

The big in-house vs agency communication quandary



By [Marion Scher](#)

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A question I'm constantly being asked, possibly as a result of shrinking budgets, is whether organisations should take communications totally in-house or use one or more agencies.

Naturally as with all such decisions there are two columns to tick here - for and against.

On the plus side by taking communications in-house you naturally save on the massive fees many agencies charge - often without giving full feedback on how they earn that money.

Your in-house communications team will also have the advantage of having easy access to historical and confidential information in order to help develop their messages.

They are also at the other side of a door in your building against the often frustrating 'straight to message' function on a mobile...

Most importantly they had better produce results otherwise they could find themselves working in the call centre.

On the minus side, especially for large organisations, you won't be able to find a team that can do *everything*, so naturally hiring specialist agencies to run big events, launch new products or handle crisis communications is still an option.

The left hand not...

Whilst on the subject of large organisations, in which I work regularly, the communications problem there is that where there are several different internal teams in place, they don't work closely together or even with the executive teams. In short one doesn't know what the other is doing - which is a course for destruction in communications.

They don't talk to each other and this often shows to the public or their customers.

A good internal communications team should eat, sleep, and breathe the company. Their blood should run with the colour of their organisation, be it blue, green, red or yellow... They should be hearing first-hand what their company stands for and is striving for and not from some brief they receive at an initial meeting.

Another minus is that many of these in-house positions are filled with junior level staff, often straight out of college. So what you're getting is a saving on salaries but a lack of experience that can have a major impact on outside relations.

Look for a balance

Depending on in which area your organisation's communications needs lie, you should look for a balance. Perhaps what's needed is an audit to determine what these areas are and whether they're being fully serviced.

On the subject of audits, something I feel that most organisations should do regularly is a skills audit of their communications team. Would you have an accountant in your company who couldn't balance a set of books? Of course not, so why have people who can't even send out a decent email or put together a one paragraph media statement?

Even more importantly why would you have someone dealing with media who has absolutely no experience in this field or understands the vital role the media play in your organisation's reputation? This is where hiring an ex-journalist who writes in your field, would be a great idea. There are many excellent out-of-work journos who have been hit by cut-backs recently and who would make a great contribution to your organisation.

A good test of the success or failure of your communications department is to simply send out a short questionnaire to the media in your field, asking how you rate with your competitors. I did this for a major organisation recently and they were surprised/horrified to learn that out of their three main competitors they ranked at an average of three out of ten with their specific media... The answers given by the media were the following:

- We can never get hold of a spokesperson
- They don't communicate with us in the same way as their competitors
- We don't even know their senior people
- We have no idea of their future plans

If you tick some of these boxes then perhaps it's time for a rethink on how you communicate...

ABOUT MARION SCHER

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