

The Future of Communications

What do in-house Public Relations Officers *really* think about digital?

The emergence of digital communications has changed the landscape for PR agencies. The days of writing a press release, pitching it and then counting the cuttings are long gone as the boundaries of what constitutes PR become blurred. Website copy, community marketing, social media and viral videos are all part of the digital mix and agencies need to be flexible and apply their skills to different disciplines.

Yet amidst the jockeying for position and claims of expertise within the agency world, we need to be paying more attention to what our in-house PR counterparts are saying. Are they ready to embrace digital? If not then what are the issues that are preventing them from doing so?

Ruder Finn UK has conducted qualitative and quantitative research with UK in-house Public Relations Officers (PROs) across the PR industry. This report is based on that research; it looks at how digital communications is currently being deployed and whether going digital really is The Future of Communications.

Industry Matters

The first thing to bear in mind when looking at what PROs make of digital is that it really differs between sectors. If you listen only to those with a background in technology you would be forgiven for thinking that the entire world is caught up in digital communications of some form. Yet the reality is that for many PROs, digital is an area yet to be approached.

“For any industry with a lot of regulation, new communications technologies require incredibly detailed planning to ensure they are used appropriately.” **Global communications director, pharmaceutical**

Healthcare and financial services are both heavily regulated industries and the research suggests that they are the least involved with digital. Whilst PROs see its potential, it is clear their challenge is in persuading internal audiences that it is worth spending the time and resource to define and achieve success.

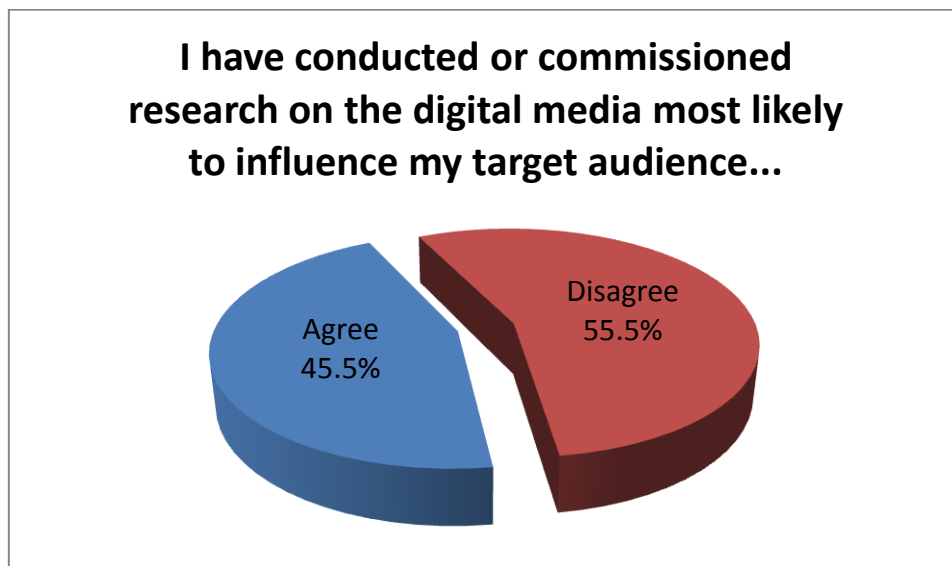
Nick Leonard, MD, Ruder Finn UK said: “There is a danger that when it comes to digital, agencies are assuming too much. Being aware of the internal pressures and industry regulations clients face is key for consultancies of any kind and this applies more than ever when presenting a new communications idea.”

Flying Without Wings

There is undoubtedly an air of uncertainty around digital for many UK PROs. They are unsure of how best to approach it, how much they should be paying for it and how to demonstrate return on investment back to the business.

“I recognise that a generation is growing up using Facebook and reading blogs but I find it a challenge to know exactly how using these to communicate will impact my business.” **UK PR manager, professional services**

When PROs do enter the world of digital they are relying on agencies to show them the right path. While some PROs are willing to try new communications technologies - nearly half claiming they had conducted or commissioned research on the digital media most likely to influence their target audience - that does mean that the majority are using digital communications without a coherent idea of how best to approach it.



“I want a true understanding of how new media can meet objectives and deliver results.” **UK PR manager, public sector**

Commenting on the findings, Nick Leonard said: “PROs are sending out a clear message to UK agencies – show us how to make digital communications work for our business. Agencies need to work much more closely with clients to give them the tools and knowledge to sell digital communications internally.”

How Much!?

Inconsistency of pricing is a particular barrier for digital take-up amongst UK PROs. When asked if they felt digital services were consistently priced across the communications industry, only twenty-one per cent agreed.

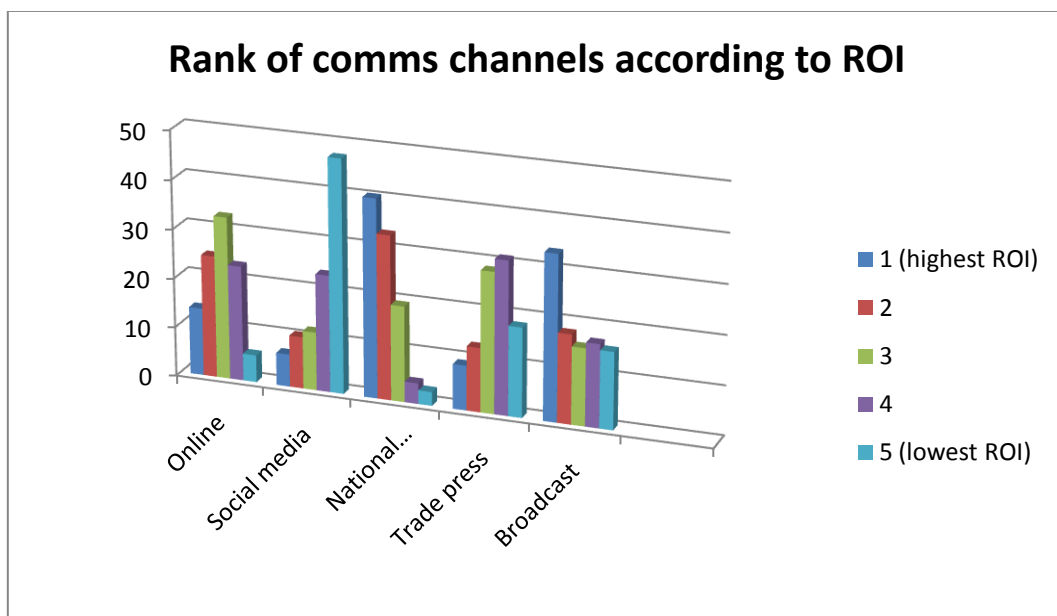
“There is no consistency in how digital services are priced.” **European brand manager, consumer goods**

The lack of consistency in pricing leaves PROs with the impression that agencies are still finding their way with digital communications and are perhaps no better qualified to offer consultancy around digital strategies than the in-house PROs themselves.

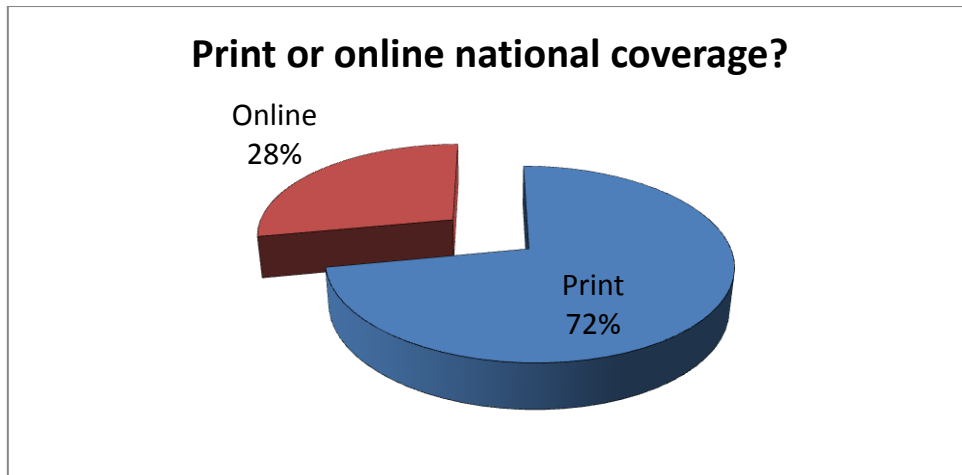
“This inconsistency means that the value in the different agencies’ pricing structures isn’t being made clear, so clients can’t make a value-based judgement,” said Nick Leonard. “More transparency would help; if agencies supply clients with their hourly billing rates and break down costs so clients can compare like with like, then more consistent digital pricing will emerge.”

Show Me The ROI

An issue PROs have with social media specifically is in seeing the ROI. When asked which communication channel provides the highest ROI, less than seven per cent of respondents answered social media compared with broadcast, trade, online and national press.

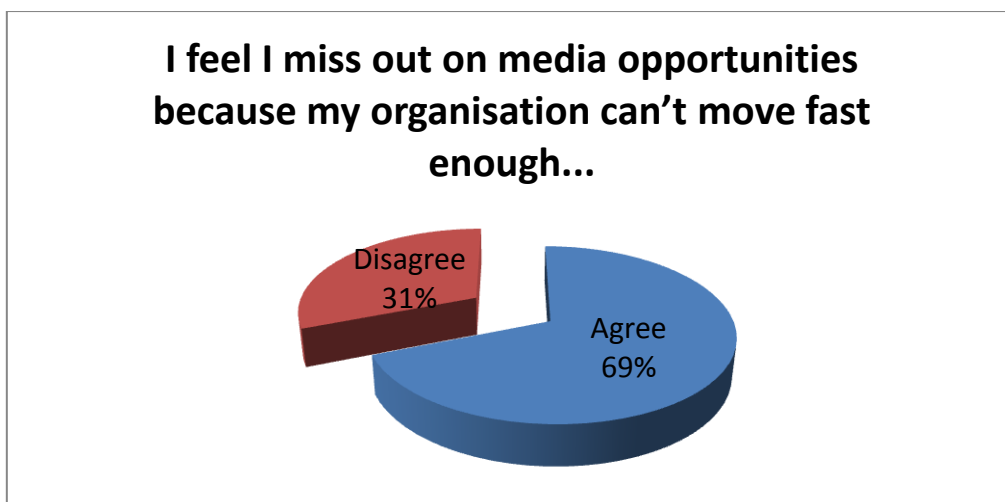


What did emerge across sectors and regardless of current digital use, was that in-house PROs still see most value in national print coverage. Not only did they rate it as having the highest ROI, but nearly three-quarters said given the choice between getting their story placed in a national newspaper or the online version of the same publication, they would choose the print version.



“There is still something about seeing a big piece in the national press, it’s incredibly exciting.” UK PR Manager, telecommunications

Yet with sixty nine per cent of PROs claiming they felt that they already miss out on media opportunities because their organisation can’t move fast enough, factoring in even quicker response times for digital communications set alarm bells ringing for many PROs.



There is no need for in-house PROs to feel intimidated by the prospect of leaving their comfort zone, according to Nick Leonard: “While digital communications can seem daunting and fast-paced for PROs used to traditional media, they needn’t be scared. An agency putting in place the required processes and demonstrating previous successes can go a long way to reassuring a reluctant client.”

Out of Control

A general willingness to embrace digital does have to be tempered with the fact that doubts remain about its suitability for many PROs and there are a number of issues – real or perceived – that are preventing wider take-up. Lack of control over a company’s messaging when engaging in digital communications was one such issue.

“It is much harder to control messages - it’s manageable but requires much more discipline.” **UK PR manager, technology**

Companies or individuals that get hung up on controlling the message are missing a trick according to Nick Leonard. “Successful digital communications is not about controlling the message, it is about leading and being part of the conversation, being helpful, useful and putting customers at the centre of communications and the business as a whole.”

One respondent cited an example of his CEO getting agitated about one blogger’s repeated negative comments about the company. The blogger was poorly-informed and read by an audience that had little or no relevance to the company, yet there was an expectation that the PRO would invest the same time in trying to change the blogger’s perception as they would had the *Financial Times* written a similar piece. This frustration was exacerbated by the blogger’s point blank refusal to engage in any way with the PRO.

Nick Leonard said: “Situations like this stem from agencies not setting expectations and educating their client properly. Blogger influence can be measured in any number of ways, from the Technorati authority rankings to the number of other bloggers that read that blog. If this is effectively explained then issues like the above can be addressed more efficiently.”

The Future of Communications

Whether digital communications will ever completely replace traditional PR is doubtful, although it is growing in influence. PROs are showing an increasing openness to using digital as part of the communications mix but it is clear that they are looking to agencies for more guidance over the best way to approach it.

Companies know they want to try something different, to stand out and to get the attention of their customers but as soon as the word digital is mentioned, common sense seems to fly

out of the window. Approaching a project with the words “I want to do a viral” or “can we put this out on Twitter?” make the hearts of even the most patient digital PR practitioner sink.

“It’s important to keep in mind what kind of reach and impact channels have.” **EMEA PR manager, entertainment**

Knowing what you want to achieve is the single most important part of any communications project but is so often overlooked in the desire to do something cool or new. When planning a digital project, the usual rules apply. How will it help the business? Who will it reach / attract / amuse / interest / engage? What else needs to happen in order for it to work? What will it cost? How long will it take? How can we measure it? And clients, ask the agency to demonstrate where it has achieved success before.

It is our job as consultants to educate our clients, help them figure out the business case and track back from the desired results to the tactics we recommend; it’s not to treat every request as a cash cow and jump in without proper thought and planning.

“Digital has been a shot in the arm for the PR industry – let’s make the most of it by working with in-house PROs to deliver solutions that address their specific requirements.” **Nick Leonard, MD, Ruder Finn UK**

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Methodology

Ruder Finn UK surveyed 100 in-house Public Relations Officers (PROs) for the research, as well as conducting 20 more in-depth interviews with communications staff from across sectors, including consumer goods, entertainment, technology, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, charity/NGO, global health and the public sector.