

# Complexity of audiences is the biggest challenge facing communications teams, report reveals

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- 81% of communications leaders expect demand for social media resources to increase
- An integrated communications strategy is seen as the key to dealing with complex audiences
- Communications representatives at board level have risen, though less respondents report to the CEO than predicted

The latest Business Leaders in Communications Study 2014/15 has revealed that the number and complexity of key audiences remains the single most important challenge for the communications function.

In the report, carried out by VMA Executive, part of global corporate and marketing communications recruiter, VMA Group, 77% of those surveyed selected the number and complexity of key audiences as one of their top five challenges. Of these, 22% reported this was the single most important issue facing their organisation. In order to address this, communications teams are utilising the reach of social media to engage with and manage a vast number of stakeholders.

“This VMA Executive study underlines the growing importance of a clear communications strategy. The growing expectations for strong internal communications that are integrated with external communications as the complexity of audiences increases, demonstrates the importance of reputation management to business success” Richard Taylor, Director of Corporate Affairs & Communications at Morrisons, commented.

The report – which surveyed over 250 communications leaders across Europe - revealed that 81% expect demand for resources in social media to increase in the next two years. This prediction is also indicative of the increasing presence of brands on social media, as reported by Simply Measured. In its Customer Service on Twitter study, the social media analytics platform found that more than 95,000 tweets mentioned a global brand’s customer service Twitter handle in January 2014 alone.

Use of these more engaging communications channels appears to be rapidly outstripping some of the more traditional platforms. Corporate advertising and sponsorship, for example, look set to be hardest hit, with 26% of those surveyed by VMA Executive expecting a decreasing demand for both resources in the next two years.

## Reporting lines shifting

While in 2012, 80% of respondents felt that they would be reporting into the CEO within two years compared to the 67% who were at that time, the number currently doing so remains relatively unchanged (64%). This is significantly lower than predictions two years ago, when 80% revealed they would expect to report to this level by 2014. This missed target may not, however, indicate a plateau in the influence of the communications department, with nearly half of participants finding a seat in the boardroom, up from 41% in 2012.

David Broome, Executive Director of VMA Executive – the global search arm of VMA Group - commented on

these findings:

“The communications world is rapidly changing. People are becoming ever-more connected and new media channels are providing greater engagement platforms. With such an array of methods to reach the end user, it’s unsurprising that the number and complexity of audiences is a key challenge for communications professionals. In this digital age almost anyone can be a stakeholder or commentator, both inside and outside their organisation. However, pigeonholing these various audiences into a neat group is almost impossible. People need to be treated in a personable, respectful and immediate fashion – a huge task for any communications department.”

“Regarding the relationship between the communications function and the board, conversations with our network reveal a split opinion as to where professionals should sit. Some argue that they should be fully embedded into management teams to ensure alignment with the board, while others outline the need to sit apart from it in an advisory capacity. While this debate continues, it is clear from the results of this survey that businesses are increasingly recognising the importance of the communications function and it’s likely that we will see rapid evolution of its role in the next two years.”