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RGyoU listening? Stakeholder communication and the digital interface: a case study of a Scottish university.

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RGyoU Listening?

Stakeholder Communication and the Digital Interface: A Case Study of a Scottish University

Abstract

Rapidly evolving digital media platforms have created an environment where communication can take place between anyone at any time and the traditional boundaries between internal and external communication have become porous and unpredictable. The technological facilitation and social acceptance of fast yet meaningful conversation through a range of media has created an expectation that organisations will engage in similar practices.

This paper presents the findings of a research project designed to assess the efficacy of corporate communication at a Scottish university from the point of view of internal and external stakeholders. The qualitative research addressed questions of message, medium, audience, impact and exchange within the digital era of conversational communication where active stakeholder engagement with strategic developments, are drivers for success.

Key Words

Corporate, communication, stakeholders, conversational, digital media

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Introduction and Objectives

The multiverse of communication channels available to organisations and their stakeholders requires an integration of communication strategies. Internal and external communication can no longer be viewed as separate entities in an environment where employees and other stakeholders can communicate freely and openly at any time.

According to Capozzi and Zipfel (2012), “The communications environment has changed. The new climate requires organisations to engage in a two-way dialogue with their constituencies.” This point is reinforced by Groysberg and Slind (2012) who argue that “Traditional corporate communication must give way to a process that is more dynamic and more sophisticated. Most important, that process must be conversational.”

For the purposes of this research, existing communication activity undertaken by Robert Gordon University (RGU) was evaluated from the perspective of both its internal and external stakeholders. The extent to which dialogue is encouraged and supported was analysed, and the perceived usefulness and desirability of the organisation’s assorted communication channels and techniques were assessed. The role and importance of digital media platforms in influencing stakeholder perceptions of communication will form the specific focus of this paper.

Methodology

The research involved a series of interviews and focus groups with RGU’s key stakeholders including students, employees, partner institutions, industry, competitors, media and the local community. Traditional approaches to stakeholder identification, analysis and prioritisation have typically involved the application of criteria such as the level of power and interest each stakeholder has in the organisation e.g. Mendelow’s matrix (1991) can be used to determine an organisation’s ‘key players’ requiring the greatest amount of communication effort and resource. However in the era of digital conversation this approach becomes flawed as stakeholders can fluctuate more easily and unpredictably between each category, depending on the issue and nature/extent of communication taking place. This is perhaps most visible in recent socio-political phenomena such as the Arab Spring where latent publics became rapidly mobilised through social media. The research therefore positioned each of RGU’s stakeholder groups as equal in relation to their potential power and interest in the organisation. Despite the unpredictable nature of these relationships, certain key influencers continue to play an important role in the corporate communication process therefore the research also sought to solicit the views of these people.

In-depth (45 minute) interviews took place with eighteen RGU employees responsible for various aspects of RGU’s internal and external communication. The employees represented a wide cross-section of functions and positions within the organisational hierarchy. In addition 33 internal and 24 external contacts who receive communication from RGU participated in stakeholder focus groups and telephone interviews during May 2013. The participants represented a wide range of organisations, roles and disciplines. The following research questions were identified following a review of relevant literature and secondary data:

1. To what extent is dialogue encouraged and supported between RGU and its various stakeholders?

2. How relevant and desirable are RGU's existing formal and informal communication channels and content, from the perspective of different stakeholders?
3. What type of communication channels and content would RGU's stakeholders prefer to be used?
4. How effective are existing RGU communication channels and content at conveying RGU's strategic priorities to stakeholders and engaging their support?
5. What role does the internal/external communication interface in the conversational era play in influencing stakeholder perceptions of RGU?
6. What does effective leadership communication involve and how effective is it at RGU?

Findings & Analysis

Key themes were extracted from the transcripts for each stakeholder focus group, telephone interview and in-depth face to face interview. The themes from each primary data set were then synthesised with the secondary evidence to identify the strongest themes in relation to the research question areas. This paper will analyse the research findings in relation to question 5:

What role does the internal/external communication interface in the conversational era play in influencing stakeholder perceptions of RGU?

Social Media Presence

When first asked about the internal/external communication interface, participants mentioned the RGU website and email more frequently than social media. There was limited awareness of RGU's social media presence beyond student recruitment activity, "We need to invest much more time, thought and resource into social media, it's not just about recruiting students, its much bigger than that" (Internal Interview) and "I think RGU needs to publicise itself a lot more through social media and raise people's awareness of the university, especially the research profile needs to be raised." (Alumni) Some participants were active followers of RGU and the Principal's social media activity, "The Principal's tweets are a bonus – if ever anything is happening at RGU I read his blog." (Competitor) A more varied, engaging and proactive social media effort may therefore help to raise RGUs social media profile.

Traditional and New Media

"Social media comments can cross over into traditional media and become news." (Internal Interview) Despite this important development for the PR and media industry, there was a strong view that social media should continue to be used in conjunction with traditional media, "I'm not sure how important social media is for RGU to be honest, press releases are the only thing we look out for and we keep an eye on twitter, but if we're not getting a press release as well then we'll be annoyed" (Media) and "It is an additional weapon in our armoury of communication that we have to take advantage of." (Internal Interview) Some participants gave examples of where social media had been used to communicate with students, however the time involved in maintaining these platforms was seen to be prohibitive, "I set up a facebook site for postgraduate and alumni, following dissatisfaction with the current alumni set up. I think it's good but we can't underestimate how labour intensive it is." (Academic) The findings suggest that a combination of traditional and new

media tools should be included in the internal and external communication strategy, and support provided for staff who would like to incorporate new media into their own communications. It was also suggested that consideration should be given to the proactive and reactive use of traditional and new media in RGU's crisis communication planning to ensure the needs and expectations of different stakeholders are met.

Tailored Platforms

The research revealed that different stakeholders have different social media preferences for different situations. LinkedIn was viewed by some as a more useful professional resource than Facebook or Twitter, "I make active use of LinkedIn and semi active use of Twitter. I avoid Facebook for work but I have RGU as a friend on Facebook" (Head) and "I use LinkedIn a lot - from a business perspective there is a huge networking opportunity there and for communication as well, but LinkedIn can be a bit scattered." (Alumni) Social media was seen to be of particular relevance to the young, especially prospective and existing students, "Other university communications can be too formal in many ways, intimidating for a school leaver" (Partner) and "We had a really important thing happening in our department and no one had read (the communications about) them, so I ended up putting the information on Facebook" (Student) and "There is certainly a role for it, a lot of the younger ones use it." (Internal Interview) Researching, understanding and maintaining the right social media platforms for different stakeholders *in different contexts* may therefore enable more personalised, meaningful and engaging communication and conversation to take place.

Transparency and Porosity

Social media was seen by many participants to have the potential to influence perceptions of the university significantly, "If staff and students feel good about where they work they will be more likely to chat positively over the garden wall about it" and "Frequency and richness of communication very much informs people's views." (Internal Interviews) The risks of social media were frequently cited including leaking information; inappropriate commentary by staff, students and others; and abuse of the RGU identity by third parties, "Negative comments on social media could deter people from applying to work (or study) here." (Internal Interview) Ensuring that internal and external corporate messages are consistent across traditional and new media platforms may help to reduce ambiguity and misinformation, "Internal and external communications are very similar because you have to be consistent in your messaging." (Internal Interview) A joined up approach by those responsible for RGU's traditional and new media channels of communication may help to achieve greater consistency.

According to a study of 32 Higher Education institutions by Swallow and Bourke, "The most significant positive effects of the (Freedom of Information Act) legislation are greater transparency, improved information and records management and professionalism amongst staff." (2012, p1) This is reinforced by the strong emphasis on transparency in the communication plans of other UK universities. Publication of the RGU communication strategy (and other strategic documents) on the website may therefore help to demonstrate transparency and reduce false speculation and FOI requests. Some participants (and non-participants) in the research expressed a desire to see the results of the RGU communication research, therefore publication of the results online may also help to demonstrate a commitment to greater transparency.

Blurred Boundaries

According to Youngs, “The new media world of the blogosphere has demonstrably expanded individualization in terms of production and consumption, and contributed to blurring the public/private spheres in what may be revolutionary ways.” (2009, p137) This blurring of boundaries and associated ethical implications were apparent in the responses of the research participants, “There is a need to educate around personal/professional boundaries and etiquette” and “There is a lack of awareness that it is published to the world.” (Internal Interviews) Lack of consistency between Moodle (the university’s virtual learning environment) and facebook pages was also perceived to be a problem in the teaching and administrative context, “Sometimes there is different information on Moodle and the (staff member’s) facebook page.” (Support)

A critical (non-managerialist) perspective of the broken boundaries between ‘public and private’ in social media raises questions of culture, conformity, identification and resistance within an organisational context. Oyvind et al argue that “It is not defensible to ignore the concept of power which in fundamental ways affects relations and communication in organisations.” (2009, p132) As organisations encourage their employees to express opinions about the organisation and management via social media, feedback which is ignored or rejected by management may generate cognitive dissonance, disengagement and resistance to the corporate strategy. In this context acknowledging, respecting and responding to feedback from employees is of paramount importance because social media is intrinsically personal and the power relationships associated with traditional communication channels are less clear. Closed networks such as Yammer can be used instead of open networks like Twitter however this may restrict positive interaction between internal and external stakeholders.

Getting the tone and content right on social media was seen to be very important and not something RGU is very good at, “Most of the stuff I have seen (from RGU) is quite low, it’s not clear if it is aimed at potential students or partners, it seems a bit random” (Industry) and “It is a lot more personal, this is what we are looking to all the time now.” (Competitor) If the tone and content is right, there is great potential for the university to make positive use of the blurred boundary between formal and informal communication created by social media, “We want staff to talk about the positive work they are doing on social media, it is very powerful,” (Internal Interview) and “It helps the current students, makes them feel like they are not just here to attend their lectures. It should feel like their second home, not that they are a customer but instead that they belong” (Student) and “Twitter definitely makes people feel valued as individuals” (Internal Interview).

A web based toolkit could be developed for staff which will enable them to coordinate, align, focus and improve the effectiveness of their digital (and other) communications. The existing RGU ‘Right Click’ campaign could be developed further to accommodate this. Appropriate skills and expertise and an IT infrastructure which is reliable and flexible to changes in the ICT environment will become increasingly important if RGU’s modern, progressive reputation is to be maintained, “We are seen to be a modern university so need to use modern ways to communicate”. (Internal Interview)

Adopters and Non Adopters

Kelleher & Sweetser (2012) argue that the extent to which communicators are ‘believers’ or ‘non-believers’ in social media could have a significant impact on the way it is used and how

effective it is as a communication channel. There was a clear divide between RGU stakeholders who have adopted social media and those who have not, “It’s part of the day job and should not be seen as anything other than the way we do business now” compared to “I may be old fashioned but I prefer face-to-face because I can see how people are taking things” (Internal Interviews); and “I tend to use Twitter a lot more now if I want to find out what other universities are doing” compared to “I am not a serial follower of other universities on Twitter.” (Competitors)

Despite strong awareness of some of the risks associated with social media including negative/misunderstood/inappropriate comments, there was consensus among adopters and non-adopters that social media should be an important part of RGU’s communication strategy, “It’s not about being resistant to social media because I think anyone who is not using it is dead in the water, I just think that both the media side and the organisation that is disseminating news has to be careful about how they embrace it” (Media) and “If you are trying to portray yourself as a modern university then you have to be on social media” (Support) and “I am the wrong age group for social media (60). I am just deeply suspicious of social media. I see the attraction of it to young people but I am of the generation that wants privacy, but I equally see that for the type of people you want to attract, it’s imperative” (Industry). The university’s social media strategy should be actively pursued however it should also take into consideration the different needs and expectations of adopters and non-adopters of social media.

Conversational Medium

Where there is fear and suspicion of social media, McAllister argues that it is less likely to succeed because there will be a tendency to over control it, “In essence, the voices of key stakeholders are being silenced via a media that is intended to provide open forums for dialogue.” (2012, p319) There was agreement among adopters and non-adopters of social media that the inability to control social media should be accepted and the opportunities it offers for enhanced dialogue should be embraced, “You can’t control negative comments on social media, trying to does more harm than good. You need to accept this and manage it as best you can to maintain a positive reputation” and “Twitter has become a very important communication tool, but we use it for announcements, not inviting interaction.” (Internal Interviews) The ability for social media to build relationships was identified, “It’s about the relationship RGU has with people inside and outside the university” (Internal Interview). However, like face to face communication, time was seen to be the biggest inhibitor to initiating and maintaining productive and meaningful conversations online.

Overall many participants regarded RGU’s social media activity as ad hoc, poorly aligned to the corporate strategy and not as interactive as it could be, “You need to go beyond advertising events and news and get discussions going and the little things as well” (Competitor) and “We need a much more joined up approach to social media and more resource to manage it effectively, it’s a full time communications role” (Internal Interview). Therefore a communication strategy which focuses more closely on the digital interface between internal and external communication; integrates traditional and social media channels; and is underpinned by a philosophy of transparency, engagement and innovation, may help to improve perceptions of, and enhance, RGU’s communications at a time when choice, accessibility and dialogue are vital for success.

Limitations and Further Research

This research project constituted a pilot initiative to test the research model and begin to explore the research questions identified. Due to the constraints of time and resource it will be necessary to conduct further research beyond July 2013, to validate the research model and recommendations more thoroughly.

The research began to address broader questions relating to the internal/external communication interface in the conversation era and with further analysis may contribute to existing theory in this area.

It is hoped that the research will also prove useful for partners in Higher Education and wider industry through further development of a new conceptual model for researching the impact of corporate communication on internal and external stakeholders.

Managerial Implications

The research evidence was used to establish the main communication strengths and challenges facing RGU and possible areas for enhancement. Key enhancement areas that emerged from the whole research project included the need for:

- Increased visibility in strategically important areas
- Closer alignment of internal/external communication with strategic priorities
- Enhanced multi-directional communication – formal and informal
- Well connected “listening” university – consistent and shared message and meaning
- Creative use of space, place, technology to motivate and inspire innovation, collaborate and constructive dialogue
- More informed, empowered and trusted advocates and ambassadors for RGU
- RGU network of media friendly “thought leaders” who can shape and inspire life within and beyond RGU

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