



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPIISODE #144 THE FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMS

TRANSCRIPT

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Richard Morecroft:

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Tim Price:

What's the key message? Who are you trying to communicate to? And what do you want them to get out of it? Just asking those questions often will get you in a better place.

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People come in with an order, don't they?

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Yeah.

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Rather than a problem. "I want a podcast or I want a webinar," as opposed to-

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Definitely a video.

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Yeah.

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Everybody needs a video these days.

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It may not be the right thing, but...

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It's reality.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms. But this time, an episode with a difference. This is the 2022 Reality Megamix. My name's David Pembroke and thanks for joining me. This is a podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. And in this episode, you will hear some of the voices that have been featured during this last year. And in this episode, you'll be hearing more from them and from a few more, as we talk challenges, fundamentals, and solutions. For many of my guests through the year, the practise of gov comms has been viewed through the prism of COVID and its impact on what we do.

Stephanie Speck is the new chief of Communications and Experience at the Department of Transport in Victoria.

Stephanie Speck:

I think we need to move away from BAU plus COVID. BAU is COVID now. There is no going back to normal. We are in the next normal and systemic complex risk that we have to deal with.

David Pembroke:

But there may just be a silver lining or two for the industry, as Melanie Gibbons, who is both the principal of Elm Communications and the leader of the International Association of Business Communications here in Canberra. As Melanie explained.

Melanie Gibbons:

I think there is increasing demand for communicators, and I hope that COVID has kind of had a role in that. Maybe that's one of the great things that came out of having a pandemic for communicators is that, our role is actually much more appreciated. People all of a sudden saw the benefit of internal communications and great employee comms and having to communicate really clearly to the public.

Speaker 8:

(singing)

David Pembroke:

But whatever the day to day challenges of the moment, some thing's never change, having stood the test of time.

Speaker 8:

(singing)

David Pembroke:

Tim Price, a whiz who's the digital content and social media manager at the Federal Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, acknowledges the importance of the fundamentals.

Tim Price:

I really feel like modern digital communication, it's still got the elements of storytelling which have existed for thousands of years. Humans want to connect with other humans and we connect through stories. And so I'm still applying those core elements and essence in social media or in modern communication. I still think I'm

doing that, and that all started from that just love of stories and reading books and different characters, different humans you connect with, the world around us.

David Pembroke:

Do you think it gets lost in this day and age, as we pursue perhaps the latest hack that may work in a particular environment, or we look to capitalise on a short-term meme? Do you think that that consistency and that classical storytelling gets lost in digital in pursuits of the short term return?

Tim Price:

It definitely can be. I think the thing that's really changed, and especially maybe in the last five or six years, is people's attention span. And so, that kind of storytelling becomes harder and harder. You might have had a bit more time previously, even within social media, to get someone's attention and tell a story. And now you've got just no time, and people are bombarded with content and there's so many things thrown at them, and people's attention spans I think are getting shorter and shorter. And so, unless you get the attention very early on, you won't get a chance to tell a story.

David Pembroke:

Tim Price, a digital expert who values the importance of story.

And Deb Rice, who has told many tales over the years while working at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and elsewhere, she's now the content strategy and editorial lead at the Office of the eSafety Commissioner here in Australia. She also supports the notion that, whatever the platform, it's the narrative that counts.

Deb Rice:

Because the platforms will change. The way you get out to the audience will change. Where you house your material will change. Well, we have websites? I don't know. But the principles of speaking to people, and stopping and making sure you're not assuming knowledge that others don't have, I think, is a really powerful ability to have no matter what industry you are in or what you're trying to communicate. The importance of the principles of a well-structured piece of information, which is clear but concise enough, that people who live very, very busy lives are likely to be engaged enough that they might come back to later to investigate more. So yeah, don't be afraid of change. Embrace the change and think about how exciting it might be to have yet another platform.

David Pembroke:

Embracing change comes with its own set of ticking time bombs. Pursuing the latest shiny object may not, according to Melanie Gibbons, be the best way to go.

Melanie Gibbons:

What I think we need to do is go back to basics, because we've gotten quite caught up in social media and creativity and video production and animation and delivering all the big shiny things, which I think are amazing. But what we know is that trust in government has decreased and continues to decrease.

David Pembroke:

While Stephanie Speck cautions against running away from the big shiny things, she argues that their potential should be considered thoughtfully and carefully. Everyone is online, so government cannot afford to be disconnected.

Stephanie Speck:

Sometimes, there's a perspective that being on social media is a risk. People might say that they don't like what the government's doing. People might defame the government or defame other people. But I think it's actually more of a risk if you don't operate compellingly in the social media space. And for me, that means thinking about, how do you manage community engagement and dialogue using the tools that we have? Not just putting one way messages and closing comments, but how do you actually engage and talk with citizens?

David Pembroke:

One standout in 2022, in the application of effective communication and engagement with citizens, was from the Australian Electoral Commission. The AEC had a social media and content strategy ready to go ahead of Australia's national election. It had seen and was concerned about the risks of mis- and disinformation in other democracies, and decided that it needed to be ready and it needed to be able to speak clearly and directly with citizens.

There was a risk in terms of institutional reputation and reputation to the integrity of elections in Australia. But sticking with business as usual, comms carried existential risk for Australia's democratic system. Evan Ekin-Smyth is the Australian Electoral Commission's director of Media and Digital Engagement. And we did two episodes, going through the experience of the Australian Electoral Commission. And in my humble opinion, it's a must listen for all government communicators, because it helps for us to see into what is coming in the future for all government departments and agencies. Here's a taste.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

We started something called AEC TV. And we didn't get people from outside in to say, "Hey, these are the experts." We got our people to stand up, sometimes reluctantly.

David Pembroke:

With that crippling fear of public speaking.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah, yeah. That fear that I was talking about. And it is probably why you saw me in a few more than I would've liked to have been in because some people were very reluctant. But we got our experts, our people running the process to stand up.

David Pembroke:

How important was that?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Oh, critical. Absolutely critical, because these are the people that know it best. And for us to be able to explain it in that medium, in very short, because people's attention spans aren't great these days, in very short form, it worked really well for us. It's a completely in-house cheap, free and quick, which is really important because we can produce, if there's an issue running, and we did this during the election. You turn around. You whip up to the studio. You say some lines in front of a camera. You edit it up. You can have it out within the hour.

You just have to have a go, really. I mean, some of the first videos that we did, and I think a couple of them were up on YouTube, you look back at them now and you go, "Gee whiz, the lighting on that, and the angle on that camera."

David Pembroke:

Well, that's it. That's it.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. But the message was right. So the content was always right and we just tweaked our approach a little bit, and we've learned a little bit along the way. And also, it's not just for creating that short form video as well. I mean, the material that we have for our AEC TV studio is the same material that I did countless Zoom interviews with media representatives on as well. So, it helps in that regard.

David Pembroke:

Fast, accurate messaging paid off for the Australian Electoral Commission, whenever questions in good or bad faith came into the public space. Aesthetically, it may have been a little rough around the edges, not always perfect, not always polished, but Evan admits that it was no shiny thing to start with. But in the end, does that actually matter?

Well, that's something that you have to think about carefully in terms of the needs of your audience. Is it the information that they need, or is it the design experience that they're looking for? It depends. The more you do though, in terms of content, the better you get, as former ABC news presenter, Richard Morecroft, told me during the year.

Richard Morecroft:

If you wanted to improve your golf swing or your tennis swing or your swimming stroke or whatever it was, you wouldn't have any hesitation in actually working on those things. There would be no self-consciousness about that. People are often very self-conscious about trying to make themselves look and sound better, or look at some of those practicalities, but they're very much just part of what should be a professional toolkit for anybody who takes their communication of important matters, in the workplace or in other forums, seriously. And if you make a commitment to working on that, it can make a huge difference.

David Pembroke:

And in terms of getting better, there's no shame in working on how you perform.

Richard Morecroft:

Good, professional communication is a performance. But sometimes, we think of performance in a pejorative way as though that's a bad thing. And the thing about performance is that, if it is genuine and a reflection of the message that you genuinely feel and want to communicate, then the performance component of that is just the way in which you manage to achieve that task most effectively.

David Pembroke:

Another of my guests this year is Ben Roberts, the Director of Communication with Cushman & Wakefield, who works in the Australian Department of Defence. And he was another who talked about the need for continuous improvement. And one of his bugbears concerns, the basic tools of our trade, the written word.

Ben Roberts:

I must admit, I have been surprised in some places that I've worked that I've encountered people who work in comms that aren't great writers. I'm always kind of surprised about how that would be, how you would come to be a comms person if you weren't a confident and clear communicator. So engaging with your content, reading a lot of material, reading lots of different books, doesn't really matter what genre they are, is really

important for a writer, because it exposes you to a greater vocabulary. So certainly, trying to expand your vocab, but also understanding when you should be using a 10-cent word and not \$10 word is pretty important.

David Pembroke:

Getting the words right, getting the delivery right, and getting the performance right is just part of an equation which solves the challenge of effective communication. Another, according to Tasmanian-based author and strategist, Melinda Maddox, is sitting still and paying attention.

Melinda Maddock:

I talk about listening skills as being incredibly important. So the best way to influence change is to listen, so to quietly observe what's going on, and understand what's going on, and listen to the people you're communicating with. The other lesson is, don't sleepwalk, so stay awake. Pay attention, especially to the power dynamics that are going on around you. Really be curious about that.

And then the other key bit of advice is, create allies. Make friends. Build your relationships. When you're in a meeting and you can sit there, you've got the opportunity to observe, take the minutes of the unspoken. So the unspokens in where people sit, what the body language is like, who's talking the most, who's chairing and why, who are they listening to. There's power dynamics in every relationship and especially where we come together as strangers to get things done.

David Pembroke:

I love that phrase of, don't sleepwalk, because I think, so many times, we go into meetings and we are not active. We are just passive. We just sit there and we listen. We don't think about it. So how do you get people to activate this curiosity and activate this interest, so that they can better understand the dynamics?

Melinda Maddock:

It's a great word, curiosity, and I think it's as simple as that. Take your curiosity to work. There's a great phrase I also use in workshops, which is practise curiosity over judgement .

David Pembroke:

So we have the experts marshalled, their delivery tweaked and the words perfectly calibrated. And we've listened intently. All is well. But not necessarily if the we is just me. Deb Rice says everyone in the team has to be on the same page. Not only is information power, it makes good business sense.

Deb Rice:

So what we did is brought together an office-wide meeting, where we actually looked at the content production and design schedule so we could ensure that everyone in the office knew what we were putting out. And there's also a column there for the marketing team and a column there for the media and communications team. So they've got line of sight right from the beginning on a resource.

I think it's been that attitude until a few years ago that what we did was you developed a report. Say for instance, you might have developed it as a print report and it's just a downloadable PDF. There, your job's done. That's it. But now, we make sure that everyone, from the very beginning, the inception of those, is thinking about, "Okay. Once it gets onto the website, how should it be promoted through the website? How are people going to find it on the website? What promotion do we need in terms of social media or in terms of EDMs, in terms of the media that might be applicable to that? Is at large scale enough to justify that? Is it worth a speech by the commissioner?" So that's been a really valuable exercise for everyone, because we can

all see what everyone else is doing in the different teams, and understand how it comes together and why it comes together.

David Pembroke:

And then, once you've got that right, it's the sell or the pitch to your client. I asked Tim Price how he goes about that.

How do you sell the value proposition of a digital content and social media manager in those types of environments? What's your pitch? "Hi, I'm Tim, and I'm here to help."

Tim Price:

Yeah, no. I'd often start with, "So if you are... What's the key message? Who are you trying to communicate to? And what do you want them to get out of it?" Just asking those questions often will get you in a better place. And I guess I win by being able to assist in that and get that greater engagement and make those posts perform better and uplift those channels. And so that's what I've generally done. And then, once I've got that, then you sort of build that trust. You've got that trust with people and they can see, "Ah, I took Tim's advice, and look how well my comms has done. Look at this report that's got massive engaging compared to the one last year." And then people, once you get their trust, they'll actually come to you and say, "Well, Tim, how do you think we should do this one? Or should we do this a bit differently? Or should we try something here?"

David Pembroke:

Evidence of engagement, elevation of trust equals better comms and better outcomes for the community. It's a great idea. But in the real world, reality can come to bite us all too often.

Melanie Gibbons:

I think a lot are trying to battle through and do as much as they possibly can, but with very few frameworks that are sitting around that about how to prioritise or what goes onto which channels, what content works well. I've worked in-house. I know what it's like. Sometimes you're just keeping up. You're just getting through day to day and trying to get the next thing over-

David Pembroke:

People come in with an order, don't they?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah.

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Rather than a problem. "I want a podcast or I want a webinar," as opposed to-

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Definitely a video.

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Melanie Gibbons:

Everybody needs a video these days.

David Pembroke:

But that's the issue, isn't it?

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

It's pre-ordained that this is what is going to happen. Now, it may or may not be the right thing, but-

Melanie Gibbons:

It's reality.

David Pembroke:

But reality can change. Let's wrap up this clip show with some random thoughts about how we can improve, and how we can think more creatively, more imaginatively, and more effectively about the practise of government communications.

In order of pontification, we have Melinda Maddox, Tim Price, and we finish with the voice of Stephanie Speck.

Melinda Maddock:

There's nothing as valuable as a new person in an organisation, doesn't matter what level they are, because they come in and it's like being in a new country with all your senses alive. They come in and they notice everything, and they kind of bring a naivete almost. And when we've been there a little while, we become part of the furniture, so we just kind of accept things. We are very adaptive creatures, human beings, so we just accept things as they are and we don't question them anymore. But the new people question them. And then you can learn from them and you can teach yourself to keep questioning and keep turning up with fresh eyes, which is really important for any organisation.

Tim Price:

I think that kind of authentic communication resonates with people. If it's kind of this sort of off-distant government department that people can't connect with, it's very hard to build that community. But if you tell personal stories, which tell that larger narrative of what is going on, what are the outcomes, what is the things that affect people in their day-to-day lives, that's when you create that connection and you can kind of build that community up.

Stephanie Speck:

So you can write all the strategies you like, but in this day and age, if you also can't produce your own content to activate that strategy on the ground, you've got a great idea and no legs. So I think we have to start looking at government communication departments as an entirety. Now, that doesn't mean that necessarily everything has to be in-house and you've got all your own production teams. It might mean sensible partnerships with agencies who can do it better, cheaper, and at a scale you can't do with two people in a production department. So I think strategy and content, every department now has to be a content producer because that's what people are accessing to make decisions.

David Pembroke:

So there you go, just some of the wonderful insights that we've had from our guests here on the GovComms podcast in 2022. What a year. It started with COVID. We moved through COVID. And in some ways, COVID seems to be, at least here in our little corner of the world here in Canberra, Australia, it may be coming back in some way, but we seem to be behaving and acting differently. But what it has done is to change so much of the way we behave, the way we engage with each other, the way we listen to messages from government, and the way we speak back to government and government departments about what they are telling us. So the change has taken place.

We have had an acceleration, but where to from here? That is the big question. And my big focus, I think, for next year is really going to be about building capability in government, so they're better able to take advantage of the gift of digital technology. Because as it relates to communication, we are now in the media business, whether we like it or not. Digital transformation has enabled government agencies and departments to have that gift of that ability to be able to create and curate and distribute useful, relevant and consistent content to engage with specific audiences, in order to achieve desired outcomes. So that is the opportunity, that is the practise, that is the muscle that government is going to have to get better at doing. And it's going to have to be able to do it, not only well, but it's going to have to do it much faster as the demands of citizens and stakeholders for government action grow even greater. And again, that is perhaps one of the dividends of COVID, where the expectation around government grows evermore.

So that's it for this episode of GovComms. Of course, you can go back in the archives and play the individual podcasts featuring those who you've heard today, and also, the many, many others who have been very grateful that they've been able to come onto the programme. As we enter, I think it's now our ninth year as the GovComms podcast. It started as In Transition. It is now GovComms, and I think we're sort of touching in around the 400 episodes. So certainly, going back through the archives, there are plenty of talented people to listen to and to learn from.

My name's David Pembroke, and I would like to thank our showrunner, Olivia Casamento, the clip Whisperer and script editor, Andrew Bell, and of course, our technical director, Ben Curry, who really helps to put the programme together each week. And without those people, this show would not happen. So a big thanks to them. And to you, the audience. We have grown GovComms substantially under the leadership of Olivia Casamento this year, so it's great to see so many of you tuning in so regularly. And please, a like, a share, a review helps us to be discovered, as we continue to work through the examination of this all important practise, because, again, we return to the figures of the Edelman Trust Barometer, which show that, in Australia, only 52% of people trust government, and a similar figure that the OECD has done and also the Reuters Institute.

So we have a challenge around trust in democracy, and more effective communication can help to be an antidote for that lack of trust. So if we can become better and more effective in our communication and our explanation and our listening, we can build trust and we can strengthen democracy, which is why we do this programme every fortnight. So thank you. Thank you to the audience. Thanks to the team. And thanks to everyone. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

You've been listening to the GovComms podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.