

# HOW BUSINESS COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY

Interview with  
NICK LAWTON  
CHAIRMAN  
LAWTON COMMUNICATIONS GROUP



In a series of interviews with Andrew Skipsey, managing director of M12 Solutions, directors and partners at professional practices consider the issues.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

"SO MANY COMPANIES fall into the trap of having a great product and the technology to enable ease of purchase and fast delivery, but don't follow up with good human contact in the form of after-sales service," says Nick Lawton, the chairman of international marketing business Lawton Communication Group.

"Some futurologists are predicting that 80% of all jobs will be automated sooner rather than later, but I think professional services will be shielded from that. We employ bright, confident, personable, affable, IT savvy people with a high level of emotional intelligence. They are selling their time, their ideas and their brainpower to help clients to achieve what they want. It's about value creation."

"And if our objectives are aligned with theirs, good customer service comes naturally out of this process. People at all levels of the company have the phone numbers of their direct counterparts at client companies and vice-versa so they can get hold of each other when they need to. Communication should be a virtuous circle."

Technology though has the potential to affect, even determine how future generations will interact, Lawton suggests. Will we one-day be running our lives completely virtually? Will we have to get out of bed at all to go to

work or will we just plug into a screen next to the bed? Will society go full circle, with people going to organised dances and being petrified because they have never had to have a face-to-face conversation with someone of the opposite sex, rather as it was for their grandparents' generation?"

Lawton says he encourages staff to actually talk to clients where possible. "We are a service business and chemistry is important. My preference would always be face-to-face meetings. You can build rapport with video-conferencing but you can't substitute the face-to-face visual cues and body language of getting into a room and sitting down together and talking."

Ironically, at a time when the cost of phone calls has gone down, fewer people are using their the phones for that purpose.

The biggest benefit that technology offers, says Lawton, is collaboration. "With old-school documentation only one person could work on a project at any one time and there could be eighteen versions of a document, but now we can have five or six people working on the same pitch deck at the same time."

Cloud-based tools facilitate collaboration across teams and offices at the same time. "We have offices in

London, Los Angeles and Sydney so we can collaborate on pitches and projects 24/7. It's a volatile industry and everyone wants stuff faster and cheaper," explains Lawton.

And, he adds: "Having sites in several locations and time zones means that we can help clients move into other markets overseas. We couldn't do that if we had to jump on a plane every time we needed a meeting. We pitched recently using video conferencing which involved people in Dubai, San Francisco and the UK."

The group has three customer-facing brands - fivebyfive which specialises in launching products, brands and services; content marketing agency Headstream, and Dragonfish, a culture and performance consultancy. Lawton says the group is quite unique in its sector by being a second-generation family business, which his father started in 1979.

"The usual path is for the founder to grow the business and then integrate it into a larger network of agencies. I have not often come across a second generation agency, if at all.

"Our independence makes us longer term from the point of view of decision-making. If publicly-listed agencies have

a rough month or quarter, they are put under huge pressure by shareholders, but we can ride it out."

Big networks, he suggests, have "had the wind put up them" by a trend for major consultancies like Deloitte and Accenture to buy their own marketing agencies. "The consultancies are eating the big networks' lunch," says Lawton. "It's an aggressive trend and the agency networks have been slow to react and have suffered financially."

The point is that as an independent, Lawton Communication Group can adapt quickly to offer something a bit different. "There are 20,000 agencies in the UK all saying they can do anything the client wants. So we spent time and effort making sure our agencies have specialist niche propositions. We've always been very progressive as a business. We built our first web site for a client in the early 1990s and diversified our PR arm into a social media agency in 2007 and then into a content specialist when the social marketplace matured. Technology means we have been able to constantly evolve to gain a competitive advantage."

Behind the scenes, the group developed its own proprietary IP to digitally manage the complete end-to-end project lifecycle. Initially, it was produced for

a major client but as it's Lawton's IP they have rolled it out to manage other clients' work too.

To illustrate the power of social media as an influencer, Lawton talks about how his brother missed an onward journey because his flight to Brisbane from Los Angeles because his connecting plane was delayed. "Virgin staff at the airport said they couldn't help even though he was a platinum customer; they just said 'there's nothing we can do'. So he tweeted saying Virgin should sort things out and less than a minute later he got a direct message telling him to go back to the check-in desk, where they did just that. The problem was that the people dealing with him in person didn't have the authority to take commonsense decisions. Virgin were relying on a customer service team somewhere else which was monitoring Twitter. I think that's utterly bonkers."

Conversely, Lawton's main frustration with technology is that it can remove human interaction at the expense of the customer experience. "As a customer, I want to talk to a human being. I don't want to spend precious time minutes pressing buttons only then to speak to someone who asks the same questions as the automated system and doesn't have the authority to help me anyway."

Another challenge is ensuring that technology serves relevant content to the right person at the right time instead of deploying it through a volume, scattergun approach. "There's no excuse these days to not deliver authentic and personalised communication," says Lawton. "And if you know what you are trying to achieve, you should be able to measure everything you do to know what every pound delivers for you."

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Researched and published by  
DECISION magazine  
[www.decisionmagazine.co.uk](http://www.decisionmagazine.co.uk)