

What we have here is NOT a failure to communicate

By Doug Sweet, Director, Internal Communications

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At McGill, we have two principal umbrella communications groups – the Media Relations Office, and the Internal Communications Office.

(University Advancement also communicates with alumni)

Various Faculties have their own communication people/offices, but when we're talking about university-wide communications (or speaking to outside media) the MRO and Internal are it.

I'll leave Media Relations to speak for itself another day, but at Internal, we have a few tools at our disposal to deliver messages to a variety of stakeholders at McGill, notably, but not exclusively, students, faculty and staff.

These tools include the McGill Reporter, which not so long ago published a print edition every two weeks throughout the academic year. That eventually gave way to what we have now – a thriving website that gets an average of about 45,000 page views a month.

Closely linked to the Reporter are our emailed newsletters, called what'snew@mcgill and what'snewstudents@mcgill. The former is delivered on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the academic year to all staff and faculty (on Wednesdays in the summer) and the latter lands in student mailboxes on

Sunday morning – away from classes, and during a time we think students might be more receptive.

Finally, we have the dreaded ALL-note, known more widely around campus as “an MRO.” The nickname comes from the MRO at the beginning of the email address. MROs or ALL-notes are emails, almost always in both languages, from senior administrators informing the entire McGill community, or parts of it, about something deemed “important.”

These are often notices of appointments, requests for suggestions from the community to an advisory body, news of a significant policy change and so on. For some reason, they are loathed by a significant number of community members. We get considerable push-back every time we send one. So we try to limit the frequency and rely more and more on the What’s New newsletters and The Reporter.

There are times, however, when we must make our very best effort to inform the community of something important and we know that the ALL-note reaches more pairs of eyes than anything else we have in our arsenal. [We tried smoke writing with an old biplane once, but when the test message turned out to be Surrender Dorothy, we quietly gave that up]

Before we use these tools, we need to ask ourselves the basic questions associated with communications. They are:

- What are we trying to say (and why)?
- Who are we trying to reach (and why)?
- What’s the best way to reach that audience?
- What can we do to make the communication compelling?
- What is the expected outcome of the communication?

The world of Internal Communications at McGill is both interesting and tedious, fraught with stress and filled with fun. That's why wine o'clock is our favourite time of day.

We consult with Senior Admin on things they need to say and things that might be better left unsaid (sometimes a key part of communications is knowing when to shut up). Sometimes the messages are routine, sometimes they are urgent and unique to a specific situation. (And here, I'm not talking about our role in Emergency Communications, which we'll leave for another day.)

We work with a wide variety of units within the University to get messages out to either specific segments of the University community or to the community at large. Some recent examples:

- Bookstore
- Facilities Management in terms of City of Montreal construction projects
- Student Life and Learning
- Secretariat
- Procurement
- IT
- RIR
- Dean of Students

Communications at McGill used to be much more of an after-thought, almost a last-minute thing. As if someone slapped their forehead the day before a big announcement and said, "Oh, we almost forgot; we need to figure out how to tell people about this."

The University is getting better at understanding the importance of effective communication and about the need to get the communicators in on the ground floor of whatever project or development that is in the works.

For example, I am part of a committee beginning to study the idea of expanding the range of smoke-free areas on campus, as well as on a working group examining policy with regard to cycling on campus. I sit in on meetings of the executives and directors of a couple of our larger units (A&F and SLL) and work closely with senior leaders in HR.

These opportunities allow me to get to know what is going well in advance of any need to communicate. I can plan better. I can schedule better. I can advise better because I have a bigger picture of what is going around this place.

I do not pretend to know everything. No one knows everything in a place as big and complex as this. But I do know more than I used to, and that, I consider to be progress.