

IS COMMUNICATIONS A STRATEGIC ACTIVITY IN UK EDUCATION?

Chris Chapleo
Portsmouth Business School
University of Portsmouth
Richmond Building
Portland Street
Portsmouth PO1 3DE
UK

Tel 02392 844793

E mail Chris.Chapleo@port.ac.uk

IS COMMUNICATIONS A STRATEGIC ACTIVITY IN UK EDUCATION?

The Author

Chris Chapleo is Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Portsmouth. His research interests are in marketing in general, and branding in particular, in the education sector. As a former HE marketing practitioner he has published a number of papers on aspects of HE marketing since joining academia, and is involved in ongoing consultancy projects in the sector. Prior to education he held marketing roles in the publishing and leisure sectors, as well as on the agency side.

Abstract

This qualitative exploratory paper investigates whether communications/ public relations is regarded by opinion formers in UK education as a strategic business activity or a tactical marketing tool. It is based upon depth interviews with sixteen senior managers with strategic roles in UK Higher or Further education, or Government bodies, conducted between June and September 2004.

Findings seem to suggest that communications/ PR is ideally seen by leaders as a strategic function, but that there are limitations to this vision becoming a reality. The research goes on to offer initial conclusions on some of the issues surrounding perception, resource and implementation of strategic communications/ PR in UK education, with implications for practitioners considered.

Introduction

This exploratory study concerns the role of 'communications' in UK Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE). Its rationale is to explore whether communications/ public relations (PR) is regarded by UK HE managers as a strategic business activity or a tactical element of marketing communications, which is principally concerned with publicity.

The paper also seeks to explore whether there are particular barriers to communications/ PR being perceived as a strategic function and how best the communications profession can build effective recognition of its role at an organisational level.

This work builds on the author's earlier research on branding in HE that considered the extent to which marketing as a discipline had developed in UK HE. This work appears as papers in the Case Journal (Chapleo 2003)

Research Objectives

1. To identify the level of understanding and interpretation of the role of communications professionals among leaders of educational organisations.
2. To identify possible barriers to communications being perceived as a strategic management activity by educational leaders.
3. To identify communications skills that are most valued among education leaders.

Literature Review

Communications or Public Relations?

The terms surrounding corporate communications activity have certainly evolved. Dolphin and Fan (2000 p 100) state that “What used to trade under the name of PR is now known variously as : corporate affairs, corporate communications, and public affairs”. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper the term communications/ PR is used, especially as other cited papers may use one or both of these terms, sometimes interchangeably, although it is accepted that they may have subtly different connotations. The study in fact sought to investigate the choice of term preferred by senior managers and evaluate whether this was indicative of the view taken of its strategic input.

Role of Communications/ PR as part of Communications Mix

The relationship and respective roles of communications/PR and marketing has always been a somewhat ambiguous one (Moss, Warnaby and Thame 1996). It has been suggested that for excellence in communications/ PR activity to be achieved, it should be a separate function from marketing (Grunig 1992), and Kitchen (1996) believes that there is an academic divide between marketing and PR with some asserting that they have little connection.

Investigating the relationship between the functions, research in the UK retail sector found that in fact communications/ PR was largely perceived to be separate but overlapping with the marketing function (Moss, Warnaby and Thame 1996).

There appears to be some agreement that communications/ PR is increasing in importance and usage in many sectors of the UK economy (Kitchen 1996) and in fact the growth of what Kitchen (1996) refers to as ‘marketing public relations’ has often been at the expense of traditional forms of marketing communications.

Strategic Marketing Communications

The debate on the extent to which practitioners have fully implemented Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) continues, and some writers argue that agencies still do not utilise IMC fully (Kitchen et al 2004). Whilst overall advances have been made in integration of marketing communications activity, it has been suggested that public relation is less integrated than the other elements of marketing communications (Kitchen and Schultz 1998)

Communications/ PR in education

Comparatively little academic research seems to have been undertaken in consideration of the role of communications/ PR in the educational sector. Internal communications issues are receiving more attention (Thornhill, Lewis and Saunders 1996, Collins and Robertson 2003) but this is not generally the case for external communications. The general consensus seems to be that communications/ PR in education “is expanding in scope, concept and utilisation” and that universities currently face unprecedented communications challenges (Cutlip, Center and Broom 2006 p457), but this does not seem to have fully translated to assessment to the degree of strategic importance actually afforded to the function.

Strategic use of Communications/PR

The question of whether communications/ PR is embraced as a strategic activity is a key one. Moss, Warnaby and Thame (1996) suggested that whilst there had been an increased recognition of the need for strategically managed communications that can contribute effectively to corporate objectives among managers, this was countered by the tendency in some sectors (e.g. retail) to actually practice communications/ PR as a more tactical part of the marketing communications mix. Other writers, however, endorse a view of communications at a corporate level adopting a largely strategic role (Hoffman 1998). Dolphin and Fan (2000 p106) suggest that “20 years ago the proposition that PR might play an essential part in corporate strategy would have been

scorned” but that today communications directors have knowledge and aptitude for strategic planning.

Grunig et al (1992) sought to evaluate what constituted excellence in management of public relations and communications activity. Particularly pertinent to this work were several of the key characteristics that they suggested as contributing to excellence, in particular that public relations should be managed strategically, and that it should report directly to senior management.

It seems reasonably safe to conclude that, whilst various sectors and individual organisations view and implement communications/ PR with varying degrees of strategic importance, it has a key role to play in the strategic planning of an organisation (Dolphin and Fan 2000). This study, exploring the strategic use of communications/ PR in UK higher and further education, is therefore considered to be topical and relevant.

Methodology

For this research project there was a distinct population from whom opinions were sought; Opinion formers, leaders and senior managers in strategic UK education roles. These are generally referred to hereafter as ‘leaders’.

Qualitative research was considered appropriate for exploring leader’s views as it is diagnostic; “it seeks deeper understanding of factors..”(Chisnall 2001 p327), in particular in-depth interviews, which enable a more accurate picture of respondents’ true feelings on an issue to be deduced.

The approach of conducting interviews with opinion makers and decision takers is one adapted from a ‘Delphi technique’ which focuses on future trends, using trendsetters in any market as a barometer and can aid in “identifying the value system” (Proctor 2000 p195) These respondents were selected through what was essentially a ‘judgement sample of people used to gather insights into the phenomenon’ (De Chernatony and Riley 1998).

This type of qualitative work raises epistemological issues concerning an ‘interpretivist’ approach that seeks ‘to understand the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants’ (Bryman and Bell 2003) and it is accepted that in qualitative research of this nature boundaries are never quite as solid as a rationalist might hope (Miles and Huberman 1994, p27).

The sample size of 16 interviews, whilst appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, can be argued to offer indicative results or ‘generalisations’ that put flesh on the bones of general constructs (Miles and Huberman 1994) and it is suggested therefore that results are hopefully representative but not necessarily conclusive.

Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate, as a picture of respondent’s true feelings on an issue was desired (Chisnall 1992) and the aim was to explore the perspectives of informants in relation to the research topics (Daymon and Holloway 2004). An interview guide was used to steer the discussion, but respondents were also allowed to expand upon ideas and concepts as they wished.

Particular topics explored included : key roles, most valued skills and preferred terminology for communications/ PR, whether communications/ PR is viewed as a strategic or tactical activity, degree to which leaders felt supported by communications/ PR and whether the activity needs to enhance its profile internally.

16 interviews were agreed as an appropriate number, and were conducted between June and September 2004. The interviews lasted an average of 34 minutes. The interviewees comprised:

- 4 Higher Education Vice Chancellors/ Principals (HELs)
- 3 Further Education College Principals (FELs)

- 4 Heads of External Relations/ Marketing in HE (HEMs)
- 3 Heads of External Relations/ Marketing in FE (FEMs)
- 2 Heads of External Relations/ Marketing for Government/Education bodies (GOVs)

The interviews were transcribed and subjected to content analysis to look for trends through coding or commonalities in responses (Miles and Huberman 1994). It should be emphasised that the anonymity required by many respondents makes direct attributing of quotes difficult.

However, a number of pertinent quotes were attributed by sector category in an attempt to partly address this issue.

Whilst as empirical as possible within the sample size, this work also had an unashamedly practical slant in seeking to aid and inform the role of the communications professional, particularly those operating in the education sector.

FINDINGS

Term used to refer to ‘communications professionals’ ?

Respondents almost unanimously felt that ‘communications’ (as opposed to PR, external relations etc) was appropriate to refer to communications/PR activity. Those who enlarged upon this felt that the term ‘communications’ is “more encompassing” has “both internal and external focus” (HEL) It was also considered that the term ‘communications’ is “more acceptable to internal academic audiences” (HEL), one HE vice chancellor commenting that it was “perhaps not surprising given the cultural resistance that educational institutions can exhibit towards marketing orientation”.

What are the key roles of a ‘communications professional’ in educational organisations?

This question sought to explore the content of communications/ PR roles and evaluate their strategic role. Most leaders suggested that strategic awareness /strategic planning skills are valued, but tactical tasks often, in reality, form the bulk of many communications roles

Particular roles which were suggested by leaders as important included:

- engaging the internal community
- excellence in language
- operational media relations
- understanding organisational strategy
- reputation management and guidance
- “key role is being strategic” (HEL)

Leaders felt that these roles linked with other areas of marketing in areas such as:

- “communications supports other marketing efforts” (HEL)
- “supports other activities – it is a tool of the communications mix” (FEL)

Overall among leaders there seemed to be a sense that the role of communications is not defined..... whether it should lead or support in a more reactive way did not seem to be agreed upon

Is the role of the communications team in educational organisations primarily strategic or tactical?

This is arguably the fundamental question of the research, and suggested some interesting opinions. The consensus was that communications/ PR should be a strategic activity within UK educational institutions, but very often became largely tactical through necessity

- “ It is a vitally important activity as traditionally we haven’t done it very well as a sector – therefore we need to make it more strategic” (FEM)
- “There is a significant tactical message but the role is becoming much more about communicating an overall strategic message rather than that days press releases” (HEL)

How effectively do you feel the communications team in your organisation support the leaders’ role?

Respondents were asked to quantify this to some degree on a scale, with 1 = ‘not at all supported’ and 5 = ‘very well supported’

- 11 of the leaders answered ‘4’ or ‘5’ – that they felt ‘well supported’ or ‘very well supported’.
- 5 other answers placed their answers at ‘3’. A recurring phrase was ‘variability’ in the degree to which they felt supported. When explored, these respondents stressed that whilst the ‘communications/ PR function worked to the best of their ability, often external factors

impacted upon their ability to provide effective support. Particularly pronounced among these were felt to be:

- “High turnover of staff”(FEM)
- “Lack of resources”.....(“but this is being addressed”) (HEL)

Do you expect the area of communications/PR to increase decrease or remain consistent in importance as a function for your organisation?

This question again required respondents to quantify the extent to which they thought that communications would increase or decrease in importance for their area of education. The scale ranged from 1= decrease in importance to 5= increase greatly.

The results were a unanimous ‘increase’ with the lowest rating being 4 (4= increase) and several leaders suggesting 4.5 to 5 (5=increase greatly).

A qualifying point made here was that that it “needs to increase but, as ever, money is the issue” (HE) . In short, it may move up the strategic agenda but resource and budget issues may limit the extent to which this happens in practical terms.

What are the valued skills of a communications professional?

A number of skills were mentioned by respondents. Some of these were clearly strategic in nature, including:

- “Ability to see opportunities, and to realise how these fit with the mission” (FEM).
- “breadth of capacity – ability to take on anything” (HEM)

Overall, whilst strategic communications activity was seen as important overall, it was interesting that when discussing specific valued skills there was a tendency to cite more tactical skills rather than the above strategic skills, mentioned by approximately half the sample.

The skills valued that were deemed to be of a more tactical nature included:

- ability to write well
- speed of response
- proactivity
- knowledge of industry

A number of respondents also cited personal qualities that they considered valuable among communications professionals

- ‘gravitas’ (also described as ‘political sensitivity’ /‘trust’) ; the ability to win the respect of colleagues at all levels.... particularly important in education
- “emotional intelligence” – “recognise the story, its importance and the audience “(FEM)
- good listening skills

What can be done to enhance the profile and effectiveness of communications professionals in educational organisations?

This was considered by several respondents to be a significant and particularly interesting question. The general consensus was that communications needed to increase its profile as a strategic activity and this was evidenced by particular comments including:

- Professionalism –more training and professional accreditation for communications generally
- The IPR should actively engage in raising the profile of the profession
- Monitor and publicise effectiveness of activity
- “Assist the professionals in the organisation in getting their messages out – work with them” (HEL)
- “Network continually in the organisation” (HEM)

- “Assertiveness training for PR people!” (Gov)
- “Seize your moment”; “knowing and acting upon the particular moment when communication is absolutely critical to success or failure e.g. a merger” (HEM)
- Interestingly, however, the opinion that communications needed to increase its ‘strategic profile’ was not uniformly the case, with 2 FE leaders (FELs) suggesting that it was “not necessary to enhance profile as the profile of communications is already high and it is accorded sufficient ‘weight’”.

Conclusions

This research, by nature of its methodology and sample, is exploratory in nature and therefore any conclusions at this stage may be indicative rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, a number of interesting and cohesive points became apparent through content analysis:

- Leaders seem aware that communications needs to play a strategic role in modern education
- It is often ‘part strategic, part tactical’ in reality
- Leaders also concede that ‘communications activity’ is often under resourced and therefore becomes more tactical than is desirable
- Consensus among leaders that communications/ PR activity is likely to increase in importance
- Leaders value higher level, strategic skills greatly but need these underpinned by sharp end delivery skills such as ‘seeing media opportunities’ or ‘writing skills’
- Most leaders think communications as an organisational function needs to continue to raise its profile (through accreditation, professionalism and proving worth with internal stakeholder groups)
- Some think that its importance is already accepted and that it has ‘strategic clout’
- The issue of ‘how to quantify effectiveness’ was raised. As one leader stated “its so much more than just a cuttings book” (FEL).

Further Research

This research, by nature of its methodology and sample, is exploratory in nature. The topic would benefit from larger scale quantitative testing, underpinned by the findings of this initial work. In particular, the author considers that several areas require further exploration:

- The degree to which communications/ PR has a strategic role in education reflects or follows wider trends in marketing as an organisational function.
- Role and need for integration of communications activity with marketing activities and departments
- To further understand the role of communications in the changing agendas of universities (e.g. In light of factors such as differential fees and competition, brand differentiation, changing students perceptions)

Implications for practice – Summary Statement

This research has a practical focus and several key implications for communications/ PR professionals are noteworthy:

1. It is encouraging for practitioners that leaders in both HE and FE seem to be aware that communications/ PR needs to be viewed as a strategic activity. They also seem to concur that its importance will continue to grow.
2. This is tempered by resource issues that often necessitate it operating at a largely tactical level.
3. Some leaders already consider that it has ‘taken its place at the top table’ and does not need its profile raising. Most, however, believe that consideration needs to be given to how best to continue to raise the internal profile of communications/ PR as a strategic activity, as well as the challenge of demonstrating its worth through quantifiable results on occasion.

Practitioners would benefit from further research into:

- What are the precise communications skill-sets needed by communications professionals for their evolving modern roles
- How communications can continue to ‘take its place at the top table’; how it can increase its acceptance as a strategic function in education.

Bibliography

- Chapleo C (2003) "The Real Impact of Integrated Marketing Communications on Colleges and Universities", *Case International Journal of Educational Advancement*, Vol.3, No.2, pp.240-253
- Chisnall P (1992) *Marketing Research*, McGraw Hill, Maidenhead, UK p 159
- Chisnall P (2001), *Marketing Research*, McGraw Hill, Maidenhead, UK. p 195
- Collins A. and M. Robertson (2003) "Issues in marketing enterprise initiatives within a university culture and framework", *Education and Training*, Vol.45, No.6, pp.317-323
- Cutlip, S.M, A.H. Center and G.M. Broom (2006), *Effective Public Relations*, Pearson, NJ, USA.
- Dolphin, R. and Y.Fan, (2000) "Is corporate communications a strategic function?", *Management Decision*, Vol.38, No. 2, pp 99-107
- Grunig J.E., (1992) *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, USA.
- Hoffman L., (1998) "Strategic PR means accountable PR", *Technology Marketing Intelligence*, Vol.18, No.4.
- Kitchen P.J.,(1996) "Public Relations in the promotional mix : a three phase analysis", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, Vol.14. No.2, pp. 5-12
- Kitchen P.J. and D.E. Schultz (1998) "IMC: a UK ad agency perspective", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp 465-485
- Kitchen, P.J., D.E. Schultz, I.Kim, D.Han and T.Li (2004) "Will agencies ever "get" (or understand) IMC?", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 38, No.11/12. pp1417-1436.
- Moss D, G Warnaby and L Thame (1996) "Tactical Publicity or strategic relationship management? An exploratory investigation of the role of public relations in the UK retail sector", *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 30, No 12 , pp.69-84.
- Proctor (2000), *Essentials of Marketing Research*, Pearson, London Page Quote Page 327
- Thornhill A., P.Lewis and M.N.K. Saunders (1996) "The role of employee communication in achieving commitment and quality in higher education", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.12-20
-