

Managing reputation in a “siloe” media environment. Reporting to the CEO (or not). Communications planning/business planning linkages.

Here are some perspectives that inform every search we undertake and reflect the trends that we are monitoring on a regular basis.

They’re based on a landmark study we conducted for a corporate client—based on 30-minute in-person telephone interviews with “Chief Communications Officers” at a selection of primarily Fortune 50 companies. Topics included internal and external communications challenges, reporting relationships, staff size, functional coverage, communications planning/business strategy linkages, SBU communications support, and CCO background. With the permission of our client, here are some brief “Insights and Takeaways” from our conversations with members of that small but influential group.

INSIGHT:

More than half of the CCOs had “digital communications” in their functional portfolios—and “assessing, managing, and leveraging the impact of social media” emerged as the group’s most significant current communications challenge.

TAKEAWAY:

In aggregate, “social media” has evolved as the key driver of “integrated communications” and is perhaps most responsible for the blurring of the traditional lines between advertising/marketing and corporate communications/public relations. In this scenario, a broad challenge has emerged for the communications professional: How does an organization “manage” its reputation (or issues related to it) in a “siloe” media environment in which stakeholders may gravitate toward media that reinforce the opinions they already have? And who in the organization will be tasked to lead this effort?

INSIGHT:

The majority of CCOs in the sample were responsible for developing an annual (and sometimes multi-year) strategic communications plan to support corporate and business unit/operating company objectives.

TAKEAWAY:

This brings accountability to the corporate communications function and positions it, at least in these organizations, as a potential contributor to corporate success.

INSIGHT:

Nearly half of the CCOs in the survey reported to the CEO. And they reported to the CEO more frequently than to any other corporate officer. In only two cases was the person who didn’t report to the CEO more than one reporting level away.

TAKEAWAY:

Whether or not the CCO reports to the CEO has been, and will continue to be, the focus of ongoing discussion. (Anecdotally, the feeling among communications

professionals favors reporting to the CEO.) But access to the CEO, and quality of that access, is a consideration that is less often explored and perhaps should be. Said one respondent from a “FORTUNE 10” company who didn’t report to the CEO: “It works for us.” That being said, there is still the question: Regardless of the reporting relationship, what are the dynamics involved in the CCO obtaining that sought after “seat at the table” if she or he doesn’t have it already?

INSIGHT:

The CCO reported to a Chief Marketing Officer or a C-suite executive whose title includes “marketing,” with the second most frequency.

TAKEAWAY:

In many larger corporations (particularly market-facing ones), we will likely see the eventual intersection of the traditional roles of corporate communications and corporate marketing—with the result that the most senior “communications” position could be assumed by a professional from either discipline. In fact, two of our CCO respondents transitioned into Chief Marketing Officer roles (including oversight for corporate communications) after our study was conducted.

TAKEAWAY UPDATE:

One of the above Chief Marketing Officers moved to another organization to assume a CCO role. The vacant CMO role was filled by a person from outside the company with a marketing background. “Corporate Communications” reported to that individual.

INSIGHT:

Relevant to the above, almost half of CCOs had “integrated communications” in their portfolios. This included corporate advertising, corporate-branded product advertising, issue advertising, and “brand stewardship.”

TAKEAWAY:

Since this is a “snapshot,” it is difficult to call a trend. But , driven by the increasing complexity of the marketplace, it projects a potentially broadened future role for the CCO.

INSIGHT:

Most Chief Communications Officers hailed from educational backgrounds in journalism or mass communications. Three held MBAs. One possessed a law degree and a Masters degree in public policy (Both from Harvard University).

INSIGHT UPDATE:

To update this insight, we recently conducted a “real time” survey targeting each of the 50 largest companies in the 2015 “FORTUNE 500” —identifying the most senior executives with “Communications” in their functional portfolios and then determining their educational backgrounds. We found that six of the executives have Masters degrees in business or a related field. Four possessed law degrees. And one had an advanced degrees in communications or (MS and Doctorate.) At the baccalaureate level, journalism/communications still accounts for the highest

proportion of undergraduate degrees—followed closely by political science and English.

TAKEAWAY:

With the earlier sample, educational background was probably less important than the “intellectual horsepower,” professional experience, records of accomplishment, and organizational credibility each respondent brought to the task at hand. But the business environment is becoming more complex and regulated—and communications more integrated. In this scenario, an advanced degree (particularly an MBA) will likely be a valuable asset for aspiring CCOs as they work with internal partners in a diversity of functions— finance, marketing, human resources, regulatory affairs, technology management, R&D, engineering, legal, environmental sustainability, and corporate social responsibility — to face increasingly inter-related and complicated business and communications challenges.

Time permitting, and with a willing partner, we hope to periodically update this study.