

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

The coming of age of communication consulting

Communication consultancies face an industry evolution where a balance between new quantitative methods and maintaining the value of qualitative practices is at play. Increased quantitative analysis and a move towards an evidence-based policy approach have provided the industry with a necessary shake-up of working. However, the interpersonal complexity behind the numbers must not be lost. Therefore, a multi-disciplinary approach is essential to optimising the adoption of quantitative practices.

A dynamic environment, quick adoption of new technology and a transparent decision-making process are words not often associated with the traditional, grey-suited world of politics. Yet, the increased use of quantitative data has presented the industry of communication consultants that work in this sphere at a crossroads. No longer simply a press release machine and someone to keep politicians' company between Parliamentary sittings, communication consultants must adapt to the age of cross-discipline teams, agile work practices and collaboration, to provide real value for clients.

To understand more about the emerging trends across communication consultancies and the impact of quantitative analysis, I spoke with **Eoin O'Driscoll** of **Hanover Communications**, a company at the forefront of this evolutionary change.

Having talked to Eoin, I realised that the world of communication consultancy is in a state of flux and is at a turning point between the qualitative old-guard and the new quantitative methods. However, to survive such an evolution requires not just a simple change of guard but an evolution of practices. The industry faces a balancing act of embracing new

practices while not diminishing the quality of its current practices and in effect throw the baby out with the bathwater. In this article, I explore the changing role of communication consultants with specific reference to the working of communication consultants in the Irish context, the changing nature of their work with decision-makers and the impact of quantitative analysis on such practices.

I began by asking Eoin to give me an insight into the client-consultant relationship.

Show your workings

Firstly, in today's world of political discourse, the significance of personal relationships has declined. The party-political landscape is more fractured and, there is a greater demand to present an evidence-based policy approach. Consultants need to bring real value to their clients. Quantitative evidence is ever more present in the solutions that consultants prepare for clients. Quantitative analysis can verify anecdotal evidence, illustrate the problem in more detail and make it easier for decision-makers to build support to address the issue.

Civil servants and politicians tend to be overworked and have too much on their plates. The time constraints create a capacity gap that consultants seek to fill. Coupled with the increased use of quantitative analysis, the profile of a communications consultant is changing. There is a decline in government experienced recruitment and an increase in hiring those with a specialist background. Yet, Eoin stressed the importance of understanding the inside of the political machine, as the theory and the practice do not often align and can go undetected by purely quantitative analysis. It raises the potential of threats within the opportunities of quantitative analysis.

The feeling behind the numbers

Public policy decisions contain many conflicting interests that may be difficult to capture within a numerical model.

Learning from the experiences of the economics discipline, we see how the concept of economic man is deeply flawed, disregarding most human interaction in its decision-making process. Political decision-making contains so much complexity; intangible factors such as culture or inter-personal relationships that are critical to delivering the right solutions to the client. To completely disregard such factors diminishes the consultant's value-delivery.

In this sense, Eoin argues that technological advancements will not phase out personal skills to the extent that the prevailing wisdom would lead you to believe. Institutional knowledge is key to understanding how processes will unfold, is tacit in nature and cannot be simply downloaded and put on file. Experienced consultants play a vital role in being the bridge between theory and practice. A mixed approach between quantitative and qualitative analysis is required to address the client's problem effectively.

When it comes to acquiring the relevant data, there is a disconnect between the academic community and the practitioner world. There is more of a concern to focus on abstract political concepts than the implementation process of public policy. It creates a black box of understanding of public policy implementation that can negatively influence the transparency of the working procedures increasing the reliance on personal relationships over the use of facts and figures. If there is a desire in the academic community to facilitate evidence-based policymaking, their data must be made more useable to the political process. Eoin pointed out that the Irish political system is an unlocked door waiting to be opened by academics. Decision-makers are crying out for solutions to the problems they have. Consultancies such as Hanover fill this gap, yet the specialisation that academics provide would aid their cause.

Getting the right mix

Eoin raised a concern about the prevalence of the shift towards the unthoughtful use of quantitative analysis. The numbers are only as good as the issues they reflect. If an understanding of the assumptions used for justification is missing, then while the outcome may be mathematically significant, the actionability is reduced. Wrongly this logic is often perceived as a reluctance to adopt quantitative methods, and as a longing for the good old days of smoke-filled rooms of backroom deals based on your alcohol consumption rather than your financial model. On the contrary, it reflects a concern about data quality.

A misunderstanding exists about what is required to obtain relevant qualitative data to supplement the relevant quantitative data. It is not a requirement to be chummy with everyone. It is an appreciation of the relevance of interpersonal relationships and not to dismiss them as irrelevant due to their lack of statistical relevance. The history of

different dynamics provides an in-depth understanding of the likelihood of one outcome to happen over the other, even though they may hold the same level of statistical probability.

At the same time, quantitative methods have provided the industry with a necessary shake-up of practices. It has required consultants to reflect on what their value-add to clients is. Instead of being the client's best friend, the relationship has moved towards a more active consultant approach. There is a recognition within the industry that simply being a communication firm excludes you as a consultant from bringing holistic value to clients. Today, there is a blending of practices within the industry.

So instead of focusing solely on communication issues or strategy issues, there is a move towards providing strategic advice

There is an understanding of the need to move beyond simple qualitative optics to

a more tangible strategic direction backed by data analysis.

A threat for the industry fears Eoin is an increased reliance on quantitative analysis to justify your productivity. Some consultants tend to justify their work by the number of meetings they had rather than the quality of those meetings. The trap of a check-the-box mentality increases with the use of data analysis. Eoin believed that this stems from a lack of appreciation for the Arts by industry leaders and decision-makers. Trying to measure phenomena such as social deprivation requires an understanding of a broader scope of knowledge than the narrow skill set of data analysis.

“The analysis of data is only as good as the data you analyse” says Eoin.

A mixed disciplines approach is required. It is about taking the best of all worlds and putting it together versus turning the world on its head. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The world of communication consulting is experiencing an exciting transformation as it comes to terms with the increased use of quantitative analysis. While the potential threat of overenthusiasm of new practices adoption remains, it presents consultancies with an opportunity to sharpen current practices and add new ones. The takeaway is to appreciate the value of qualitative data that the statistical model does not capture but simultaneously be wary of becoming beholden to the anecdotal nature of the qualitative approach. A multi-disciplinary approach is essential to optimising the adoption of a quantitative practices.

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