



**DELPHI**

**COMMS AS A COMPETITIVE  
ADVANTAGE FOR TECH BUSINESSES**

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Over the course of our careers, we've seen the power of communications to help technology businesses tell incredible stories of change and possibility. But we felt that there was room for comms today to do so much more – playing a bigger role in delivering business strategy and increasing reputation capital.

That was the hypothesis we started Delphi with. But like any good tech start-up, we wanted to test this idea with our potential customers first and listen closely to their feedback before we launched to the world.

So we tapped into our networks and conducted qualitative interviews with 20 world-class comms directors at some of the UK's leading tech companies. These companies were deliberately chosen to provide a good cross-section of the industry: publicly listed global enterprises, venture-backed scale-ups and fast-growing start-ups.

From these conversations, we got a snapshot of the thoughts and feelings of comms leaders within tech in 2023. It helped us understand what comms directors want from their external consultants.

And it's validated what we believe is a fresh approach: enhancing the role that comms plays in business success by making it a genuine competitive advantage.



# 01

## WHY COMMS IS UNIQUELY VALUABLE FOR TECH

Before we go any further, it's worth reflecting on why communications plays a uniquely powerful role within the tech sector. From our interviews, we identified three main reasons.

### SELLING THE UNKNOWN

**1** Tech companies are often building new or innovative products and services that the world hasn't seen before. As one of our interviewees put it, "our whole comms strategy is about educating our end users, demystifying what certain buzzwords and terminology means."

Even when their markets are mature, there's a challenge to stand out from the crowd. To succeed, tech businesses need comms to effectively explain what they're doing, why it matters and how it's different. This storytelling and vision-setting are vital in securing investment, attracting talent and convincing customers.

### SYSTEMICALLY IMPORTANT PART OF SOCIETY

**2** Tech's power and impact have grown enormously in the past couple of decades – it now shapes our culture, our economy, and our politics. "We live in tech-led times," one interviewee told us, where "tech is intrinsic to society" and consistently dominates the headlines. Comms helps to successfully engage and manage relationships with the multiple stakeholders that this impact gives rise to.

### STAKES HAVE NEVER BEEN HIGHER

**3** In today's radically transparent, ultra-connected and super-fast world, tech can evolve at lightning speed. Reputations (and fortunes) can be won and lost in an instant. "We're in a more customer-led world," one comms director said, "so people are making decisions on what they see and hear, and reputation is 100% fundamental."

Comms helps navigate today's complex information environment to minimise risk and capitalise on opportunities.

# 02

## WHY COMMS LEADERS ARE REASSESSING THEIR NEEDS NOW

**“Not doing comms properly is holding tech businesses back. I think we are almost paralysed into doing nothing because we don’t know where to focus or prioritise.”**

**“Every agency relationship starts the same. They give massive love at the beginning; it’s chocolates and flowers on the first date. But once they get married, out come the slippers.”**

We heard consistently from in-house comms leaders that the time is right to take stock, look at how the tech sector is evolving, and work with a partner that can help you on that journey. From our interviews we identified four big reasons why they’re reassessing their needs now.

## Too many business leaders (still) don't understand its value

"Every conversation is a comms conversation," said one comms director. "There's a comms component to every business decision." Despite this, too often comms isn't in the room when these discussions are had and decisions are made. Comms might not be brought into the process, asked for its view or kept updated about developments. At best this puts comms on the back foot; at worst it causes brand reputation mishaps.

At the heart of this are two connected factors. Too many business leaders don't understand comms sufficiently. And they don't always appreciate its value. Almost every comms director we spoke to mentioned that, if they could change anything, it would be one or both of these.

Our sense is that this is partly an experience problem and partly a framing problem. If a business leader has experience of comms then they tend to appreciate it more (especially if they've gone through a crisis situation). Regardless, too many of them mentally frame comms incorrectly: they tend to pigeonhole it as either a tactical function that drives media coverage and nothing more, or as a marketing function that should drive sales.

This means they don't understand its potential impact on business reputation and stakeholder relationships, and don't measure it properly through qualitative rather than purely quantitative metrics.

"The challenge is to show the value, to show the impact, to get the understanding that it's more than just the coverage that's being generated."

"You have other marketing channels that have a more demonstrative impact, but then everyone gets upset when they see a competitor in the news!"

# 2

## Structural issues are influencing effectiveness

Structure is at the root of many of comms directors' day-to-day challenges. Whether they complained about silos, unclear ownership, a lack of alignment, or a lack of integration, they frequently said the structure of their function, and how it fitted into the wider business, was affecting their impact. One interviewee even went as far as saying that ideally "I'd start with a blank piece of paper."

This was reflected in how our interviewees acknowledged that most of the hurdles to effective comms are internal. One aspect of this is whether comms leaders are able to build relationships and

influence stakeholders across their organisation. Another is that external advisors are only as good as the client. It's the client's responsibility to give those advisors access and help them get under the skin of the business. But the reality is clients won't do this if they don't think those advisors will have credibility at the highest levels of their organisation.

On a wider structural point, most interviewees worried their business was moving too slowly to keep up with the pace of the outside world. They struggled to get stories out of the organisation or engage subject matter experts who'd bring their messages to life. They battled with risk-aversion and analysis paralysis. The only exception was among start-ups, who had the opposite problem: their businesses moved too fast to stick with consistent storytelling and messaging.

"We're too tunnel-visioned and siloed, with no cohesion across channels - and that structure stops us influencing audiences in more ways than just media."

"Speed is definitely an issue. The time it takes to get things signed off and approved. That's a massive issue for us."

# 3

## Increased demands are making it hard to stay focused on core reputational requirements

The tech sector's power and profile brings opportunities but also challenges for comms leaders. The single biggest challenge is in cutting through the noise of an increasingly crowded industry.

Many of them have responded by streamlining their comms activity: there was a distinct trend

towards a "less is more" approach. A number of our interviewees are trying to focus on just two or three themes to concentrate effort, rather than spreading themselves thinly across multiple activities. But they often struggle to prioritise their stories and messages effectively, as they're pulled in different directions by competing demands. This militates against staying focused on their business's core reputational requirements and landing their narrative consistently.

Similarly, our interviewees often admitted to lacking the personal headspace or organisational bandwidth to think deeply about what really mattered to their business. This isn't for want of trying – it's simply that there isn't enough time in

their day to balance short-term and long-term goals. Part of the role of external advisors, they said, was to help with providing this bigger thinking, driving tangible action, and holding them to account where necessary.

“What happens in big companies is there are loads of comms people all trying to prove their value and have lots to say. That's all very good but it means there's too much in the basket, so focus is lost. You need to focus on three things max and be brutal about it.”

“It's all about prioritisation and finding time to do those bigger pieces. Having the headspace to sit and think about the bigger things. If you don't start thinking about that until 4pm, you're not onto a winner.”

## 4 Expectations have been raised, driving a shift to new ways of doing things

Comms directors don't think that comms in the tech sector has kept pace with the way the sector has developed and innovated more broadly. Legacy mindsets among agencies still persist, even as our information ecosystem and our professional tool set have been completely transformed.

But comms leaders' standards and expectations have been firmly raised. They are open to new approaches and methodologies – including from fields like psychology, social science and

management consulting – to solve their problems. It takes bravery to do things differently, though, and it depends on in-house leaders trusting the tech specialism of their external advisors.

Perhaps because of a lack of resources and investment in new skills, agencies are struggling to keep up with how the sector is changing. They sometimes lack the big thinking necessary to truly grasp the challenges clients face, and even the expertise in new technologies as cutting-edge areas develop rapidly. Meanwhile, great ideas and talent are trapped within these outdated agency structures and unrewarding financial relationships. It's the innovator's dilemma in action, as agencies fear disrupting their existing core businesses.

“The sector is innovating at a much faster pace than our comms around it.”

“Working in a deep tech, I'm unable to find PR agencies that can do good work for us... We need new types of solutions. The old one's not working.”

# 03

## HOW TO UNLEASH COMMS AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

From what we heard in our interviews, we think tech companies are looking for a new approach that helps unleash comms as a competitive advantage.

This needs to be delivered by a strategic communications consultancy with a bias for action – mixing the best-in-class expertise and external perspective of a consultancy, with the hands-on and action-orientated approach of comms people who've seen it all before.

There are four elements to unleashing comms as a competitive advantage. We call them story, teller, structure and stage.



### Story

Creating brilliant stories will always be at the heart of comms. But the tech sector – proud of its innovations and breakthroughs – can sometimes be too navel-gazing.

It often doesn't talk enough about what its customers want to hear, or show real empathy and understanding towards them. Tech's stories will resonate better if we can shape them from more powerful insights, and connect them to audiences' agendas.

“My philosophy has always been, 'let's talk about the world in which our customers operate. Let's not talk about ourselves'. That's stating the obvious, except I still think so few companies do that well.”



### Teller

Great comms requires great communicators. It's essential we make storytelling a bigger strategic priority for businesses and a more important skill for leaders and leadership. That can involve one-to-one coaching for key individuals or even broader culture change across the organisation. Through this, we can educate business leaders and help them better understand comms' power and potential.

“Especially for technical founders, they don't give a damn about comms, they just want to build stuff. So there's an education piece to do with them: we're talking business strategy here, we're talking about where you want to take the business.”



# 03

## HOW TO UNLEASH COMMS AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE



### Structure

So many comms challenges are structural in nature. Comms needs to fix these issues at their root, with better ways of working, and improved relationships between the comms function and the rest of the business. Unless you start here, the majority of comms problems will never get solved.

"I'd love to work out who are we trying to reach and how do we best influence them - and then decide what channels we use. But the structure, ownership and capacity make this impossible right now."



### Stage

Comms can provide an important outward-facing function for organisations. It can study the business's external landscape, spot opportunities and identify best practices to take on board, as well as connecting with stakeholders. By providing a regular view of what's going on externally, comms can challenge, advise and inspire.

"The job of comms, especially for public businesses, is to keep an eye out for potential incoming risks - or, on the other side, incoming opportunities. In this way, comms becomes about more than just doing comms - it becomes, also, about making business decisions and managing business risks."



# 04

## THE WAY FORWARD

So if that's our suggested approach to more impactful comms in the tech sector today, how do comms leaders go about putting it into action?

Inevitably the details will vary from business to business, depending on their individual circumstances, so it's not possible to give a single

answer that applies to everyone. But we think there are a few ideas that comms leaders should consider.

### 1 DECOUPLE STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

Tap into senior expertise for strategic and creative thinking, with the ability to advise knowledgeably on industry best practice and to drive real change rapidly. Meanwhile, keep execution separate (either in-house or via media relations specialists).

### 2 EMBRACE COMMS AS A QUALITATIVE CRAFT

When educating business leaders about comms, root it in its role as a builder of reputation, relationships, trust and credibility, which are all inherently measured qualitatively, not quantitatively.

### 3 INVEST IN THE HUMAN FACTOR

Comms is (still) a people business. That needs to manifest in two ways. First, building brilliant relationships with stakeholders across the organisation. Second, finding a trusted advisor who can be your coach, sounding board and challenger.

### 4 CHAMPION THE POWER OF NICHE EXPERTISE

Lean into the benefit of tech sector specialism rather than relying on generalist consultancies. Explore a more flexible approach that draws on genuine experts who solve specific problems and deliver clear value for you.

### 5 START SMALL TO UNLOCK ACHIEVABLE IMPACT

Break down your problem into smaller units. Identify the leverage points where focused activity can drive easier wins. These will help you to start unlocking comms as a competitive advantage quickly and allow you to build from there.



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