

Blurring boundaries



Survey reveals tensions between European communication directors and global headquarters **by Nick Helsby**

European communication directors believe their real value to the business is being able to offer advice on how corporate activity will be perceived by different audiences.

A new international study reveals that almost half of European communication directors (or their senior vice president or equivalent) want greater integration with their global counterparts so that they are better able to carry out their roles and responsibilities of managing corporate reputation in the region.

The report was commissioned by the U.K. executive search firm Watson Helsby and is based on in-depth face-to-face interviews with more than 20 European communication directors from well-known multinational companies such as Microsoft, Disney, Toyota, McDonald's, Dell and Citigroup. All participants work closely with, and often report to, a global communication boss and/or team headquartered in the U.S. or Japan.

According to the findings, 49 percent of communication directors want greater involvement in headquarters planning, particularly on issues such as communication strategy and the

identification of priorities and issues. They claim that without this input, they find that many of the directives and plans flowing from the global communication team are impractical or unworkable in Europe or in any other heterogeneous geographical region. One respondent noted, "You have to be integrated; otherwise you get saddled with inappropriate messaging and planning."

Specifically, European communication directors want to be more involved in:

- **Corporate communication planning:** overall strategy, key themes and messaging, priority identification and pre-agreed processes for decision making.
- **Management of specific issues and risks:** positioning statements, Q&As and communication timetables.
- **Project-based activity:** messaging and communication timetables.
- **Plans for the future of the function:** standards, processes, training and development.

By not being involved early

on in these activities, communication directors complain that some of the directives coming from outside Europe are inappropriate for the region. Not only does this lead to tension and frustration on both sides, it also compromises the European team's effectiveness. These cracks become even more pronounced when headquarters comes under strain and tends to default to more of a command-and-control structure, which further eclipses regional perspectives. One communication director commented, "As soon as something goes wrong, all the strings are pulled back to the mothership. They have to take control of everything."

Forty-three percent of respondents are happy with the level of integration with their global communication counterparts. However, when asked what else headquarters could do to help maximize the effectiveness of the European team, more than half (57 percent) say they want more involvement in planning, and 48 percent believe a greater appreciation by headquarters of



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the communication challenges faced in Europe would be beneficial to the overall cause.

Among the challenges that can derail plans but are not necessarily appreciated by headquarters teams are the following:

1. EU directives and country legislation, especially employment law
2. Varying regulatory frameworks
3. Different media landscapes
4. Language
5. Time zones
6. Non-U.S. business models
7. Different business customs
8. A complex range of stakeholder audiences
9. Local leader personalities
10. Skeletons in the local cupboard (past events and issues that are known to the European communication director that have not necessarily reflected well on the company's reputation, such as the loss of a major local client or financial irregularities)

So how do European communication directors propose that headquarters develop greater insight into regional communication challenges? According to the survey, if the global team can develop a better understanding of the inherent communication issues that a culturally diverse region such as Europe presents, they believe their input and advice on overall planning will be better heeded. Respondents made some specific suggestions for how to effect this. Arranging job rotations, job swaps or secondments is seen as instructive; allowing headquarters team members to experience some of these issues

firsthand is a powerful way to educate and engage them. Where these options are not possible, the respondents suggest that their global counterparts shadow them for at least a week and/or arrange extended visits to offices located in Europe or other areas.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents also want greater guidance on communication policy and procedure so they have a clearer framework that will enable them to operate more effectively and without interference. Sign-off procedures are a particular source of irritation. Having to translate news releases into English before they can be approved by the global team is considered unnecessary and laborious, leading to bottlenecks and unhelpful delays that can damage corporate reputations.

Two-thirds of the respondents work with a global team that is also responsible for communications in the country where the global team is located, most often the U.S. Most of the communication team members are therefore responsible for both local and global work. According to the survey, this means that at best, their specific duties for the country in which they are based can inhibit them from forming a proper worldwide perspective. At worst, they can develop an attitude of parochialism that can impair their judgment on international communication issues.

To address this, communication directors suggest that the two spheres of activity be split between two separate teams to engender a more focused global stance. They warn, however,

that merely splitting the team is not enough; the composition of the group tasked with global responsibilities must also be international. As one respondent observed, "Although we have a separate global team, every one of its members is an American."

Because of their relationships with, and insights into, different audiences, European communication directors believe their real value to the business is being able to offer advice on how corporate activity will be perceived by different audiences, and how it will affect reputation—a perspective that no one else within the organization is qualified to give. "We act as the glue between the different national businesses," one respondent noted. "I am the ringmaster in reputation management terms. I align many different activities which are complicated by environment, culture and language."

Looking ahead, the report also considers the future role of the communication director. Given that 15 years ago, 85 percent of the companies taking part in the research did not have a communication director for Europe, it is clear that the role has evolved quickly and continues to change. Markets such as the U.K., France and Germany are now mature, and companies are expanding into emerging economies such as Poland, Russia and the Czech Republic. It is likely that we will see companies dividing the EMEA region into smaller, homogeneous subregions such as Northern Europe or grouping markets by characteristics other than geography. ●

dig deeper

Read the full report on the study of European communication directors. Copies are available from Watson Helsby Ltd., London. E-mail info@watsonhelsby.co.uk.

about the author

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