

# Tech In Review: 21-22

## Navigating Tech PR & Comms

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# 1. NO INDUSTRY IS AN ISLAND

After the seismic events of 2020, 2021 brought fresh challenges to the technology market – and saw the unwelcome return of some old issues.

While tech companies accelerated their growth this year, the ramifications, and reactions to this have shown that no industry is an island.

We can't thrive long-term without understanding and adapting to the world around us. We won't survive as an island.

The economic, social, and political spotlights are firmly on the technology sector.

We grow as part of the economy and society, not separate from them.

For this reason, the technology sector has significant responsibilities that come with its great opportunities.

Our Year In Review & Outlook report dives more deeply into these issues and what they mean for tech.

Here, we wanted to focus on specific aspects and what they mean for you as a marketing or comms professional.

Understanding the big picture is key to creating better campaigns with content that resonates, and strategies and tactics that drive customer behaviours.

Moreover, comms and marketing have critical roles to play in how the rest of the world perceives the tech sector.

We hope this report will provide food for thought, useful insight, and a call to action to take the steps that will prepare you to navigate the challenges and opportunities of 2022.



## 2. THE CHANGING ROLE OF TECH COMMS

The pandemic has rocked the status quo of media relations.

During the early stages of the pandemic, people consumed huge amounts of media to try to grasp the constantly evolving situation.

This resulted in a saturated news cycle dominated by big themes, and an over-proliferation of channels of communication.

It is uncertain how this landscape will have evolved by the end of 2022.

Advertising budgets that moved online during the pandemic could be funnelled back into print to contend with issues around data privacy, for example, bolstering flagging newspaper sales.

Consumers in search of trustworthy content might be more tempted to pay for subscriptions.

The situation is still changing so quickly that it is tough to understand it completely

and, according to Kantar research, there's a disconnect between how we in the industry view the situation and the reality.

An eternal truth is that, in an ever more complicated landscape, brands need to communicate clearly. LinkedIn has reported that chief communications officer hires grew by 35% over the past year.

Communications expertise is valued more and more highly across all areas of business, from humanising corporate responses to the pandemic, through managing concerns around environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues.

In the increasingly complex world that tech companies must inhabit, anticipating and assessing issues, and establishing a clear, defensible business position is essential to building stakeholder trust.

That trust is the foundation of investor, consumer, and regulator confidence – and, therefore, of business success.

PR and comms teams are well-versed in managing and coordinating stakeholder relationships, from the media to board members.

In 2022, tech comms has an opportunity to solidify the role it has played in successfully steering firms through 18 tricky months.

# 3. FIVE MACRO TRENDS SHAPING TECH

## Trend 1: Tech platforms become the new battlegrounds

As the digital economy matures, we are seeing the next generation of players go head-to-head in the digital space.

Rapidly evolving legal, marketing and economic dynamics are continually reshaping online marketplaces.

The likes of Apple's App Store and the Amazon Marketplace are the new battlegrounds for clashes.

As companies increasingly rely on these platforms as a means by which to access their customer base, these challenges will intensify.

This is just as important for B2B as it is for consumer brands. Commodities, retail, transport and services are increasingly facilitated via online marketplaces.

### Actions

Growing your brand on the platform of another brand has huge advantages. You can scale quickly and reach an engaged, ready-made consumer base. But you also need to create your own distinctive branding and experiences to ensure your survival isn't tied to one marketplace.

Market-aware branding and smart messaging will help you survive

strategically, while thought leadership and content that demonstrate your expertise with clarity will ensure you cut through the noise.

## Trend 2: Chip shortages highlight the impact of supply-chain issues

The continuation into 2021 of the chip-shortage crisis has implications for industries from automotive to mobile telecoms. Moreover, supply isn't expected to return to normal until the end of 2022 at the earliest, significantly affecting the global economy.

But this is just one plotline in a wider story that has overtaken business pages this year: that is, the global supply-chain crisis. This affects areas from logistics, digital trade and supply-chain ethical standards within a globalised market that relies on vast, complex and interconnected routes of trade.

### Actions

Taking measures to retain confidence in your supply and infrastructure is key to surviving challenges, whether this involves greater scrutiny of your production and supply standards, or simply reassuring customers that you can continue to deliver the goods and services they require.

You need to be as transparent as possible about how your supply chain works and where goods and services are sourced, and be ready to handle any supply-related issues that might emerge.

### Trend 3: Don't believe (all) the hype

From the downfall of Theranos to devaluations suffered by rising stars such as WeWork, hype can seriously damage a business and brand.

When world-changing ideas seem tantalizingly within reach, it's easy for founders to focus on the future ideal and neglect today's business necessities.

When driven by technologies that can have a significant impact on people's lives, the disconnect between dream and reality can become significant.

That leads to a backlash when the emperor's new clothes are called out, blocking further innovation, and making it harder for your firm to succeed.

#### Actions

Founders need to assemble a team of advisors who can help you place your dream in the market context and remind you of business realities. Marketing and comms are crucial to this.

Brilliant technical minds are busy designing algorithms, products and services that have a huge amount of influence over our lives.

That's where marketing and comms can help business leaders navigate the real marketing landscape, from workplace culture to product.



### Trend 4: Billionaire space race inspires some and riles others

Three household-name billionaires now sit at the forefront of humankind's ventures into space. For some people, the exploratory ambitions of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Richard Branson are inspirational, showing we still possess the drive and ingenuity to push the limits of human discovery.

For others, it demonstrates that technology is becoming less and less

concerned with contributing to society and more focused on boosting the egos of the ultra-wealthy.

### **Actions**

A clear understanding of and strategy to communicate the societal benefits (including the generation of new jobs, new technologies and new ways of working) of your business are essential, backed up with evidence and case studies.

## **Trend 5: The Facebook papers add to the woes of Big Tech**

Big Tech has been on trial this year, both in the law courts and in the media.

Companies are under pressure from regulators, tax authorities, governments, competition authorities and privacy groups.

This year isn't the first in which there have been warnings of a 'techlash', but it does feel like the first year in which sufficient pressure is building to pose a real threat to the business models of tech companies.

As the technological dominance of tech has morphed into economic dominance, and now political dominance as well, regulators are under pressure to show they're the ones in control.

### **Actions**

There is a risk that smaller companies will be caught in the crossfire, without a loud enough voice to shape the debate.

Marketing and comms must embrace their role as champions of both good stories and the building blocks of a successful future for our industry, gathering the evidence and amplifying voices and perspectives as tech giants and regulators fight it out.

# 4. 2022 PR & COMMS PRIORITIES

## 1. Fighting fake news

While communications teams are by no means limited to media relations, an overwhelming distrust in information and the media jeopardizes a key channel of communication with consumers.

The media is still more trusted than social platforms or brand channels as a source of information. Earlier this year, The Verge had to update its public ethics policy to be clearer in interactions with public relations and corporate communications professionals. Building relationships with journalists and sharing trusted and verified data is a great step to rebuilding trust.

However, this is a two-way challenge for PR professionals. With rising volumes of fake news, there's an increased risk that your brand will become the subject of a campaign, spread via social-media sites.

Having a clear crisis-communications strategy in place, and an ethical and transparent framework to deal with issues as they arise, will be vital to combating this issue.

## 2. Fighting value washing

With ESG moving rapidly up the business agenda, there's a temptation for companies to inflate their green credentials without following up to substantiate them.

Communications can take the role of the marketplace in tempering the discussion of such a strategy, providing an outside perspective to senior leaders and ensuring that claims will stand up to the scrutiny of the cynical media and sceptical consumers.

## 3. Finding real opinions to cut through a competitive content environment

A more competitive media market requires innovative approaches, real opinions, and original thought leadership.

The news cycle is dominated by big issues, and precision-targeted strategic campaigns will help place your brand within these.

Too many thought-leadership pieces have very little new to say; generic pieces are lost in a crowd of replicated opinion. Everything that comms showcases should have original

content and a clear purpose.

On top of that, comms needs to keep finding new ways to tell stories.

Comms has slowly been leveraging a more integrated approach for several years but as media becomes more competitive comms must find new channels of storytelling to own.

## 4. Determining Your ethical framework

Consumers and businesses expect companies to take an authentic, passionate stand on issues.

While high-profile approaches like those taken by Ben & Jerry's isn't right (or authentic) for every brand, there's plenty that comms leaders can learn from them and apply in their own contexts.

Crucially, rather than just planning for different scenarios, brands must spend time developing an internal ethics framework that will ensure they can respond appropriately to any issues that might arise. In December 2019, very few people were planning their

pandemic-response messaging, for instance, but those with a sound framework in place would have found it easiest to formulate a suitable plan for their customer bases and workforces.

For comms teams who feel confident that they are prepared for a crisis, 2022 is the year to stress-test that theory. Use audience-attitude data to test your perceptions and assumptions and run workshops and games to see how spokespeople handle simulated pressure.

In 2022, it's critical that brands find their internal North Star, to help manage issues from data breaches to supply-chain issues. There are five principal areas where tech businesses should be focusing their attention. Marketing and comms should be leading this activity internally and overseeing the public-facing element of each.

## 5. Evolving ROI and measurement

While comms and PR teams have had to embrace a greater scope of responsibility in the pandemic, much of the work they do remains intangible; however great the impact,

it can't be seen on the balance sheet. 2022 must see continued evolution on the part of comms, with teams finding new ways to demonstrate the commercial impact of their strategies.

Each business and team will take a distinct approach, whether through planning more closely with the sales team or finding a consistent benchmarking metric that the CFO can get on board with.

Others will want to look at integrating more closely with other marketing activities and technology stacks to ensure activity is measured and recognised. Larger businesses may be able to carry out in-depth data studies to calculate brand impact on the bottom line.



# 5. CAN META FIX FACEBOOK'S REPUTATION?

Although the term 'metaverse' has been around since the early 90s, it's only this year that it has gained buzzword status. That's mostly down to Mark Zuckerberg and the rebranding of Facebook to Meta.

For critics, the metaverse is either a slightly dystopian version of the future we may have to look forward to, or a re-packaging of technology that's already available, mischaracterized as innovation.

This timing of the rebrand isn't coincidental. Facebook has gone from tech start-up to tech titan in the space of two decades and is now a company that whistle-blower Frances Haugen has described as willing to "put their astronomical profits before people".

This type of rebrand has happened before. Google is now owned by parent company Alphabet, after reshuffling and rebranding the business in 2015.

That move helped Google focus on multiple areas of innovation; provide more insight into how different areas function financially; and ensure that innovative ideas weren't overshadowed by search and advertising.

Will the same move work for Meta?

The past five years have been rough on the Facebook brand, into least the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which put Facebook's potential for political influence fully in the spotlight, a challenge that Google didn't have to face.

Nightmare futures aside, the metaverse presents a great opportunity for Facebook to reposition itself at the heart of a new frontier of technological innovation and user interactions, building on a slew of VR acquisitions since they bought Oculus in 2014.

The timing of the announcement may seem like a distraction from current events, but it had to happen eventually.

## **Rebrands won't fix technology failures**

For Meta's future to become a reality, the business needs to instil a deep trust in the brand and the people behind it.

The metaverse would see us handing over even more time, money and data to the companies that run it, an important consideration

for B2C and B2B business units.

Take Facebook's professional-collaboration platform, Workplace, as an example; as it continues to grow, being associated with a company that is regularly accused of misusing data is going to raise some red flags.

Facebook has had a challenging time governing its own technology.

The default solution seems to be sticking to in-house policies and designing more algorithms to fix the problems that are caused by the technology they control. Failing that, a referral to the oversight board is required.

This isn't a problem just for Facebook, however; it's systemic, pervading the tech industry, especially social media.

However, as Facebook owns two of the top-three messaging apps, the top photo-sharing app, and has access to over a third of the world's population, they are a yardstick for behaviours throughout the industry.

In the short term, a rebrand is not going to improve the public image of Facebook,

Instagram or Zuckerberg himself.

What it does do is start the process of distancing the conglomerate from the criticisms that have been laid at its feet since 2016.

And, as Facebook's leadership will have recognized, it's better to start that process while the metaverse is still a long way off.

### **Sweeping current issues under the carpet?**

But the rebrand speaks to a wider problem afflicting Facebook. That is, it is always looking for the next thing and ignoring immediate issues impacting its customers and users today.

Online safety has been a huge problem for a long time.

It's been close to two years since Netflix premiered *The Social Dilemma*, which walked us through the way platforms manipulate users to boost engagement and, therefore, advertising revenues.

Yet these practices continue unaddressed, to the point where mobile operators such as EE

have felt the need to run campaigns promoting the measures it has taken to help kids to use their first phones safely.

A variety of companies are now involved in trying to mitigate the social impacts of the platform. And while collaboration between tech companies, governments and law enforcement and service providers is crucial, Meta needs to show it can get these foundational issues right itself before being trusted to take on entire 3D universes.

Looking at the bigger picture, the conversations that regulators are having around Big Tech monopolies, and how difficult they're finding it to keep ahead of the platforms, is also impacted by Facebook's rebrand.

This year has seen a focus from regulators on investigating how platforms are influencing news and politics via social media. But clearly the likes of Meta are ahead of that. The future Meta envisages for itself is very different from the one that regulators are trying to contain.

On top of that, the tighter integration of Facebook's multiple services could make it harder to separate them out.

Regulators will need to build even more flexible standards and rules if they want to govern what tech platforms are becoming, not what they are now.

Off the back of the rebrand, Meta announced that it would shut down the Face Recognition system on Facebook, resulting in the deletion of more than a billion individual facial-recognition templates.

The announcement said that Meta believes "that limiting the use of facial recognition to a narrow set of use cases is appropriate".

For this rebranding to have an effect, Meta needs to do more than just talk a good game; it must act to ensure privacy, safety, and well-being of its users.

# 6. HOW MARKETING AND COMMS CAN CHAMPION DE&I



Author: MaryLou Costa

Going into 2022, the UK tech industry is still a far from diverse place. 19% of tech workers are women compared with 49% of the UK workforce overall, and just 22% of tech directors are women - the same it's been since 2000, according to Tech Nation.

The picture looks even less impressive when you put the spotlight on startups and scale-ups, where 57% have no leadership roles at all occupied by women. Shifting the perspective to the Black and minority ethnic (BAME) community, which represent just 8.5% of senior leaders in the tech industry compared with 14% of our society as a whole, and to people with disabilities, which make up 8% of the tech industry compared with 19% of working adults, and you can see a running theme here.

As Michaela Jeffery-Morrison, co-founder and CEO of the Women in Technology series at Ascend Global Media, puts it: "The industry needs to address the reasons minority groups are disadvantaged in the workplace. It is also critical for the future workforce to rebuild systems that they are kept out of in the first

place."

Here are four tangible practices that can help tech companies do that, and ultimately scale in a diverse and inclusive way.

## Salary transparency

Software company Buffer, for example, publishes its salary formulas and bands, and has been reducing its gender pay gap as a result.

And it's working. It credited salary transparency as the main reason for reducing its gender pay gap to 5.5% in 2021 from 15% in 2020. Being transparent has made the business more accountable and motivated to progress women from lower earning roles, it said in a blog post.

When a salary band is published on a job advertisement, and is attached to all roles in a company, candidates have a good idea of where in the spectrum they can place themselves, rather than both sides thinking that adding a few grand onto their previous salary is going to be a win - and keeping salaries

down for people who've traditionally been undervalued. This way, negotiation doesn't have to be a dark art.

## 2. Rethinking the language and visuals of recruitment

Challenger bank Monzo has cut its gender pay gap from 20% to 4% by implementing tangible changes like ensuring balanced shortlists and incremental shifts at manager and individual level.

It's one of the reasons chief operating officer Sujata Bhatia joined in June last year, with an ambition to drive that 4% right down to zero as part of Monzo's Women in Finance Charter commitment, which also includes a target to increase its proportion of female board members to 40% by 2020 - it's now 44%.

"When I joined, I asked our machine learning lead why his team was so diverse. He had done something as simple as posting a picture of a team with diverse faces on LinkedIn,

and he then saw an amazing diverse pipeline of people coming through the door,” says Bhatia.

### **3. And rethinking recruitment pathways**

Looking beyond its immediate networks to unearth underrepresented talent is how Saas giant Salesforce plans to build more diverse organisation.

Salesforce’s Trailhead online training programme is available to anyone, and the company makes a concerted effort to work with schools, universities, representative organisations, as well as return to work and apprenticeship schemes, to reach underrepresented groups. They’re opening up careers in technology to people that might have otherwise faced barriers, while also diversifying their own talent pipeline.

“We launched Trailhead to democratise digital learning, taking participants from a low-level of technical knowledge to a Salesforce role in as little as six months,” says Stuart Mills, VP, Trailhead & Ecosystem EMEA, Salesforce.

### **4. Marketers being champions of action**

As Richard Pash, chief customer officer at Zurich UK, states: “This is about walking the walk.

Marketers are in the unique position of putting DE&I at the heart of a brand’s purpose, and be the missing link between mission and action.

Pash references the media campaign to share the company’s success in attracting more senior female hires through its new approach to recruiting.

“We achieved widespread national media coverage and were endorsed by key social media influencers. Creating media ‘noise’ around these initiatives is crucial as this is one of the key conduits to advocacy.

Post campaign analysis showed that one in five people were aware of the campaign which was an amazing outcome for us. It’s also a great way to encourage other brands to up their game, says Pash.

However, he’s keen to add a “strong health

warning” to marketers inspired by Zurich’s rocketing brand reputation: “Authenticity is key. These initiatives must be driven from the heart of the business, not simply for media exposure.”

And that’s perhaps where marketers can make the biggest difference.

# 7. HOW CAN TECH BRIDGE ETHICAL GAPS IN 2022?



*Author: Virginia Matthews*

The race between London and Brussels to pass the toughest new laws on big tech is on.

It has already spawned the UK's Online Safety Bill and for the EU, the Digital Services and Digital Markets Acts.

Yet while forcing platforms to be legally accountable for a string of concerns such as fake news, privacy infringement, sexual harassment and AI bias may earn plaudits, tech's deep-rooted ethical dilemmas will not be solved by legislation alone.

Facebook whistle blower Frances Haugen told UK MP's last month that her former employer had an internal culture which prioritised profits over people.

She spoke for the billions of us who love – and fear – technology with equal passion.

And while the majority of marketing and PR professionals in tech may never face the barrage of hostile headlines which followed her testimony, the industry's communications challenge has become high stakes across the

piece.

In the more regulated tech world to come, the role of marketing and PR professionals as a force for good will be pivotal, says Gareth Thomas of business ethics specialist The Good Consultancy.

“Both disciplines are an essential part of any solution to issues around harmful content or lack of competition and as new legislation takes effect in 2022 and 2023, their expertise will be vital,” he says.

“By taking a progressive view of ethics across technology and behaving with integrity, practitioners can not only guide their clients in an ethical direction but can help promote a general culture of transparency which benefits society as a whole.”

The burning Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues is now racing to the top of the boardroom agenda.

The need for all organisations to be accurate, clear and transparent in what they claim

around issues as broad as net zero or diversity & inclusion is vital.

In tech, where the very purpose of human beings in an increasingly machine-led world

is now up for discussion, the stakes are particularly high.

With a mission to become the ‘world's trusted identity platform,’ London-based biometrics software firm Yoti provides age-verification services to the private and public sector.

Unusually for the industry, the firm has a proactively-ethical standpoint which, it says, has inadvertently become a business advantage in a much-misunderstood technological niche.

Backed by an external ‘guardian council’ - comprised of experts in fields such as human rights and data privacy - and an internal trust and ethics group representing

everyone from security personnel to HR, Yoti's ethos has also helped build a united workforce.

With both Google and Microsoft accused of playing fast and loose with the entire notion of guardians however - setting up committees in a fanfare of publicity, only to ditch them, quietly, some months later – is the jury still out?

“In my view, ethics committees certainly have a positive role to play in tech, but they don't tend to be where they perhaps need to be – on the sales side and in the engineering department, where the algorithms themselves are being created,” Thomas argues.

Given the current concern over developments in AI however, notably the potential for surveillance and discrimination, any deliberate 'ethics washing' by tech firms in 2022 and beyond will prove an increasingly risky business strategy, he predicts.

High on the list of issues which business leaders say keep them awake at night is their own organisational culture.

Particularly if it is out of step with changes in public mood.

While the prevailing culture in tech so often appears to lack moral compass, the impact of demographics cannot be underestimated.

The inevitable transfer of power from older, white males to a new generation of IT entrepreneurs - drawn from more diverse backgrounds - offers the hope of a sector-wide re-set which puts purpose, as well as profit, squarely on the dial.

And there are other reasons to be positive – not least the crucial role that tech will play in the global transition to lower carbon.

Tech has serious ethical problems to tackle, but the future opportunities are incalculable.

# ABOUT

Stretton Communications is a marketing and communications agency. Our specialism is the technology sector.

We work with start ups, fast-growth businesses and established players to tell their story, in the right way, to the right people.

The result? Supercharged business results.

High-growth businesses looking to harness the power of marketing and communications to support their objectives, seize market opportunities and navigate the challenges of being a technology company.

We thrive working with founders, marketing teams and tech experts who believe in what they do.

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