



The Executive's Guide to Building and Leading an Impactful Communications Team



In many organizations, a major fragmentation exists between executive leadership and the communications function. The communications team may not be held accountable for contributing to corporate and financial goals, so oftentimes, the department is either held to a lesser standard or operates in a vacuum rather than being seen as a strategic partner. As a result, communications professionals often become vulnerable to budget and headcount cuts.

To help bridge this gap, Onclusive has looked at the communications function through the executive lens while keeping the communications pro's perspective in mind. In this whitepaper, we are bringing it all together with actionable insights and best practices for building and leading a successful corporate communications operation that contributes to organizational success in a measurable and sustainable way.



The value of communications in an organization

Your company's earned media is key to building long-term relationships with all of your stakeholders, be it customers, employees or investors. Studies show that people trust earned and owned media more than paid advertising. According to a 2015 Nielsen study of 28,000 respondents in 56 countries, the top three most trusted forms of advertising are "earned" forms of media, and number four is "owned" media.

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CEO & Founder, Equilar

Equilar spends 90% of our marketing and communications efforts on earned media. We are often cited in major publications such as the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, CBNC and Economist, which use our data as backup for their stories around corporate leadership. We invest a lot in earned media because this is precisely how you build trust and corporate reputation—not through buying a full-page WSJ ad.

In addition, it's been proven time and time again that owned media, such as your blog and social media, contributes not only to the trust factor, but also to tangible business outcomes such as revenue. **Airbnb and 23andMe's joint Heritage Travel Campaign** is an excellent example of how these two innovative companies achieved business success by harnessing the power of their social media and blogs.

Why is this important? Because your communications team owns your company's earned and, oftentimes, owned media. **Strategic communications holds the keys to building stakeholder trust, and is, therefore, a major driver of corporate reputation—your biggest brand asset.** This applies across all of your external and internal audiences—customers, prospects, investors, policy makers, regulators, NGOs, analysts, employees and society at large—especially if social media efforts are a part of that team.

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Onclusive enables us to understand exactly how our coverage is being adopted and read, and which content is driving traffic back to our website. Along with demonstrating our knowledge of our target audience and their reading behavior, this data helps us prove the power of earned media to our C-Suite.

According to a RepTrak 2020 CRT study, the effect of communications on reputation has increased by 3% since January 2020. Companies face pressure to speak up—and more than half of customers think brands need to “fundamentally transform how they engage.” The confluence of a global pandemic, a global recession and significant civil unrest has corporate leaders responding directly at a high rate. Companies must navigate the implications of publicly supporting causes and beliefs, but can no longer remain on the sidelines.

Communications also plays a big role in your entire customer life cycle, including brand awareness, recognition and the emotional connection that drives purchase decisions, because it is directly tied to what others are saying about your company, which oftentimes has a bigger influence on buyer sentiment than what you are saying about your own company.

Shifting from gatekeeper to champion of your communications team

The accelerated dynamics of the global economic, political and business environment are all shifting public opinion and strategic communication to the center of corporate management.

Based on a survey of over 600 European business leaders in large corporations (CEOs, presidents, managing directors, full-time board members, etc.)—the largest sample of top executives interviewed about corporate communications so far—most top executives agree that public opinion and corporate reputation are more relevant for business decision-making today than they were in the past. As a result, two-thirds (66.5%) of C-level executives predict a rising relevance of the communication function compared with other functions in their company.* These trends indicate that communications has an increasing impact on the achievement of organizational goals. However, more often than not, this does not translate to an increase in the influence or budget for communications professionals working in these organizations.

As an executive setting the overall strategy for your company, you play a decisive role in making sure that your communications team is not just a necessary cost center—but that it is empowered and given the resources it needs to contribute to your company's major business goals, serving as your trusted adviser and strategic partner in corporate decision-making.

This whitepaper outlines the C-level executive's roadmap to building and leading an impactful communications team, based on the best practices we've seen across our global customer base of both Fortune 500 companies and start-up organizations. Here is what we'll cover:

- Understanding of the purpose and contribution of the communications team to organizational success
- Building an impactful communications team
- Outlining clear roles and responsibilities
- Defining the optimal scope and budget for communications
- Setting SMART communications goals aligned with corporate objectives
- Measuring key performance indicators (KPIs) tied to the purpose, goals and, ultimately, tangible business outcomes



Clarifying the purpose and contribution of the communications team to organizational success

It's clear that the importance of communications for organizations has risen over recent years, especially during the turbulent times. However, only 62% of the communications professionals from 43 countries interviewed for the European Communication Monitor—the largest annual study of the status quo of strategic communication worldwide—agreed that the influence and status of their role have increased during the same period. And only 15% reported increased budgets for the communication department compared with other functions.*

Onclusive has observed similar trends. In many companies, communications often bounces between strategic relevance and task-oriented project work, unless a crisis unfolds and gets a high degree of executive attention. To some degree, the executive relationship with communications can depend on its connection to marketing—sometimes communications gains stature because of its association with marketing and sometimes it is buried under marketing. Either way, in many cases communications goals are separate from marketing and business goals, which may stem from a lack of clarity about the purpose and contribution of communications versus other functions, including marketing.

At the same time, the performance of corporate communications depends heavily on the perceptions, beliefs and expectations that top executives hold towards this function and its contribution to organizational goals.

What is the purpose of the communications team, then?

While motivating employees and building the company reputation are arguably the two most important objectives of corporate communications for top executives, the communications function is much more comprehensive and contributes to corporate success by driving two primary types of activities:

- **Outbound:** Building up reputation, brands, cultures, messaging and supporting operational activities such as awareness building and employee engagement
- **Inbound:** Monitoring public opinion, identifying opportunities and issues and managing relationships and crises

This covers not just speaking to the organization's stakeholders and influencing public opinion (outbound activities), but also—very importantly—listening to and fostering a dialogue with all of these stakeholders (inbound activities).

Business leaders agree that both are critical for organizational success.

As an executive, where would you like your communications team to make an impact?

To gain clarity around the unique contribution you'd like communications to make to your company, here are the key questions to ask:

- What are your corporate goals and objectives?
- Where can the strengths, capabilities and assets owned by your communications team make the most impact for your organization?
- How can the communications team best support your company's business goals, serving you as a trusted adviser and strategic partner?

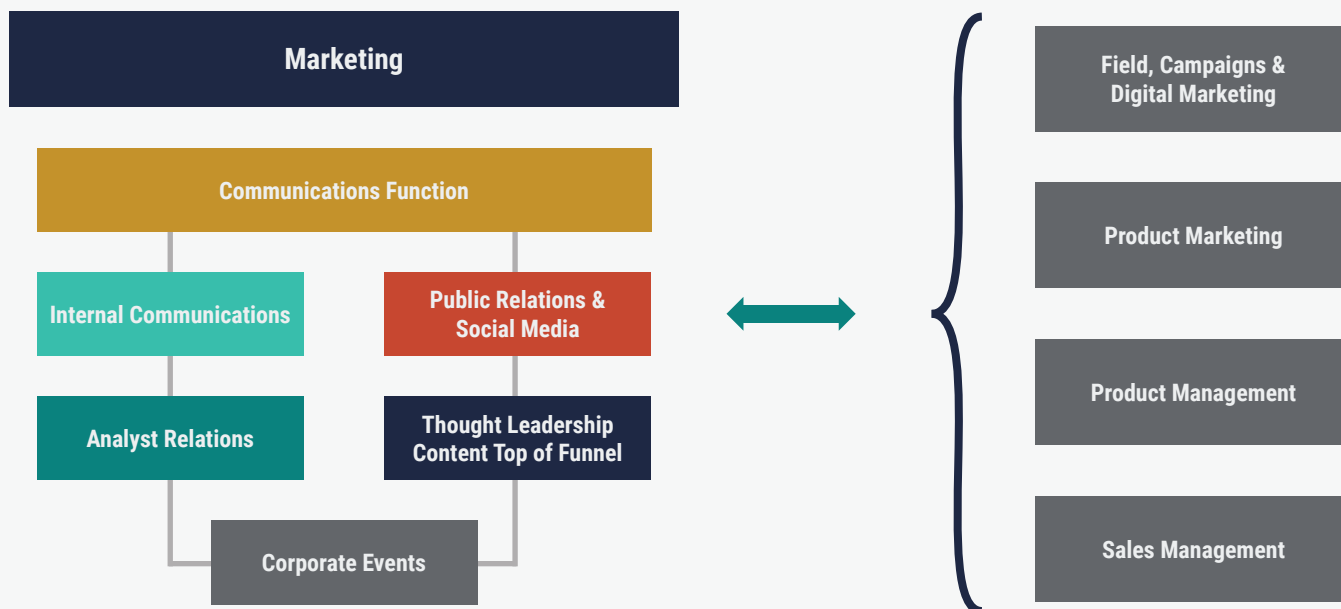
Building an impactful communications team

As we've discussed so far, communications is a highly strategic function that supports the growth of your entire organization by nurturing and enhancing how your brand is perceived internally and externally. Today, it is necessary for the C-suite to be involved with both developing the overall strategy for communications and delivering consistent messages to constituents.

As an executive, you have the power to set up your communications team for success from the start. For example, if you're recruiting a new senior communications leader, look for someone who can support top management decision-making based on brand awareness, public opinion and corporate reputation considerations, as well as the insights collected from listening to and fostering a dialogue with all of the company's stakeholders—a critical function of communications.

Onclusive works with global companies across industries and we see a lot of different communications team structures. Overall, those teams tend to be stronger when they include social media, content marketing and analyst relations. A strong communications department also tends to have its own analytics function, so that they don't have to rely on marketing or someone else for PR measurement and can use their own lens to evaluate their effectiveness. Those are the teams that continue to have credibility within their orgs and have ongoing executive attention, input and participation.

Here is an example of effective communications structure from Lona Therrien, Sr. Director, Global Corporate Communications, Mimecast:



This example demonstrates multiple key components that a strategic communications team interacts with to create a synergy of well-orchestrated activities between different functions. For example, putting PR and social media together can be very powerful. When it comes to analyst relations, the industry content and reports coming out of this team can greatly enhance your communications strategy. Corporate events can also be tied in with corporate communications, putting a wrapper around your brand and stories. Finally, it makes sense to integrate marketing and communications because they are closely tied and there are many synergies between the two when it comes to content - which is still king - and campaigns. The bottom line is that high-performing communications teams have integrated plans so that their messaging remains consistent. This is a vital building block of your brand process and helps as a foundation of your corporate identity.

Today, it is more important than ever for executives to stay involved with communications on an ongoing basis. Typical demands from stakeholders and the media usually involve the entire company or brand, and as such, the core responsibility for communications ultimately lies within the C-suite. As a leader, you decide on the roles, priorities, key structures and resources for communications. You are also often on the front lines speaking with the media, and your communications team can support you with not just briefings and speaking points, but also identifying opportunities that best leverage your strengths and expertise.

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CEO & Founder, Equilar

I stay involved with my communications team because our media strategy has been very successful, and I see that the time I put into communications decision-making has an ROI associated with it. We have a cross-functional team that meets every two weeks for 15-20 min to understand what's going on in the marketplace, gain input from the sales team, discuss early trends and stories, and review our Onclusive dashboards with the results of our communications strategy, which help facilitate our discussions and accelerate our decision-making. I see the ROI without question, and that's why I am excited to be a part of it.



Here are a few best practices from some of Onclusive's customers for setting your communications team up for success:

- Treat communications as an essential part of your business, including not just your time as a spokesperson but also ongoing strategic discussions with communications leaders.
- Have an open line of communication and engagement with the communications team.
- Empower communications to think about how they can drive and impact corporate strategy and trajectory, and offer regular opportunities to contribute to decision-making.
- Ask for actionable insights, solutions and measurable results—encourage communications to share unexpected insights, propose an action plan, and then measure and report on the outcome of the action.
- Set clear goals and expectations aligned with your business objectives, and establish accountability through an ongoing reporting relationship with consistent metrics and outcomes.

Outlining clear roles and responsibilities

Most communication-savvy C-level executives feel that they are personally responsible for this function. In fact, based on recent research, they use about one-third their own time for all disciplines of corporate communications, ranging from internal and brand communication to investor relations.

However, while top executives see themselves at the center of strategic communication, they also need counsel and support from others to master the challenges of a 24/7 information flow and the dynamics of real-time opinion building in global settings. This is where communications and PR comes in as an important adviser and strategic partner to the C-suite.

Effective communication is a two-way street—sending messages as well as receiving them—and no one can navigate ongoing conversations with the public better than your communications team. As corporate reputation now matters more than ever, communicators are also more valuable than ever. Their expertise includes not only the outbound process of generating public attention, messaging and campaigning, but also the inbound activities of monitoring public opinion and stakeholder interests, identifying trends and opportunities, and managing relationships.

This focus on listening and relationship-building allows your communications team to inform decision-making processes that are critical for business success.

Top executives agree that active listening is key—whereas before they would primarily task their communications teams with issuing releases and launching campaigns, now they are even more interested in finding new and better ways to listen to their stakeholders and take those views into account when formulating strategy.

As an executive, you might feel more familiar with the needs of shareholders, customers and employees to ensure business growth, whereas communication professionals are traditionally geared towards interfacing with journalists, policymakers and communities to build relationships. Working together in synergy maximizes the strengths and expertise of both the C-suite and your communications department.

To create the space for successful collaboration, take the time to clarify the roles and responsibilities of your executive team versus your communications professionals.



Defining the optimal scope and budget for communications

Corporate communications addresses a broad set of internal and external audiences and involves multiple instruments, platforms and channels. The scope of the communications function is, therefore, quite comprehensive and includes:

- Employee engagement & communications
- Company & brand awareness
- Company & brand reputation
- Communicating messaging to external audiences
- Media relations, including mass media and social media (journalists, social influencers, bloggers, etc.)
- Other stakeholder relations (investors, analysts, policy makers, society, etc.)
- Monitoring public opinion, the media and competitors
- Identifying opportunities and issues that arise in the internal and external environment
- Crisis management

While the exact scope will vary from business to business, what we outlined above is the overall range of expertise that the communications team brings to the table. Two of the most impactful contributions communicators can make are listening and building key stakeholder relationships, so those inbound activities should always be top of mind as executives define the optimal scope and budget for communications in their organizations.

When it comes to budgets, all too often communications departments receive leftovers and are the first to have the cuts, unless they have connected their actions and output closely to corporate priorities in a measurable way.

Here are two recommendations from Onclusive for setting your communications budget:

- 1 One of the best practices we've seen for defining the optimal scope and budget for communications is weighing the significance of the different stakeholders for corporate strategy and the effectiveness of various lines of action. That's why **measuring the performance and business impact of your communications activity** is so important.
- 2 Another option is setting the budget based on the measurable contribution of communications to corporate success. Start with the 3-5 key business objectives, your "big rocks," and focus your communications investment around those initiatives. As a result, you and your communications department will speak the same language and there will be a mutual understanding of specific communications initiatives that will move the needle where it matters most.

In general, here are the key elements that a well-rounded communications budget will include:

- Team headcount and salaries
- Agency retainers, including media relations & crisis communications
- Owned media and contributed content development
- Technology tools, such as media monitoring, media database, communications / PR measurement and internal communication platforms for employee engagement

As a C-level executive, in addition to being the most sought out company spokesperson and brand advocate, you make the final decisions on the roles, priorities, key structures and resources for communications. This includes holding your communications team as an important influencer of your company's strategy, and providing them with access to the necessary budget and support.

The bottom line is, without executive cooperation and participation in building the corporate communications strategy, success is impossible to achieve.



Setting SMART communications goals aligned with business objectives

The first step in tying corporate and communications goals together is to review your business objectives. We often see executives set those around acquiring or retaining customers, improving corporate or brand reputation, creating a new category, or gaining meaningful brand engagement. These goals are often tied to revenue targets.

Once business objectives and metrics are identified, the next step is to determine goals that will best support the department. In successful organizations, communications objectives are driven by executives in collaboration with the communications department.

If your company's goal is improving reputation, then this directly ties into your communications strategy. However, you can create corresponding communications goals for other corporate objectives, as well. For example:

- Website traffic and desired actions generated by earned and owned media can be tied to acquiring customers.
- Building relationships with media outlets that publish powerful educational stories resulting in new inquiries can be linked with creating a new category in your industry.
- Achieving a certain volume of article reader interactions, such as social shares, supports the goal of gaining meaningful brand engagement.

We recommend setting SMART goals, an acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely. A SMART goal incorporates all of these criteria to help focus your efforts and increase the chances of achieving your goal:

- **Specific:** Well defined, clear and unambiguous
- **Measurable:** With specific criteria that measure your progress toward the accomplishment of the goal
- **Achievable:** Attainable and not impossible to achieve
- **Relevant:** Aligned with your organization's context
- **Timely:** With a clearly defined timeline, including a starting date and a target date

Each element of the SMART framework works together to create goals that are carefully planned, clear and trackable, establishing a strong foundation for achieving success.

How can you hold your communications department accountable for reaching their goals? Best practices include staying involved in communications decision-making, goal setting and using measurable KPIs aligned with these goals and, ultimately, tangible business outcomes.

As the leader in communications measurement over the last 10 years, Onclusive has seen that communications teams that have clear goals and use data on a quarterly, monthly and campaign basis to assess their progress against those goals not only have stronger results, but are also able to significantly contribute to corporate strategy and planning at the highest level.

Measuring real business impact of earned and owned media

Three out of four top executives agree that the ability to estimate and evaluate the achievements of corporate communications is an important part of a CEO's or top manager's qualifications.* As a result, the C-suite is relatively involved in high-level communications goal setting, but many executives are regularly frustrated with the low quality of earned media measurement.

Today, communications measurement is not about impressions, earned media placements and article counts. It is not only possible, but also imperative, for communicators to measure KPIs tied to corporate objectives and even revenue targets. This includes keeping a close eye on your industry and regularly reviewing your peer's and competitor's activity and results.

Here is the framework developed by Onclusive to reliably measure real business impact of earned, owned and newswire media content across the entire customer journey. Each step in this framework is aligned to specific metrics that help determine the quality, resonance, influence and bottom line impact of every article.

Content Quality

Am I producing the right content?

Engagement

Is my content being read?

Influence

Am I influencing readers?

Action

Is my content driving behaviors?

Content Quality: Going beyond measuring just the “quantity” of coverage, it is also important to understand the “quality” of your content using metrics such as Onclusive’s **Power of Voice™**, which combines relevance, publication authority, repetition, social amplification and article sentiment into a single competitive metric.

Engagement: While it’s good to get press, is anyone even consuming your content? How much and for how long are they reading it? These questions can be answered by Onclusive’s **Reader Engagement** score, which incorporates the reader’s time on page, average attention, scroll depth and unique visitors, both for individual articles and in aggregate over time.

Influence: How did your content shape the opinions of the reader, and how did it impact your brand sentiment and consideration? Onclusive’s **Brand Impact** measurement can show you this with real-time survey results from your target audience.

Action: What business outcomes did your content drive, including website traffic, sign-ups, sales and revenue? Look no further than Onclusive’s **PR Attribution™** to understand how many times people, after having read a piece of content about your company, eventually visit your website and which specific actions they take.

We call these “metrics that matter” because they are tied to the KPIs that the C-suite really cares about. They can empower the C-suite to understand the true impact of earned and owned media on organizational success consistently over time and across regions, which in turn can drive overall company strategy and shift goals based on what is resonating with all of the key stakeholders.

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We report on our initiatives quarterly using a communications dashboard. Onclusive has been a wonderful partner to help us drive data points that we need to understand how our programs, campaigns, content and messaging are performing, and we can see quarter over quarter what really works and what doesn't in terms of engagement or traffic to our website. It comes down to really being able to demonstrate the value of our programs using data in that executive dashboard.

Once the communications KPIs are set, it’s up to you as an executive to ask your communications team for regular communications reports and insights. This entire process can be simplified by using technology to both measure success and easily share results across the organization.

Using technology for communications measurement

Modern PR and communications measurement is enabled by intelligent technology that can not only effectively monitor global media coverage for your brand and competitors, but also analyze billions of data points and provide actionable insights to help shape strategic communications.

Companies around the world now have access to tools like Onclusive that show communicators and executives which publications, journalists, campaigns, stories and messages are driving engagement and moving the needle in terms of website traffic, engagement, conversions, and ultimately, revenue.

To make this possible, Onclusive provides an Enterprise solution for established organizations, a Pro platform for growing organizations and a Data-as-a-Service offering for custom applications to enable using Onclusive's data internally. [Request an Enterprise demo](#) or [start your free Pro trial](#) today!

Key Takeaways

- Communications is a major driver of corporate reputation—your biggest brand asset.
- The communications team is one of the most important advisers and strategic partners to the C-suite.
- Achieving success requires executive cooperation and participation in building the corporate communications strategy.
- Communications can make significant contributions to overall organizational KPIs.

As a result of proper alignment with the corporate goals and ongoing executive involvement, you can build and successfully lead a strong communications function that makes measurable contributions to key business outcomes and supports your company's growth in real and tangible ways.

***References:** Corporate communications from the CEO's perspective: How top executives conceptualize and value strategic communication. Published in March 2014. Accessed on January 25, 2021.

Global Trust in Advertising: Winning Strategies for An Evolving Landscape. Published in September 2015. Accessed on January 25, 2021.

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Every year we do a New York Times CEO Pay study that focuses on the 200 highest paid CEOs, and it's always one of our most impactful media stories. Thanks to Onclusive, we can see without question the big difference in the website traffic right after this story runs, plus the spike over the next few days. As a bonus, the story continues to be amplified on social media for weeks, and people find it and come back to our website long after it has run. This is a very measurable way to look at the impact of earned media on our website traffic and, ultimately, our business growth over time. That's why communications is an area where we continue to raise the bar, invest and build out the team.

Onclusive

Onclusive is the data science company for communications. We connect content to business outcomes for the first time, and leverage artificial intelligence to reveal which communications strategies drive actual brand engagement. The result is thousands of high-performance campaigns around the world. Onclusive developed the Power of Voice™ metric as a way to measure the quality of a brand's media coverage in relation to its competitors, and invented PR Attribution™ to measure the real impact that content is having on a company's bottom line. Onclusive was founded in 2011 and is headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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