



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EP#156: MASTERING PUBLIC
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES,
LEADERSHIP AND CAMPAIGNS

- WITH MARDI STEWART

TRANSCRIPT

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Mardi Stewart:

It's all about for me, be passionate about what you do. Because that's our old saying, if you're passionate about what you do and you enjoy what you do, as you know, you never work a day in your life. There can be peaks and troughs, there can be good days and bad days, but it's about having that resilience. But at the core of it, it's about enjoying what you are doing. I think life's too short not to love what you do.

The first thing is always have a learning mindset. So, there's always things to learn. So, I think be open to opportunity. And if something makes you feel uncomfortable because you think you're not quite ready, it's probably a sign that you should go ahead with it. That is going to be where you're going to learn the most, probably.

Voiceover:

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 about the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me today. It is again, old friends week as we welcome Mardi Stewart, who is a senior leader in the Australian Public Service with more than 30 years experience in comms. She has had a number of roles in the public service at the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, working with Operation Sovereign Borders, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission. She's also worked at the Sydney Children's Hospital, the New South Wales Premier's Department, and also, with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and also her current role at the Department of Social Services.

And in that current role, she's the branch manager of campaigns and strategic communication at DSS. And Mardi and her team are responsible for creating and delivering the award-winning Stop it at the Start campaign, which is to end violence against women and children. They also look at the Care and Support Workforce campaign, which is all about raising awareness of employment opportunities in the aged care sector. They also work on disability support and veterans care sectors, and also the delivery of the Carer Gateway campaign to raise community awareness of the diversity of carers and the important role that they play in supporting our community. Mardi Stewart, welcome to GovComms.

Mardi Stewart:

Welcome. Thank you. Nice to be here.

David Pembroke:

So, Mardi, I was only thinking today, I think the first time we met was at 51 Blackall Street in Barton at one of the very first meetings of the IABC in Canberra. I think it was you, it was me, it was Sandy Logan, Gabe Rotman. And I'm not sure who else might've been there, but that is a long time ago.

Mardi Stewart:

You have a very good memory, David. But yes, that's my recollection of our first meeting and really important to promote professional communication networks for people, especially those up and comers in the comms

industry. It really provides a safe place to discuss ideas and any issues you may be having, and to get that mentoring ship from senior leaders.

David Pembroke:

Now, I'm still a member of IABC. I haven't been quite as active as I needed to be, but back in those days, we were really just trying to get it off the ground. But it's an outstanding organisation, really, isn't it, in the way that it does lead, globally, the communication profession.

Mardi Stewart:

Absolutely. I've got a lot out of IABC in my career.

David Pembroke:

Incredible.

Mardi Stewart:

And it's just about that worldwide view. And knowing what we are facing as communication practitioners, it's just opening the doors to talk about some of the issues, some of the challenges, but also some of the best practise communication activity throughout the world. So, it provides really good insights and also that mentoring. So, to have someone who will mentor you in any career decisions that you may face is really important.

David Pembroke:

So, IABC has a pretty good and thriving community here in Canberra, but there can always be more. And really, we'd want to encourage people, wouldn't we, to get involved, particularly in those early years, to get into the IABC and to learn and to be mentored.

Mardi Stewart:

Absolutely. And I think there's nothing like that face-to-face communication. So, obviously, with COVID, that brought challenges for professional memberships, and a lot of activity now is online, especially with work from home. So, I think it's even more important for communication professionals to have that face-to-face engagement with their colleagues.

David Pembroke:

Now, you haven't always been a government communicator. There were things happening before then, but tell us the Mardi Stewart story. What was your pathway into communications and public sector communication?

Mardi Stewart:

Certainly. I've always loved writing, so that's why I got into public communication. So, I started-

David Pembroke:

From primary school, were you interested in writing always?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes. So, what enticed me is that I won the ANZAC Day writing competition when I was in year five. And in year five-

David Pembroke:

What school were you at? Where-

Mardi Stewart:

That was at Berkeley Vale Primary School.

David Pembroke:

Which is... Where's that?

Mardi Stewart:

On the Central Coast.

David Pembroke:

Central Coast of New South Wales?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes, New South Wales.

David Pembroke:

In Australia.

Mardi Stewart:

So, that enticed me because I got a \$200 check back then, which was a lot of money.

David Pembroke:

\$200?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes, absolutely. When I was in year five. So, I thought, "Oh, there's something in this." So, that's what enticed me in terms of my writing career. And then, looked into journalism, but I found that I went and met with the Sydney Morning Herald chief of staff, and he gave me a very good view of some of the harder things as a journalist that you're faced with in terms of going to accidents and things like that. And then, found out about public communication, and thought I was more suited to that.

David Pembroke:

So, going back to being in year five and writing, so obviously, you connected to a subject, but were you a reader as well? Is that how you sort of started to acquire the skill?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes, absolutely, always loved reading. So, I think, and I agree, they go hand-in-hand in a lot of cases. But certainly passionate about reading and writing.

David Pembroke:

And as you went through high school, did you continue... Well, when did you start to think that, "Hang on, I might be able to make a bit of a career out of this"?

Mardi Stewart:

I think it started about year 10 where I started to seriously look about what interests me and the pathway that I wanted to take. And certainly, my strength was always in the humanities, art, history, rather than the mathematical science subjects, which for a lot of communication practitioners, we do find that.

David Pembroke:

And so, what was that pathway where you decided that journalism wasn't for you, public communication was? What happened then?

Mardi Stewart:

So, then I looked into relevant degrees and ended up here in Canberra, at the University of Canberra. I liked the practical subjects at the University of Canberra bachelor of arts degree presented, so did my three-year degree. And in my third year of my internship... You had to do an internship, and I did that at Department of Health and I loved it. So, that's what sparked my passion for public communication.

David Pembroke:

So, you've been a career public sector communicator?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes, although I did spend 10 years out of the public service, I did want to find out if the private sector offered something that the public sector didn't. So, I spent 10 years consulting with private clients, and then decided after that 10-year journey that I'd like to come back into public sector communication.

David Pembroke:

So, you mentioned before, and obviously, now you're in a very senior role, you have a big team to look after, a number of important projects and programmes that you are looking for. And you talked about the changing landscape and the challenges and the opportunities that are there for effective communication. How are you viewing that at the moment in terms of that very specific and important role that public sector and government communicators have, which is to explain the policy, the programme, the service, and the regulation? What are you seeing as the biggest challenges and opportunities that you've got at the moment?

Mardi Stewart:

Look, I think the biggest opportunities is that there is so much important work that the government is doing. And I'm really passionate about some of the social policies. You mentioned ending gender-based violence against women and children. Recognising those carers who help people, and also people with a disability, recognising and celebrating the achievements of people with disability. So, I think the challenges are, there is so much work that government is doing, and every component of that you need to communicate. So, especially in my portfolio, I think the challenge is that the breadth of responsibility, but that's also an opportunity.

So, it's exciting work, it's work of value, so you feel like you're contributing to the betterment of Australia, which I think it's really important as a communication professional to have that passion about what you're doing. And then, the challenges. Look, I think it's that 24-7 media cycle, the quest for information, for making

that information clear and concise and regular for members of the public, making sure it's accessible information. So, there's some of the things that we really are passionate about within my branch.

David Pembroke:

So, in terms of that campaign that is there to assist the communication around reducing the violence against women and children, it's horrendous what's happening at the moment and has been going on for some time, but it really does feel like there's something wrong at the moment with some of these acts... Well, acts of horrific violence against women and children. As a communicator, when you see that real problem and you're sitting there as part of trying to build towards that solution, how are you looking at the actuality of the situation and the role that you and your team are playing in trying to change?

Mardi Stewart:

So, it's changing behaviour. And as we say, that's within a generation. So, it's looking at the evidence base. So, it's looking at all our campaign activity is very strongly skewed towards the research, and having that developmental research as our evidence base. And then, testing any concepts that we are looking at, doing benchmark and tracking research and then evaluation research. So, the Stop it at the Start campaign, it's up to its fifth phase. And there has been success in terms of behaviour change, especially among parents and young children. I think it's just we need to keep on working on it, and it's a community problem. So, behaviour change campaign is one part of an overall agenda in terms of combating gender violence.

David Pembroke:

Is it distressing when you're working on it every day and you're reading some of these stories? And I just look at it just appals me that this is where we're at.

Mardi Stewart:

Certainly. Like I think everyone who's reading the media coverage, it's very distressing.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So, then just take us through that process then of the way that you and your teams would be thinking around, let's take this as a particular issue. As you say, we're now five iterations into it. So, that formative research, how does it work? What does your process look like in terms of putting a campaign together?

Mardi Stewart:

Certainly. So, we work very closely with the Communications Advice Branch at Department of Finance, and we start a campaign by seeking authority from government. So, there's a funding source, we get that funding source. Then, we work closely with Communication Advice Branch. We work closely with a preferred supplier for getting that developmental research, so that we understand community attitudes. And then, it's about looking at what themes emerge from that research, and then working very closely with a creative provider and developing some concepts and testing those concepts to make sure as much as possible that we know they're resonating within the community. And then, of course it's developing those creative assets and then evaluating, making sure at every stage we're evaluating if the communication's having the impact it needs to have.

David Pembroke:

How are you going about doing that evaluation piece?

Mardi Stewart:

So, we do that after each phase of each campaign. And then, the key lessons that we get from that we make sure we incorporate into the next phase of the campaign.

David Pembroke:

So, in terms of your team then, let's have a look at what sort of skills and mix of skills do you have in the team that you are directing at the moment around these multiple campaigns that you're looking after?

Mardi Stewart:

So, it's really important I think, for a campaign officer, they need to be able to work under pressure because there is many components to an Australian government advertising campaign before it launches. So, they need good writing skills as well. It's really important when you're developing briefs and working with suppliers, and in looking at scripts and fact sheets and other products that we produce. They also need to be able to collaborate across government. It's really important to understand that you're not working in a silo, and whether that be with state government or other Commonwealth agencies. So, they need to collaborate. They need to be curious about what's happening in the external environment, and they need to look at research and then interpret that research. So, they need to be quite inquisitive about how they go about their jobs.

David Pembroke:

So, that's that person who sits at the project management level, I suppose, about coordinating all of those different areas. But then, how many people and what sort of skills do they have inside their teams to be able to deliver?

Mardi Stewart:

So, in working with external suppliers, it really depends on the size of the campaign. So, we've got some smaller scale campaigns where it's a smaller team and then you've got the bigger teams in terms of the higher profile and bigger campaigns. And then, for strategic communication activities, we do have teams that work with our internal business areas on different policies and programmes and promoting those, and using various channels that don't cost any money. So, you need to be aware of social media channels and the internal communication component, utilising, digital media and design and production teams that we've got internally. So, they really need to have lots of experience and lots of different mechanisms within their toolkit to make sure that we're getting the best bang for our buck.

David Pembroke:

And you mentioned earlier this changing landscape that we're in now, and obviously, we're seeing huge change. For example, free-to-air television is nowhere near where it once was in terms of its dominance of being able to get a message out. Fragmentation of audience, social media, multiple channels, et cetera, et cetera. How are you thinking about that fragmenting, increasingly digital technology-driven, artificial intelligence-enhanced environment when you are doing your job? What are you seeing or what are you thinking about?

Mardi Stewart:

Well, certainly, as you mentioned, at the start of our careers, there was no social media. The environment has changed so dramatically. So, you do wonder how are things going to change in the next 10 years? But it is really important as government communication practitioners to stay on top of the different mechanisms that are available to us to communicate with our audiences. So, certainly we are doing everything with an evidence-based lens. So, we won't do any media buy on a platform until we know that is going to be what is going to work best in terms of targeting that particular audience.

So, we work really closely with the master media agency to do that in a campaign environment. And for those what we call the below-the-line activities, it's really important that we use the metrics available to us through social media or being able to evaluate in that way as well. So, we use whatever we can to interpret the information that our audiences are presenting to us.

David Pembroke:

So, a lot has changed, there's no question. When I started my career, we were using typewriters as a journalist with blotting paper to get multiple copies. But a lot of it hasn't changed. What to you hasn't changed in terms of the fundamentals of best practise in public sector and government communication?

Mardi Stewart:

I think what hasn't changed is you need to be able to deliver, as I said before, you need to be able to work under pressure. You need those good writing skills. You need good relationship skills. You need to be able to communicate well with colleagues and those stakeholders that you need to bring on board with any of the activities that you've got to deliver on. So, some of those essential skills I think will always be important.

David Pembroke:

They're the people skills, aren't they?

Mardi Stewart:

Yes, absolutely.

David Pembroke:

And I asked this question of Bev and Hannan the other day in terms of we now have a hybrid working environment, where people are working from home, they're working flexibly, teams aren't together all the... Back in the day, everyone used to come in and everyone was there, and you'd be able to work together. How are you dealing with that in terms of being able to deliver the mentorship, deliver the capability building, delivering and developing the relationships such that you then have the capacity and the capability to deliver what your senior executive is looking for from you?

Mardi Stewart:

And I think with the working from home, it's even more important to have those relationships with the people that you work with. So, it's about making sure you're connecting and however you do that, really depends on the individual staff member, but to me it's about knowing staff members. So, it's about knowing their strengths, knowing the career path they want to take, knowing any stresses that they have in their life. And I think that comes from that interpersonal relationship. And I've always thought that if you look after the people, then the work will get done. And I think it's that people-first approach, which I find over time, it does work. Because it's important to have that relationship and that honest communication, so that if you're going through a really tough time in terms of just being able to deliver, it's being able to call on those relationships really that will get you through it.

David Pembroke:

How do you do that now? I remember in the old days you're very charming, very engaging, very gregarious, you like people. And so, obviously, it would've been quite easy for you just to be you. But how do you invest that time and effort and energy now into people when they're maybe not around as much as they used to be?

Mardi Stewart:

And I think it comes back to you need to be more deliberate about it. So, it's making sure you are picking up the phone or you're doing that Teams message, or you're inviting people in for the morning tea, whatever it is, and I've got the lens now of what's in it for me? How are we making it of importance for someone to come into the office? I think there's a lot more pressure on the managers and the leaders to make it worth the while for staff to actually come into the office environment. And I think during COVID, we proved that we could work from home and deliver. So, I think for moving forward, it is going to be a challenge for managers, but it's about maintaining that connection, the people that you work with.

David Pembroke:

What are you seeing in terms of younger people who are wanting to join the communication profession? And perhaps are there any differences than from the older days? Are you seeing different types of people with different skills wanting to contribute in this space?

Mardi Stewart:

I think it's really positive, I have to say, because I think that the younger generations are coming in with a wider skill set. So, when you and I started, it was very much, "Okay, you'll do event management, you won't do campaigns," for example. So, I think now a lot of the younger generations have the design skills, have the production skills, have the writing skills, and I think that's a great thing for the profession. And their IT skills. They've grown up with it, and it's just second nature to them.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I see that as very encouraging. And I see it here in the younger people we have working with us. They can do it, whereas I have to work a lot harder to try to make it, to be as dexterous as they are. And I see the output, which I think connects particularly in the newer digital channels, it's fascinating. And I do think that there is a real opportunity to continue to build into that space, and we call them the Swiss army knife where people are able to do multiple things and to be applied against the different task. So, how then, or what advice would you or do you give to the younger people that you're working with in terms of how they engage with policy areas and service delivery areas to make themselves known, to make themselves useful and relevant to those important areas as connectors really inside your teams?

Mardi Stewart:

So once again, it does go back to relationships. So, it's making sure you do connect. If you've got a client area that you are doing work for, it comes back to relationships to meet. So, know the people, know their subject matter, know their business, and you need to always add value. So, to me, it's always about delivering on anything that you say you're going to deliver on. So, it builds that trust. So, it's about the trust and of being valued. So, what can you add to help them achieve their business outcomes.

David Pembroke:

So, looking backwards and probably stepping back and looking maybe perhaps into your career, I'm sure there's been some people along the way who have had an enormous influence on you. Who might some of those people be and what is it that you took from them that has helped you to be a better communicator?

Mardi Stewart:

I've been very fortunate to have some fantastic mentors in my career. So, I think it started off with Dr. Michael Brydon at the Sydney Children's Hospital. And what I loved about working for him is that he was a senior paediatric professional, and he always took communication and public relations and fundraising, he always thought it was very important to his role. So, what I learned from him is the importance of what we do and the difference that it can make, and the difference that it made in people's lives. So, that, to me, was inspiring.

And then, I had Sandy Logan. So, once again, a fantastic mentor. What I learned from him is about supporting your people. So, he always had his staff's back, and you learn a lot from that. So, it's always about making sure you have the people that work for you, making sure you've got their back. And I had Paul Williams at ACIC, and once again, just really supportive of his people. And I think when you've got those relationships, you always want to deliver for someone that you admire and respect.

David Pembroke:

So, with that, and it's an interesting point, you referenced early the importance of comms, the traditional view is that not important, the colouring-in department, tidy it up on the way out. Do you see that that has changed or is changing and continues to change? And is there a recognition of the importance of communication?

Mardi Stewart:

Oh, look, absolutely. I think you look during the COVID crisis, how important communication was. I think there will always be a need to continue to provide your relevance and for that seat at the table. And I think as communication professionals, you do need to work in some organisations or some industries to get that, because in some industries, if it's an aviation industry, it'll always be about the engineers and you're a support service. So, I think in the industries where you're a corporate and enabling service, it is always about understanding the business and then for them to understand what you can bring to them to make their roles easier and for them to achieve their outcomes.

But I think as an industry, we have come so far and the professionalisation of what we talked about before, having those bodies where we all get together and learn from each other, it is so important. But we have come leaps and bounds, and I think we will continue to. And I think the role of the communication practitioner will only continue to become more and more important. Because no matter what we do, you always need to let people know about it.

David Pembroke:

And would you see COVID as a bit of a tipping point for it? That there was that sense of, "Okay, this is something that is really important, we've got to grip this up and we've got to be serious about it"?

Mardi Stewart:

Absolutely. I think when you look at across government, if you were in an internal communications team during COVID, you were called upon and you needed to provide that important communication to the organisation. If you were in Department of Health, you're doing the public information campaigns, so important to get messaging out to people, to different cohorts. So, I think it certainly showed the importance of the practitioner during that time.

David Pembroke:

One of the things that struck me recently or was increasingly obvious, I think that needs to be addressed is communication around culturally and linguistically-diverse audiences. And I don't know, maybe I don't think about it or I haven't thought about it enough, but one in four, Australians born overseas, one in two Australians has either parent born overseas. It's a huge for communicators, it's something that really has to be thought about and addressed and capability developed.

Mardi Stewart:

Absolutely, and it should never be an afterthought. So, we have got really good in government in terms of making sure, whether it's First Nations or called, or people with disability, we are looking at how we communicate to these cohorts along with mainstream audiences. And it's really important that whole nothing

for us without us. So, it's really important that we are making sure we are incorporating all the different cohorts that we need to communicate to at the beginning of a project and not at the end.

David Pembroke:

You've had a stellar career. You've had a lot of great opportunities to work on so many important communication campaigns and programmes, and you maintain the energy and the zest. Every time we catch up for a coffee and a chat and all the rest of it, you're busy, but you're loving what you're doing. When you turn it around, looking into the future, what do you see? How would you describe what's coming and what advice do you have to people to get ready for what's coming?

Mardi Stewart:

I think it's all about, for me, be passionate about what you do. Because that's that old saying, if you're passionate about what you do and you enjoy what you do, as you know, you never work a day in your life. So, there are some days where I go, yes, I do work. So, there can be peaks and troughs, there can be good days and bad days, but it's about having that resilience. But at the core of it, it's about enjoying what you are doing. I think life's too short not to love what you do.

So, I think if you're lucky enough to be a communication practitioner and you enjoy what you do, there are so many wonderful opportunities, whether it be in government or in private sector, we are really privileged in the breadth of activity we can be involved in, the changes that we can make. So, I think it's really important to have that passion. And if you're not feeling that passion for what you're doing, look for something else because there's so many different industries within a communication practitioner's remit you can go to, whether it's in the medical services, or production and television network, or government. There are so many opportunities within the profession.

David Pembroke:

Now, to the audience, which is predominantly of government communication people, both senior, middle ranking and junior, what would be the or two pieces of advice that you would give to each of them to improve what they're doing? What are some of the areas that perhaps you might be working on to get better?

Mardi Stewart:

Yeah, I think the first thing is always have a learning mindset, so there's always things to learn. So, I think be open to learning and be open to opportunity. And if something makes you feel uncomfortable because you think you're not quite ready, it's probably a sign that you should go ahead with it. Because I have found in my career the times when I've been a bit hesitant or it seemed too big, that is going to be where you're going to learn the most probably. So, I think that's important. And I think for younger people, it's about having the relationships. So, it's all about relationships. So, always stay connected with the people that you've worked with. Go out of your way to develop relationships. That's what will help you in your career. I know now people that I worked with 30 years ago, they're good friends, but I also know I can pick up the phone and ask them a question. And you've got that relationship basis to be able to do that. So, I think that's the most important thing.

David Pembroke:

Well, Mardi Stewart, thank you so much for coming in to the GovComm studio to share a bit of your experience and your wisdom and your insights with the audience. Much appreciated. And I know that the audience will take a lot from it. It's been a great career that you've had and you've led in so many ways with so many teams and you continue to lead. So, congratulations on a wonderful public service career, and more to come. So, still a bit of a fight left in you yet.

Mardi Stewart:

Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. And to you, the audience, thank you so much. And what a gift to be able to spend a bit of time with one of the true greats of our business here, not only in Australia, but globally. Mardi has won plenty of awards over the years for the work that she's done, and has made a contribution and continues to make a great contribution, not only with her own team, but across the APS as well, sharing a lot of her experience with other leaders as they continue to build that function of communication here in the Australian Public Service, so it's great to see her doing that with all of the other band 1s, as they're known here in Australia.

So, thank you for coming back once again for today's discussion. A rating or a review, I know I ask regularly, but if you could do that, it does help other people to find us. We've got lots to look forward to. We are going to be speaking to Strath Gordon in the coming weeks ahead of the Olympic Games in Paris. He's the director of communications for the Australian Olympic Committee, and he's going to explain to us exactly what is going on in terms of how the Australian Olympic team is going to communicate while they are at the Paris Olympics.

And we also have a sport commentator, Tim Gavel, turned government communicator. He is now working at the Australian Sports Integrity. So, we're going to talk to a sort of ragged old, haggard old sports commentator and see the great work that he is now doing out at Sports Integrity Australia and at the things that he has learnt and how he's taking a lot of that skill that he had as a journalist for and commentator for the ABC for many years into public sector communication. Because as Mardi said, it is all about learning. It's all about that transference of skills.

So, thank you rating or review. Just do it now. Make it easy. Lots to look forward to in weeks to come. Very grateful for you turning up once again. My name's David Pembroke. We'll be back in two weeks time, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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