

A fresh approach to customer service

 By Judith Middleton, issued by DUO Marketing + Communications

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During 2018 we made some significant changes to our internal team structures that have improved our business, delivering greater value to our clients, and a richer and more fulfilling work experience for our team across PR and digital marketing services.

The shift came about as a result of two insights. The first being that some of the roles we need to play as PR and digital marketing professionals are contradictory. Sometimes it's all about commercials or industry depth of knowledge, media expertise and risk mitigation and sometimes it's about metrics, spreadsheets and attention to deep detail. Secondly, the conventional AE, AM or AD roles were just not serving us or our people and our culture demanded that we support our employees strengths rather than correct their weaknesses.

Our breakthrough came when we recognised that we'd been confusing the jobs that need to be done, with the people who need to do them. We took a step back to reconsider what our clients needed from us, and settled on four roles: the connector, the holder of accountability, the implementer and the administrator. These roles are sometime straddled for optimum learning, exposure to new opportunities and for knowledge sharing with new team members but they always drive key requirements by the person best at the specific role.

The **connector** is the role that's responsible for tending relationships: not only with clients, but also with external stakeholders like media and suppliers. When there's a tough conversation to be had, that's a connector task; which becomes the buffer between client and the implementation role. It's a role that needs commercial acumen; emotional intelligence, strong boundaries and maturity to handle successfully. This would typically be an AD role, but sometimes it needs CEO/MD input, and there's no reason a good AM couldn't take some of it on. Pragmatism, experience and rich consultation is required in this role to find the best solutions for our business, our clients and our team.

The **holder of accountability** is the role we step into when we're being the client's champion or advocate. It involves asking questions like: Are we delivering what we promised? How do we achieve exceptional results? Is this still what the client actually needs? Are we providing the best solution for the client's business objective? Are our team and our suppliers working effectively and achieving excellence? This is a management and strategic role that requires experience, foresight and an ability to step back from the daily grind and see a larger picture. This is role that can be played at AD or senior AM level and tends to suit A Types who, even if they're not connectors themselves, need to work closely with connectors. This role requires excellent project management skills and a strong sense of what is required to drive and motivate their teams to deliver irrefutable return on investment for our clients.

Then in the **implementer** role, we are delivering the work we promise: producing quality content, arranging interviews, establishing relationships with media and suppliers, creating briefs, managing online campaigns, monitoring the competitors and analysing the overall success. This is the role where we need high energy and tight focus, typically carried out at the AM level but very often supported by an eager intern or graduate that has shown a passion for certain elements of delivery. This role is the cornerstone of success and cannot be done without the guidance and support of the accountability or connector role and in most instances without the administrative role either.

The **administrator** is the role in which one who holds the admin, reporting and project management tightly together, prepares WIPS and submits reports, creates schedules, manages deadlines, checks SLAs and makes sure all is accurate and up to date. It takes patience and careful attention to detail which isn't always the strength of the implementor or accountability roles. This role is optimally suited to a strong personality who is highly dependable and can mobilise the team to get what needs to be done completed, on time and per the client's requirements.

The challenge comes when we confuse a hierarchy of experience with personal skills and characteristics. It won't be a surprise to anyone if we point out that people who are fantastic in administration roles are often less brilliant at connection, and that enthusiastic connectors procrastinate to avoid administration tasks. This should not be the reason an AM is not promoted or encouraged to deliver excellence to your client base. **Our challenge is to drive a strengths-based methodology and remove the shackles of old-school layering with limiting potential.**

We've reorganised our teams to redistribute these roles to the people who are best suited to them and we've arranged the work differently to better match people's skills and personalities. For example, an excellent AD who doesn't particularly enjoy networking or relationship building per se, is now the holder of accountability across several clients — with the support of a strong connector, who could be the CEO or an AM, depending on the needs of the client. Great implementers have been freed of admin tasks, and our best administrators freed of writing tasks to those better suited.

On the whole each staff member is working with more clients, but doing a smaller range of tasks for each client; spending more time on what they love and are good at, and less time on what they're weakest at. And with the implementation and administration happening more efficiently, our senior staff are freed up to do more connecting. We're committed to the idea that the top management of our firm should never be too busy to spend time with even the smallest client, not only because they deserve it but also because it's during those gatherings that we get the feedback that helps us develop new products, keep strategies on course and work towards global best practice.

The result? Our clients are being served by truly multifunctional teams that consistently deliver the collective best we're capable of offering, on every front. We're communicating better with each other despite our people being in three different cities; the business is less siloed; meeting times have halved with the new processes enabled and our work is bringing us more delight than ever before.

Source of inspiration: Marcus Buckingham's Go put your strengths to work.

ABOUT JUDITH MIDDLETON

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