

It Pays to Talk

A public relations company recently confessed that in its early days it wanted to show a potential client that it was already a big, bustling organisation, not an ambitious wannabee. So when the client came round, they hired actors to fill up the empty desks and give the right impression. They got the contract.

Given such stories perhaps it's not surprising to read about the outcry when a major Midlands hospital advertised for a director of communications recently. The local MP and many others complained about wasting money on spin, when what were needed were improved services.

All too often investment in effective communications is dismissed as a public relations stunt – as putting presentation before substance. This is a real problem. Because good communication matters.

All organisations need to invest in effective communication – large public sector bodies such as a hospital, particularly so. And if they don't, people will rightly complain about a lack of engagement, about not being kept informed.

Communications is far more than PR. It embraces employee and community engagement and at its best is about informing and involving your key stakeholders in what you are doing and explaining why. It is also a two-way process, unlike advertising, because again, if done well, it builds links between the organisation and its employees, customers and communities and encourages a dialogue that can help the organisation achieve its objectives.

But to be effective communication requires a serious investment of time, effort and money. It should never be seen as a one-off. It needs to be at the heart of an organisation's culture. Nor is something you can tack on at the end after decisions have been made, or something business leaders can leave to others.

Communication needs to be considered as part of the decision making process, not viewed as a delivery mechanism for decisions already taken. By considering communications up-front, organisations can avoid real brand and reputation damage. They can also build customer loyalty and employee engagement. Both of which add to the bottom line.

And communication must be led from the top. Chief executives must devote time to personally informing and convincing stakeholders of their plans. Otherwise there's no sense that communication is, in reality, anything more than just presentation.

And finally communication needs to be open, honest and compelling. The Economist recently cited research that too much communication is 'irrelevant guff'. Being honest when things go wrong makes it far more likely that your audiences will believe you and give you credit when things go right.

Which is why, if they are serious about communication, there really should be no objection to a hospital or any other organisation investing in it. And if they aren't serious about communication, then their investment will have been worthless. There's nothing more easy to detect than presentation without substance.

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