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Functional silos, integration & encroachment in internal communication

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ABSTRACT

Some companies and organizations are pursuing joint planning and coordination between internal and external communicators; however, functional silos still appear to be a barrier and concern. Through in-depth interviews with 28 communication executives working in the United States, this study provides evidence that dual oversight of external and internal communication by a senior executive from marketing or corporate communication appears to be a good way to reduce functional silos, but the arrangement can weaken the power and influence of internal communicators. Recommendations and implications for practice are provided.

1. Introduction

Some employers are embracing an integrated approach to internal communication, which involves treating employees as just another stakeholder in communication campaigns rather than assigning dedicated employees to internal communication (Neill, 2015). If the practice is widespread, the trend would represent a shift compared to earlier research (Dolphin, 2005), which reported the creation of independent internal communication departments. Despite the fact there has been much research on integrated marketing communication, Smith (2013b) pointed out there is a lack of research in the area of internal relations and IMC, and he added that while IMC tends to be considered an “external process, it begins internally” as it involves cooperation between multiple communication disciplines (p. 511). Smith and Place (2013) pointed out that the terms integrated communication and integrated marketing communication (IMC) are used interchangeably by some scholars. However, they perceived IMC to be more marketing centric, or focused on consistent messaging and channels, and integrated communication as dedicated to cross-functional coordination and decision-making (Smith & Place, 2013). Because IMC is more commonly used by the original scholars who first discussed the concept (Duncan, Caywood, & Newsom, 1993) and is still used today we will use IMC to refer to the practice of integrating communication efforts.

This new integrated approach may be due to limited resources, but it also may be based on a perception of the blurring of audiences. Employees often read information about their organization from external sources such as the media and external social media channels as well as internal communication channels. The integrated approach also may be due to the push to create consistent messaging both internally and externally (Dolphin, 2005; Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014).

While the goals of integrated marketing communication are honorable, it may lead to encroachment by external communicators, such as public relations, marketing or advertising practitioners, which could result in the concerns of employees not being given as high of a priority, a mistake Kelly (1993) referred to as “environmental blinders” in the context of encroachment that was occurring between public relations and fund-raising in nonprofit agencies (p. 353). Functional encroachment or imperialism involves “one

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department intruding on the activities traditionally in the domain of the other” (Lauzen, 1991, p. 245) and structural encroachment refers to assigning someone from outside a discipline to manage the function, which also diminishes the department’s influence regarding policy decisions (Dozier, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not companies are making integrated marketing communication a priority and if so, how that is impacting their attention to internal communication. More specifically, we looked at how the internal communication function is structured in companies and organizations with regional and global offices, and how that impacts the power and influence of internal communication. To examine these issues, 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with communication executives working at companies listed among the Fortune 500 as well as other well-known companies and organizations.

2. Literature review

As a theoretical framework, the study began with an examination of stakeholder theory. Next, an examination of previous research regarding internal communication and integrated marketing communication are discussed, followed by an examination of theories regarding organizational power and encroachment. Finally, theories related to structure and challenges associated with managing internal communication globally were consulted.

2.1. Stakeholder theory

Stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46), those who have a “contract, expressed or implied, between them and the firm,” and who may experience harm or benefit as a “result of the firm’s actions or inactions” (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 85). All the aforementioned criteria are applicable to employees. However, several scholars (Smith, Drumwright, & Gentile, 2010) have questioned how much priority external communication such as marketing executives give to stakeholders beyond customers such as employees, and they referred to this tendency as the “new marketing myopia” (p. 2). Furthermore, Smith (2013b) claimed marketing’s approach to stakeholders tends to be “unidirectional and sales-focused” rather than focused on developing relationships (p. 509). Despite these criticisms, other scholars have described a “marketing orientation” that has evolved and led to the expansion of the “notion of the ‘consumer’ to include families, friends, and sometimes even society” (Cheney & Christensen, 2004, p. 516). Other terms used to describe this transformation include relationship marketing or 30R, which refers to 30 relationships that are crucial for companies and organizations (Gummesson, 1997). However, the purpose of building and maintaining these relationships is based on profit or economic goals (Gronroos, 1997). Others have suggested that all stakeholders have intrinsic value (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Jones & Wicks, 1999; Sayil, Donmaz, Simsek, & Akyol, 2016), and “the corporation has duties to others, even in the absence of potential benefits” (Gibson, 2000, p. 248). Consistent with the relationship marketing perspective, others view employees as internal customers, as channels of delivery of services for customers (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Gronroos, 1997; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), or brand ambassadors (Dolphin, 2005; Kim & Rhee, 2011). Based on these perspectives, employees would be a valuable partner in integrated marketing communication campaigns.

More and more companies and organizations are realizing employees should not be overlooked as stakeholders, because their degree of engagement is tied to key business outcomes such as profitability and customer satisfaction (Gallup, 2013a). Engagement is about motivating the “discretionary effort exhibited by employees,” (Saks, 2006, p. 601) or their willingness to go beyond the minimal efforts required to keep their jobs. Scholars have conceptualized engagement as being comprised of three components: trait engagement, referring to employees with a positive view on life and work; psychological state engagement, which is associated with job satisfaction, commitment and involvement; and behavioral engagement, which includes components such as role expansion and personal initiative (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

In contrast, the costs associated with poor employee relations are estimated at \$450 to \$550 billion a year including absenteeism, labor grievances, production interruptions, repair and warranty expenses, and employees who are disengaged or underperforming (Gallup, 2013b; Lloyd, 2002; Saks, 2006). Effective internal communication may influence engagement and commitment, but poor communication can lead to disengagement (Welch, 2011).

Internal communication can include routine communication with existing employees through a range of channels including face-to-face, company newsletters, and email to provide information about new employees or promotions, updates regarding benefit programs, and recognize individual contributions and achievements (Argenti, 1998; Cheney, 1983). More strategic purposes may include creating a corporate identity or culture, motivating employees, creating brand ambassadors, communicating organizational change, and providing the information necessary for employees to complete their jobs (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Mazzei, 2014).

2.2. Previous research on IMC and internal communication

The Integrated Marketing Communication or IMC movement began in the early 1990s (Duncan, Caywood, & Newsom, 1993; Moriarty, 1994). IMC is the “practice of coordinating all brand communication messages” and “marketing mix decisions” (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2015, p. 41). Some of the foundational principles associated with IMC include building long-term relationships with customers, delivering a consistent message often referred to as “speaking with one voice,” and a commitment to listening or two-way communication (Luck & Moffatt, 2009; Moriarty et al., 2015). An IMC perspective tends to view employees as key stakeholders, but also recognizes that employees also may fit into other stakeholder categories such as shareholders or local community members (Moriarty et al., 2015).

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