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## University of York: Moving IT Communications to the centre



In 2017 the communications and marketing resource for IT Services moved from within the IT department into a central University function as part of a wider restructure of marketing within the University. IT Services had developed its own in house marketing and communications team over at least 19 years prior to that, building from a single Information Officer role in the late 1990s to a team of three (one Communications and Marketing Manager, and two Communications and Marketing Officers) which supported the converged IT Services, Library, and Archives (known collectively as Information Services) from 2011 onwards.

Joanne Casey, Senior Content Producer & Team Lead, and former Information Services Marketing and Communications Manager explains how they've managed this move and how she's managed to let go! We're hoping she'll explain the headgear too.

### **Q: What have been the challenges in moving from an embedded to central resource?**

We knew that Information Services were going to have less resource, and we tried to prepare for that in discussions with the Directorate Administrator & Strategic Support Officer, who fed back concerns and suggestions to the Senior Management Team.

Other than reduced resource (from a team of three full time staff to 2.5 FTE roles supporting other departments as well as Information Services), we were worried about the lack of immediacy and knowledge, and the ability to react quickly to situations. The way that we worked with our colleagues and gathered information not just by formal routes, but also from tea room conversations, corridor catch-ups, and online chat rooms would need to change.

We were also concerned about the future of the [social media accounts](http://libinnovation.blogspot.com/2017/04/they-retweeted-me-once-it-was-quite.html) <http://libinnovation.blogspot.com/2017/04/they-retweeted-me-once-it-was-quite.html> that we'd been managing; Facebook and Twitter accounts for the Library and IT, and an [Instagram account for the Library](https://www.instagram.com/uoylibrary/?hl=en) <https://www.instagram.com/uoylibrary/?hl=en> The Library Twitter account had even

won an award ('Unsung non-academic hero') from our Students' Union. We'd built good engagement and a clear voice on all of the accounts, and we were (and still are!) a bit sad to think of 'losing' them.



If you work in IT, emergency comms are probably a part of your world! Monitoring social media, we were sometimes the first to spot an incoming issue ("Hmm, three people saying they're having wifi problems in the same building - maybe something's up..."), and once we knew something was awry, we were always involved - liaising with customers and colleagues, translating tech speak to plain English, answering questions, providing updates, and anything else that was needed. We were close by, and updates were easy. How would this work in our brave new world?

Finally, we were a bit concerned about all the quick turnaround jobs - as well as bigger comms plans, print design, social media etc my team had taken the lead on producing ad hoc notices for broken lifts, event directions, booked rooms and the like. We knew that the central team wouldn't have time to take this on and get notices created and printed at (almost literally) a moment's notice. So who would? Even though we were leaving, we didn't want to return to the days of typos or 'out of order' hurriedly scrawled on a piece of paper.

### **Q: How have you overcome these?**

Before we moved, we listed everything that we did and this was assessed by SMT to decide which tasks needed to continue in some way, and which could end - only a few things were removed.

Once the restructure was implemented, I worked with the Strategic lead in Marketing and with relevant people in Information Services to establish a partnership agreement, clarifying what work would be in scope (eg web edit, promoting new and changed services) and what wouldn't (eg making ad hoc notices, updating publications like the floor plans and user guides which were information intended for an internal audience). It was agreed that we'd continue to manage the social media accounts for a period of time, and that we'd gradually hand over the task of posting ad hoc messages and responding to queries (we continue to post messages on IS social media that are part of a broader communication plan).

I took my new team to meet people in Information Services so that people could put a face to a name, and know who they were working with. I was able to explain the foibles of Information Services to my new colleagues, so they understood how to handle requests. I meet with the Directorate Administrator once a month, and the Strategic Lead for IS has regular meetings with the Director, so both sides know what's going on in each other's world.

We worked with the designers in the new Marketing team to provide templates and guidelines for making notices to use in IT rooms etc - in Word to suit people's expertise and software access. A member of the IS Admin team went on Photoshop training to enable them to update the user guides. To save money, IS replaced a number of printed guides with online versions.

We carried on with sole responsibility for IS social media for several months, but it was inevitable that this would become untenable, so we arranged presentations and training for the teams who would take this on - in IT, it falls to the IT support team, and is a logical extension of their customer facing role. We gave a large group presentation [http://www.ucisa-comms-toolkit.org/library/downloadables/York\\_social\\_media\\_training.pdf](http://www.ucisa-comms-toolkit.org/library/downloadables/York_social_media_training.pdf) followed by two smaller group training sessions which gave lots of opportunity to discuss tone/voice, when and why we post and respond on social media, the basics of social media management tools, and other Uni resources (<https://www.york.ac.uk/social/>). So, the day to day posting and responding has been handed over (very successfully) - we still write and schedule social media content as part of larger marketing plans.

In IT, we used Slack for chat rooms, and as luck would have it, the Marketing team use the same tool. This has made it easier to stay in touch, and maintain a presence in the IT Emergency Comms room (does what it says!). We adjusted emergency arrangements a little, handing over responsibility for social media in an emergency to IT support, but we're willing and able to pitch in when needed - if the IT support team are overwhelmed with phone calls, we can still pick up social media.

**Q: Any tips for anyone else going through this exercise? What worked and what didn't?**

It helped that we planned ahead, and that everyone involved was flexible at the point of handover. We took with us ongoing work; where we were withdrawing support, this happened gradually, not overnight. Staff in IS were kept informed as things changed and were told how to go about requesting work.

However, you can't prepare for every eventuality and a willingness on both sides to develop the way that we work is also vital. I've had to remind people that we can't react as quickly when we have other departments needing our input, and that they can't assume that everyone in Marketing will be as steeped in IT terminology as my team were, so they do need to include background and expand acronyms when they send in a request for work!

**Q: Thinking more broadly about how internal comms works at the University....Can you talk us through how you now establish comms plans with IT Services ?**

We encourage people to come to us via a single point of contact (we have a marketing support email address) and work is triaged at that point. Some things - minor web edits, for example - are done very quickly. Others - for instance. a mini comms campaign around scheduled downtime - will take longer to set up, with more text to be signed off, but are generally turned round within a few days. More significant projects - the launch of a new or significantly changed service - take longer; we might meet with the team, agree a project brief, and depending on the amount of work needed, put it through our prioritisation process. We rarely say 'no' to anyone, but we sometimes say 'not yet...' or 'yes, but how about...'

We have a tried and tested format for comms plans - an overview of what's needed and when (including who the audience is), a breakdown of the channels and key messages, and then the drafted text which will be signed off by the relevant people in IT. When we're sending a message out on behalf of IT, the text agreed by the people involved is then sent to all IT staff; this ensures that everyone in the department knows that a piece of work is happening before the rest of the University.

Wherever possible, we keep things light-touch - we want our process to streamline the work, not to add to it.

**Q: With all your years experience within IT communications would you like to share with us some examples of when you've got things right but also when things have gone wrong?**

I cite this one often, but when we rolled out Google Apps to the University, I think we did a great job - technically, and in terms of engaging people and keeping them informed. It was exhausting - I (and many of my colleagues in IT) did nothing else for months, but there was great joy in going into a room full of Google-doubters, demonstrating key features (and sometimes learning about them in front of a room full of people as at that point new features seemed to be added weekly!) and watching cynics convert as they spotted that one thing that was going to transform their working life.

More generally, establishing the [IT Services Twitter feed](https://twitter.com/UoYITServices) <https://twitter.com/UoYITServices> at a time when colleagues told us they didn't see the point of it, and later taking over the [Library Twitter feed](https://twitter.com/UoYLibrary), <https://twitter.com/UoYLibrary> was a great project - it really improved the way that we engaged with our audience, especially students, and let people get to know us better. I can also confirm that if you manage two Twitter accounts, it's pretty much obligatory to make them talk to each other!

Twitter was also a great source of things going wrong. It's surprisingly easy to tweet a photo (see above) of yourself wearing a tinfoil hat with Viking horns from the wrong account on your phone. Luckily, it's quick and easy to delete!

The introduction of a web CMS has saved us from disasters too - it's no longer possible to make your home page disappear with a misused comment tag. Yes, that happened to me too, once upon a time.

I think the way IT departments manage communication with their audience has really transformed over the years that I've worked here; not just at the University but everywhere. It used to be quite normal not to tell people if things went wrong, why they'd failed, or when they'd be back. That's no longer the case - we all understand (because we're users of other services ourselves) that people, rightly, expect to be kept informed - even if that means regular messages saying "We're still looking into it".

It's been 16 months since the restructure now, and we still have the odd instance of "do I still ask you about this?" but in the main, this process has been pretty much as smooth as it can be, and that's been down to a willingness on both sides to maintain communication and make things work.

