

# COMMUNICATIONS BENCHMARK REPORT

— 2021 EDITION —

Essential data and analysis for forward-thinking communicators

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# INTRODUCTION

**T**he communications discipline experienced a transformation in stature and scope during the last 12 months, as the public health, economic and social-justice crises that engulfed the country underscored the need for messaging management and strategic direction from communicators at organizations across the U.S. and around the world.

Comms pros have been called on to develop and distribute the message on new policies that affect internal and external stakeholders alike. Their role has become more vital as they helped keep their organizations focused and moving forward. Communicators saw their access to the C-suite increase throughout 2020, and forged important new alliances with peers in other departments, including HR, finance and workplace wellness.

These are among the key findings from Ragan's annual Communications Benchmark Report, an exclusive study from Ragan's Communications Leadership Council. Culled from more than 750 respondents, the results reveal a range of sentiments and best-laid plans during a very dynamic time. The 32-page report, available in its entirety to members of the Communications Leadership Council, includes a deep dive into the data, analysis of trends and recommendations for a new communications blueprint.

## A Dizzying Year

It has been noted that the pandemic accelerated business change within organizations by as much as five years. This year's Benchmark Report reflects that dizzying pace and provides communicators with a blueprint for 2021 and beyond.

"There is no doubt that communicators rose to the unfortunate occasion that 2020 brought, but they are exhausted and resource-strapped," notes Diane Schwartz, CEO of Ragan Communications. "The Benchmark Report research underscores their importance to senior leadership and 2021 is a critical year for communicators to not only maintain that momentum but to help their organizations rethink the key ways they are interacting with stakeholders."

The pandemic remains a communications priority as organizations adapt to the next phase—vaccination planning and a return to the workplace. Communicators are even now still working to improve engagement with their remote workforce. An overwhelming majority of Communications Benchmark Report respondents—66%—said they anticipate remote or flexible-work arrangements will be a permanent option going forward. Only 14% said that won't happen at their organizations.

At the same time, respondents split on whether returning to the workplace will result in the need for extensive remodeling of office space and long-term social distancing.

All of this is occurring against a backdrop of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected communicators themselves. The short answer? It's been a challenge. Nearly 80% of respondents said COVID has led to an increased workload. More than 20% said the pandemic forced budget cuts, and 15% said it led to layoffs.

## **There's a Seat at Some Tables for Comms**

But COVID has been a double-edged sword. It's led to some valuable new organizational dynamics. When asked to describe how COVID impacted the department, 42% of respondents, for example, said they've forged stronger relationships with other departments, and a quarter said they've gained a seat at the table in strategic decision making. And more than 20% said they now have better access to the CEO.

Ragan's Communications Benchmark Report surfaced a variety of other communications priorities as well. Comms pros are focused on the burgeoning field of workplace wellness. They're formulating what they're going to say about vaccination, and when employees will come back to work. Diversity, equity and inclusion strategies made the top of the priority list.

Complicating these efforts is the fact that many organizations have a global footprint and need strategies that account for distinctions among the countries and populations they serve.

Then there's technology. It was already the fastest-changing aspect of global work life, but 2020 accelerated adaption and now there's no looking back. Communicators see an increased reliance on mobile communications going forward. They see an increase in virtual communications and in the use of artificial intelligence.

Technology, communications professionals believe, will sometimes play a disorienting role in how they ply their craft. "We have way too many platforms," one respondent said. "I like adopting new tools when it makes sense, but it's confusing when we have way too many of them. There is a disconnect."

Ragan's Communications Benchmark Report is based on responses to an online survey conducted between Jan. 13, 2021-Feb. 7, 2021. The survey yielded 755 qualified responses from internal and external communicators worldwide.

# KEY FINDINGS

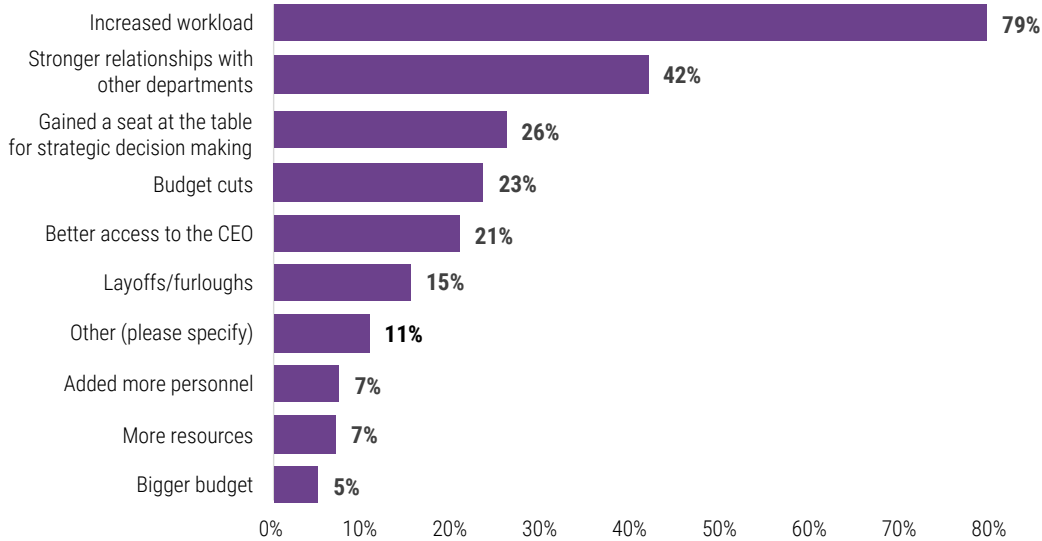
- Communicators see dramatic changes coming in the next three to five years, and not just a few. There will be an increased focus on communicating with remote workers. There will be a greater reliance on social media. Workplace wellness will occupy a large role for communicators, though a shared role with other departments. There will be more personalization.
- Diversity, Equity & Inclusion will especially increase as a focus and it is incumbent on the communicator to find his or her leadership spot with these efforts or risk being sidelined by counterparts in other departments.
- Technology will change the landscape in dramatic ways. Virtual communication has already transformed the industry, and more than 40% of communicators believe it will continue to drive change in the next three to five years. Artificial intelligence will rise in importance, as will mobile communications.
- A surprising number of respondents, 46%, said they did not create a crisis-communications plan in 2020. But 69% said they had a crisis plan prior to 2020, suggesting that they moved forward with their existing plans in 2020. In both questions, a statistically significant number of respondents indicated they didn't know the answer to either.
- As the COVID-19 vaccine rollout accelerates, there's widespread uncertainty about implementation. Asked if their organization will create a vaccine-related communications plan, only 45% of respondents said yes, while 42% said they didn't know. For large companies of 10,000 or more employees, 60% said they will have a communications plan for the vaccine.
- Similarly, asked whether employees will be required to be vaccinated before returning to work, 55% of respondents said they didn't know. About 40% said no, and just 4% said yes—employees would be required to have been vaccinated before returning to work. Among organizations with more than 10,000 employees, the percentage of those requiring a vaccine as a condition of returning to work drops to 2%.

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- Respondents are increasingly pleased with their organizations' communications efforts. This year, 52% rate their efforts as above average or excellent, an 11 percentage-point gain from last year. But some saw room for improvement. "We need more integration of internal and external efforts, was a typical response. "We need to be more focused on storytelling," was another.
- Overall, 78% of respondents measure their communications effectiveness. And communicators are also more satisfied with their measurement efforts—41% say they are satisfied with their efforts this year, compared to 28% in 2020.
- For respondents, there are many obstacles to producing more effective communications, but the most significant—by a wide margin and across both internal and external comms and large and small companies—is too many last-minute requests. Other obstacles include lack of staff, lack of budget and too many distractions.
- A plurality of respondents—31%—have comms budgets of between \$50,000 and \$500,000, excluding staff. About 20% are below that, and another 20% are above it, while 30% don't know how much is in their organization's communications budget.
- Given the chance to increase departmental spending, the majority, 52%, said they'd hire more fulltime staff. Other wish-list items were to improve metrics, improve technology, and increase team training.

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## How did COVID impact your communications department?



COVID increased the workload for communicators, but also catalyzed an increasingly strategic array of new opportunities. Comms pros found themselves building new relationships with other departments, with better access to the CEO, and a seat at the table for strategic decisions.

## What changes do you expect to see in the communications industry in the next three to five years?

Increased focus and investment on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	63%
Increased focus on communicating with remote or non-desk workers	53%
More communications via mobile	41%
Virtual Communication	41%
More Personalization	37%
Greater reliance on social media	31%
Workplace wellness	26%
Increased importance of employee advocacy	26%
More brand journalism storytelling	23%
Use of artificial intelligence	23%
More thought leadership	20%
More focus on influencer marketing	16%
Investment in Intranets will Increase	10%
Consolidation of communications under marketing	8%
Consolidation of communications under HR	4%
Decrease in number of PR firms	4%
Increase in number of PR firms	3%
Investment in intranets will decrease	3%
Other	1%

There's widespread consensus that a staggering number of changes are coming to the profession—in tech, in new channels and techniques, and in wellness and personalization—all led by DE&I and remote work.

Communicators are still working on educating C-suite leaders on social media, and they're increasingly focused on the importance of communications in supporting DE&I related initiatives. But the crises of 2020 thrust them into the center of enterprise strategy, and they're looking to continue the momentum.

This report—32 pages of research and analysis in all—is a product of the Communications Leadership Council. It's packed with mission-critical empirical findings on communications budgets, technology rankings, trends in communications planning and measurement, crisis-communications policies, trends in both internal and external communications channels, team structures, and lots more. Non-Council members can learn more about the Council and its benefits, which include research and benchmarking reports, [here](#). Or they can contact our Customer Service department at [cservice@ragan.com](mailto:cservice@ragan.com) or 800-878-5331.

To schedule an interview or discussion with the Benchmark Report analysts, please contact Tony Silber at [tonys@ragan.com](mailto:tonys@ragan.com).



## About Us

For more than 50 years, Ragan Communications has been delivering trusted news, training and intelligence for internal and external communicators, HR professionals and business executives via its conferences, webinars, training, awards, subscriptions and membership divisions. Its daily news sites—[PRDaily.com](#) and [Ragan.com](#)—are read by more than 600,000 internal and external communicators monthly. Its Communications Leadership Council is one of the fastest-growing membership groups for communications executives.

## Ragan Products:



Through our world-renowned newsletters, conferences, research reports and guides, [Ragan Communications, Inc.](#), delivers practical advice, real-world solutions and field-tested strategies for today's corporate communicator.

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[Ragan's Communications Leadership Council](#) is an exclusive membership organization for senior-level corporate and internal communicators. Comprised of the most innovative companies in the world, the membership provides benefits for both senior leaders and their teams, including premier networking, extensive industry training and benchmarking reports.



[Ragan Training](#) is an online membership portal providing access to video training courses in communications, public relations and digital marketing. The video library provides sessions and courses covering new practices and required skill sets for various specialties—as well as panel discussions and perspectives on the changing nature of our industry.



[Workplace Wellness Insider](#) gives leaders in HR, wellness and communications the insights, ideas and strategies to align employee health and engagement with organizational goals. Through its subscription service and training programs, Workplace Wellness Insider provide managers with the tools, strategies and ideas on employees' mental, physical and financial health, social wellbeing, and work-life balance.



The logo for Ragan's Social Media Council includes a small 'r' in a square above the word 'agan', followed by 'Social Media' in a large, teal, serif font, and 'COUNCIL' in a smaller, teal, sans-serif font below it, flanked by horizontal lines.

[Ragan's Social Media Council](#) is an exclusive membership organization for senior-level social media leaders. The membership offers benefits for both senior leaders and their teams that are tailored to companies' social media needs, including monthly webinars, networking opportunities and in-person training.

The logo for Ragan's Crisis Leadership Network features a small 'r' in a square above the word 'agan', followed by 'Crisis' in a large, green, serif font, and 'LEADERSHIP NETWORK' in a smaller, green, sans-serif font below it, flanked by horizontal lines.

[Ragan's Crisis Leadership Network](#) is the resource you need before, during and post-crisis. As a member, you have access to an online members-only portal, all-access pass to the annual Crisis Management Conference, subscription to the Crisis Communications Daily, access to research, data, case studies, checklists, tipsheets, articles and other resources, plus a peer to peer discussion board to interact with other members. You and your team will also have unlimited use of online training via webinars and virtual conferences on crisis management topics.

The logo for Ragan's First Draft includes the text 'RAGAN'S' in a small, green, sans-serif font above 'FIRST DRAFT' in a large, bold, green, sans-serif font, with the tagline 'Ready-to-Go Stories for Busy Editors & Communicators' in a smaller, green, sans-serif font below.

[First Draft](#) provides communicators & editors with timely and relevant content to keep readers engaged and connected.

The logo for Bits & Pieces features the words 'BITS' and 'PIECES' in a large, blue, serif font, with '&' in a smaller, blue, serif font between them.

[Bits and Pieces](#) is a monthly magazine read by thousands of professionals seeking personal inspiration and motivation.

The logo for Ragan's Crisis Communications Briefing includes the text 'RAGAN'S' in a small, green, sans-serif font above 'CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS' in a large, bold, green, sans-serif font, and 'BRIEFING' in a smaller, bold, green, sans-serif font below it, flanked by horizontal lines.

[Ragan's Crisis Communications Briefing](#) is a weekly newsletter delivering the latest news and insights around brand crises and reputation management. Curated by Ragan editors, the Briefing provides you with a quick read on the most important crises of the week and how communicators are leading their organizations through various levels of disruption and transformation.



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