

How PR Generates Brand Advocates by Collaborating With Internal Communications

By Keerti Baker

Times have changed for public relations. Formerly categorized as purely an external communication tool, the power of PR has become recognized as a valuable asset to any organization's internal communications strategy. Legacy views of PR are too narrow for where organizations and communications have evolved to today. PR should no longer be equated to press releases and external media. PR has grown to support and, at times, lead on internal communications, a function that used to rest predominantly under the remit of human resources departments.

With organizational structures and internal teams becoming more complex, the need for clearer, timely and proactive internal communication has risen. Employees not only need to be kept informed, but also need to be positively engaged with. 21st-century living and its hectic pace have also seen an increase in the trend of home or remote working. This increases the need for employees in satellite offices and employees who work remotely to feel that they are part of the wider team and not isolated.

Tasks that sit within the HR function of an organization can be more effectively accomplished by collaborating with the proven tactics and methods of PR. Although there is a line between PR and HR functions, it is getting blurrier with time, with several aspects of internal communications crossing over to benefit from what PR can offer.

Given the discipline's distinct characteristics and various practical applications over the years, it is not a surprise that PR has evolved to play a vital role in internal communications. Here are some of the reasons why PR works so well to complement internal communications:

1. **Strategy:** PR's strategic approach to communication means that internal messages are drafted to reflect the organization's business objectives as well as objectives set by HR personnel. For instance, if the organization's goal is to increase market share in a particular product category, employees are informed of any progress or otherwise. Similarly, if the HR department has been tasked to reach particular employee demographics or roll out messages about any internal employee schemes, a strategic process is essential to ensure there is a plan of what messages need to be communicated to which audiences and when. In many instances, internal communication can solely become a task that is responsive to an internal occurrence. While necessary, this type of reactive communication should not be the driving reason behind internal communications. Having a proactive approach similar to that which is used by PR will ensure that both reactive and proactive messages are communicated in a timely manner to meet strategic objectives.

Who Owns Internal Communications?

As the lines between PR and HR continue to blur, the evergreen question most communications professionals are faced with is: "Where does the responsibility for internal communications sit?"

Although internal employee relationship management is an HR function, the specialty of communicating falls to PR professionals. They have a constant task of communicating an organization's news to external audiences and have devised strategies, techniques and methods to look after multiple projects and an ever-expanding workload that now includes digital platforms. Specifically, PR has established itself as a discipline that engages with diverse audiences to deliver complex messages in a simplified manner. For internal communications to be used to its best potential, HR and PR must work in partnership to deliver composed messages in a strategic way and ensure they are synergized across the organization, its teams and appropriate communication channels.

PR's role in engaging, motivating and structuring internal communication plans is only complementary to the overall communication objectives that are set in conjunction with HR's goals.

These goals should wholly align with the organization's overall goals for internal communication, whether it is streamlining messages, eliminating internal silos or creating a strong employee culture.

HR may continue as the logical custodians of employee relations, but a central communication department with PR principles and/or PR professionals at its core will serve to enhance internal communications. While internal communications always will be a democratic discipline in its own right—one that is owned in varying degrees by all employees—the true guardians and leaders of internal communications are CEOs and senior managers. If the fundamental value of PR's role in internal communication is cascaded from the top down, the task of collaborating and engaging becomes easier.

2. **Content:** Content really is king and there isn't another discipline that comes close to generating as interesting, motivating and engaging content as PR does. With a core function of spotting angles and stories and generating positive goodwill, PR always will reign supreme when it comes to content generation. For internal communicators, content droughts hamper the most earnest of efforts and campaigns, but this characteristic of PR not only plugs the gap, but also urges new ideas by employees, which in turn enables smarter content planning.
3. **Timing:** Employees need to be communicated with in a timely manner. There is nothing worse than finding out a crucial piece of internal news in the office canteen or near the water cooler. It leads to unwanted segregation amongst teams, a lack of team spirit and a disjointed workforce. PR's characteristic of meeting press and copy deadlines enables internal communications to follow a clear process to communicate messages. Internal communications should consider internal approval processes and what cascade levels are in place to reach all employees. Furthermore, all relevant communication channels should be used to keep messages consistent to reach different generations of employees. PR's timing and methodical approach can significantly aid with this.
4. **Tone:** Different communication channels, such as internal newsletters or memos, the intranet, posters, internal

announcements and emails, should have a consistent tone that reflects the organization and its brand. Consistent tone and the proverbial “house style” can often be overlooked in IC. It is very underrated compared to the importance of meeting deadlines and broadcasting internal messages. PR pros, whether in agency or in-house roles, are well versed in juggling multiple projects and clients with their own tones and house styles. The PR function can define the tone of IC messages whether they are informal, corporate, laid back, passionate or impassive, and ensures they are consistently delivered in a professional manner.

5. **Quality:** In many instances, IC can focus on the quantity of messages and their frequency, as internal communicators are tasked with regular employee engagement. PR can balance this requirement by ensuring that the quality of messages is enhanced with interesting, relatable and topical messages. While specific and frequent messages have to be part of the overall internal communication plan, creative and interesting internal stories with news about employees captures the attention of different ages and levels of employees. PR can lend personality, culture and voice to the internal communications of an organization.
6. **Mediums:** IC needs to consider what channels employees use to access information. Is it permission-based or is it mandatory, i.e. can employees opt in to receive information, or are there certain announcements or messages that need to reach them? Using PR planning methods can ensure IC messages reach all intended audiences via all relevant

mediums, such as: newsletters, the company intranet, emails, posters, personnel briefings, text messages and internal social networks like **Yammer**. PR's ethos and experience in dealing with multiple audiences and media perfectly equips it to ensure messages are consistent across applicable channels to reach all internal audiences.

7. **Embargoes:** At times, internal news and announcements precede the release of external news. PR's strict embargo procedures lend valuable experience to IC. This avoids any awkward or embarrassing situations where employees share anything confidential with external media or clients. Access to social media and networks also can prove challenging when looking to maintain control over what employees can share externally. PR's method of defining clear procedures and a chain of internal command can clarify any ambiguity in this matter so employees know whom to direct any sensitive inquiries to.

The very nature of PR and PR professionals facilitates easy two-way communication and relationship building to encourage dialogue between employees and management.

Theory vs. Practice

Theory and practice can be two very different truths. This is especially so when it comes to the evolution of PR as a strategic business partner to internal communications and HR. Theoretically, HR and PR operate as separate functions in many organizations, but in reality, their outputs are integrated and converge on almost a daily basis. The line between HR

and PR is becoming an increasingly blurry one.

PR can help meet internal communication objectives, making the influential co-relation between HR and PR apparent with the following examples:

1. Increasing employee morale

PR can work with different departments to build internal relationships with stakeholders and business units. As an unbiased third party, the PR function is not privy to any HR-related matters or confidential employee matters. For the task at hand, it is only concerned with how internal relationships can be formed and built upon to achieve the communication objective. The very nature of PR and PR professionals facilitates easy two-way communication and relationship building to encourage dialogue between employees and management.

PR can strategically partner with HR initiatives to support increasing staff morale. First, PR can play a useful role in identifying opportunities to “shout about” different stories and news within the organization. Second, PR can generate a positive voice to enhance organizational culture, internally broadcast news about teams and colleagues and help keep people informed. By generating a positive buzz and vibe, PR can not only increase staff morale, but also encourage future participation from teams that would like to get their news known to the wider organization.

Sensitive news can also be viewed differently by employees when it is sent out by HR as opposed to it being sent out from a central communications team driven by PR. PR gives IC messages a consistent and professional tone, especially where difficult messages need to be cascaded across an organization.

2. Engaging with different tiers of employees

One of the biggest challenges facing IC is the engagement of stakeholders and team members in each level of the organization. PR can build long-term relationships and bridge potential gaps with teams and colleagues who are perhaps known to work behind the scenes and may feel less involved with the organization.

PR can identify and communicate the value added by each tier in an organization. A structured approach ensures all departments and service levels are considered for internal communication. Each team should be given the opportunity to speak to the wider organization via IC. This extends to senior leaders within the organization who are hugely influential in providing direction to employees, increasing morale and motivating teams. PR also acts as a valuable communication agent between senior management to refine, soften and tweak internal messages and deliver them in the desired manner. Consistency of messages not only establishes a house style that is welcomed by employees, but also builds trust.

3. Reaching all employees

Each organization is different and employees prefer receiving information in different ways. There are employees who don't log on to the company intranet unless there is need to reference a particular document, and then there are others who prefer to check the intranet for any company news before they begin their day. The point is that PR's approach to utilizing all elements of the communications mix will serve IC well when it comes to reaching different generations of employees.

IC can adopt PR's principles in following a defined format and a checklist approach to ensure all communication channels are updated with IC messages to reach the entire employee demographic.

How PR Empowers IC

When applied to IC, the tried-and-tested principles and practices of PR enhance the delivery of messages. It works in two ways, by connecting with employees and letting employees connect with the organization's values and goals. This alignment results in an enviable organizational culture where employees feel appreciated, listened to and valued.

Generating content from within the organization gives employees a voice and empowers them to share what they have achieved. When focus is shifted onto employees, they become more open to receiving internal news about themselves, their teams and people they work with. As a result, any barriers to receiving and absorbing IC messages can be removed and employees become more receptive to messages delivered by the organization.

This powerful two-way traffic of information can benefit any organization as employees become clearer on what role they play in an organization's success, what the organization's goals are, what the brand stands for and

what values and culture they are part of.

PR and Internal Brand Advocates

Ultimately, the success of internal communication is shown when employees become strong brand advocates of their own accord. This organic process is one that happens over time. PR partners with IC to educate employees with key messages so they, in turn, become informed brand champions. This internal influx of information and motivation empowers employees to become positive external advocates when required. The reputation of an organization always can be measured by how happy its employees are to work there. This positive reiteration can be achieved by internal communications that is empowered by the strong working practices of PR. ■

*Keerti Baker is media and communications manager, VOW Europe (Part of EVO Group).
@Keertibaker*