



## **Ampersand Corporate Affairs Insights 2013/14**

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## Corporate Affairs practitioners take their place at the top table

**Tim James, National Practice Manager - Corporate Affairs, at renowned boutique executive search and recruitment consultancy Ampersand, offers his reflections on the current status of corporate affairs in Australia - following the recent CAS2013 Corporate Affairs Summit, which took place in Sydney – as well as his thoughts on the future direction of the industry as we kick off the new financial year.**

The level of caution and uncertainty in the marketplace, and the subsequent column inches the unstable economic and political environment has generated in the media, has engendered a growing air of cynicism amongst the audience that corporate affairs practitioners are communicating with.

Additionally, the various social media channels now freely available to everyone offer people the opportunity to voice their opinions, regardless of whether those opinions are educated and considered or not.

A contributing factor in this is the gradual erosion of loyalty in the workplace, both from the employer and the employee. The all-important people agenda linked to culture and employee engagement has taken a hit during times of significant restructuring and organisational realignment.

There are certainly exceptions to this trend, with some institutions investing heavily in Employee Value Propositions as a key talent retention and attraction strategy during turbulent times. Not surprisingly, these organisations have fared better during the more recent climate of recovery. With this, organisations are realising that the investment in their people is as important as the investment in their customers.

Nevertheless, it still remains the case almost across the board that the focus on managing cost and minimising risk, whilst optimising performance, has resulted in organisations needing and expecting more from their people resources than ever before.

Now while those developments make the task of a corporate affairs practitioner somewhat more difficult, another trend has served to significantly increase the influence that their position can bring to bear upon an organisation.

The trend in question is one that has seen corporate affairs now firmly recognised as a strategic advisor across the business, rather than working in isolation, as it had typically done in the past. As a consequence, corporate affairs needs to have enterprise-wide visibility with a seat at the decision making table.

Further, there is a necessity for corporate affairs and marketing to work more closely. Social media has proved to be a conduit in bringing these two functions together because it is a channel that both can utilise and it can also have an effect on how both functions conduct their business.

Additionally, there is a growing importance for corporate affairs teams to work more closely with legal counsel in terms of dealing with reputational issues, as well as using legal counsel to identify and forecast potential challenges on the horizon.

## The new social media landscape

A move away from the traditional corporate-speak to a more personal form of communication on both an external and internal level certainly helps organisations to engage more effectively in this new environment. Encouraging two-way dialogue - as opposed to the traditional one-way communication channel - is also important.

The social media landscape has developed fairly rapidly and is quite a different beast compared to where it was just 18 months ago.

Initially there was pressure for organisations to play in this space, but there's now a growing commonality that this is just one of many channels in which to engage with your audience, so organisations should not get caught up in the noise of social media because it's not the be all and end all.



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Having said that, for some particular verticals, such as consumer-centric organisations, where they are using it as an engagement tool, social media has a heightened importance. Telecommunications providers, broadcasters and FMCG organisations amongst others fall into this category.

There is now a better understanding of social media. People are going into it with a much more educated and considered view of what they need to do, rather than dipping their toe in the water and potentially coming unstuck.

There is now best practice in this space and a lot of organisations are bringing that expertise in-house. In most cases, you do need a dedicated resource if you want to expertly manage this space, or else depending on the size of your organisation you need to outsource it to a specialist who can provide strategic counsel, monitoring tools and respond to posts on your behalf, in keeping with company guidelines.

Once you have a social media presence, you must maintain a level of consistency in your communications. Adherence to a set of social media guidelines and policies that are specific to your business, for internal and external people who are involved in the operation of your social media platform, will help your organisation achieve that consistency.

The way we now consume media is also having an impact, as people no longer sit and wait for the evening news to hear about the day's events. They now have the opportunity to consume media immediately and it's always changing and developing. This has led to a race between media outlets to be first to stories, and this pressure on journalists to file their stories has a knock-on effect in terms of how quickly we need to respond to situations, particularly in a crisis.

## Understanding your audience

The first thing you have to do as a corporate affairs practitioner is understand your audience. You need to know how they consume their information, what they want to hear, what they need to hear, and whom they want to hear it from.

It's certainly not a case of 'one size fits all.' A lot of challenges and diversity are usually present within an internal audience. There are may be geographical hurdles to considers, accessibility to technology, differing literacy levels, and so on. In short, there are a multitude of factors that need to be taken into consideration.

An internal communications audit, by means of a survey, or a series of focus groups, can provide organisations with an accurate representation of what their audience wants to hear and how they'll be best engaged.

People consume information in very different ways and it is important to be mindful of how they do that.

The corporate affairs teams that firms are now employing are quite different to those from years gone by. More of their work is around thought leadership and research driven communication to engage the audience, and the audiences are a lot more targeted now than they once were – you can really drill down and segment who you need to talk to and assess which channel/s will create the greatest reach. There's a real science to it now, and some of Australia's leading organisations have global best practices in this space.

## Calmness under pressure

Crisis management preparedness is high on the agenda for corporate affairs teams and practitioners across the board. Even though the documentation and structure may be in place for a range of crisis scenarios, it's only when it's set in motion that you can really judge its effectiveness. There is a need for scenario planning and mock exercises rather than waiting for the real life event to take place.

There are experts who can be called upon by organisations to help them prepare for a crisis, or indeed, to come in when a crisis has occurred to manage it on your behalf. Organisations shouldn't be afraid to call upon the expertise of those people if they feel they need it.

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## Looking ahead

Our firm is structuring a Corporate Affairs Advisory Board to be launched in the 13/14 financial year. The Board will consist of 8-12 leading corporate affairs practitioners who will be hand-selected from a range of industry sectors with the purpose of meeting quarterly to discuss corporate affairs developments (and related impacts and opportunities) but importantly, to drive functional best practice within Australia.

These days, compelling leadership, role security and culture are extremely important to employees, more so than the sole monetary award, so people are assessing an organisation based on this criterion before determining whether to accept or consider a role. This coupled with the brand's perception in the market, are the key drivers, with the level of remuneration also playing its part.

Further to that, and specifically to corporate affairs practitioners, their choice of company is very much centred on how much the organisation values and understands the function. They want to know whether corporate affairs has a seat at the decision-making table and how innovative the organisation is in terms of the way that they utilise corporate affairs to engage the internal and external audiences.

From a talent sourcing perspective, as a leading firm in the corporate affairs space for search and selection, the calibre of the talent pool we have here in Australia is very strong.

We are seeing fewer corporate affairs professionals actively looking for roles, with most preferring instead to sit tight and consider potential opportunities only when they're actively approached.

Within this trend lies the power and value of a highly specialised talent network to attract and secure the very best people for organisations, as we do, not only within Australia but also into Asia and the United Kingdom. More and more talent sourcing is being conducted behind the scenes in a highly targeted manner to identify top talent with the appropriate skillset, leadership credentials and cultural alignment.

In Australia, corporate affairs is in a healthy place however we see an opportunity for the function to continue driving global best practice at a local level. Today, we see a stronger understanding and value placed upon it. More and more we are seeing corporate affairs sitting under the nose of the CEO, which is where it should be positioned.

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We watch with interest the functional trends both within Australia and globally and view our role as not only to map, source and engage top executive and emerging leadership talent but to offer functional advocacy, structural design and capability assessment, and cross-sectoral advice to our client partners at CEO and Executive level.

## Your Ampersand Corporate Affairs Consultants

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## And a little more about us...

Ampersand is one of the leading, specialist Executive Search and Recruitment firms operating within the Asia Pacific region. Its world-class service delivery, strength of national and global networks, innovation in service and channel offering, and uncompromising candidate and client experience has created new benchmarks in industry standards within Australia and offshore.



It is our **Client Service Proposition** that best defines Ampersand Executive's functional expertise.

Our business model is built on organisations' two core assets – their **Customers & People** and **Business Enablement**.

**Ampersand's Customers & People Asset** builds and delivers talent capability across four specialist disciplines:

- **Corporate Affairs**
- **Marketing, Product & Insights**
- **Digital**
- **Human Resources**
- **Sales & Business Development**

**Ampersand's Business Enablement Asset** builds and delivers talent capability across two specialist disciplines:

- **Change & Transformation**
- **Project Management**
- **Strategy**

Accordingly, the Ampersand business has appointed National Practice Managers to lead each functional discipline as subject matter experts for Permanent and Contract requirements. We partner with a diverse suite of some of Australia's most iconic brands, together with global blue chip organisations.



Since inception, Ampersand has managed and delivered Executive Search assignments across Functional & Commercial Heads of Business, General Management and C-Level. In 2012 due to market and client demand, Ampersand Search separated from the Executive business to allow for focused growth, an exclusive leadership structure and a Search brand offering a fully equipped and expertly resourced business unit with an established national and Asia Pacific framework.