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Maturity in Leaps and Bounds – Organisational Listening for Customer Engagement

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Abstract

Much of organisational development occurs during times of crisis when answers and solutions are urgently needed. The research presented in this paper suggests that, during such times, what matters for organisational legitimacy is understanding stakeholders' changing needs. This paper proposes that organisational listening become a core function for brands and organisations. Building on theories related to organisational listening, social media and stakeholder engagement in digital marketing, this article argues for incorporating mature online listening into the customer engagement in social media (CESM) framework introduced by Santini et al. (2020).

In the practise of organisational listening, organisations employ their processes, structures, technologies and skills to show attention to interpret and respond to their stakeholders. This article concentrates on listening on social media because changes have been most visible in this context due to the lack of gatekeepers, such as legacy media institutions. Times of rapid development make positive changes possible, but when development is rapid, unintended consequences can also follow. In the early years of social media, unintended consequences included banner advertising and targeted advertising, but during the pandemic, issues related to disinformation and spam have arisen.

The research described herein views organisational listening as a skill that develops from immature to mature. To illustrate our position, we chose two time periods during which organisational listening practices developed especially quickly. During the late 2010s, stakeholders were introduced to a direct route to brands made available through social media, and many unanswered customer service questions suddenly became visible and were subsequently addressed. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on organisations' communication systems to respond to citizens' urgent concerns.

The analysis of both examples reveals that organisational listening matured significantly in a relatively short time. The illustrations show that organisations under pressure, despite their strategic objectives to promote two-way engagement, often resorted to one-way speaking and direct marketing on social media. However, the prerequisites of engagement, trust and satisfaction are only built if organisations listen. Our findings indicate that organisations rush to engage with stakeholders on social media using one-way speaking and direct marketing, skipping the vital stage of listening and establishing trust and relationships, without which listening cannot become strategic, nor can it mature to its full usage potential.

These results call for organisations to take a more strategic approach to organisational listening to attain their desired higher levels of engagement and conversion to action and to generate positive WOM. Modern technology can be used systematically for wider listening and for establishing relations with stakeholders online. However, listening activities must be strategically planned; the non-strategic use of listening technology does not guarantee success and may even backfire. We suggest that communication professionals embrace times of rapid change to best utilise the pressure put on their organisations, as the leaps in growth observed in the current research highlight the importance of communication and organisations' ability to mature more quickly in an environment of accelerated advancement.

Keywords: *social media, stakeholder engagement, organisational listening, public organisations*

1.Introduction

Much of organisational development occurs during crises, times when answers and solutions are urgently needed. During the late 2010s, customers and stakeholders were offered a direct route to brands and organisations through social media, and many unanswered questions regarding online services suddenly became visible and were subsequently addressed. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on organisations' online communication function, as stakeholders seek answers to emerging questions regarding the pandemic.

Times of rapid development make positive changes possible, but when development is rapid, negative consequences can also follow. For example, new places for information quickly fill up, not only with information but also with disinformation and spam. This paper introduces organisational listening as a new core function for organisations in the current communication environment. Communication is a two-way process of listening, speaking and responding (Littlejohn and Foss 2009; Macnamara 2018;); organisational listening employs the organisation's processes, structure, technologies and skills to show attention to, interpret and respond to its stakeholders (Macnamara 2016). This paper concentrates on organisational listening on social media, which is becoming increasingly more important for stakeholder relationship management in private and public organisations (Crawford 2009; Dreher 2009; Maben and Gearhart 2018). As prior studies indicate, most organisations are present on social media, but their communication on these channels remains primarily one-way (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 2012; Macnamara 2016; Kent and Lane 2017; Watkins 2017); challenges to effective online listening include poor topic identification, inadequate answer formulation and slow response times (Brandel 2010; Canel and Luoma-aho 2019).

This paper identifies how organisational listening has matured in leaps and bounds and compares two time periods during which organisational listening developed with particular speed. The first occurred in the late 2010s when organisations adapted to the rapidly growing social media environment and addressed stakeholders' increasing demand for dialogue by introducing new platforms and measuring stakeholder interactions. The second occurred during the 2020s when the COVID-19 pandemic forced organisations to adopt new platforms to respond to urgent stakeholder needs.

Building on organisational listening, social media and engagement in digital marketing theory, this article proposes that listening on social media as a corporate communication strategy is a skill that matures, building a basis for engagement and action. In the first section of this article,

we review research on organisational listening and summarise the literature on social media and digital marketing, focusing on stakeholder engagement. In the second section, we provide examples to illustrate the rapid development of organisations' social media listening using data collected in 2016, 2017, 2020 and 2021 from organisations under pressure to listen to stakeholders (2016–2017: airlines; 2020–2021: public sector organisations). Based on our analysis of these examples, we propose that trust and satisfaction, which are prerequisites for stakeholder engagement, are built by listening and engaging in dialogue with stakeholders online, thereby forming a basis for further relationship development.

2.Literature review

2.1 Organisational listening on social media

Couldry (2010) claimed a 'crisis of voice' exists in contemporary societies, but Macnamara (2016, 3) argued the real problem is the 'crisis of listening'. Social media has increased the potential for organisations to engage in two-way communication, to engage with various publics (Avidar et al. 2015, 215) and to manage their corporate reputation (Yaxley 2012, 431). Brandel (2010, 14) reported that challenges to social media listening include identifying appropriate discussion topics, determining responses and acting quickly. In an increasingly transparent environment, organisations must communicate honestly and ethically with the public, as mistakes are quickly mentioned in online discussions (Avidar et al. 2015). Organisational listening on social media is an active process that involves being present, observing and responding to stimuli through social channels (Brandel 2010) and has been defined as an architecture that 'comprises the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organization to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and public' (Macnamara 2016, 52).

Organisational listening on social media has been linked to positive outcomes, including the engagement necessary to develop long-lasting relationships and the identification of stakeholder engagement strategies that build trust, enable legitimisation and support corporate reputation and risk management efforts (e.g. Brandel 2010, Navarro 2018;Yaxley 2012;). Further, listening organisations are perceived as more authentic, and they receive more support from followers (Bentley 2010; Heath 2001; Kang 2014; Men and Tsai 2015). The success of brands and organisations in the social media domain requires participation, authenticity, resourcefulness and credibility (Barker et al. 2013).

2.2 Weaknesses in listening

The politics of listening concerns an organisation's strategic decisions on whether to listen, what and whom to listen to, what results are expected and with whom they should be shared (Macnamara 2016). Research indicates weak organisational listening has negative consequences for both the organisation and the stakeholder group involved. Organisations' reputations are endangered by a lack of organisational listening because the absence of data gathered through such measures organisations to underestimate stakeholders' expectations and depreciate their needs and wants (Taiminen et al. 2015, 736); moreover, it can negatively impact an organisation's reputation and success, resulting in financial costs, dysfunctional organisational communication and poor networking with communities (Burnside-Lawry 2011).

Nevertheless, many organisations still shy away from interaction through social media due to the

challenges they encounter in identifying the right discussion topics, forming responses and responding quickly (Brandel 2010), especially when resources are tight and the number of comments is high (Macnamara 2020). However, as Valentini et al. (2012, 8) observed, social media does not exist without users. Furthermore, technologies do not create the listening or dialogue; they are tools to be used in the act of listening and interacting – tools that can be used poorly or effectively (Macnamara 2016, 265). To have a successful online presence, organisations must use the tools available through social media effectively. Additionally, Valentini et al. (2012, 8) opined that collaboration is the key public relations 'mantra' in social media environments.

The lack of a social media strategy, represented by underdeveloped policies, unclear goals and untrained staff, and the inability to use modern technology to measure social media outcomes and visibility also impacts organisations' willingness to interact through social media (Barnes and Jacobsen 2014, 147). Further, organisations may fear triggering negative stakeholder reactions by appearing in the often grassroot-driven social media platforms with organisational messages.

Organisations often find one-way talking to be easier because the activity is similar to sharing a press release or posting an advertisement. Industry reports confirm that the topics that organisations prefer to address on social media are of little or no interest to stakeholders, while at the same time, organisations ignore most topics that stakeholders prefer (Freundt 2013). The challenge of social media for organisations is to combine the multiple functions of content creation: 1) sharing interesting content, 2) listening and managing questions and comments and 3) tackling disinformation, rumours and fake news. The ideal communication model calls for organisations to provide stakeholders with opportunities to engage in both positive and negative ways (Callison and Seltzer 2010; Kent et al. 2003; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007).

2.3 Models of listening

The Organizational Listening Competency Questionnaire (Burnside-Lawry 2012, 113) combines concepts from the listening competency, participatory communications and service; revealing that appropriate organisational behaviour, comprehension, corporate culture and speech conditions are related to effective listening during stakeholder engagement. Organisations can achieve better listening by increasing their ability to respond to 'incoming messages' (Burnside-Lawry 2012), as situational and contextual elements contribute to listening expectations and provide valuable perspectives on how competent listening practices are and are not achieved.

Macnamara (2016) listed eight key elements of listening for organisations engaged in the politics of listening, which relates to an organisation's decisions on whether to listen, what and whom to listen to and whether and how to distribute the data gathered through listening (Macnamara 2016, 254–255). Listening structures and processes align daily listening with the organisation's work. Social customer relationship management (CRM), which combines social media data with enterprise applications (CRM / BI, or business intelligence), is becoming more popular. Social CRM generally comprises five fundamental processes: 1) mapping social profiles with stakeholder data, 2) monitoring social media, 3) managing (i.e. creating processes and rules), 4) implementing middleware (enabling data flow between dashboards and systems) and 5) measuring (using BI to identify trends, measure sentiment and so on) (Brandel 2010). Listening resources include professionals skilled in social media monitoring and analysis, customer service, reporting, consulting and correspondence processing. These functions already exist in

many companies but often focus on disseminating information only one way.

The organisational listening competency combines the environment in which listening occurs with an employee's listening skills (Burnside-Lawry 2011, 149). Organisational responses to stakeholder questions and complaints are categorised into the following dimensions (Davidow 2003): timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility and attentiveness.

2.4 Listening is connecting

Online relationships with stakeholders can be established, developed and managed by listening and replying, such as through traditional communications. Social media is available for use to foster relationships between the organisation and its key stakeholders (Allagui et al. 2016, 21). Valentini, Kruckeberg and Stark (2012) noted that the role of public relations is to support both the public and organisations to build a community where dialogue and mutual understanding take place. In social media, stakeholders are often communicators themselves, creating and reacting to organisational content (Dellarocas 2003).

How an organisation manages complaints and feedback online is important, as those complaints and feedback can pose a risk to the organisation's reputation. Responding, apologising and active transferring of the complaint enhances the satisfaction of the complainant; moreover, effectively handling complaints opens the door to considerable opportunities to win complainants back as customers and even enhance the organisation's reputation among stakeholders (Einwiller et al. 2015).

However, many companies have not fully embraced the opportunities afforded by social media to interact with and assist their stakeholders because they prefer not to handle complaints publicly. As a result, social media teams are not empowered to address complaints and must ask the complainant to contact another representative of the organisation. Oftentimes, companies do not use response strategies that foster complaint satisfaction; they simply offer a corrective action, like thanking complainants for their feedback and asking them to contact customer service (Einwiller and Steiler 2015, 195, 201). Thus, social media has not increased transparency, as the quality of information is more important than all-inclusive information delivery (Taiminen et al. 2015, 736).

2.5 Digital marketing in social media

The importance of social media channels in managing relations has increased over the past few years, with a significant number of stakeholders eager to give their feedback or dialogue directly with an organisation. In practice, social media is regarded as a marketing channel to reach and engage the masses.

Social media related marketing research highlights the importance of engaging with stakeholders through social media, defining it as 'an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with stakeholders and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders' (Kannan and Li 2017, 23), which closely resembles Macnamara's (2016) definition of organisational listening.

Marketing strategies aim to increase sales by leveraging social media stakeholder management, which involves mapping social profiles to stakeholder data, monitoring (listening to) social media, managing (creating processes and rules), implementing middleware (enabling data flow between dashboards and systems) and measuring (using BI to identify trends and measure

sentiment) (Brandel 2010). Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed viewing marketing as a type of technology rather than as the traditionally conceived 'exchange of goods'. Martech is a well-established term today, but based on our findings, CommTech – Communication Technology is what is needed to manage listening among the growing number of online discussions taking place in multiple spheres. Arthur W. Page Society (2022) defined multiple stages in the CommTech progression. The lowest level is the 'professional' level, which is where social platforms are monitored and content performance and sentiment are followed to gauge reputation; it is also where companies are able to detect cyberattacks and fake news. The mid-level stage is the 'pathfinder', where audiences are segmented by demographics, interests and behaviours and where delivery is automated, content and campaigns are optimised and stakeholder journeys with sequential touchpoints are designed. The highest level is 'pacesetter', which is where the focus moves from digital communications to performance communications.

2.6 Stakeholder engagement in social media

In the field of marketing research, stakeholder engagement has been defined various ways, for instance, as an individual's eagerness to interact in communities (Algesheimer et al. 2005) or as acting as a brand ambassador with brand-related content combined with affection and passionate, emotional behaviour (Baldus et al. 2015; Hollebeek et al. 2014; Obilo et al. 2020Paruthi and Kaur 2017;).

Stakeholder or customer engagement has substantial value for organisations (Santini 2020; Pansari and Kumar 2016); hence, big investments are made in social media to increase engagement by converting external stakeholders into brand ambassadors and messengers, facilitating interactions between the organisation and its stakeholders by forming communities and reaching bigger audiences (e.g. Sashi 2012); however, the actions may not always provide the needed results (e.g. Macnamara 2016; Santini 2020).

Stakeholder engagement is driven by positive emotions, but all relationships are built on trust and satisfaction. Santini et al. (2020) studied stakeholder (customer) engagement on social media and defined the customer engagement in social media (CESM) framework, which encompasses the following stages: 1) relationship formation, where trust and commitment impact satisfaction and positive emotion; 2) stakeholder (customer) engagement, which is built on trust, satisfaction and positive emotions; and 3) further stakeholder (customer) engagement, which converts into actions and word-of-mouth. Another model proposes affective, cognitive and behavioural as the stages in the engagement process (Bowden et al. 2016).

2.7 Creating trust and satisfaction

Industry reports confirm that the topics organisations prefer to talk about online are of little to no interest to their stakeholders, while at the same time, organisations ignore most of the topics their stakeholders prefer to discuss (Freundt, Hillenbrand, and Lehman 2013). Organisations are not always able to provide satisfactory replies to their stakeholders, for a plethora of reasons. If organisations respond in a way that does not meet the expectations of their stakeholders, they fail, which leads to the perception of organisational deafness, even if the organisation has, in fact, considered the views of its stakeholders. Macnamara (2016, 231) called for organisations to close this listening loop by introducing discussions on unmet expectations.

Listening helps organisations understand the perspectives of their publics, and it supports them in gaining their trust. However, no connection can occur if organisations do not follow through

when their stakeholders utilise opportunities to interact with them (Callison and Seltzer 2010, 145; Kent, Taylor, and White 2003, 75; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007). Callison and Seltzer (2010, 145) recommended that organisations make themselves available for quality communication. Decisions regarding acceptable topics of discussion are not made by the organisation only; the participants in the dialogic process also contribute to the decision-making process (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 2012, 9). Wolvin and Coakley (1994) asserted that the listening competency includes behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions: knowing about listening, being willing to listen and engaging in listening behaviours with an attitudinal component. Gutierrez-Garcia et al. (2015) claimed that the heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen, and Couldry (2009, 80) linked the practices of listening and speaking tightly together. Burnside-Lawry (2010) reported that organisations would better understand how to achieve good listening practices if they unified listening competencies with participatory communication criteria. Technology can support listening and facilitate stakeholder engagement; organisations may play a transformative role, replenishing social resources at the micro level by engaging 'vulnerable' stakeholders through corporate social media (Fletcher-Brown et al. 2020).

Companies increasingly are providing customer service through social media, helping stakeholders on a real-time basis. Customer service requires systematic listening. Gunarathne et al. (2018) studied three million tweets to seven major U.S. airlines on Twitter to investigate the drivers of differential treatment when customer service is delivered via social media; the researchers observed that the airlines were more likely to respond (and responded more quickly) to complaints from stakeholders who had more followers, which confirms the existence of a social media influence effect. Guo et al. (2020), who studied online customer service, argued social media adoption helps organisations absorb resources from external stakeholders (customers). These resources, including stakeholders' feedback and ideas, support organisations in establishing better reputations and a competitive advantage. This 'absorptive capacity' of external stakeholders can take the maturity of listening to the next level, contributing to strategy, for example, through innovative processes.

3.Illustrative examples

3.1 Airlines and growing number of social media users

This first example illustrates how the social media organisational listening of 17 European airlines developed during a one-year period. An analysis of three combined datasets (company policies, results of a 2016 analysis of the companies' Facebook and Twitter accounts and results of a 2017 analysis of the same) indicates that listening occurred across multiple social media channels. The results show that, despite airlines' active social media usage, their focus on social media was (in January 2016) on one-way speaking, while stakeholder requests were forwarded to a separate customer service function. In early 2016, only 2 of 17 airline companies provided 24/7 service through social media. Furthermore, the maturity of organisational listening in social media was passive, as customer requests were only forwarded to another email or telephone or they were not replied at all online. non-existing if they were never replied to online.

Due to the rapid growth in social media's popularity, just a year later, in March 2017, clear changes were visible: most airlines had streamlined their social media processes and had proactively used Twitter to listen and respond to stakeholders; several had incorporated 24/7 services via social media and had also deployed direct messaging services to their Facebook pages. Twitter was popular (used by 16 of 17 companies) for purposes such as handling

questions from customers, informing customers about flight schedule changes and managing crises. The dialogue was open and transparent on social media, and when a matter could not be handled online, the process was still carefully described on the public channel. The social media team had become the customer service team. The channels were used proactively for listening and replying to all kinds of questions.

One of the most important topics of developing organisational listening through social media is engaging stakeholders by showing respect and empathy when listening; this can be done easily by creating a channel on social media that excludes all sales talk and advertisements (Kent and Taylor 2016), as the airlines did when establishing their Twitter customer service channels.

3.2 Public sector organisations and COVID-19 pandemic

The second example involves the recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating how key public sector organisations in Finland faced an urgent need to align their strategic communications with social media to respond to increased questions on the platforms. The data were collected in the winter of 2020–2021 through semi-structured interviews with 14 communicators from the key Finnish public organisations responsible for COVID-19 communications with stakeholders.

The maturity level of listening was higher in these organisations than it was for the airline organisations at their start phase. All had a presence on social media and had established strategic targets to increase online interactions, develop stakeholder relations or manage their reputation. These organisations were primarily engaging in one-way communications to improve customer satisfaction or create engagement. Soon after the pandemic struck, they realised posting vaccination guidelines and restrictions was not sufficient, as the number of questions, comments and followers on social media continued to grow by double digits to meet stakeholders' demand for information. Four of the seven organisations interviewed strengthened their social media teams to better manage listening activities. The results indicate the pandemic strained public organisations' communication skills, tools and aims, forcing them to align their social media practices rapidly and reactively by listening online and enabling useful content, thereby limiting opportunities for false or misleading content to develop. Once the listening function was organised and all questions had been answered, feedback grew more positive, and the number of followers increased remarkably. The results suggest further development of listening structures and processes is needed to enable the multivocal online discussion and strengthen trust and satisfaction among stakeholders.

4.Discussion

'Gradually, then suddenly' (Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*)

Maturity occurring in leaps and bounds describes how organisational listening developed during the times of change as discussed in this paper. In 2016 when the first examples were collected, not all organisations had social media accounts, and listening was conducted via regular customer feedback and surveys. The few existing social media channels were mostly passive – 'there was an account as you needed to be there' – and lacked a plan for regular content sharing. Next came the phase during which the account was used to post the user's own content, social media was just one channel among others and the popularity was measured with simple occurrences, such as 'likes'. In the second example, some public organisations were still passive or engaged only in one-way information-sharing on social media before the onset of the

pandemic. However, stakeholder pressure forced them to move to the more mature level of active listening and replying.

Table 1. The four stages of organisational maturity of listening.

Missing: **No presence on social media**	**Immature:** **Passive presence**	**Developing:** **One-way communication**	**Leap**	**Maturing:** **Strategic listening**
no accounts or presence on social media	accounts on social media but no strategy, organisation or regular postings	account(s) on social media, one-way communication with marketing, info-sharing content. random replies		Some strategy in place, listening function established, active online presence and listening/replying to stakeholders even outside own accounts supported with technology

The biggest leap (black rabbit) occurred in both cases from the developing to the maturing during urgent times of change. Our key findings based on the two examples provided indicate that organisations rush onto social media platforms to use one-way speaking and direct marketing, striving to achieve engagement. They forget that the relationship must be established before social media engagement can occur. Such relationships are built on trust and satisfaction; organisational listening online plays a key role in facilitating both.

The public organisations handling COVID-19 questions and the airlines with their customer service focus all realised they could better engage stakeholders and create trust by establishing an architecture to support listening on their digital channels. Within 12 months, both had implemented listening functions and provided customer service via social media: public organisations replied to all comments and questions through their own social media accounts, and airlines utilised their channels, especially Twitter, for the same purpose.

We suggest that, to best utilise the pressure put on organisations during times of rapid change, communication professionals need to embrace these times, as the giant strides in listening maturity reported in this paper highlight the importance of communication and enabled organisations to mature more quickly than they otherwise would have. The development towards online listening is highly beneficial, as it appears to increase trust and transparency and to accelerate online listening and customer service in all organisations, which are incentives for high stakeholder trust and satisfaction. Santini et al. (2020, 1223) recommended that organisations allocate resources towards pleasant, satisfying touchpoints and observed that Twitter is the best channel for improving customer engagement via positive emotions and satisfaction.

Many organisations need a social media listening strategy that establishes the listening function. Modern technology can be used systematically for wider listening with limited resources and can make participation in strategically important discussions in multivocal public spheres possible. The systematic organisational listening culture is open but also needs guidelines, processes and skills to collect, analyse and utilise data effectively (Macnamara 2018; Maben and Gearhart

2018).

Table 2. Modified model following Santini, 2020: Customer engagement on social media (CESM) with examples of organisational listening activities.

Illustrative example:	**ORG. LISTENING:** **CONNECTION**	**RELATION FORMATION: SATISFACTION & TRUST**	**ENGAGEMENT:** **SATISFACTION & POSITIVE EMOTIONS**	**ENGAGEMENT:** **ACTIONS & WOM**	**MATURITY level**
Airlines and social media	Establishing accounts in social media, getting followers to the org. account	posting content and reacting to the feedback (still to email/phone) -> no trust /satisfaction yet	Twitter established as a customer service channel replying to questions and sharing info of flight delays etc. creates satisfaction	Not apparent	**Immature to developing**
Pandemic and social media	Listening started in org. channels as the no of followers rapidly growing	Satisfaction from the info shared and seeing the replies on the wall.	Getting replies to questions Finding the content and information shared interesting and helpful.	Useful content up-to-date, dialogue on the org. account, sharing content to spread the info	**Developing**

5.Implications

Development during times of crisis and change is challenging, as much effort and coordination is dedicated to surviving the change rather than to developing organisational functions. Nevertheless, we suggest that to best utilise the pressure put on organisations at such times, communication professionals should embrace these periods of rapid change, as the accelerated growth in the maturity of organisational listening highlighted in this paper emphasises the importance of communication and the ability of organisations to mature more quickly during times of crisis than at other times.

The results call for a more strategic approach to organisational listening for organisations to reach their desired higher level of engagement and conversion to action, prompting the following question: how can organisations ensure that times of change can, in fact, be exploited as strategic tools for organisational development?

Modern technology can be systematically used for wider listening and for establishing relationships with stakeholders online, but the non-strategic use of listening technology does not come with a guarantee of success and may even backfire. Taking on new technologies on the go remains a challenge, but once achieved, can significantly enhance the organisational maturity level of listening. These leaps and bounds in growth imply that management and communication and marketing professionals also develop accordingly so they can ask the right questions to glean the most useful information from the data available. As organisational listening becomes a new core function, changes are needed not just in training but in the practice of communication and marketing to best utilise this strategic skill.

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