



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

**EP#145 PERSONALISING GOVERNMENT
COMMUNICATIONS**

WITH ANGELA KAMPER

TRANSCRIPT

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Angela Kamper:

Doing that allows us to be more personalised with our communications. And that's definitely the future for us in government communications, you know? Making it more personalised. To be honest, the less we communicate the better. Because people are so busy these days, they don't want to hear from you with emails every day, or how many emails do you get every day in your inbox? It's so frustrating and we understand that. We get that feedback from customers.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. Today we speak with Angela Kamper, who is the executive director for brand digital and communications at the New South Wales Department of Customer Service here in Australia.

Now, many of you regular listeners would have listened to the interview that I did at the end of last year with William Murphy, who is Angela's boss, who gave us the sort of high level view of exactly what it is that the customer service team at the New South Wales government are doing, and indeed leading the world in many ways about the way that they are communicating with citizens and stakeholders, and the way they are delivering value.

Now, Angela, like many who are working in the public sector these days has a great background in journalism. She worked with News Limited newspapers for 13 years and she specialised in political and crime reporting, and is the co-author of a non-fiction crime book, My Brother's Keeper, which was published in 2006. In her work in government, her vision is really to empower her team to lead and drive excellence in communications between government and its customers by ensuring that they are always effective, they are efficient, and they are impactful with each and every of those interactions. She joins me from the customer service building in the centre of Sydney. Angela, welcome to GovComms.

Angela Kamper:

Thank you, David. Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke:

So listen, I always like to get the backstory to understand where people come from. So, what is the Angela Kamper story?

Angela Kamper:

Well I came from journalism, as you mentioned. I worked for the Daily Telegraph for many years, actually. And after quite a few years in newspapers, I'd met a lot of government people, had a lot of contacts in government, and I was really interested in what was happening on the other side. And when you move from journalism into government, people say, "Oh, you've moved from to the other side."

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Angela Kamper:

And, "What made you move there?" You know? But a lot of the skills you have as a journalist, government finds really useful. Being able to tell a story well, explain things, and engage the community is a skill that a lot of journalists bring to government. And there's also that risk management skill. As a journalist, you talk to a lot of stakeholders, a lot of industry, a lot of people in the community. Those listening skills are really important. When government departments engage the community well and you bring those skills in, they get better outcomes on all their policy programmes overall, and it's better for everyone.

David Pembroke:

What was your first job in government, and what struck you about that job in terms of what was appealing about it?

Angela Kamper:

Well, I started working for RMS at the time, and I really got involved in road safety campaigns. And there was so much we could do to influence people to do the right thing on the roads, and there was campaigns in development. So I got very much involved in that. And what was some of the... There was so much interesting information around crash data that we could use to influence people to do the right things on the road. And it was about that storytelling that really attracted me to the role. So, that was where I started and then I started doing school... Working in partnership with the education department to do road safety education campaigns. Working with stakeholders like the NRMA to make sure that we had drivers on board before we launched major programmes. So, that was where the exciting part was for me/

David Pembroke:

It's worthwhile and indeed engaging work, often, when you are working inside government and getting your hands on those great stories and thinking about how are you going to best present those to the audiences that you are seeking to reach, to influence and to engage. So what barriers did you find when you first started into this path? Because I know a lot of people in journalism are often thinking about, well, should I go and work in government? But often, there's a little bit of a resistance to, as you mentioned before, going to the dark side and selling out, so to speak. But what did you find in your experience in coming in, and how did you deal with some of those inevitable frustrations that do come when you are working inside a bureaucracy?

Angela Kamper:

Sometimes people are a bit skeptical of journalism, so when you first start in government, people have been burnt perhaps, in the past or story hasn't been told the way they want it wanted it to be told. So when you come in as a journalist, you need to kind of sell yourself a little bit in the beginning, and start really focusing on building those internal relationships and showing how your storytelling can help them to get the right message across in a better way, so people can listen and engage with content. So it took a little bit of time, probably about six months, for me to really get my head around who I needed to build a relationship with so that I could be influential, let's say.

David Pembroke:

So with those relationships, and it's a theory I've been rolling through the GovComms podcast for a while now. And it's the evolving and emerging leadership potential for communications inside government organisations by... Leading by getting up and walking around and building the relationships, and being out in the different areas and talking to people and sourcing the different stories that you need to explain government policy and

programme services and regulations. What's your view about that potential leadership role of comms, and comms becoming more influential in the digital age?

Angela Kamper:

Well, that's a really good question because in the past, people would often go to comms in a crisis. But now they've realised that, well, we actually have to engage the community before we make a decision. So we are playing a different role now, and we are really demonstrating that when you engage the community, you get a much better policy outcome, or programme outcome, or if you're building a road or whatever you're doing in government if you bring people along, you're going to get a better outcome.

David Pembroke:

And selling those services or selling that particular benefit, do you find that there is now more appetite for that? So comms is moving away from the traditional sort of end of the line function, what I describe as the colouring in department, and being seen much more as a strategic partner in policy and programme development?

Angela Kamper:

Oh, definitely. I mean, if you look at... One thing we are developing at the moment is the digital birth certificate. So in the old days, you would've built a digital product and then put it in the market and tested it. But now, we're asking people what do they want to see in the digital birth certificate? What are the things that are going to make them feel more secure about using a digital birth certificate? And that's well before we build anything, so that's how comms has really changed in government and that's what makes it a little bit more exciting, because you feel like you're having more impact.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So in terms of your team, you are the executive director of brand digital and communications as part of that wider team that you do have there at the New South Wales government. Can you just describe to us just exactly how many people you have in your team? What are their roles, and what does a sort of typical day look like for the brand digital and communications team at the Department of Customer Service in New South Wales?

Angela Kamper:

So we have close to 200 people in the team, and there's two major functions that we play. One is a central agency role that we have, and that is how we support the rest of the government agencies. So transport, department of justice, education, health. We play a major role in supporting them. And the way that we support them is we have a capability team that develops programmes to make sure that comms people across government... There's about 2000 comms people across government, so we need to make sure that they're skilled in the right direction. And that's in social media, websites, media, all the different comms function. Design, brand, video development, content development, you name it. These are all things needed in government, so we need to make sure that our comms teams across government are evolving with the communications field. So, that's one role that we play.

The other big role that we play is we've got really big communication channels here at the Department of Customer Service. And when I say large channels, I'm talking about... A few years ago, we started with an email to customers with about 20,000 people on it, and now we are reaching 5 million customers who've opted into our emails to find out government information. So, it's a really big channel. And that's not just putting together an email and loading it up. It's a digital platform, it's making sure you've got links in it that click straight through to information customers need. It's making sure the information is timely and relevant to customers,

it's making sure that the information that we are giving customers is information that they need. If we're communicating to people in Penrith, we don't want to be doing an email blast to 5 million people about information for people in Penrith. So, we'll be more targeted in that way. So that's a big machine.

The other thing we do, our team also assesses government campaigns. There's about 80 campaigns we assessed last year, and we make sure that those campaigns are highly effective. So we've got a peer review process where we assess the campaigns, looking at how targeted they are, has the content been tested? Does it resonate with community, so we can make sure that the awareness is effective for some of our campaigns? And of course, there's a big role in our team for branding. So it's not just about putting a Waratah logo here in New South Wales. We've got the Waratah logo, and it's not just about putting a logo on something but the brand is a whole lot more and says where this service is coming from.

If you've got a complaint or you've got a positive piece of feedback, you need to know who is delivering that service. So we've got a brand framework here in our team that we deliver for the rest of government, and we do that as well. And we've got multiple social media channels and also the media team that we've got here, as well. And a huge stakeholder engagement team that was, during COVID, reaching out to 3000 stakeholders a week.

David Pembroke:

Take a breath. Well, let's just pick apart some of that because there's a lot there. And I think people have... Always interested in how people assemble their teams and what roles they do, and what's the benefit and impact that they're seeking to create? So just perhaps before we jump into that, clearly the Department of Transport, the Department of Health will have their own comms teams but as the central agency, are you just looking at that from a capability point of view? Or do you also influence strategy, or does that come from another central area that may be operating in, perhaps, the Department of Premier and Cabinet?

Angela Kamper:

So we do influence strategy, the Department of Premier and Cabinet have other strategic objectives, but ours is more about customer. So when it comes to engaging with customers, we set the standards and best practise for that, and we work with other government agencies to make sure that we meet those standards. So as I was talking before about campaigns, we make sure that campaigns across government, those 80 campaigns, we don't deliver all those campaigns but we support government to make sure they have best practise there, when reaching customers.

David Pembroke:

Now in terms of capability building, which is obviously the flavour of the month-

Angela Kamper:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

... and the year, it really is something that... You know, there's a general uplift, not just in Australia but around the world, about how do we lift up that capability? And you mentioned that there is library, there are courses, there are all sorts of things that people can do. How, in fact, do people then access those services in their day-to-day? So if I'm working in, for example, I don't know, the Department of Regional Development, how would I access that capability uplift?

Is it through accessing and learning it on a digital platform, or do I attend courses? And indeed, does New South Wales have a framework that covers the whole of the... Like a hierarchy for communications officers,

that covers the whole of the public service, or communications people in the public service? Or is it not as rigid or as structured as that, at the moment?

Angela Kamper:

So you do have hierarchies in each cluster, let's say. So you've got a hierarchy at transport of communications people, and we have a hierarchy here at customer service department. But not all the departments play a central agency role like we do. And the heads of all the departments, we all meet, I chair meeting once a month for instance, with all those heads. And we talk about what are the things we need to focus on? And we've got a central hub where people can access information and learn about what the latest is. We also shoot an email out to all the communications professionals with the latest and greatest. And what makes a good video, what makes good social media? What are the things... How are we researching these days? How are we testing things? All of those things, there's a community of practise across government.

David Pembroke:

How many people would you train in any given year?

Angela Kamper:

Each department does their own training.

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Angela Kamper:

And so within here, we are coaching and training and driving people to content every day.

David Pembroke:

Yeah-

Angela Kamper:

So yeah, it's hard to put a number on it.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, yeah. Exactly. Well, and that's fair enough too, isn't it? Because that formal way of, "I do a course, I sit the course, I've finished the course, I have a tick." As you say-

Angela Kamper:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

... it's far more iterative these days where people are learning, acquiring new skills, developing new skills, taking on new challenges all the time. So listen, I'm fascinated by this growth in this email platform that's gone from 20,000 to 5 million. How did you do that?

Angela Kamper:

You know? It's about having interesting content on there but making sure that it's content that's going to be of interest to customers. And one thing that gets people in, we had our cost of living campaign recently and we had a big savings finder platform and service New South Wales. And you can go in there and find all the government rebates and savings in one location. And we would send out an email and say, "If you're a parent, download your active kids voucher," and you're getting a hundred dollars there.

So things like that got a lot of interest and started to grow the email service. But if we're engaging on a policy, even. So in the old days, we would put a submission up on a policy and hope that someone would come and look at it on the website and give us feedback. But now we are using that email service to say, "Hey, come and engage on the environment or on strata management laws that we are changing." Or mental health at work. And people are piling into those engagements because of that email service. People want to get involved in government, our customer data has shown us that people definitely want to get involved in the decision making, so we are making it easier for them.

David Pembroke:

But relevance is obviously key, as you mentioned previously. That it's got to be relevant to people because as you say, they're not going to be... If I'm in... Or say if I'm in Yass, I really don't care that much about what's happening in Penrith. So how do you go about that segmentation and that targeting? How powerful and how granular is that targeting? How accurate can you make it for particular communities?

Angela Kamper:

Yeah. Well that depends on your database, and it's really important to ask people if they want information based on the information they've provided. So if someone... For instance, if we have a database of people who have school-aged children, which we can do, in the case of the active kids vouchers. And we've asked people, "Do you want us to send you information that applies to you if you've got kids?" So doing that allows us to be more personalised with our communications, and that's definitely the future for us in government communications, making it more personalised.

To be honest, the less we communicate, the better. Because people are so busy these days, they don't want to hear from you with emails every day. How many emails do you get every day in your inbox? It's so frustrating. And we understand that, we get that feedback from customers. So what we are trying to do is rather than have multiple government departments emailing you about the same thing, we send one email a month and have the important information in there. And if we can segment it, that's even better. And we see open rates well beyond 50%, especially in the segmented emails because people are more interested in the information and it's important. And we write those emails in a way that's not government talk, you know? It's about speaking to people and engaging with them.

David Pembroke:

Now, at New South Wales there, you've done a cracking job over a number of years now, to develop and evolve this operating model. Because there's clearly your team, but then there's the research team, the data team, and there are others who maybe fit sort of slightly outside of where you are at the moment. But if I could ask you to look a little bit further into the future, this 2, 3, 4 years down the track and taking up that point around personalization and greater relevance and impact, how do you see government communications teams evolving in order to better service customers?

Angela Kamper:

I think communications teams are going to be more involved in policy and product development in future. I see that evolving even more. I see that government is really appreciating the work that comms people are doing now, and I can see growth in that area. The important thing, too, is that when you work in government,

you communicate to everybody. So you can't just communicate to one group, you have to be there for all communities. And so in future, I see more communication in language to multicultural communities. Just recently, we've started sending that email out in the top most used languages. And we had, just one email, we had 25,000 people read it in their own language.

David Pembroke:

Oh, yeah.

Angela Kamper:

So you can see there, that there's a real need for that. And if we are bringing skilled people into the country where English isn't their first language, this sort of communications is really important and we want to make sure that we engage those people and we keep them interested in what government's doing.

David Pembroke:

It was interesting, the review that was done by E61, a think tank, into the federal government's response to the COVID crisis. In fact, I think that was recommendation number four if I remember correctly, that... Certainly that the federal government at least, needs to massively improve its ability to be able to communicate effectively with people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Because a lot of the hotspots and difficult areas were in those areas where there are greater numbers of people without... From a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

So yeah, that's clearly going to be something that needs to be focused on. But how, then, do you do that? How do you start to lift up, again, that capability inside government such that... The mindset's there straight away, to be starting to think about multiple languages. But then to be able to do it in a way that's effective, because communicating in different languages is... To different cultures is... That's a sophisticated business.

Angela Kamper:

Yeah, it's a good question. And one of the things that we are doing is hiring people who are part of the community we serve. So, you've got to get people in who want to communicate to that community, they have a passion for it. It really makes a difference. During COVID, especially during the Delta outbreak, we could see that we had people in parts of Sydney who weren't understanding our message or really struggled to understand the need to get vaccinated. And we had a responsibility there to help people understand. The only way we're going to do that was to engage the community itself, engage community leaders on a daily basis.

And we had a campaign even, called Let's Do This, at one stage to try and get people to get vaccinated. And we had lots of images of all the things we're going to be able to do once we get vaccinated and to keep COVID at bay. But that message in itself didn't resonate as much with our multicultural communities, the Let's Do This message. So we had to change that key message to Let's Get Vaccinated, as simple as that. And a lot of them wanted to go overseas and visit their families and all of that. So, we changed the message for different communities and that's how you get it done. You know, you listen to what they've got to say.

David Pembroke:

It's fascinating. But you do, ultimately, then need to... Yes, you need to be adaptable and agile and be able to move to that solution, which you clearly identified. But then you do also have to have the technology and the platform to be able to manipulate it in such a way that you can then reach these people with this personalised, relevant content. So how are you dealing with those ongoing changes in technology? How do you keep abreast of best practise? And do you have people who are assisting you in the brand, digital and communications team around some of the software and other applications that you might be using to achieve these outcomes?

Angela Kamper:

Absolutely. Social media platforms are changing all the time. We are looking at doing more customer service on social media because people are there. We have so many millions of Australians using social media, so we need to be where the market is. And those platforms are changing, we need to understand them and we have people who are experts in this area who are looking at uptake, length of videos. Simple things like that to see, "Are people listening to this message or not?" And we do a lot of reporting on every channel that we have, to see if it's working. And if it's not working, we ask the question, "Why?" Sometimes we'll go to... Or a lot of the times, we'll go to customers, or we'll watch the trends on our channels and see why isn't this resonating? It's our responsibility to do that, to make sure everybody gets a message.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, so this sense of set and forget, that's all pretty much over and you're really looking at it in real time almost, to understand what those trends are, what those changes are, what those adjustments are. In order for you to be able to, then, almost in real time, I imagine, be able to respond to reframe, to refit the content into the format, into the channel at the right length, at the right time, in order to have that impact?

Angela Kamper:

That's right. That's exactly right.

David Pembroke:

That's pretty exciting though, isn't it?

Angela Kamper:

It sure is.

David Pembroke:

But it's a pretty exciting... It sort of conjures up these notions of sitting in a control room and content moving out into the ecosystem and, "Did it work? Did it not work? What are we going to do?" And it's almost that continual movement, continuous improvement and adaption. Which I don't think, notionally, many people would think about, that that's what you'd be doing if you went and worked in government communications.

Angela Kamper:

Well, I think the formation of the customer service department really made a difference there. Because rather than it being more about media, and planning media events and being reactive, we started being more proactive by going out there and finding out, well, what do customers really want to hear here?

David Pembroke:

Yeah, yeah. Now listen, just a quick one before we get going because you've been very generous with your time. But just that point that you raised around policy, and comms strategists being invited into the room early into the process to start helping with that consideration of putting the customer at the centre. You know, the famous Amazon apocryphal story where they begin their meetings with one empty chair because that is the customer, and we always have to be thinking about the customer. How are you seeing that playing out, and how can people who want to be more involved in policy and programme development be able to put forward the case that comms really does need a seat at the table if, indeed, you're going to be effective?

Angela Kamper:

Well a couple of years ago, we made a real change on our New South Wales government website. Our have your say section. So we decided... I don't know if you've ever given feedback to government, but sometimes there'd be some really thick PDF document that used to go on the website and-

David Pembroke:

Yeah.

Angela Kamper:

... it used to be a line underneath saying, "Give your feedback to this document in an email." You know? But now what's happening is, last couple of years we've done over 120 consultations on different policies and programmes. And it's on your phone, short surveys, quick polls, little groups you can join to have a chat about it. There's someone there, waiting to answer any questions on our have your say platform. And we're going from having a few responses with feedback on a policy, to thousands. And I'm talking, when we did strata consultation a couple of years ago on the strata laws, we had 15,000 people responding. So, that's a big difference. And that's where you're really capturing not just those peak bodies who have a say-

David Pembroke:

Yes.

Angela Kamper:

... but you're capturing the people where it matters to them. The people who are really going to be affected by this policy, and that's important.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well listen, Angela, we could speak all night about government communications because it is so fascinating and it's evolving and it's becoming more important, more relevant. And again, it's great to see the New South Wales government having done such wonderful work in this space, and being recognised globally as one of the leaders, as the OECD has done, continuing to examine the New South Wales model as it seeks to understand what does that operating model look like?

Because really, the application of what you're doing in New South Wales is just as relevant here as it is in New Zealand or Jakarta or Malaysia or London or anywhere else, because I think it's that ability to be able to use digital technologies to listen, as you mentioned before. That important skill, that journalistic skill, but also a skill of all great communicators to listen and understand, and then to be able to take those insights and turn them into better policy and better programmes. So congratulations to you, congratulations to the team and thank you-

Angela Kamper:

Thank you, David.

David Pembroke:

... so much for joining us on GovComms.

Angela Kamper:

Most welcome.

David Pembroke:

There we go. What an outstanding professional. And again, it's great to see the journalist hopping the fence. It's not the dark side. I did it myself, a number of years ago and I don't feel like I went to the dark side at all. I went into a very interesting place where you can really have impact and use those skills to be able to better assist communities. And isn't it great to see someone of Angela's pedigree?

I didn't get to ask her about My Brother's Keeper, but that was a big deal. A very big deal and a distinguished journalist. And to be able to have someone of her skill, knowledge, and experience applying them in the best interests of the people of New South Wales, that's got to be good for the people of New South Wales.

So thank you very much to Angela, and thanks to the customer service department in the government of New South Wales. Thanks to you, the audience, for coming back once again. Another great conversation. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke and it's bye for now.

Outro:

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