise that with the developing practice of the governance of an organisation being focused more on a corporate team than on the board itself a full board seat might be an irrelevance.

Generally the communication director is positioned in a helicopter role at the third level of the hierarchy, although one interviewed had no defined place at all. The practitioner recognised that it was necessary to know the organisation deeply as much of his or her work would involve communicating the policies and views of the corporation with their key audiences and developing relationships with them.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study seeks to investigate a number of issues, the underlying difficulty being the absence of a sound theoretical base on which to ground deductive hypothesis. Accordingly the conclusions reached might be considered to be inductive.

A Profile of PR Director

A communication director in a significant British organisation is twice as likely to be male as female. In his middle forties the executive will probably hold a bachelor's degree which may well be in English, history or in one of the social sciences. There is a 30 percent probability that the practitioner had been a journalist, otherwise the executive entered communications from another area, quite likely by chance. The director will not have formal training and does not belong to any professional body; over one third of them (and all of those in top positions) will have been headhunted. An excellent communicator, the executive is seen to be a sensible, honest and trusting person; one having integrity. He or she demonstrates good judgement and has a confident air. A creative, courageous person, the practitioner is much aware of internal politics. A good listener, who empathises with their fellow men, the executive shows resilience and is able to take knocks. Having risen fast through the ranks the practitioner is now near the summit of the organisation; probably one level below the Executive Committee (which in turn is one layer below board level). The executive will go no further. Having enormous influence, but little real power, the communication director is a satisfied, contented and humorous person enjoying a very diverting position giving considerable autonomy. The practitioner reports direct to the CEO with ready access to his chairman and is more than familiar with the differing

audiences addressed by the corporation; he or she supervises communications with them.

There is no favoured background. There is a fair smattering of former journalists (the traditional background). There are an equal number of generalists and an equivalent number of career communicators, many with experience in consultancy. The finding is that anyone with the necessary drive and talents can reach the top. This study found no evidence of encroachment. Another significant finding is the slender relationship with marketing. Nessman (1995) writes that too frequently the PR function is seen as an *appendage of marketing*; no evidence sustains this view; marketing is certainly not a background from which communication directors emerge. Save for one case, there was little marketing connection. Nor was there much evidence of the two corporate departments being directly associated.

The research indicates that the role varies between organisations and that there are enormous variations within the role itself. Over the last decade the role of the director of corporate communications has developed from that of the old style PR manager. He is now a very senior figure, reporting to the CEO and with a position that directly impacts on strategy. There is clear indication that the position holder is now very much involved in *strategic* communications. This is an area for potentially fruitful research; not least in the area of the use of corporate communications to raise a company's profile.

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Table 1 The list of respondents and their titles.

THE ORGANISATION	THE RESPONDENT
ASDA Plc	Director of Corporate Communications
Avon Rubber Plc	Group Publicity Manager
Avon & Somerset Constabulary	Public Relations Manager
B.A.T. Industries Plc	Director of Group Public Affairs
Boots Group Plc	Director of Corporate Affairs
British Airways Plc	Director of Public Affairs
British Telecommunications Plc	Director of Corporate Communications
GlaxoWellcome Plc	Director of Group Public Affairs
Lloyds TSB Plc	Head of Corporate Communications
London Transport	Head of Corporate Affairs
Northumbria Ambulance NHS Trust	Public Relations & Marketing Manager
J. Sainsbury Plc	Director of Corporate Communications
W. H. Smith Group Plc	Director of Corporate Affairs
Southwestern Electricity Plc	Director of External Affairs
Storehouse Plc	Director of Corporate Affairs
Tennent Caledonian Breweries Ltd	Communications Manager
Vaux Group Plc	Director of Group Public Relations
Wessex Water Plc	Director of Corporate Communications
Whitbread Plc	Director of Corporate Communications
Yorkshire Tyne-Tees Television Plc	Group Director of Corporate Affairs