

# A need for external relations

Convincing clients of the true value of external comms can be achieved in just a few steps

I have spent more than half of my professional career in-house and most of the remainder within agencies. Looking back at my in-house years, no matter which company I worked for and what role I was in, I inevitably came to the same conclusion. The effectiveness of companies' external relations efforts is often hampered by internal divisions on the one hand, and the inability of the external communications teams to fully demonstrate the added value their function brings to the business on the other.

Since rejoining the agency world, my new perspective has confirmed this conclusion, which got me thinking about how APCO should find new ways to add value for our clients.

I knew from experience that in challenging economic times or when a company's business performance is disappointing, support functions such as corporate communications and public affairs are some of the first to come under scrutiny. This has a domino impact on our own industry, characterised in the past 18 months by dwindling account budgets and increasingly fierce competition for fewer contracts.

This means another one of our top priorities should be to figure out ways to help clients, which will ultimately contribute to safeguarding and even growing our business with them.

A key challenge within large companies is organisational design, with silos often working towards common goals but not in a co-ordinated manner. Another major challenge is that too few internal stakeholders understand what external relations functions can do to help them. They often have a simplistic view of such functions, boiling their output down to PR and marketing and failing to appreciate the need to engage with a broader ecosystem of influencers.

APCO has devised an approach that helps to address this dual challenge: the 'influencer engagement method'.



JULIAN DODD

Broadly speaking, it is a type of brainstorming exercise structured around a detailed and rigorous methodology. Its aim is to deepen collaboration between a client's business unit leaders and those responsible for the external-facing functions, aligning them behind commonly agreed business objectives.

The first step is to work with our client contacts on identifying which parts of their company's business objectives have most to gain from external communications support, and who the key internal stakeholders are. The second step - admittedly not the easiest - is to get them into a room for a day, together with the heads of marketing, government relations, operations, legal, media relations, investor relations and so on.

Ideally, the session should begin with expectation-setting from a senior executive. The first part of the session is to hear from business leaders what keeps them up at night. The discussion should then proceed to identifying the key external stakeholders that will influence customer buying decisions or that can help fulfil other business priorities, and to build an influencer ecosystem map. More often than not, many of these stakeholders are already known to the people in the room. The next step is for the professionals to devise an influencer engagement plan, working with the other external relations functions, and to present it back to the group.

The advantages of this approach are obvious: it puts the spotlight on our client contacts internally, thereby enhancing their reputation; helps educate business leaders on the value of the external relations disciplines; and almost always helps unlock new budget streams to fuel the activities arising from the final planning phase. Ultimately, it has proved incredibly beneficial for APCO by helping us forge new relationships and generating significant new business along the way.

*Edward Walsh is MD of APCO Worldwide, London*

## Views in brief

### Which three words best describe the account manager of the future?

Entrepreneurial, innovative and multi-disciplined

### How comfortable do you feel pitching against agencies from different disciplines?

Very. In today's environment, a prerequisite is to master most if not all disciplines and to apply them holistically to help achieve a client's objectives.

### What were/are the essential elements of your most productive client relationship?

Mutual trust, empowerment, exceeding expectations and demonstrating value.