

COMMUNICATION TOP DOWN BOTTOM UP

Communication is in our DNA. Without it we limit our knowledge, have few friends and will never become wise.

Personal communication between two or a few is relatively simple – information, opinion and response makes content, words and pictures give us voice, body language and facial expression give us away.

But when many are communicating with many others, such as between a corporation and its publics, it's not that simple. For corporate communications departments there's a bunch of internal publics as well, between a rock and a hard place if not resourced accordingly.

Commercial corporates have it easy. Whatever triggers a sale is good and easily measured. On the other hand, governments have multipurpose policies in lieu of single purpose products, and the payoff is a functional and cohesive community, not sales. Needless to say, it's what services do at the coal face (or the solar panel) which ultimately produces this payoff.

As keepers of corporate channels, communications departments experience a continuous stream of demand from services for airspace and expertise.

A corporate communication department's default role is to inform, pre-empt and represent the organisation at large. Although their colleague service departments may understand why, if not given enough attention they'll feel out on a limb and do their own communication if they can.

With that as background, my hypothesis is that the organisations able to communicate best and most effectively are the ones striking a balance between this top down vs bottom up scenario.

We sent out a straw poll via LGPro's Communications Network asking, "What is the best or most effective thing your communications department has done in the last year or two?" The question excluded turn-key projects and campaigns. By and large, responses seem to support the hypothesis, for instance:

- Baw Baw Shire Council set up a "news brand" and diversified its channels to better match intended audiences, an important factor for services.
- Benalla Shire Council made its customer service staff corporate messengers with a regime of regular and detailed briefings about major initiatives.
- The City of Boroondara reimaged its modus operandi for services communication by setting up an agency model, where communications officers have service area portfolios, supported by a backroom of content delivery experts.
- Wellington Shire Council's communications department took advantage of tablet deployment across the organisation and use of the MS One Note cloud for "simultaneous document editing by multiple parties", streamlining content creation for everyone.
- Yarra City Council took internal communications to the level it deserves, consulted with staff to produce a strategy and indicators, and appointed a dedicated officer to run with it.

If these examples are at all a guide, the best thing you can do to improve corporate communication is to improve how the corporate and the rest of the organisation work together.

Effective communication lies less in controlling the message than accommodating the diversity of messages your organisation has.