

# What time is it on your planet?

"I AM TIRED of being seen as a PR chick," my client sighed. Her boss and many of her internal clients saw the PR/communication function as a valuable support to the business – but ultimately an expendable one: the budgets could be culled from there most easily, without real business impact. The internal view was that the function should provide event support, media relations and, generally, create a good image for the business. Her efforts at providing long-term strategic advice were blanked. The time was just after 9.

Switch scene: a communication network meeting in South Africa.

The Nigerian team is detailing a government-relations project. The programme was designed to effect a change in the export tax regime, which had been making the local product portfolio uncompetitive. The project turned out to be stunningly successful. In one fell swoop, the products were able to play on a level ground and swiftly become market leader. Senior management subsequently viewed communication activity as a process that was core to their overall success.

In training we use a ready reckoner in the shape of a clock face. At 9 we have the term "valuable support"; at 3, the term "core process". The delegates need to move the arrow somewhere between the two "times"

## Gerry Griffin on why good PR is all about perception

in order to diagnose the perception of the value of the PR/communication function.

Remember, this is not a valuation of personal competences. It is an indication of the *perception* of the value of the function; the perception of the internal client (boss, budget-holder, assignment-giver) of the difference the communication function can make to delivering value.

When I was a consultant, we used to have a saying: "You can only be as good as your client allows you to be."

If the (internal) client has the function pegged at 11, then the space between 9 and 11 becomes your zone of discretion. There is little point in coming up with plans and advice that more properly reside in other zones – this will only cause confusion.

However, time does not stand still. Ask yourself this: what projects have I been involved with in the past six months that have moved the arrow to where it is today? There indeed may be projects equivalent to the impact of the Africa tax programme here; or perhaps a recent issue or crisis that has underlined the importance of the function in maintaining business continuity.



Often you can borrow ideas from projects that teams in different parts of the world have implemented, and succeeded in moving the arrow forward.

So what time is it in your organisation? Of course it can vary depending on organisational size, maturity, category and location, but if I were to average it out based on experience, I would say that the time is just before midday. And this median represents a move forward in the past decade.

Despite residual views that communication is a vague, immeasurable and slightly underhand art, there is a genuine development in the professional competence of communication executives and a growing appreciation within the business of what they can really do to drive value. ●

Gerry Griffin is founder of the Business Communication Forum (BCF)