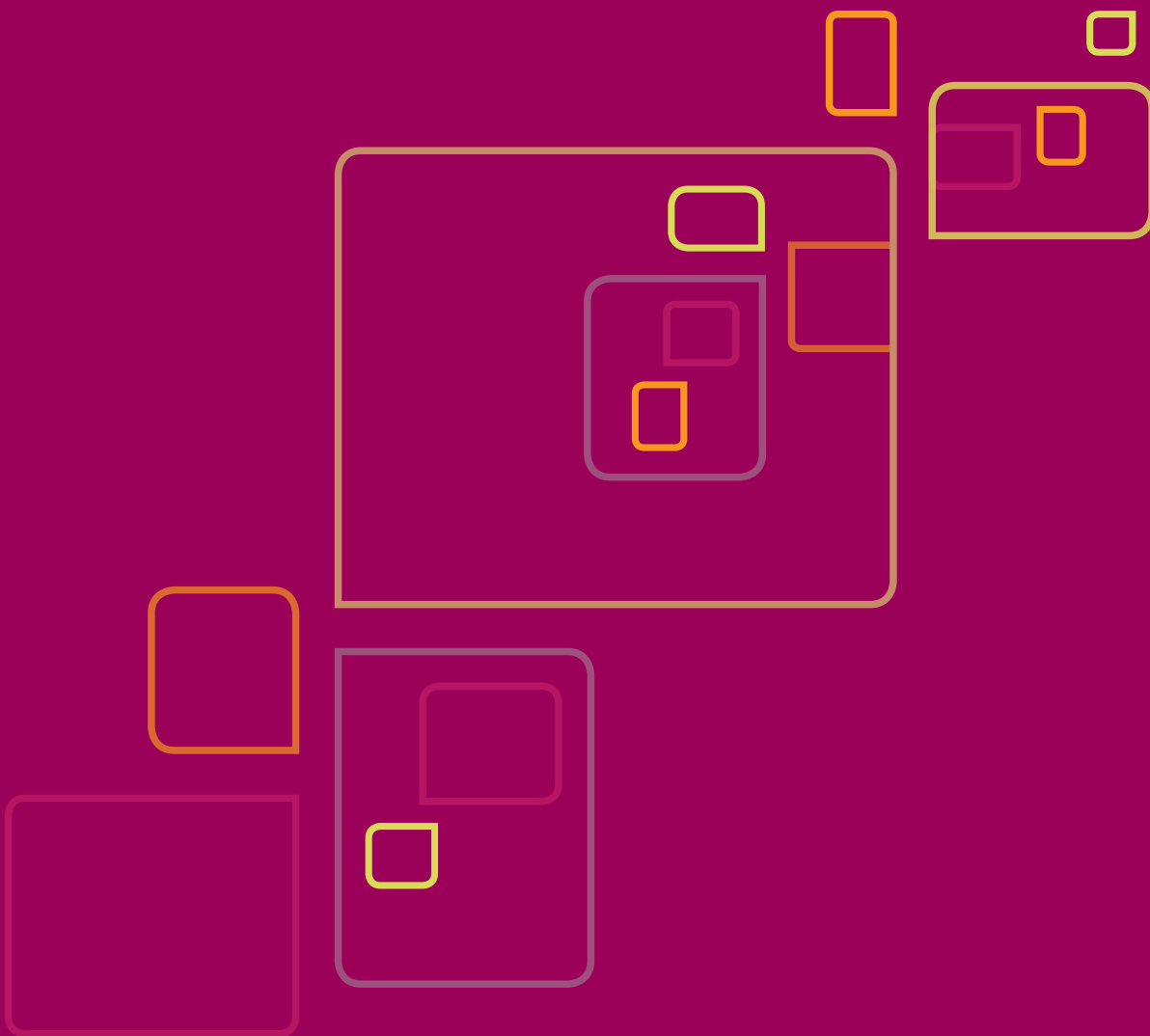




# SURVEY of senior communications executives

## Maximizing the Value of Communication





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We recently solicited the perspectives of more than 30 senior communications executives on the evolving role communications plays within their organizations and the world around us.

We could not have asked for more in return. The communicators we talked to were generous with their time, candid with their comments and insightful with regard to the challenges they face on a daily – even minute-to-minute – basis.

They represent a diverse range of organizations and industries and a broad array of views. Yet we found tremendous commonality and consensus on the opportunity at hand for communications to add value and rise as a strategic priority – along with broad agreement that doing so is not an easy task.

While the concepts we heard are consistent with much of what we read elsewhere, what we found most interesting was the nuance and trajectory. Clearly, even some of the most seasoned communications professionals feel unable to keep up their knowledge with changing platforms and practices, and to apply adequate resources for technology and staff to generate content.

We're pleased to share highlights of our conversations (each of us handled about half), including a sampling of verbatim comments. We think you'll find – as we did – that we're all in this together.

To all those who took the time to talk to us, thank you for your candor and your insights. We look forward to continuing the dialogue.

Scott Chaikin

Chas Withers



## Who We Talked With

During the fourth quarter of 2014, we talked with more than **30 senior communications executives** representing business-to-business and business-to-consumer companies ranging from under **\$1 billion** to more than **\$100 billion** in revenues, plus civic organizations, professional services firms and health care institutions. Participants were mostly senior communicators, with a mix of responsibilities for investor relations, marketing communications and crisis communications. Their staffs range from “**what staff?**” to well-oiled organizations of **more than 100 people**.



## BROAD STROKES

### Major Themes and Trends

The opportunity is out there. Unfortunately, the resources may not be.

That’s the challenge these days for the senior communicators we spoke with, many of whom seem to feel like the proverbial one-armed paperhanger. On the one hand, they are increasingly earning a “place at the table” and being called upon to help shape and drive organizational strategy through consistent messaging across multiple channels. On the other, they are typically forced to do more with less, handcuffed by stagnant or eroded budgets, often understaffed and more overwhelmed than ever by the need to continually prioritize on the fly.

While there’s progress on the whole, it’s not universal. Constant triage has become a way of life. They recognize that while they can’t *do* everything, they need to at least *get to* everything. Still, they are deathly afraid they’ll miss something as a result.

...understaffed and more overwhelmed than ever

Some communicators at least enjoy an environment where senior leadership recognizes the value of communications. (“My CEO sees communications as one of his two or three biggest priorities,” one of the lucky ones told us.) Others work for management that sees them as merely a tactical function and cost center. (“I’ve been trying for three years to get funding for a low-level person for our department,” lamented one of the not-so-lucky. “It’s clearly just not important to them.”) In both cases, however, they find recruiting and keeping talented people to be one of their biggest challenges, even when budget is not an issue.

...can’t *do* everything,  
...need to at least *get to* everything.



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At the same time, the art and practice of communications is changing all around them:

- » **Globalization and technology** have added to an already frenetic pace (As one veteran put it, “There is only one time zone worldwide for us, and it’s *now*.”), and communicators are scrambling to adapt.
- » **In a world** where “the story used to be what we said about ourselves – now it’s what is said by others while we’re out of the room,” many candidly confess that they are not yet sure how to fully harness social media and digital technologies to their organization’s advantage.
- » **With the general exception** of those in large B2C organizations, most are hard-pressed to find the resources to keep even the most basic technology tools, such as websites and intranets, up to date and relevant.

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“There is only one time zone worldwide for us, and it’s *now*.”

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On top of it all, they are facing increasing challenges to demonstrate that they are delivering bang for the organization’s bucks. They grudgingly recognize the growing role of the procurement department and understand the increasing importance of ROI as a corporate priority. However, they struggle with how to measure success and are asking their partners to help derive solutions. Yet while some organizations quantify success in terms of stock price, employee engagement scores and similar metrics, others take the view that “We’re about tomorrow. Measuring yesterday doesn’t do anything for us.”

For many of these communicators, our conversation represented an opportunity to pause and reflect on the profession they chose and the changing role they play in their organization. Indeed, the task can seem thankless and a communicator can be left at times with the feeling that “we’re completely underwater.” But through it all, most still thrive on their “front-row seat for some very interesting stuff “ and take tremendous pride in making their organization look great to its most important audiences.

And whatever they may feel when things are at their toughest, they can take some comfort in a certain communicator camaraderie and know that they are not alone.

...most still thrive on their “front-row seat for some very interesting stuff “ and take tremendous pride in making their organization look great to its most important audiences.

## DRILLING DOWN

### Highlights of Responses and Selected Verbatims



#### ***What has changed most about your function in the last three to five years?***

- Speed – everything is real time – expectations are crazy
- Less time for strategic thinking
- Advent of digital and all related issues; social channels – has changed everything
- Audience fragmentation and proliferation
- Difficulty in prioritization, exacerbated by integration of functions
- Higher degree of risk/reward than ever before
- Less control of the message – signaling shift to owned media
- Analytics
- Devolution of traditional media

“Need to crack media relations code in a digital world.”



#### ***How will your group and its activities be different three to five years from now?***

- Everyone will have a voice; how do we manage that dynamic?
- Demographic/cultural/generational attitude changes accelerating
- *“Need to crack media relations code in a digital world”*
- Earned more powerful than owned or paid; measurement is huge
- Not possible to operate in silos anymore – one landscape
- Mobile as a priority – *“You’re way behind if you’re not pursuing.”*
- Have to be more and more strategic – not tactical – and we’re not being successful
- Have to figure out what really matters with cluttered landscape
- More technology interwoven – have to adapt and embrace



***What accomplishment would you consider a home run over the next 18 months?***

- Website redo, revise, overhaul (and intranet, IR websites)
- Better control on social and digital channels
- Helping leadership find voice and message
- Sharpen brand, reputation, image and message
- Proving business case to hire; get more resources
- Crisis plan rollout and training
- Educate internally on ROI, value and worth
- Have internal communications play more of a role on culture and attitude

“...create a ‘stop doing and start thinking’ mentality.”



***How could you be a hero to your senior leadership? To your people?***

- Show real impact on the business bottom line, either to the upside or by protecting downside risk
- Measurable results; help leadership attain stated goals
- Ensuring a clear, consistent message with inside and outside audiences
- Proactivity vs. reactivity – knowing the business drivers to be anticipatory
- Make my CEO look good; raise our profile as a superior organization
- For internals: Win more resources, inspire passion, show support, help them improve and move forward, protect them, “*create a ‘stop doing and start thinking’ mentality*”



***How do you measure success for your team? How does leadership score success for your group?***

- Quarterly scorecard; employee engagement scores; metrics across all fields (KPIs, MBOs); though there is also this: *“We’re about tomorrow. Measuring yesterday doesn’t do anything for us.”*
- Empirical success against peers; MR scoring
- Wow-factor projects: Used to dismiss, but they help us gain visibility
- Quantifiable success with key audiences (IR, PR, customers)
- Figuring out new challenges (social) and having a strategic disposition on how to implement
- Keeping us out of the news can be as much of a win as a big story
- Pre-planning and preparation; leveraging best practices across org
- Stock price appreciation – *“My CEO loves me when we’re up five dollars.”*

“We’re about tomorrow. Measuring yesterday doesn’t do anything for us.”



***How could you add additional meaningful value? What gets in the way?***

- Have to get a better feel for next-stage technology tools and how they can help us
- Impediments are almost purely time/staff/money – *“We just don’t have the resources to go above and beyond.”*
- Culminating a shift from defense to offense, and from tactical to strategic
- Thinking outside traditional parameters – it’s where outsiders can be very helpful
- *“Create better stories, do better storytelling, create more distribution, further extend our message.”*
- Sharpen focus on extraneous activities that don’t produce and eliminate them



### ***What keeps you up most at night?***

- Reputation and brand can be forever damaged in an instant
- *“Afraid I’m missing something”* – Can’t keep up with developments
- Managing volume – *“We’re completely underwater.”*
- Dearth of real journalism, and how anyone with a keyboard is a reporter
- Not doing enough to reach internal audiences the right way
- Need more people to understand value of what we do, not just activities
- *“My CEO keeps me up – He calls me during the night all the time.”*
- *“How does my team show up strategically? It really worries me*

“We’re completely underwater.”



### ***Are there two or three areas where you wish you and your group had more knowledge, insight or capability?***

- Business savvy and expertise; need more capability
- Social, social, social – almost everybody
- Market intelligence and insight
- Writing talent
- Bandwidth to do the things outside daily ritual
- Big data – how to leverage and sort through in a practical way
- Content marketing
- Better media relations packaging and targeting





***What makes you proudest of your team? What are the most important contributions your group can make?***

- Hard work, care deeply about the organization and our people
- Being strategists that can help shape winning initiatives and counsel internals on programs that support business goals
- Bring concepts to practical fruition
- Smart stewards of resources focused on ROI
- When new ideas are brought to the forefront
- Make our organization look great to its most important audiences
- *“How we’ve moved the needle regarding the value of communications”*

“My CEO sees communications as one of his two or three biggest priorities.”

***How does your senior leadership team think about corporate communications? Do they see it as a strategic priority?***

- See it as an emerging corporate asset that will only grow in importance going forward – *“My CEO sees communications as one of his two or three biggest priorities.”*

**VS.**

- See it as a tactical function and cost center – *“I’ve been trying for three years to get funding for a low-level person for our department. It’s clearly just not important to them.”*
- Expect the function to demonstrate its worth just like anything else in operations
- Understand the ties between brand, stock price, winning market and mind share



**What gets you most excited and engaged about your job?**

- Projects and programs that will make a difference and leave the company in a better spot
- Enjoy controversy and the adrenaline of uncertainty
- Knowing that tomorrow isn't clear – and we have to figure it out
- Innovation – knowing that the job may be very different in five years
- Work for a fantastic company and have a chance to help our employees appreciate that fact
- *“I've got a front-row seat for some very interesting stuff.”*
- Helping my CEO leave a great legacy
- Love creative, innovative problem-solving

“I’ve got a front-row seat for some very interesting stuff.”



**What are the most important contributions an outside resource can make?  
Are there elements of those relationships that could be improved?**

- Knowing our business extremely well, which translates to great counsel, ideas and valuable perspective – also understand our culture and personality
- Exposing us to new trends, best practices from other clients or companies (personal trainer analogy)
- Media relations relationships
- Creativity, design and visual capabilities – technical expertise
- More listening, less talking, and great writing is a must
- Capability under duress – *“Without waffling, either. I need confident, decisive partners.”*
- Knowledge not easily found elsewhere – unique insight and can challenge us

**Interested in a conversation? Contact us today.**



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