



Secrets of Corporate Digital Leadership

Seven strategies the world's best corporate digital teams use to overcome challenges and achieve measurable impact

March 2024



Over the course of a year, we sat down with more than 25 communicators in high-performing corporate digital communications teams and asked them to explain how they do it.

We conducted two executive-style roundtables with managers responsible for large companies' owned, external corporate digital channels (websites and social media) – one in New York and one in London – inviting candid discussion around problem solving, continuous improvement and the role data and measurement play in doing good work. We also held in-depth one-on-one discussions with six of the world's top corporate website teams, to understand their thinking, what goes on behind the scenes in their organisations and some of the secrets to their success.

All conversations were confidential, to allow people to speak freely, and we have distilled people's responses into generalised insights and actionable recommendations intended to help corporate digital managers everywhere improve, whether you are already a leader in your field or aren't quite sure where to begin.

About this research

14+
hours of interviews and peer-to-peer discussions

57%
UK/EU-based corporate digital communicators

43%
US-based communicators


12
companies in the top quartile of the Bowen Craggs Index of the world's best corporate digital estates

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Our Findings in Brief



1 Think ahead:

Develop a long-term strategy and regularly revisit it. Give specific team members responsibility for managing this, so that day-to-day doesn't derail it.

2 “Sell” your plans:

Brand your initiatives to give them momentum, and align your pitch with senior leaders' priorities – to gain support, including budget.

3 Manage with data:

Focus on specific insights pulled from multiple data sources to drive change, and choose headline figures for senior management that hold useful nuance.

4 Collaborate constantly:

Adopt component libraries, data exchanges and cross-functional meetings to ensure that best practice spreads from the digital team across the organisation.

5 Do more with less:

Build a digital team that's specialised, passionate and always learning – and bring in young viewpoints for fresh ideas.

6 Outsource wisely:

Keep a laser focus on the people side of your design and development agency relationships, and consider working with smaller, hungrier agencies for innovative results.

7 Embrace new tools:

Consciously experiment with new tools that can chip away at the hard parts of corporate digital communications – including, carefully, AI-powered tools.

ALSO IN THIS REPORT:

What stories does your data tell?

How to say “no” like a pro

What does a high-performing corporate digital team look like?

AI and the corporate digital near-future

Key takeaways for senior leaders

1. Think Ahead

Develop a long-term strategy and regularly revisit it. Give specific team members responsibility for managing this, so that day-to-day doesn't derail it.

WHAT TO KNOW:

For corporate digital teams, responding to urgent requests and keeping the content flowing tends to be more than a full-time job. Yet standards and external stakeholders' expectations are always evolving. Continuously improving is imperative. But how?

The advice from the high-performing teams we consulted: put together a long-term plan covering the next three to five years, drawing on the company strategy and all available data. Make a point of educating key stakeholders on your strategy and reminding them often of the goals your team is working towards.

Adopt roles that allow some team members to be more focused on day-to-day responsibilities and urgent requests, while others keep up the progress towards bigger aims. Chipping away at these achievements can be one simple way to ensure momentum as the months pass. One top digital manager said their team focuses on improvements that internal stakeholders "don't care much about" during summer, when many colleagues are on holiday and there aren't any big events.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“When we have a long-term perspective, it’s easier to plan things. We try to jump between the day-to-day and strategic work based on what’s required at the time. But what’s sure is that our plan is well defined and that we know what we’re going to do very much in advance.”

“The main challenge is feeling like you’ve got the mandate to be in charge. No one is ever going to give you that mandate, so you should just assume that you have it.”

1. Think Ahead

TAKE ACTION:

Adopt an integrated digital strategy – across channels and audiences

Several high-performing communicators we talked with noted that digital channels are more on the map than ever for their senior leaders, in part because social media channels have become such a go-to barometer of public sentiment towards companies. It stands to reason that the most impactful corporate digital strategies will thread website and social media planning together so that they are, as one digital manager put it, “singing the same song”.

Compile a channel-audience matrix to inform planning and decisions

Take time to plot how, when and why key audiences use each of your corporate channels and what they want. This “helped us to redefine what we’re doing”, one top digital manager said. Furthermore: “Through channels research that we did with an external agency, we’ve found that on the social side it’s LinkedIn if we really want to get engagement, and also the website. The core corporate audiences we’re going after still use the website as their main source of truth.”



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“In corporate communications, it can be hard to get your voice heard. If we want to make a change and we’re convinced about an idea, we push for it.”

“I have been pushing for years for there to be pages on our global website that explain what the company does, and finally other parts of the company have caught up.”

Most of the communicators we spoke to are part of a team that looks after both the corporate website and at least some social media channels:

86%
are responsible for corporate websites plus all or some of the corporate social media channels

14%
are responsible only for websites

2. “Sell” Your Plans

Brand your initiatives to give them momentum, and align your pitch with senior leaders’ priorities – to gain support, including budget.

WHAT TO KNOW:

One unifying factor among the very best corporate digital teams is a common understanding of how to “sell” what they do to internal stakeholders, particularly their senior leaders. Teams lucky enough to have a communications-minded advocate in the C-Suite or a close working relationship with the CCO seem to have a natural advantage here (one person told us their big site relaunch couldn’t have happened without the daily interventions and persuasive powers of their CCO; others said having a personal connection to the CCO has really helped).

Working within a Corporate Communications function where all the different teams are harmonised around a common strategy and set of messages also has many advantages. But as one digital manager cautioned, “you can’t rely on the company framework” to ensure your ideas will get the support they need.

Luckily, there are ways to get your plans noticed and build a foundation of support, even if you don’t regularly have lunch with your CCO and if your other interactions with key internal stakeholders are a bit more at arm’s length.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“You can come up with a strategy and a plan, but the quicker you get to a prototype the better; otherwise, you won’t get any funding. In the end, you have to create something.”

“We get out there and do it and then people realise that what we’re doing is a good thing. We have the support of our direct leadership to do it right, but we haven’t always had buy-in across the company and across all leaders. That came with time.”

2. “Sell” Your Plans

TAKE ACTION:

Use prototypes and branding techniques to make your projects seem inevitable

Give your idea a catchy name and prepare a high-level pitch (“little soundbites” was how one digital manager put it) that can be dropped into conversations and presentations, to generate excitement and get the attention of stakeholders, especially budget holders. Then, move quickly to create a prototype – which can be as simple as a flat design or diagram or as sophisticated as a mocked-up interactive feature – so that key stakeholders will get it.

Hang your pitch for support off senior leaders’ priorities – and what might happen if you don’t get support

Thoughtfully incorporate your leadership’s priorities into the way you present your strategy and budget proposals internally. Highlighting risks and compliance factors that your ideas address can also help. One corporate digital manager we know keeps a risk spreadsheet. Some projects and workstreams are so important to the C-suite that successful delivery may in and of itself strengthen your hand. After delivering an ambitious site relaunch that senior leaders had considered a pet project, one digital manager asked for a 50% budget increase – and got it.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“We know what would be good for the website and we are out there trying to make that happen internally. We sometimes piggyback off business as usual and events, as in: we have this publication coming up, this is a great opportunity to try out a piece of functionality that we want to roll out.”

We asked high-performing corporate digital managers:

How would you describe your relationship with your Chief Communications Officer?

66%
said “close-knit”

33%
said “depends on the day”

3. Manage with Data

Focus on specific insights pulled from multiple data sources to drive change, and choose headline figures for senior management that hold useful nuance.

WHAT TO KNOW:

Google Analytics, site traffic, engagement, digital sustainability metrics, user testing, visitor surveys, reputation measures: the list goes on. The corporate digital managers we spoke to have numerous methods for measuring the effectiveness of their digital channels. However, trawling through this vast “data lake” (as one person we spoke to calls it) to find the specific data needed to inform plans and solidify relationships is challenging. It can be difficult to gauge how well a company’s communications strategy is working solely by looking at basic web analytics data such as website traffic and page views.

Identifying the most impactful KPIs – the ones that tell a story and rise above the noise – can be particularly hard, and even most top corporate digital teams are still figuring this out.

We found a trend: senior stakeholders often want to see the “big numbers” such as the total page views and social media interactions, but these figures can conceal a lot of the most useful nuance. It’s the specific insights, not the big numbers, that are key for tracking continuous improvement over time and against peers. There’s also a question of which metrics resonate when reported up, and which ones simply don’t.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“My leadership couldn’t care less how many people are coming to the careers section. They aren’t really that interested in how many shareholders are checking their dividends. But they are interested in how many people are visiting the strategy pages, and they care about SEO performance and how we’re doing with search terms.”

“One KPI we’re trying to use more is ‘share of search’. There are certain terms we should be the authority on, and generating the KPI shows we’re actually doing that.”

3. Manage with Data

TAKE ACTION:

Manage up: Choose headline KPIs that show the value of the corporate digital channels

Sometimes there is a wide gulf between the data that digital managers find helpful and the data senior leaders are interested in. The best corporate digital teams are moving past the “vanity project” of sheer number of page views or social media interactions and focusing instead on turning data from various sources into stories that convey important insights about the company’s communications and business objectives. The best KPIs are simultaneously headline figures that are likely to resonate with senior leaders, which are also specific enough not to hide useful insights. Measures that say something about the state of the company’s reputation can carry particular weight.

Manage across: For your own purposes, go granular to drive improvements

Day-to-day, try to focus in on extracting specific, granular insights from your data sources that have a knock-on effect on long-term strategy and can help guide continuous improvement. For example, one high-performing digital manager found that about 40% of their website visitors watch landing page videos. This specific insight led editors to compete for a place on the home page, which drove up the quality of content overall.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“Senior leaders care about what they care about. Keep the rest for yourself.”

“We’re seeing far fewer people click through from our social channels to the website, but the ones that do are much higher quality.”

STRATEGIC INDICATORS MENTIONED BY HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS WHO ARE ACTIVELY MANAGING WITH DATA:

- **Net Promoter Score – overall and by key visitor groups**
- **Pre- and Post-Visit Feeling**
- **Brand Perception**
- **Conversion (% of neutral visitors whose brand perception improves)**
- **Goal Achievement by visitor group**
- **Domain Authority, Health Score, Share of Search and other SEO metrics**
- **Engagement around specific campaigns**
- **Scores and ranking in the Bowen Craggs Index**
- **Time on Page**
- **Digital Sustainability metrics such as Page Weight, Errors on Page**

What Stories Does Your Data Tell?

Get actionable insights from web analytics data by understanding who is visiting your channels, why they are visiting, and whether they are achieving their goals.



BOWEN CRAGGS

WHAT TO KNOW:

A company's corporate website is a vital channel that can build brand awareness, drive business growth and bolster company reputation. Yet digital managers and their internal stakeholders are asking harder questions, such as "How can we see the impact on our reputation?" and "Who exactly is coming to the site, why, and what effect is it having on them?".

The corporate website can also become a forgotten channel internally. Social media, with its easily trackable metrics, often gets more attention from senior leadership than the dotcom, which can be underrated as a data source because of a perception that it's too difficult to meaningfully measure website effectiveness. Opt-in cookies add to the challenging environment.

Bowen Craggs has created a Measurement Playbook to solve exactly this issue. For those with an abundance of data to select from, the Playbook helps identify storylines, goals and KPIs and effectively leverage insights. It suggests an approach for combining data from web analytics with other sources, such as visitor surveys and qualitative insights, as a lens for tracking the company's standing with key audiences – and better understanding the role of the corporate site in serving them well.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"None of our dashboards tell the whole story, so it's more of a case of looking at all the data and asking what's the story we want to share?"

"Is data always a silver bullet? No. It's the approach to the data that matters."

25%

The amount several corporate digital managers said they now add to Google Analytics data to make up for cookie opt-outs (other answers ranged from 0% to 50%)



What Stories Does Your Data Tell?

TAKE ACTION:

Understand your visitors to create an “outside in” approach to data

Visitors are the key to turning data into insights. Understanding their wants and needs can help you distinguish which forms of engagement are the most worth tracking over time. One digital manager told us: “Engagement matters more than just simple views. People are starting to realise that there is more value in the audiences that they want to engage with – how is that audience engaging versus how many people have looked at the page.” At Bowen Craggs, all our advisory work is rooted in visitor personas backed up by survey data. It’s an approach that is at its most useful when tailored by company and mapped to a variety of detailed data sources.

Treat your external awards and rankings as potential KPIs

Several digital managers mentioned the value associated with having activity on the corporate digital channels externally vetted and verified. Third-party awards and rankings, such as the Bowen Craggs Index, are immediately understandable data points that can be used to persuade stakeholders internally of your team’s expertise, and that the improvements you’re making are verifiably on the right track.

HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“I have junior team members who look at survey data and Google Analytics and produce a data report that’s presented to the team each quarter.”

“Being able to illustrate our expertise through external ratings and other data points has really solidified the team as being a good one to partner with internally.”

FURTHER READING ON BOWENCRAGGS.COM:

A unique and data-backed role for the corporate website in supporting sales

When your boss asks about measurement, try flipping the question

4. Collaborate Constantly

Adopt component libraries, data exchanges and cross-functional meetings to ensure that best practice spreads from the digital team across the organisation.

WHAT TO KNOW:

No digital team works in isolation. Establishing credibility and trust with internal stakeholder groups can be a challenge when teams have different priorities. It's never easy to keep everyone around the business in the loop and ensure that all stakeholders are adhering to the same best-practice standards, or sometimes even to get other teams to engage at all. As one digital manager noted, "half the people around the company are not even aware they are responsible for certain pages on the site." Even the best teams struggle with this.

Finding like-minded allies in other teams (HR or the press team, for example) and comparing data with theirs can be a good way to build relationships and chart new blueprints for achieving impact with key audiences.

Successful stakeholder management comes down to open discussion and knowing who to deal with. Many of the high-performers we spoke to stressed the importance of staying open to dialogue and input from other teams throughout the duration of a project. Tactics used for this include rolling out website improvements through a series of meetings, being persistent ("call after call, follow up after follow up") and being proactive when it comes to building internal stakeholder relationships.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"We are the experts. I think it's bringing the information and data that we have that makes us a strong partner and makes sure people listen to us and follow our advice."

"It's a big a challenge to stay up to date on who's responsible for what around the company. We're constantly having conversations to understand what people's roles are."

"Sometimes you just have to do something, and then everyone is super interested."

4. Collaborate Constantly

TAKE ACTION:

Host a cross-functional data meeting

A case study: “All our communications teams come together quarterly to share particular successes and insights from recent work. This is something that we have to make time for, but it’s a fun way of using the metrics and it’s quite inspiring. For example, we found that our most-visited pages were surprising: a reporting page that hadn’t been updated in over a year, a videos page, and the dividends page. None of these top pages had any of our key messages on them, so we put banners and widgets on them to drive some of that traffic to where we want it, namely the pages that explain how the company is changing. If we hadn’t stopped to do that quarterly piece of work, we wouldn’t have thought of that.”

Compile a menu of readymade design components

For some top digital managers, creating a library of reusable design components has helped them manage requests for new websites or features more efficiently. Such libraries are particularly effective when all components are accessible by design and have been made with the questions “what do you want to achieve” and “who is the audience” in mind. Best practice is therefore built in and can be easily rolled out across the company.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“Sometimes at the end of the day, the trust comes from proving yourself a little bit.”

“No one is being difficult just to be difficult. And we are in communications. We should be able to understand someone else’s view and see how we can find a middle ground.”

75%

of high-performers said stakeholder management and other organisational factors are among the biggest challenges they face

FURTHER READING ON BOWENCRAIGGS.COM:

How Nestlé has pioneered a “mixternal” approach that blends internal and external engagement

How to Say “No” Like a Pro

Use data and strong relationships to push back on internal requests that contradict good practice. Citing “compliance” can also help.



WHAT TO KNOW:

Keeping HR, legal, market/local, investor relations and press teams happy and on board isn't easy. Some internal teams can be very hands-on, requesting new microsites or control over certain sections. Sometimes, you have to say no, especially when it comes to the question of who will pay for things (“HR wants us to do stuff and not pay for it, but we don't have the budget”).

We've pulled together some strategies for saying no from top-performing digital teams. Most important is to have the backing of your chain of command and use data as evidence to support your points. As a stakeholder management tool, data can remove the emotion from the discussion.

Leverage your reputation as internal experts. Often, “people come in fresh from one team or another, and they say I want to build a new page and this is how it should look. You have to remind people that you are the experts, which is really hard to do but you have to get the tone right and say we are the team that knows and can give advice. Hold that space.”



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“Every individual in the company has objectives and goals and we refer to those, and also to data, when saying no. We look at Google Analytics, our Bowen Craggs benchmark report and the Crownpeak digital standards tool before making a judgement on content requests.”

“If we did the same thing last year and it didn't perform well, then we would say that.”



How to Say “No” Like a Pro

TAKE ACTION:

Be ready to invoke compliance as a rationale for saying no

Risk and compliance with company or regulatory requirements can be persuasive negotiating tools: say no to a request for a microsite, for example, by reminding the requester of the risks involved, such as falling out of legally mandated GDPR and accessibility standards. Simply reminding stakeholders that they will have responsibility for maintaining a new site and keeping it compliant long-term is sometimes enough to dissuade people from developing unnecessary new sites. Bowen Craggs research shows that visitors are more likely to find what they are looking for if the number of microsites is kept to a minimum: another good argument to persuade people internally.

Develop platforms and processes that make saying no easier

Brand hubs are an easy way to gatekeep visual quality and impact across a digital estate, and a library of pre-approved digital components can be used in the same way. One top digital manager asks anyone who requests a non-standard site, layout or tool, “what is the problem you need to solve?”, then points them towards existing components that might be a better choice than what they’ve asked for. When there is a genuine need for something new, it gets added to the library for everyone to use. Someone else said they make a point of keeping their available layouts and CMS elements lively and interesting, so that people will be less likely to break from the platform and develop their own sites.

HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“When other teams come to us with an idea for a microsite, we ask who will be responsible for it, who will make sure that it’s GDPR compliant and up to date with the latest accessibility standards ... and we often don’t hear from them again.”

“An editor might say they need a highly interactive chart. Our first question would be ‘why?’ Then we would take them through the available components. Usually there’s something there already that fits the bill.”

5. Do More With Less

Build a digital team that's specialised, passionate and always learning – and bring in young viewpoints for fresh ideas.

WHAT TO KNOW:

Corporate digital team leaders have to deal with the hand they're dealt, and that almost always means making do with a smaller team than is really needed. One key takeaway is that culture matters at least as much as the size of the team.

A passion for upskilling is needed: the best digital teams see themselves as the ones in the business who have the latest updates and the latest knowledge on specific topics. "It's an ever learning, ever evolving process," one digital manager said. Another commonality among successful teams: regular touchpoints in the form of weekly or even daily meetings to make sure actions and strategy are aligned and to keep motivation high in the face of the fast pace of corporate digital work.

Clearly defining everyone's roles and objectives is essential. But agility and a one-team mentality are essential too. One top digital communicator told us that in their team everyone has website sections and internal stakeholders that are their responsibility 90% of the time, but that when workloads or projects demand it, everyone steps in to do whatever it takes for success.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"The hard skills are important, but today it's kind of easy to learn the hard skills. What really creates the value on top is the people and motivation."

"Our original idea was that any team member could work across any channel, but we learned that each channel requires specialist knowledge. There's a big difference between a magazine article and an Instagram reel."

5. Do More With Less

TAKE ACTION:

Test, learn and keep going

Restless pursuit of better communications is a defining trait of leaders in this corner of communications. After making a website improvement, one corporate website manager told us they monitor performance for a couple of months, then decide whether to roll the change out more widely. “Test and learn” is the term they use for this, and the testing includes Google Analytics monitoring; any tell-tale signs in survey data and comments; and A/B testing using tools including Google Optimize and SessionCam.

Build an age-diverse team

One hallmark of a high-performing digital team is a culture that embraces experience and also fresh thinking. Building a team with a combination of ages and experience levels is one way to ensure that accumulated knowledge will mix with new ideas. Maintaining the same high standard of work is really important, but as one manager noted, “we have to be looking to the younger generations, because they are the ones who are out there mastering cutting-edge digital communication for their own image and because they’re up on the latest trends.”

HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“We don’t have high turnover rates in our team, which results in lots of accumulated knowledge. We don’t want to create something and let it out there and walk away. We want to continue to own it, nurture it and see how it integrates with the rest of the website.”

“I ask my people to train themselves on different tools, so that we don’t have to rely on anybody else.”



We asked:

What has given your team an efficiency boost recently?

42%
said new technologies or tools

33%
said a new team member or newly centralised resource

17%
said process improvements

What Does a High-performing Corporate Digital Team Look Like?

The high-performers we spoke to have a bigger core team, on average, though not massively so. Most of them sit within Corporate Communications, positioning them for easy collaboration with other communications teams.



AVERAGE CORPORATE WEBSITE TEAM SIZE

(team leader + editors and project managers)

3.75 people
Answers ranged from 3 to 6

compared to
2.75 people
among those not ranked in the top
quartile of the Bowen Craggs Index

AVERAGE CORPORATE SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM SIZE

4.5 people
Answers ranged from 3 to 6

compared to
2.5 people*
among those not ranked in the top
quartile of the Bowen Craggs Index

* Estimates based on a 2021 survey

WHERE THESE TEAMS SIT IN THE ORGANISATION

85%
are in Corporate
Communications

15%
are in Brand, Marketing
or Sales

AVERAGE NUMBER OF LEVELS DOWN FROM THE CEO

4 levels
Answers ranged from 2 to 5

RESPONSIBLE FOR COUNTRY CHANNELS (websites and social media)

50%
No

38%
Partly

12%*
Yes

What Does a High-performing Corporate Digital Team Look Like?

TAKE ACTION:

Make the case for a modest but essential increase in the size of your team

Our analysis suggests the most effective corporate digital teams have more people in the core team compared to others – but not by a lot. Use the figures on the previous page to build a business case for one additional person in your team. Even a part-time or shared employee could significantly improve the team's impact, if they fill a skills gap. For one digital manager, that was someone to handle time-consuming admin and financial tasks. For another, it was a writer. For yet another, it was a project manager brought in for a relaunch, who then became permanent. There's a theme here: ask at the right moment (when senior leaders are invested in the outcomes) and you may have a much better chance of getting a "yes".

Focus on your team's individual and collective strengths to unlock great work

While team size and your organisation's structure and culture undoubtedly matter, our observation after hearing from high-performers in this space is that the culture within the corporate digital team matters most of all. One top digital manager told us it starts with "focusing on people's strengths, not weaknesses" and giving everyone the scope and encouragement to define their roles in ways that will be individually motivating.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"You need passion in this job, a real passion for driving reputation on digital channels."

"You can have an expert on SEO, you can have two experts on SEO, but they won't take on the challenge in the same way because they don't have the same vision of their role. So I always say to anybody who reaches out to me about a job, you have a job title and job description, but actually you can shape it."

6. Outsource Wisely

Keep a laser focus on the people side of your design and development agency relationships, and consider working with smaller, hungrier agencies for innovative results.

WHAT TO KNOW:

Top-notch creative and development agencies can bring original ideas and that certain something to your corporate digital communications deliverables. But they can just as easily give you back mediocre or off-piste work.

The best way to avoid the latter is to focus on people. Firstly, your visitors – who is this for, and what do they really want? And secondly, but just as importantly: the human aspects of team-agency relationships. Agencies churn. People leave or get pulled onto other accounts. With the creative pizzazz and fun studio visits comes a need for constant stakeholder management.

There is also another tactic espoused by many of the high-performing teams we talked with for this research: build up enough skills and self-sufficiency within your own team that you can afford to rely on agencies only for tasks and projects that require a step-change of skill or approach.

One digital manager said: “Working with an agency can be a bit like having a new government every three years. Let’s rip it up and start again.” That’s less likely to happen if you’ve set the agenda yourself and if your own team is doing the bulk of the work.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“Agencies can be especially helpful when you’re doing something for the first time.”

“Even with agencies that do a good job on one project, people leave and you don’t have exactly the same collaborations. This is why agencies are good for one shot based on a really specific thing that we want to create.”

“The team that’s pitching to you isn’t necessarily the team you’ll work with. How can they understand your challenges, if they can’t understand your stakeholders?”

6. Outsource Wisely

TAKE ACTION:

Scope out a detailed agency brief, including guarantees about who will be on the team

When working with an external agency, begin each project with a detailed brief that pins down the who, what and when of the agency's involvement. Ultimately, it's about the people. One high-performing digital manager told us they negotiated with their longstanding design agency to hire two people specifically to support different aspects of a redesign project, funded out of a separate budget, not the normal retainer.

Seek out smaller digital design agencies for one-off, high-quality work

We were surprised to learn that one corporate website team, which regularly produces communications of the highest order, has switched to working exclusively with smaller agencies, and usually for a single deliverable rather than an ongoing contract of service: "Smaller agencies are more creative, innovative and can think outside-the-box."

HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"I focus on making sure teams at my incumbent agency are always the right teams. I will be very vocal if new people come in and they're not working out."

"A smaller agency has higher motivation. They really want to develop their business and they're eager to partner with big companies."

We asked:

How often do you use external design or development agencies?

50%

said often – as a crucial extension of the team

38%

said sparingly or never



7. Embrace New Tools

Consciously experiment with new tools that can chip away at the hard parts of corporate digital communications – including, carefully, AI-powered tools.

WHAT TO KNOW:

Everyone we spoke with for this research was keen to talk about artificial intelligence and its potential to disrupt corporate digital communications as we know it, and virtually everyone reported actively experimenting with AI tools. However, even among this group of high-performers there were more questions than answers at this early stage of the AI paradigm shift.

Many of the big innovations we heard about have been initiated in teams outside the corporate digital remit, so this is an area where cross-team collaboration could be particularly useful. One bit of practical advice: stay in touch with IT. “They’re hungry for use cases and might be willing to foot the bill.”

Beyond AI, the digital teams we brought together in roundtables were eager to compare notes on new sentiment analysis, SEO, analytics, cookie consent and content management tools they had discovered or heard about – suggesting that a willingness to try new tools is one of the hallmarks of high-performance in the digital space. Also that the very human practice of relying on recommendations from peers to gauge which technologies are genuinely worth trying out may not be going away anytime soon.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“Migrating all our corporate websites to Sanity has been a complete game changer. There are so many benefits. Workflows are a lot simpler.”

“An AI-generated blog post on a particular topic from our CEO might be 70% or 80% of the way there, but it’s much better than starting from scratch.”

7. Embrace New Tools

TAKE ACTION:

Set up an AI-powered toolkit to save time when the company's reputation is at risk

A case study: One company's Corporate Communications function is using AI to create a database of past announcements and materials that can be used if a similar crisis should happen again. The company's digital manager told us: "We can very quickly use that information to come up with a response, drawing from what we did before." But the human element remains very important, to ensure that "we're gathering useful information and that it's an archive with the correct language, to reduce risk."

Consider new content management tools that can speed up and simplify publishing tasks

Multiple high-performing teams said they had implemented "headless" CMS solutions and been pleased with the new ability to draw on a central content repository and move information around with ease. These implementations require time (minimum: a year) and also upskilling within the team. Also make sure that the ease of publishing doesn't mean you end up churning out more pages and websites than you have capacity to actively keep up to date.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

"I use ChatGPT when I just need a sentence or two, and it's incredibly useful for that."

"With our headless CMS package, automated testing is built in as part of a website build. We didn't quite get the return on investment we thought we would, because setting it up was more expensive than expected, but we still got lots of savings."

Digital managers we spoke to are already using generative AI to:

- **Act as a virtual assistant to boost team productivity**
- **Generate content recommendations and carry out A/B testing to gauge impact**
- **Apply the company's tone of voice to draft text**
- **Write metadata, edit images, boost internal search visibility and quickly roll out translations (via CMS plugins)**
- **Quickly extract key information from knowledge repositories**
- **Identify accessibility improvements and spot bias in content**

AI and the Corporate Digital Near-Future

Strike a note of cautious enthusiasm and enjoy playing around with AI tools. But be mindful of the risks.



WHAT TO KNOW:

Everyone we spoke to for this research agreed that ChatGPT, image-manipulation tools, CMS plugins and other AI tools have huge potential for corporate digital communicators, but there was also a collective caution about jumping in without taking account of the risks.

There is plenty to be vigilant about – from corporate secrets being inadvertently fed into the AI brain to someone failing to declare that something was written with the help of AI and opening the company up to legal risk. Then there is the even more existential question of how to respond to a new kind of corporate crisis: the CEO deepfake. New boundaries and rules of play are needed.

On balance, we think this is a moment for optimism and that corporate digital communicators who carefully embrace the new tools could see their influence as communicators grow exponentially as a result. Seen in this light, almost every experiment with AI means being part of the important work of figuring out how AI's benefits can be enjoyed safely and helping to define what that actually looks like. With this in mind: avoid getting sucked into marketing claims, keep a clear head, and don't forget to have fun.



HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“It’s one of my team’s priorities to use AI in lots of different ways this year.”

“There are some cases where AI hits the goal every time, some cases where it is good enough, and then there are cases where you’ll have to make choices for what’s right for your organisation.”

“We’re limiting our AI experiments to internal uses for now, because of legal risk.”



How to approach AI and the Corporate Digital Near-Future

TAKE ACTION:

Become an AI policy-setter now to secure Influence later on

The current AI bonanza is reminiscent of the early days of corporate social media, when guidelines were essential to establishing the parameters of engagement. At issue here: setting policies around when to use and when not to use AI, what's fair game to feed into external AI tools, and how and when to be transparent about AI use. At least one corporate digital team we spoke to has partnered with their IT department to issue guidance on the use of AI. Get in on the boundaries-setting discussions now to ensure you have influence, longer term.

Join cross-sector efforts to preserve authenticity in digital content

To ensure a bright future, consider getting active in industry-wide efforts to protect authenticity and set standards for the ethical use of AI in corporate communications. Consider joining Adobe, the BBC, Bowen Craggs and other organisations in the **Content Authenticity Initiative**, which aims to develop a universally recognised system to authenticate the provenance of information.

HIGH-PERFORMERS SAID:

“We need to start small with an AI proof of concept. It seems a fantastic opportunity, but we can also see the challenges in the responsibilities of running a corporate website day to day.”

“When you're trying to demonstrate the trustworthiness and authority of your corporate brand, having an AI-generated person speak for the company would be counter to that.”

FURTHER READING ON BOWENCRAGGS.COM:

[Five recommendations for using artificial intelligence in corporate digital communications](#)

[An expert's view on how AI is changing the landscape for corporate communicators](#)

Key Takeaways for Senior Leaders



- **The risks from artificial intelligence are real, but so are the benefits.** Some corporate digital teams are already using AI tools to save money, make resources go further and serve key audiences more dynamically. Make sure your company's policies establish guardrails without blocking innovation and setting up a competitive disadvantage.
- **Nuanced data is more useful than the headline figures.** Big numbers such as total page views or interactions are alluring, but they can get in the way of more valuable insights. Your digital team needs access to data that lets them understand who the visitors are, what they think of the site and whether they are achieving their goals – and increasing traffic may not always lead to better engagement and awareness if these factors have not been considered. KPIs taken from this pool will be a more strategic “big number” in your briefing.
- **A small increase in team size could have big implications for how the company is perceived.** High-performing corporate website and social media teams have on average three more people in the core team than those that don't achieve the same level of impact. Finding the budget for

one more person to fill a skills gap could significantly improve how well these channels perform, as measured by net promoter scores, brand perception, benchmarking relative to peers and other metrics.

- **Unified communications teams are more effective.** One high-performing corporate digital team reported how much more effective they became when two separate communications functions were united into one. Adopt a holistic view of key messages and strategic goals across digital and non-digital communications channels and teams. Simple governance strategies such as weekly team meetings help ensure message discipline and common cause.
- **Recognition helps drive further success.** Corporate digital communicators are unsung heroes in many organisations, even though their passionate efforts on behalf of key stakeholder audiences can majorly affect the company's reputation and profitability. These teams juggle immense organisational and technical complexities day after day. A little recognition can go a long way towards keeping morale up – to drive standards higher.

Key Takeaways for Senior Leaders



HIGH-PERFORMING CORPORATE DIGITAL MANAGERS SAID:

“I don’t think people always appreciate the level of effort it takes below the surface to make stuff happen on the company’s digital channels.”

“Being able to illustrate our expertise through external ratings and other data points has really solidified the team as being a good one to partner with internally ... We look at Google Analytics, our Bowen Craggs benchmark report and the Crownpeak digital standards tool before making a judgement on content requests.”

“We have a leader who has oversight of everything communications-related, and there are various governance strategies to ensure that everyone knows what is going on across the teams. The weekly team meeting and weekly content triage session make all the difference.”

“We wouldn’t have had any hope of delivering our site relaunch on time without our CCO’s daily involvement, sorting out problems.”

How Can Bowen Craggs Help?

We provide external corporate digital teams with meaningful data – to track progress and make the right decisions.

For most companies, corporate digital is the biggest owned media channel that they completely control. If you invest in your corporate website, social media and country sites, the returns are clear in terms of audience satisfaction, brand perception, joined-up communication, and customer engagement.

Many corporate communications teams are largely going it alone, relying solely on their own previous experiences for what best looks like. What's more, they often find themselves making decisions based on poor data or none at all, and end up deciding based on which stakeholder is shouting loudest or is the most senior.

Bowen Craggs services are an investment that ensures these crucial channels are as effective as they can be so that you deliver on your communication strategy, joined up with other communications initiatives in the organisation, while meeting your audiences' wants and needs.



TESTIMONIALS:

“Our jump in the rankings in the Bowen Craggs Index was shared around a lot internally. External recognition of progress really helps.”

“Data from our Bowen Craggs visitor survey is very helpful for the senior leadership team.”

“Bowen Craggs has been integral in enabling us to continuously improve.”

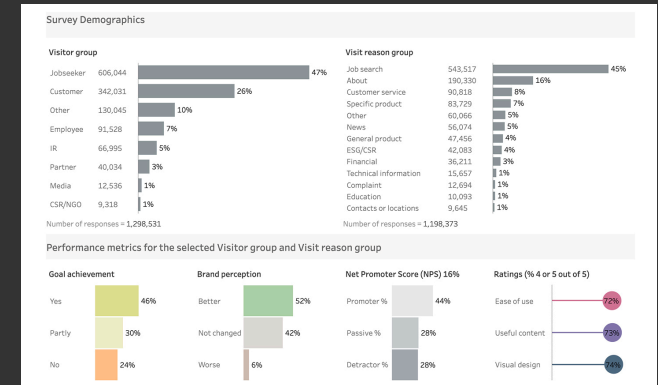
How Can Bowen Craggs Help?

MEASURE YOUR SUCCESS

Bowen Craggs helps companies make measurable improvements on their digital channels that will benefit the company, its stakeholders and society at large. With our benchmarking and visitor research metrics we evaluate how well your corporate digital channels are performing and tell you what you need to do to improve.

Rank	Score	Company	Construction	Message	Contact	Serving society	Serving investors	Serving media	Serving jobseekers and employees	Serving customers
1	234 ↑	Nestle	50	43	11	28	27	25	25	24
2	230 ↑	BP	47	41	9	29	21	28	26	26
3	221 ↑	Bosch	46	39	10	26	24	25	24	27
3	221 ↑	Unilever	48	40	10	27	24	21	26	25
5	217 ↑	GSK	45	41	10	24	27	23	25	22
6	216 ↓	Verizon Communications	41	36	8	28	23	24	28	28
7	213 ↓	HSBC	43	40	10	25	30	20	23	22
7	213 ↑	NXP	46	40	10	26	20	20	21	30
9	209 ↑	Aviva	43	36	10	26	23	21	24	26
10	208 =	Target	44	38	10	28	19	20	25	24
10	208 =	Shell	45	38	7	25	29	17	25	22

The Bowen Craggs Index evaluates more than 160 corporate digital estates across 26 metrics, giving you a clear view on how you are doing, who is doing it better, and what you need to do to improve.



Bowen Craggs surveys help you understand who your visitors are, why they came and whether they achieved their goals. This data is vital in understanding if your corporate website is performing effectively for the diverse audiences it serves. The surveys also measure the impact the corporate site is having on your company's reputation – a valuable metric that is all too often overlooked.

Get in touch with Tom Golden, tgolden@bowencraggs.com to discuss how Bowen Craggs can help you to become a corporate digital leader.

Learn more about what we do at: bowencraggs.com