Companies spend years and vast resources building and reinforcing their reputation in a public domain, and yet it can take only few minutes to dismantle it. A wrongly formulated statement or inappropriately formatted medium of communication can have a huge impact on a firm’s reputation, especially if it involves social media. Like never before, for good or bad, a corporate message can spread like wildfire across the Internet. Some say that any news is good news as one is able to attract ‘free’ attention; others are more cautious, as bad news is communicated differently than good news and it can have serious consequences for the firm.

So what is external communication in business? On the one hand, it is about facilitating an effective, reliable, accurate and timely communication between the firm and their suppliers, investors, regulators and shareholders. On the other hand, it is about constructing and portraying a more favourable image of a company and what it has to offer in terms of products or services to a target audience and to society at large. In basic terms, external communication is the transmission of a message between the business and a particular audience. In the process, both the company and employees can use a variety of channels to convey and transmit their message, including verbal (face-to-face) communication, print and broadcast media and electronic mediums such as the web, email, social networks and mobile apps.

How a company manages external communications very much depends on their **resources** (financial and human capital), the **geography of their outreach** (inter-cultural complexities), the **circumstances** (increasing sales vs. crisis communication), **purpose** (product launch vs. branding), and the **intended recipient** (niche audience vs. general public). In this context, it is possible to highlight three forms of external communication strategies:

**Public Relations (PR)** – in general, the message is broad and is about creating a positive image of the business, goods/services and activities. It can also be deployed as a form of crisis or risk communication when a company’s reputation is challenged.

**Media Relations** – the business will go a long way to foster good working relationship with the media and the journalists in an attempt to influence how a story about their corporate values, strategies and outputs is communicated and interpreted. Some companies are more proactive and interactive in this domain; while others are more reactive or retroactive – they only engage with media in a time of crisis.

**Advertising** – is a highly specialised and targeted form of external communications. It is about promoting a company’s products, services and corporate values to a targeted audience. At the end of the day, its main objective is to increase revenue and solidify the corporate brand.

Even though most companies have designated marketing, communications and PR departments that facilitate corporate communications, **employees are increasingly perceived as ‘communication ambassadors’.** As many
employees now have personal blogs or Facebook and Twitter accounts, companies are realizing that they are no longer in charge of the corporate message. Even if an employee is blogging or tweeting in their own personal capacity, outside their designated work hours, and from their personal device, that does not mean that their association with a company is relinquished. In contrary, both in case of positive and negative publicity, **individuals and their style of communication are affiliated with their role and position within the workplace.** In that context, employees always have to be aware that their personal reputation is interlinked with a corporate brand, and vice versa.

In the age of social media and mobile applications, some companies are more innovative than others as they seek to engage and train their employees to be better at the way they communicate. Some see this as a form of mitigating potential risks; others see it as the opportunity to convey corporate messages to an extended audience (employee’s personal network). While such an approach can generate positive publicity, one (un)intentional tweet from an employee could unwittingly put a company at the heart of a media storm. In order to minimise potential conflict, a large number of employees have some form of disclaimer on their blog or Twitter accounts, clarifying that opinions expressed across those channels are of a personal nature and they do not represent the company’s views. Although prudent, it is naïve to think that a generic disclaimer can disassociate an individual from its employer if their external form of communication is perceived to be deceitful, racist, vulgar, xenophobic, aggressive or threatening. At the end of the day, no social media disclaimer can prevent dismissal!

Integrating social media with personal and corporate communication is only possible when a company fully understands the interplay between internal and external communications. After all, **social media and personal blogs are public-facing tools that are based on the principles of internal communication.** Recent studies suggest that social media is critical to employee engagement, as an increasing number of individuals are proactively posting messages, pictures and videos about their work, supervisors, company products and corporate values or social responsibility. Even though some are complementary, some are less so; the fact remains that so called ‘employee activists’ exist and they are here to stay. As they gain numbers and strength, companies need to be prepared to facilitate the activism of these employees and channel their outputs in a positive direction.

For those enterprises that operate in different countries and in different sectors, **the issue of intercultural communication should be high on their agenda.** The aim of this form of communication is to share information across different cultures and social groups. In the process, one has to take into the account specific ethnic, religious and sociological attributes when shaping a customized message for different groups in different parts of the world. What makes this process effective is the sense of trust. **When trust exists, cultural differences may be easier to bridge and ‘lost-in-translation’ issues resolved.**

In order to build that trust, a company needs a coherent external communication strategy which is reflective of its internal needs and external aspirations.

**Finding a balance between being professional and being interesting is difficult in communications,** especially if an employee is expressing both personal and work-related views from the same social media channel. On the one hand, employees need to consider employment related issues, such as bringing their employer into disrepute in the event of hate speech, cyber bullying, defamation or even certain criminal offences. On the other hand, the employer needs to be more prudent and ensure that their IT and social media policies are both flexible and more importantly up to date. Ultimately, external communication should be adapted to the needs and interests of the recipient in order to generate the desired effect without compromising the integrity of the information.
Our Code – Know it. Use it. Live it.

External Communications

Matrix – External Communication

Importance of External Communication in Business:
- Achieving Goals
- Strategy Formulation
- Motivating Employees
- Feedback Loop
- Risk Management

Exchange of Information
- Making sense of it all
- Engaging with Audience
- Monitoring
- Lesson-Learned

Enhancement of Employee Skills
- Facilitating Protocols
- Connection with Stakeholders
- Internal Control Mechanisms
- Integrity & Trust

Internal and external communication should align
Corporations are no longer in control of the message
The smartest organizations are those who tailor content

How Technology has Changed Workplace Communication
- Mobile Work-from-Home
- Closer Collaboration
- Unified Communications
- Bring-Your-Own-Device

The Factors Influencing Workplace Communication
- Method of Communication
- Content
- Frequency
- Digital Skills

Components in Communication
- The Individual Sending the Message
- The Context for the Message
- The Person Receiving the Message
- The Delivery Method Chosen
- The Content of the Message

3 Levels of Problems for Communication
- The technical problem: how accurately can the message be transmitted?
- The semantic problem: how precisely is the meaning conveyed?
- The effectiveness problem: how effectively does the received meaning affect behaviour?

Keep the Message Simple, but Deep in Meaning

Source: Information used in the Matrix was adapted and recombined from various sources: Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication; InterNations: Cross-Cultural Communication; and The Times 100 Business Case Studies – Communication

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External Communications

Additional resources  Further Reading

Step 1  Please refer back to Our Code of Conduct.

Step 2  If you would like to know more about Human Rights & Business, the following external links have been selected for your reference:

**CIPD: Social Media and Employee Voice**

This report argues that our conceptualisation of employee voice should not be static, but rather should evolve in line with technological and social developments. In recent years, as a result of the relentless advance of social media, employee voice is evolving rapidly. The greatest difference is the shifting patterns of communication, from being one-way or two-way to being multi-directional.

[https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/technology/employee-voice-report](https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/technology/employee-voice-report)

**International Association of Business Communicators**

IABC provides a professional network to 14,000 members in over 70 countries. It serves as a vibrant resource in the fields of: corporate communications; public affairs; PR and media relations; government / community relations; and marketing.


**European Commission – External Communications Network (ECN)**

The main mission of the ECN is to exchange best practices on preparation and implementation of communication plans and other communication practices.


**Hootsuite Employee Advocacy on Social Media: How to Make it Work for Your Business**

Third-party endorsements bring more customers and brand recognition. Sponsored posts reach people in your target demographic. Company-sourced social media updates help spread the word about products, services and brands. But there’s another way to reach and influence people. It’s an often-untapped resource that’s right under our nose: employee advocacy.


**Public Relations Society of America**

The world’s largest and foremost organization of public relations professionals. PRSA provides professional development, sets standards of excellence and acts as one of the industry’s leading voices on the important business and professional issues of our time.


Step 3  Do your own research on the Internet

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