



The 2021 IPR Future of Communications in Asia Report

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About the Institute for Public Relations



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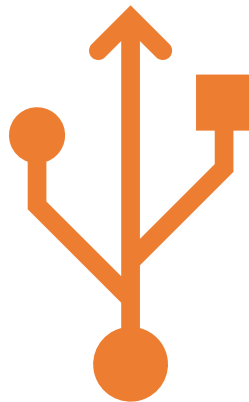
Methodology

- In 2019 and 2020, IPR interviewed nearly 30 senior communications executives at Asia-headquartered companies in the auto, energy, education, healthcare, financial services, CPG, manufacturing, travel, real estate, and technology industries.
- Follow-up focus groups were conducted with nearly 20 senior communication leaders in Asia in November and December 2020

Full report available at instituteforpr.org/2021-fow-asia-report/

Five Major Themes

1. Asia's Future is Now
2. Evolution of the Communications Function
3. Exponential Growth of Technology
4. Increasing Focus on Internal Communications
5. Spotlight on Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance



PART I

- Many countries could easily be categorized as **digital-first economies**
- Digital platforms **differ vastly from one market to another in Asia**
- Communicators must **use multiple platforms** to target both internal and external stakeholders
 - Including Microsoft Teams, WeChat, WhatsApp, Viber, and others



Asia as a Highly Diverse Region



- Every market, every region, and every country is different
- Digital platforms differ vastly
- Executives are increasingly becoming **more regionalized and localized**

Asia's COVID-19 Recovery

- COVID-19 was **a catalyst for change** in communications
- Leaders are focused on how these changes fit into **a more cohesive global communications plan**
- Accelerated growth has also put **pressure on performance**

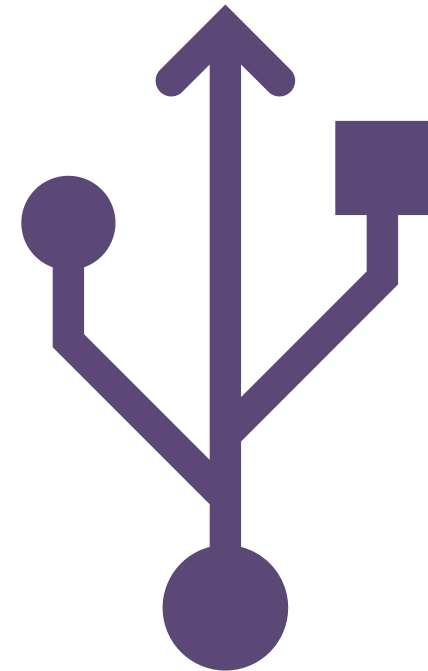


PART II

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION

An Accelerating Pace of Change

- **Speed of change** affected by:
 - Rapid growth of technology and innovation
 - COVID-19 factors
 - Socio-political factors
- Changed the **style of communications**:
 - More informal in terms of tone and delivery
 - Investing more in communications technology
 - Increased responsiveness
 - Brevity of messages



Communications Becoming More Strategic and Influential

- Historically, communications was **perceived as a press function** in Asia
- Quickly **evolving** to play a more active **leadership role**
- There is still a need for **continual “education”** about what a strategic communications function should look like

“
Corporate communications, or PR, has often been seen as something like a tax; You have to have it, but no one really wants to have it . . . However, now, online media and digital have changed the way that people consume information. We have a much larger role in actually shaping the story of the company and influencing the people that we want to target about their image of our company in a very more direct way.

- Head of Global Communications | Automotive Company

Analytics and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Will Drive Measurement

- **Culture** influences how people interact on digital platforms, which influences interpretation of metrics
- Some leaders say their metrics are “weak,” too expensive, or they **haven’t found the “ultimate” tool**
- **Pressure to provide stronger metrics**, but not sure where to start

“

You drive intent, awareness, goodwill [and] loyalty, but how do you then connect all those dots to say that equaled X million in sales or business or product purchases? That’s still not something we’re very good at answering, and I would challenge the entire comms industry: We’ve got to take it up a notch.

- Head of Global Corporate Communication | Consulting Company

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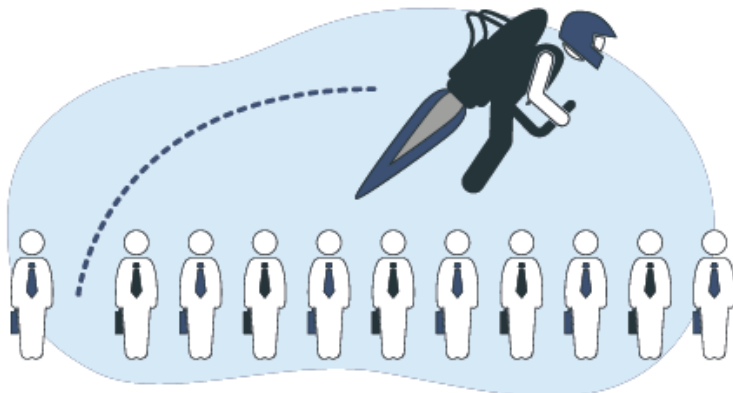
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PART III

EXPONENTIAL GROWTH OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology Enabling Leapfrogging

- Many Asian markets have leapfrogged traditional stages of technology
- **Changing** the way stakeholders expect to hear from leaders



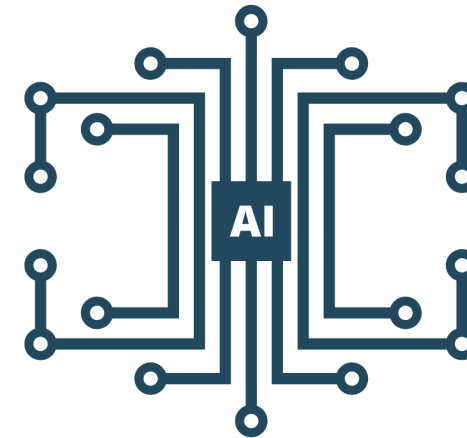
“

What I've found in my time in Asia is that Asia leapfrogs . . . You just leapfrog a whole swath of what happened in the West over the past decade or so, where you log on to a computer and you do your banking, or you do your grocery shopping, or whatever. They can just go, “This is the best technology in the world, this is the most convenient. We're going to go straight to that. We don't need to do it in an incremental way.”

The Impact of AI and Other New Tech Will Be Significant

- AI is a **powerful and positive force** to:
 - store and organize data
 - train and upskill employees
 - make work flows more efficient
- Although the communications function has not fully adopted all that AI technologies have to offer, **it's clear these technologies could eventually generate immense benefits**
- The use of AI will **vary with each Asian market**
- Predictions that **AI will be used** for
 - writing news releases & annual reports
 - converting text into video
 - analyzing social media conversation
 - conducting media research

“ There is absolutely a role for AI in terms of standardized communications, but something we've talked about as a firm quite a lot is to what extent AI, given the sophistication of current technology, can replicate the general communications function or skill . . . I think we are a long way off AI replacing skilled communications. But for some things like fact-driven, commoditized, technical information, absolutely. ”



Communicating to Digital-First Economies and the Expectation of “Always-On” Communications

- Booming tech and **mobile-first** society will continue to change the way their companies communicate
- Investing **less in websites** and more on apps.
- Participants said local social platforms that will continue to be dominant in Asia include **WeChat, WhatsApp, QQ, Weibo, LINE and KakaoTalk**.
- Many local social platforms in Asia provide an entire online ecosystem, allowing people to do most or all of their daily online activity via that one platform

“

There’s this always-on, highly informed society in Asia . . . It’s created a whole new generation of tech-savvy, highly digital people and high expectations as a result. So, if the experience is poor when it comes to brands communicating with them, you’re going to lose people quickly.

- Global Head of Communications | Consulting Agency

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Content Is Owned, Shared, Personalized, and Localized

- Investing more in personalized content
- Relying heavily on owned and shared media, as well as online influencers
- The degree of influence of media type also depends on the country
 - For example, in Japan, traditional media is one of the most important channels of communication

“

We have to figure out how to get earned media to work for us in the social media space. I don't think anyone really has an answer right now. Also, at some point, people are going to realize that these paid spots that you see on Instagram and YouTube are simply that, paid spots. I think Millennials today don't really seem to care if it's earned or paid, but I think that's going to change.

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PART IV

INCREASING FOCUS ON INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

- When COVID-19 hit, **investments in resources and time skyrocketed**
- Specifically, investing in technologies to communicate better with their employees
- LinkedIn reported a 60% increase in the volume of “remote” job searches in key markets such as China, India, Australia and Singapore



Executive Visibility Is Increasing Internally

- Employees want their leaders to be **more visible**
- More executives **on internal social media platforms**
- Some leaders have embraced this visibility as it allows them to be more successful in achieving corporate goals.
 - *As an executive at a multinational beverage company said, "It's clicked to people that if you can tell what you're doing more efficiently to more people, you can progress what you're aiming to do in your business purpose."*

“

Some of them are very cautious or even embarrassed to be using social media. Some of them still think that it looks like they are fishing for a career change or they're trying to, you know, build up their reputation, putting themselves in the front, before the company.

- Communications Expert
Insurance Company

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Engaging Mobile-First Employees

- Blurring the line between personal and professional life as **employees desire more personalized communications**
- Employees in Asia want to use **digital tools they are already using in their personal lives**

“ *Employees expect that companies will engage with them socially across those boundaries. You’ll get work colleagues or potential business colleagues wanting to communicate with you on what you’ve considered to be your private social channels, whether it’s Facebook or WeChat or others. In Asia, those lines between business and personal are increasingly blurred and, therefore, as communicators, you need to understand that and reach out to your stakeholders where they want to be contacted.* ”

An Agile and Adaptive Cultural Mindset Is Critical

- Resistance to change may result in their companies **becoming obsolete**
- COVID-19 has spurred some **changes for the better**
- Focus on a change-ready culture **from the top to bottom**

“

Resources are not an issue. The issue is resistance and mindset. By resistance, I mean we are our worst enemy because we think that we are always right because we have been right for centuries. Suddenly, people are telling us, “Well, you know, you have to think in a different way.” Resistance may not be so prevalent at the business-unit level, but it is at the upper echelon. It’s a challenge because the advocacy needs to start from the top.

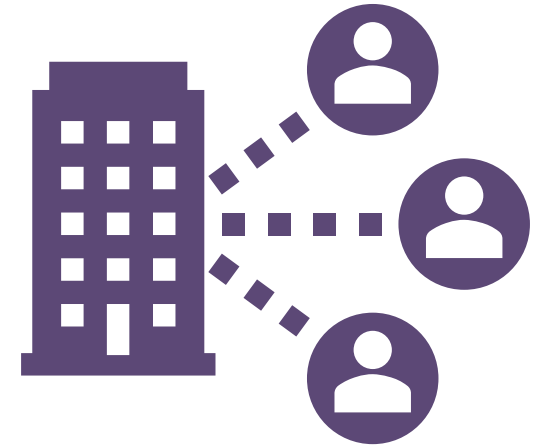
- Corporate Affairs Director | Conglomerate

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Investments in Upskilling and Reskilling Employees Are Needed

- Preparing for advances in the future of work such as automation
- **Engaging a multigenerational workforce is KEY**
- Innovation and growth in the Asia-Pacific region are contributing to **a lack of availability of key skills**, which is driving the talent crunch in certain markets



“ On the one hand, I’ve got a team of much younger talent who are kind of biting at the chomp to get ahead and really get reskilled and retooled, but we’re not investing nearly enough, so that’s really where I feel the investment needs to be in the next one to three years—training and reskilling. ”

PART V

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION

“

COVID-19 and all those other challenges have impacted us over the last year, so it has raised the awareness that as a business, you will have to plan ahead, you will have to look at risk that's ahead of you, very much like climate change.

- Communications Leader | Energy Company

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Rising Growth of Sustainability

- More communicators are becoming increasingly more involved in the charge toward carbon neutrality
- For some, this is a critical area to offer thought leadership

“ If you look in terms of the major trends, I will say that [sustainability] would be the key. That’s the reason why we announced our strategy, which is to focus on performance, sustainability and having a dynamic organization. I think the key in terms of the sustainability part is it’s also a function of the fact that if you look at investors, there’s a lot more focus and importance placed to this area, so investors are a little bit more resistant to looking at companies that are not as green. ”



Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)

- ESG continues to **significantly advance** in Asia, driven particularly by investors and regulators
- In 2015, the Hong Kong Stock Exchange updated its rules to shift from “voluntary” ESG reporting to a “**comply or explain**” **requirement**.
- Participants fed back that many of their companies are **taking steps to improve their ESG standards**.
- **ESG requirements** – in both actions and reporting – are providing communications in Asia with new opportunities to elevate the function.



The Rise of Issues Management

- Communication leaders are being drawn into geopolitical debates, but overall, companies were hesitant to participate
- The new Biden Presidential Administration in the U.S. plays a role
- This affects areas such as:
 - **regulation**
 - **customer interactions**
 - **a range of ESG-related matters**
- More leaders seek to have a voice on societal issues
- Asked to weigh in on critical issues: **such as the impact of regulations and legislations on the company's brand and reputation.**
- One of the challenges cited was **how to speak up** and **what issues to speak out about** from a global perspective





In Conclusion

- Asia is leading the world in terms of **technological transformation**.
- Asia is not a monolithic block; it is **highly diverse** in multiple ways.
- The COVID-19 **pandemic accelerated the transformation** of the communications function in Asia.
- There's a **shift toward mobile-first channels** and a greater emphasis on internal communications.
- Companies in Asia are **focused more on ESG issues**, especially in consideration to sustainability.



Thank you!



Download the full report at
instituteforpr.org/2021-fow-asia-report/