

## Beyond control?

### The rise of interactive communications.

Organisations recognise that having positive **“word-of-mouth”** is good, but not always quite good enough, to support reputation in the sector, and much effort and resource has been invested in developing more **“manageable”** forms of communications with audiences.

#### IN CONTROL?

The consistent emphasis has been on controlling or **“streamlining”** hard copy and online output:

- So that communications accurately reflect what an institution wishes to say about itself.
- That communications help stakeholders to make informed decisions.
- To ensure that organisations are **“legal and honest”** in their descriptions of their services and portfolio.
- To deliver communications that are tailored to the needs of diverse audiences (and can reach them through the most appropriate channels).

Control, however, has always been the major issue. An endless quest for institutions with a multitude of outlets and points of contact with internal and external audiences has been the desire to impose as much order as possible on the form and style of their communications. Anyone in HE knows just how fraught that task can be, with responsibility for the management, development and delivery of communications devolved across diverse functions and financial boundaries.

#### THIRD PARTY INVOLVEMENT

The rise of **“third party”** involvement in communications has been inevitable: the imperative (and positive impact) of ensuring that an organisation doesn't simply try to **“tell the story”** itself, but gets its stakeholders to do the job for them. This has moved significantly from the, now, run-of-the-mill testimonials in prospectuses, to current staff endorsements via streamed online video to potential new hires. The need to evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of communications and incorporate feedback into future efforts has been a constant, but something far more radical is on the horizon, now, and it is not for the fainthearted.

#### INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

The advent of social networking sites such as My Space, and You Tube has delivered possibilities for profiling institutions, staff, students and opportunities, an option exploited by a number of UK universities. They have tapped into a new audience profile, meeting target stakeholders on their home ground. For universities, managing the new media communications channels will be all about active stakeholder involvement: increasingly, they will need to be **“co-authors”** of their communications with input from their stakeholders across a wide range of online channels.

## INVESTMENT

Texting campaigns, blogs and podcasts are now on the communication manager's schedule. Managing communications channels in complex organisations has never been more like trying to run up a **"down"** escalator: institutions must keep pace with new media formats and this will demand investment in skills and resources.

The increase in online interactive communications has raised expectation levels for staff and students. The **"my university"** interface via the corporate web site, tailored to an individual's preferences, becomes standard. The sector has expected an increase in investment related to e-learning, but the investment required for stakeholder – focused online communications will be unprecedented in the next five years.

## BEYOND CONTROL...

The real challenge is not in keeping pace with rising standards in online delivery, but how new media communications can place unrestricted power with the stakeholders' hands. The notion of corporate control over communications and word-of-mouth is theoretical in the face of **"bad news"** blogs and **"rating"** web sites that have hit the headlines.

The reach, potential speed of change and raw vulnerability of word-of-mouth communications is supercharged in an online environment.

The public thirst for demonstrable accountability in HE, the media preoccupation with league tables plus heightened expectations among stakeholders drive a culture of active feedback and reportage, sometimes accurate, sometimes anecdotal.

HE institutions can't live without online communications, but they may need to plan their **"coping strategies"** for a world in which they share such channels with others.

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