

When two worlds collide with a single voice



The state of play: national distrust

Despite a modest rise of trust in 2019, the Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that as a nation, Australians continue to typically distrust our NGOs, businesses, government and media institutions. The Royal Commission into the Financial Services sector has only amplified this distrust with poor corporate behaviour aired on an almost daily basis. Against this backdrop of mistrust, the role corporate affairs and marketing departments play within organisations has never been more critical.

People are increasingly searching for trustworthy companies to work for and purchase from, or to be a member of. It's businesses that have a strong purpose and robust moral compass at their core that are succeeding. In the modern day, we're seeing people and customers prepared to stand their ethical ground and they want organisations that they work for, or brands that they purchase from or subscribe to, to do the same.

Authenticity is vital – as is genuine storytelling through the power of advocacy (in other words, others telling your organisation's story). This cannot be underestimated. The ability to see different perspectives on a single issue is paramount, as is the craft of being able to communicate a message in a variety of short, sharp and accessible ways to engage and influence the myriad of stakeholder groups.

A modern hybrid: corporate affairs & marketing

Today, we're seeing more organisations placing greater emphasis on corporate affairs and marketing teams working together with an integrated approach. This single voice across the business is increasingly essential in order to navigate a successful business path in the face of a nation that fundamentally distrusts. As we know, building advocacy from the inside is just as important as the outside.

With advocacy increasingly at the core of the corporate affairs and marketing functions, we're already seeing this hybrid approach adopted by several leading organisations; the Commonwealth Bank and Macquarie Group are just a few who have recently merged these critical functions. Noting this almost always brings with it a guaranteed seat at the executive table and at the very least the erosion of traditional and silo functions as these two functions collide.

The burning question is; will it be the organisations that put in place a combined corporate affairs and marketing function who reap the rewards?

There are many reasons why such a merger may make sense. Within a business, these functions may perform distinctly different roles, however to the inside and outside worlds, in order to achieve genuine engagement and influence and drive advocacy, stakeholder groups must be met with a unified and integrated approach. It's no different to the changing world of communications where the lines are increasingly blurred between internal and external communications and centralised content is being created for both audiences.

Leadership spotlight

With this hybrid approach, comes the creation of a Chief Corporate Affairs & Marketing Officer. A separate 'Head of' or 'General Manager, Corporate Affairs', and similarly for marketing, could sit under this role, allowing a new level of cross-pollination between the two disciplines. This collaboration may enable a shared approach to cascade through each function, helping to break down potential integration barriers, increasing brand transparency and building trust and credibility.

Corporate affairs and marketing functions routinely work together, particularly during periods of reputational crisis. In an unstable environment, the business and its corporate affairs and marketing functions need new ways to make decisions and advocate internally and externally, drawing on a plethora of channels including social media, news portals, partnerships, community forums, and customer reviews.

Depending on the size of the business, the sector in which it operates and the way in which these two disciplines currently work together - with advocacy at the centre – could this hybrid approach be the future of corporate affairs and marketing?

A new future?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines advocacy as, “the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal”. As outlined in the UK's [Advocacy Project](#) – to be effective, advocacy involves several important concepts, including clarity of purpose, independence, a person-centred approach, empowerment, equal opportunity, accessibility, accountability, confidentiality, and feedback.

With advocacy increasingly at the core of the corporate affairs and marketing functions, is it time to look inwards at these profiled functions, to introduce new ways of fostering a more integrated model or is there scope for these two functions to even merge? It's certainly worth exploring.

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