



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EP#163: MANAGING HIGH-STAKES
EVENTS AND DATA DRIVEN
GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

- WITH ALISON SENTI
TRANSCRIPT

Transcript

Alison Senti:

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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 that examines the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. As we begin today's program, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land from which we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region, and indeed to all First Nations people who may be listening to this podcast today, I pay my respects to all of you.

Well, today we have a wonderful guest, one of Australia's leading change and strategic communications experts, Alison Senti joining us. Alison has enjoyed a storied career in both the public and private sector. Her work has taken her across many sectors in both the private and public sector. She's worked in hotel management, legal and intellectual property marketing to working in consulting with KPMG. In government, she has worked for the Department of Industry, Intellectual Property Australia or IP Australia. She's worked for Immigration and Border Protection, the Digital Transformation office, and she's currently working for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Importantly, Alison has also been a leader of the International Association of Business Communicators here in Canberra. She contributed for six years and was the president.

She has a lot to talk about today or we have a lot to talk about today, and the most recent role that she has held was with the Southeast Asian 2024 Taskforce or the 2024 ASEAN Special Summit that was held in Australia earlier this year where Alison was the senior strategic communication advisor.

Now, that meeting was brought together for the 50th anniversary of the ASEAN- Australian Dialogue and really a very important meeting for Australia where it gathered the leaders from across the region to talk about issues like trade, climate change, maritime cooperation, leadership development, and a range of other things. I really want to dig into that to try to get a sense for us about the role of communicators in those big events. But before we get to that, I just want to get Alison or welcome her to the program. Alison, welcome to GovComms.

Alison Senti:

Thank you very much, David.

David Pembroke:

It's been a fantastic and diverse career that you have had over a long period of time. How has change, changed the way that you've gone about your work over the past 20 years?

Alison Senti:

Yeah. I would definitely say that my career hasn't been linear in any way. I have definitely gone in and out of different sectors and followed... My philosophy is always we follow the interesting work. So if you're interested in what you do and you're curious, then I think you find yourself in interesting places and situations, and that's what I have let my career sort of follow that kind of a path. But definitely the last 20 years, obviously there's been enormous change in all technology, climate obviously is another one, but technology particularly for a communication professional has seen extraordinary change. I mean, 20 years ago we didn't really have anything like the technology and social media and media landscape that we have now. I guess when I was at university, we were still talking about press releases and the press, public relations in its truest form, which is what I studied at university.

So I did do essentially a marketing degree, but with public relations and advertising major. And they were very much still those traditional industries back then. There hadn't been a huge amount of change for quite some time. You're still writing for the written press, writing media releases for the overnight publication of something. Now of course, we have a 24-hour media cycle and platforms that are desperate for content.

Content is king now in every sense of form. We've got so many different new emerging online social media platforms coming even in the last couple of years. You've seen the rise and fall of Twitter, which is now X, and TikTok and Snapchat has been big and now it's not so big. It's both a little bit confronting but also really exciting that there's new communication channels that you have to consider every time you're looking to communicate something, whether it be as a private organisation, a commercial organisation, or in government like I am.

David Pembroke:

What are some of the things though that have remained true throughout your 20-year career? What are the things that are the foundations of your success? Because you've had a lot of success and you've taken on an enormous amount of projects and had achieved quite a lot of things. So what are those essential elements that started as true 20 years ago, but stay true today, 20 years later?

Alison Senti:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the things I learned at university in the early part of my career around the fundamentals of communication and understanding the subject matter, understanding the audiences. What is the key message you are trying to get across? What's the call to action? Are you trying to get someone to change behaviour? Are you trying to get them to think differently? Are you trying to get them to buy something? Are you trying to get them to do something by a particular deadline?

So breaking it down. Every problem or every communication conundrum, can be broken down pretty quickly by asking yourself those questions. And I think when I go to talk to people, whether it be internal clients inside... I have a very client mentality even if I'm working in government within my own department. I treat people as a client. What does my client need? How do I help them with the tools I have and the experience I have, get where they want to go and what they need to do. Often it's around dissuading people to jump straight to the solution, so I think universally communication professionals have the challenge of always saying no, putting a brochure together is not the first thing we're going to talk about. Let's talk about your problem, what's the problem statement and how can I help you? And then let me suggest and work with you on the types of tactics we can take. So brochures and social media and all of those things are tactics to a broader strategy.

So getting that information, that base information together early to form the strategy will inform the tactics. So I don't think those things have changed at all. I think what has changed is the agility in which you have to do that now. I think you don't... Back in the day when I started at my first public service job and we did long-term campaigns, marketing campaigns around programs for specific audiences, we would do research for six months first, then we would do initial product development and work with a client area to go through those things.

You may not have that luxury of time, so you still need to be able to tick all of those boxes that you've done your due diligence on those things, but perhaps move more quickly.

David Pembroke:

Would you agree that the communication function has taken on a greater degree of importance and the recognition of its importance post COVID? That seems to have been a theme that's developed with a number of our guests over the last year or so where there was perhaps a recognition that communication is a lot more than just a brochure and just graphic design and other things, and that it is a fundamental strategic enabler of objectives. So would you agree?

Alison Senti:

Yes, absolutely.

David Pembroke:

Is that your experience?

Alison Senti:

Yeah, it was.

David Pembroke:

Have you seen there's that recognition?

Alison Senti:

Yep. It was a really, I don't want to take anything away from the actual essential workers in healthcare and other professions, but in some ways communications professionals who may not have even been in comms at the time, it was their time to stand up as well. So I think internal communication, there was such drastic change in the way people had to behave as workers, as well as members of society, that everyone that was a communicator needed to put their shoulder to the wheel on that as well and help quickly and clearly. The biggest angst a lot of people have is around not knowing what they needed to do or if I'm... I know that the policy is this, but if I'm this person or I have this health issue, or I have this type of work arrangement, how do I do that? So navigating all this new information that was being thrown at us sometimes daily when we were in the biggest crisis period was where communicators could really help.

I mean, personally, I just actually moved into my first ever true change role. So organisational change role inside an indigenous organisation to do a major ICT transformation. I'd been there six weeks and the change team were actually... Well, the project team were actually in Sydney and I was in Canberra. I'd had six weeks in the office with the team that I was attached to, I'd met the project team once, and then we went into lockdown from March till August. So I never set foot in the office again for more than six months.

So that was really challenging. But the biggest problem right there, I mean the project was working with an offshore technology company, so that posed problems because that country was actually affected very badly by COVID in the initial stages. So they were struggling with their own workforce to help with the project that we were doing, but also we had to recalibrate the entire project timeline around that.

In the meantime, the organisation I was working for, they are all remote and regional based, and there's 200 staff and the only 30 of them had a laptop. So we were faced with how do people work from home when they don't actually have the tools to do it or have never done it before either. So there was a very quick pivoting of the project team I was working in to roll out 150 laptops and mail them to every employee around Australia along with instructions that I drafted based on how to set yourself up, working from home, all the things that people needed to do to be able to work remotely.

In some cases, we even had to mail out dongles for people who didn't actually even have home wifi. So it was quite a swift turnaround in what I had been doing, but I was like, "I need to do this because they need this help and I'm a comms person and I have that skill." There was a small comms team there, but they're more focused on really importantly on supporting Indigenous Business Australia's clients to manage through that period. So how was IBA going to support their client base? So that left me to do the internal side.

David Pembroke:

Did you find yourself working over with the comms team as well? Were they looking for support and looking for your expertise as well?

Alison Senti:

They are very, very experienced in working with their very unique target audience and client base. So not so much. It was more I could take the pressure off them having to also support the internal stuff, so that's where I saw my value during that time and it was fantastic. As COVID did for lots of people, there were lots of opportunities out of that. And one was around showing the organisation how the ICT function within Indigenous Business Australia was adding value and supporting them during that time. So that was also a great outcome of that.

We got through and when everyone got their laptop, I think, we managed to get in five working days, everyone had the brand new laptop and instructions and were working remotely within five days. So we had very little business disruption despite going from almost zero base a week before.

David Pembroke:

You've had this wonderful career. As you say, you've followed your nose, followed your opportunity to the next most interesting thing, and you ended up as the senior strategic advisor to the ASEAN's Summit here in Australia earlier this year. Take us through that. What does that role look like and what were your responsibilities in being that senior strategist around a major multilateral political event such as that?

Alison Senti:

Yeah. It was a really welcome return to that subject matter. So I'd actually worked a couple of times with ASEAN. So one was when I was at IP Australia, I did a lot of capacity building work there in South Pacific and Asia with a couple of multilateral forums, one being ASEAN, also APEC around intellectual property awareness. And then later I actually did a year consultancy with a colleague of mine from IP Australia working on a communication strategy for ASEAN countries leading up to the launch of the economic community, which was in around 2013. So that was funded through an ASEAN and DFAT program.

So I'd had a couple, luckily a couple of good experiences with it. So I understood the region's issues and the types of, I guess, the importance of our trade relationship with those countries and those multilateral forums. So that was a helpful start coming into this. I had just worked on another major event prior to that. So in one way it was sort of like the coming together of an excellent run in and also having known the community. So I didn't have to do too much to-

David Pembroke:

So you're familiar with the-

Alison Senti:

Familiar with it, yeah. It wasn't something-

David Pembroke:

... needs of the different countries.

Alison Senti:

I wasn't something I was like, "I don't know anything about this."

David Pembroke:

That's right.

Alison Senti:

Or what the priorities are or what the issues are. So that is helpful, but can never replace the fact that I am not... I don't own, or the Summit itself doesn't actually own the broader subject matter around ASEAN. As you said in your intro, we were celebrating the 50th year of Australia's dialogue relations with ASEAN. So there's 50 years of relationship between Australia and that body that needed to be respected and incorporated into the Summit, which was a three-day event.

And notwithstanding the event had its own three days full of meetings, and as you said, there were themes around maritime leaders, emerging leaders. Trade and investment was the key one. So a few months previous, there had been the release of the 2040 Invested Report through DFAT. Dr. Nicholas Moore had launched that and a lot of strong themes coming through from that report into the summit for discussion. So that was a real focus. So my job was really around how can we use the three-day spotlight of this international event to highlight the government's key messages around that report, the 50 years of history and acknowledging that and also where the relationship would go in the future. So I don't own that subject matter, but I need to be cognisant of the chain of events that got us to here and what would the legacy be left afterwards and the platform for the next 50 years.

David Pembroke:

So how big a team did you have and what skills did that team have?

Alison Senti:

Yeah. Smallish team, but mighty in terms of skill. So I had communication strategist, a partnership relationships sort of expert, a social media strategist and a small social media team, graphic designer, a web designer and another person that was looking after all the printing and merchandise for the entire summit.

David Pembroke:

So how much of a run-in did you have and what did that team do in preparation for, and then what did the team do during? How did that look?

Alison Senti:

Yeah, very, very good question because it was our roles changed somewhat during the Summit. So preparation wise, we basically had nine months. The taskforce started on the 1st of July last year 2023. Quite short timeframe when you think about what needed to be done, not just in my team, but the many other streams of activity that the summit covered. So you are talking about transport, and liaison, and protocol, and the catering, the venue. It was quite a ginormous operation.

My team basically, we probably had about sort of seven streams of work. So, we printed all the materials for the summit that were of a communication - So fact sheets, folders - but we also printed all of the things that were functional. So name plates and menus. And so all of that had to be-

David Pembroke:

The logistics stuff.

Alison Senti:

So it was a big discovery exercise with each of the teams early on saying, "What kind of things do you think you'll need because we need to put this in our contracts?" So we had contracts we managed for all of these as well, but we had to scope all of those really quickly. Graphic design, we did a lot in the department and in house. We didn't actually go external for that, so that's probably quite unique. That included development of the branding and the logo and the broader branding elements and the sub-branding for each of the tracks. So the things, you mentioned before - maritime, emerging leads, business, climate.

David Pembroke:

But that's a good thing, isn't it? Because it's a core capability now. Government agencies, departments need to have high performing production so that they can produce this stuff because as the world moves faster, there's some value in having external partners from time to time, but you really do need to have this capability.

Alison Senti:

And not every agency obviously can have that. I mean, we are small to medium size. When you think about Prime Minister and Cabinet as an agency in its own, it's sort of on the small side, but Prime Minister and Cabinet does support a lot of things like this, or taskforces, and a lot of that is leveraged out of the department initially. Sometimes it goes externally. But no, it's great to be able to do most of that in house. I guess the other parties that throughout the entire time we were always consulting with ASEAN. So there's a third party. So you not only have other government agencies, obviously the Prime Minister's office and policy areas, but ASEAN are absolute key player in all of this. So at every step of the way, depending on the issue, and we would seek advice from ASEAN often through DFAT, that is our direct path to the ASEAN organisation on key deliverables, both in my team but in others as well around how ASEAN would like to see those sort of things play out during the summit.

So we did have to factor in a lot of time to consult with so many different stakeholders, but also we had pretty strict deadlines when it came to... There were practicalities around if we don't have branding and logo sorted, we can't order merchandise, we can't print things. We built the website in-house as well, that gave us back a little bit more control over the deadlines.

David Pembroke:

So project management skills, fundamental to really and logistics, and the meat and potatoes really of making sure that this happened. So that was in the preparation too. But what was it like during that three... Well, I'm sure it wasn't just three days, but leading into as the pace accelerated as the planes started to arrive, as the hotels started to fill up, how did the works change?

Alison Senti:

For my team, we arrived a couple of weeks before. We had, back to that meat and potatoes, we had a lot of logistics to coordinate around signage, banners, assisting the Venue's team with final branding application inside the venue. There was a lot of decisions that needed to be made once we got there, depending on different variables around placement of items in rooms. And the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre is a ginormous space. So sometimes until you get there, even though we did many site visits, until you get there and see it in person, you think 'actually we need something else there' or actually we need to change that. And that's all normal and very much part of organising such a gigantic venue. Our venue and events team did an amazing job and everything looked fantastic. We worked really, really closely with our team, but also their supplier who did a lot of the build of key spaces, so that was a really great experience.

David Pembroke:

But then on that day to day, when the meetings are happening, when the media is there, what does it look like then? It starts to get very hectic, I imagine.

Alison Senti:

For me, it was just keeping an eye on all of those things. So, have all the printed items gone to the place that need to go, what's missing? We had actually stood up a rapid printing service with our printer. So, of course there were last minute changes to things. Sometimes it was location, sometimes it was other things. So we could produce new products really quickly if we needed to. So managing that process, making sure that allocations of items, particularly around merchandise had gone to the right areas and the right country rooms and supporting those functions on the ground.

Most busy were my poor social media team who did a fantastic job. So we had obviously a whole bunch of pre-approved social media content that lined up with the particular events that we knew would happen. But we also had free-range, I guess opportunistic social media around reels and things that were happening and behind the scenes. So we actually did a time-lapse video of the setup of some of the main areas with the Venues team, which were really great. So we could show how do you set up for an international summit? Well, this is how it gets built over three days, building something that's literally a concrete bunker. So some of those areas are just literally a concrete floor and almost look like an airport hanger. And to see it come to life in 30 seconds, let alone over a couple of days is pretty fun. So personally, I was doing a lot of approving of content before it got published that wasn't already pre-approved and just generally supporting. We had an event operations centre that ran almost 24 hours a day. Whatever-

David Pembroke:

What sort of hours were you putting in and the team?

Alison Senti:

Yeah, it was for me around anywhere from 6:00 AM-

David Pembroke:

16, I think.

Alison Senti:

... to 11:00 PM at night. But that wasn't as big as some other areas that were... The transport airport teams because they had people coming in and out around the clock. They did some massive hours and everyone just without complaint just got it done.

David Pembroke:

But those big events are great fun, aren't they when you're involved?

Alison Senti:

Yeah, oh it was excellent fun.

David Pembroke:

There's that esprit de corps that comes forward. And it's great because you're all in it together and you're all looking to present Australia's best. You really are representing the country.

Alison Senti:

I've got to say through the entire nine months leading up to the summit itself, we had that. And that's why everyone that works on this sort of an Olympics or a Commonwealth Games or whether it be CHOGM or G20, everyone says that, and it's absolutely true. It's very motivating, having a hard deadline obviously, but it's also really exciting and you literally get to see the things you've been working on for 6, 9, 12 months materialise in front of your eyes over a couple of days and it's very satisfying.

I was really pleased for my team, especially the more junior members to get to have that experience. I haven't done something of this sort of level before, but I've done lots of events before and it's always satisfying to see all that hard work come together and the buzz around the event. We had some fantastic feedback over the three days. All the countries were really happy with how they were accommodated and the types of facilities that Australia provided during the three days of the summit. There was a lot of great feedback around the international media centre and the facilities that were there. So we think we hit the KPI.

David Pembroke:

Now, I do want to take you back to stakeholder consultation and engagement because it is an area of your expertise. But before I ask you that question, what advice do you have to people listening to the program who are in government communications and they're going to have to organise events, it's going to be one of the things that they have to do? What do they need to do to make sure that they can present something like the ASEAN Summit and be as successful and hit that KPI?

Alison Senti:

Well, number one, reach out to people that you might know that have done something like this. But there are already lots of government departments that are constantly organising events. So you think about Department of Education and the old department that had small business in its name. They used to run seminars all the time, like 30, 40 city seminars sometimes for showcasing what government services are available to small business or to tertiary education overseas. So there are people that do this all the time who are absolute experts at most efficient value for money, impactful way of running these kind of events. So, I would encourage people to reach out to them. In terms of major events, well, certainly in Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, we're currently going through a very rigorous evaluation and I guess lessons learned process. We take very seriously recording how we did things. They're not always going to be fit for purpose for the next major event or even the next ASEAN Summit if there is one. We certainly lent really heavily on the excellent record that the 2018 ASEAN Summit organising team left behind. So they paid that forward to us, and it was absolutely invaluable. It was a different type of summit. I mean, ASEAN is a prescribed sort of formula - Normally over a few days, normally, there'll be a leaders meeting and there'll be some sort of track element. Ours did differ quite a bit from what happened here in 2018 in Sydney. However there was lots that we could take from what had happened there. I guess what was really different was in between the 2018 one and 2024 - COVID had happened. The workforce, I guess environment had changed. Cost of materials and all sorts of things had increased exponentially.

So there were things variables that we dealt with in our summit that were very different to what 2018 did, but that's always going to be the case. But on the whole, we were much better placed having had that record left behind. So certainly I would recommend if you are in this kind of environment, make those notes, pay it forward to the next group that are going to be doing it.

David Pembroke:

But reach out, find these reports, find the lessons learned because there's nothing new under the sun as they say. So lots can be drawn there.

Alison Senti:

And there might not even be another leader level thing. It might be something, a ministerial level meeting, but those people are out there that are working on those, notwithstanding that there's leader and ministerial level international visits happening all the time. So if it has an international component to it, reach out to PM&C or DFAT, or Defence who have those visits and protocol functions within their agencies.

David Pembroke:

So if I could ask you around that stakeholder consultation engagement piece, it is an area of your experience and significant skill reputation. You're known for being very good at doing that. What's the secret of getting stakeholder engagement and consultation right?

Alison Senti:

I don't think there's a secret. There's no easy way and there's no quick way, you can't skip through any steps. I think if you're going to be authentic around stakeholder engagement, you have to invest the time. I say that also... I've just said to you earlier that time is now sped up, but you can still invest in the process and come to the table in an authentic way. So for me, it's always around, obviously if I'm engaging on a particular issue or topic or on behalf of whatever project it is I'm working on, it's finding what do I need to get out of this and what do the people I'm seeking views from want to get out of this, and where do we cross over? Where do we actually have some common ground, and start there. I mean, there's obviously issues that are very contentious where you're going to have polar opposites, but you've got to try and find some common ground where you can coexist together or agree on a course of action together so you can have progress. And for me, there's also now a lot of new technology around. So if you wanted to reach different audiences, you need to be cognisant of who it is that you're trying to seek that information from. Can you reach them through more traditional means like round tables and in-person consultation and surveys, or activation in a community where you ... like pop-up stands. A lot of what we don't see in federal government is, and they probably do this a lot more in state government, particularly around infrastructure, is actually visit places where the thing is going to happen that they're going to be impacted like train stations and think about big infrastructure, rail development, public transport. There's a lot of effort invested in connecting with people while they're using that service or the people that are going to eventually use that service. And I think that's potentially an area that we could probably do a bit better in federal government.

But then on the other hand, there is also technology. If you're working with people, vulnerable communities and people with disabilities, you have to find ways that makes it easier for them to participate as well. You can't exclude people by sticking with traditional methods of stakeholder engagement. So I think we have a much broader array of tools at our fingertips now to be able to do that, which is great.

David Pembroke:

And you've mentioned the process. You said that there is challenging and there can be challenge around time, but process is always available to you. And I know that you take certification very seriously, both through the IABC and I think IAP2 as well. What are the value and the benefits that you see through certification for people to understand that it is a process, it is a system and you just need to follow the system?

Alison Senti:

Yeah. With IAP2, we've just talked about tactics and different ways of doing things. So yes, I have spent a lot of time studying the engagement certificate with IAP2. So the International Association of Public Participation and the fundamental principles behind IAP2 is around the commitment you'd make to the public when you say you're going to engage with them. So people use the term co-design or collaborative design fairly interchangeably.

In IAP2 terms that actually constitutes a promise to the public. So if you say you're going to co-design something with somebody or a group, you're actually going to almost take their views on board equally as your own and incorporate them and work with them to implement. So do you actually mean that? Do you mean actually we are going to do something. We want to get some information and then we'll inform the public. And I really encourage anyone hasn't heard of the spectrum of public participation through IAP2. You go and look it up. It's very simple model, but it actually... Every time I hear someone say co-design, I think, are you actually-

David Pembroke:

Are you serious?

Alison Senti:

Are you serious about that? These days there are actually a lot of fabulous examples of co-design.

David Pembroke:

Well, the Albanese government made it a priority almost on day one or day two of being elected that that was what they were going to do.

Alison Senti:

Yes. But that is obviously one of the most resource and time intensive methods. So if you're going to do co-design and you do really mean it, you also need to follow through and actually use the full range of methods and steps that you would take to produce a co-designed solution to something.

David Pembroke:

But do you think it's equally important that if you're not going to that you just tell people that you're not going to.

Alison Senti:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

We're actually going to do this. We're not going to ask you. Or we are going to seek your views, but at what level we're going to consider those views-

Alison Senti:

And to what percentage or degree will your feedback as either a community or as an individual make up the final solution?

David Pembroke:

So manage expectations.

Alison Senti:

Yes, that's it. It's all-

David Pembroke:

Be absolutely clear about what those expectations are.

Alison Senti:

And it should be around the timeframe, how you'll consult the type of feedback you're looking for and how it'll be used in the design of the solution. So again, it's a pretty simple, simple... People get caught up in the tactics and the timeframe. And sometimes you just need to pull back and go, "Actually, this is what I would like to do and share with you in talking about this issue and just be really, really upfront.

David Pembroke:

Now, I know you are the mother of children. I'd never ask you who was your favourite child, but I'm going to ask you about reaching back through. There's that vast and impressive career that you've had. What's a project that you worked on that you think fondly of or you learned the most from? What's something that you reflect on?

Alison Senti:

There's lots and I'm very lucky and I've really enjoyed nearly everything I've ever worked on for one reason or another. I think that's part of my, I get on a mission...

David Pembroke:

Sorry to interrupt you, it's actually worth having a bit of a sticky beak at Alison's LinkedIn because it just shows you the appeal of a public sector communications job. You sort of go through and you go, "Oh, that would've been interesting. That would've been interesting. That would've been interesting." Sorry, I interrupted.

Alison Senti:

No, no. I certainly don't think being in public or private sector exclusively guarantees you a more interesting career at one or the other. I've worked in both and for different reasons. I've had just as many interesting from IP to ship building, to law firms, to all sorts of places. I've done that in the public sector and I've worked on some really fun things in private sector as well. So I think I'm a bit of a bowerbird, I think I like the things that are bright and shiny and yeah, I like sort of those.

David Pembroke:

So tell us a story of one that stands out for you and why.

Alison Senti:

I was thinking about this earlier and one that I like to tell because I think for people who are newer in their careers in comms whether you've come into it later or you're just starting out, the good old-fashioned starting with evidence. So when I first started at IP Australia, we always did market research. We had a quite substantial market research budget. And these days you would think, "Oh, that's an easy way to save half a million dollars and put it into something else." I think some ways with technology research can be done more cost effectively now because we have more tools.

David Pembroke:

There's different forms of research now, isn't there?

Alison Senti:

That's right. But sometimes you need to... Things happen organically of their own and sometimes you need to stop and use some research to look into what's going on. A problem that was presented to me when I was working at Customs and Border Protection in the communications team there was around the Border Security television program, which I'm sure lots of people are familiar with and has been around for a very long time now.

David Pembroke:

I was watching it the other night.

Alison Senti:

It still does very, very well on repeat. They still film now, so there's lots of new episodes I guess still coming out, but you still see a lot of episodes repeated. I know it's syndicated around the world, so that shows to its broader appeal. When I was in that team at that time, so this is going back about 10 or 11 years ago, it had been around, I think around eight years and it had obviously exploded in popularity, but also the process by which the show came to be with Channel 7 and the department had just, I guess evolved organically.

There was more volume coming through as in more episodes were being filmed, there was more filming being done, but how we were managing approvals within the department, and I guess the impact it may be having on officers in airports, container examination facilities. We also filmed with other agencies. Those sort of things hadn't really been looked at in detail for a while. And we were getting a few things happening, one was senior management were getting a little concerned perhaps that it was too much for the department to handle in terms of approvals and public scrutiny and some media scrutiny around our relationship with Channel 7 at the time, and I can't speak for now, but there would never been any commercial arrangement between the two, as in payment. There was a contract around the limits of the agency's participation, but that was brought up in the media occasionally that we were paying Channel 7 to do this. Well, that wasn't the case.

Secondly, as I mentioned, there was a bit of pushback starting to happen in some of the Sydney, Melbourne airports around people not liking the attention anymore that they were being featured on this high rating program. So officers were being recognised at their local IGA when they get their milk and it's like, "I saw you arrest that girl," or "take that

guy's laser pointer off him at the airport, good on you," or they would have an opinion. So that's a bit confronting like you're just doing your job and you're being filmed while you're doing it and people are making comment about you at the shops.

Also we hadn't been really been able to demonstrate in any meaningful way the monetary value or the PR value that this show had for our agency. So I was asked to come in and do a review not only of the processes behind the approval of episodes, but to try and pull some evidence together around those other issues that were sort of bubbling away. So very small amount of money, but I did do some formal market research around the perceptions that people had of border processes.

So whether it be in the airport or importing goods through the container examination facility or other situations that were featured on border security. So the public perceptions of those as a result of watching the show. We also did some sort of visits to each of the airports and those other facilities with our own staff and did some research with staff around their concerns. It turns out that we were very pleased to be able to say that the show overwhelmingly was positive. 99% of people were positively disposed to customs and border protection officers, and the job they were trying to do in protecting the country because of the show and because the show had a reach of 1.5 million viewers per episode or something. It was a very, very high rating show, and still is. That was a great outcome. The PR value was the tens of millions per year, now, that is something the department would've never had the budget to spend on itself for public relations purposes, so that was a great outcome also. And then we were able to use some of that data around how much empathy people had with our customs officers for doing their job and that they felt that they respected them more because of it. We were able to do that almost like a mini internal communications campaign back to those staff that were really concerned who were really considering not participating in the filming anymore to say, "Our research is showing that this is actually helping you to do your job. People are more understanding." These are the types of things that they would comply with more if they hadn't... Sorry, that would comply with less if they hadn't watched the show. So that helped us gain support again with our staff to be able to continue doing the show.

And then the other one that was a really big surprise was it was our biggest recruitment tool and we didn't know. So people were like they really wish they could get a job that made them want to work for customs and border protections because of what they had seen on the show. We used that information to be able to target future recruitment campaigns for border offices in the future.

David Pembroke:

So the moral of the story is evidence. Because once you have the evidence, you look at all of the benefits that you're able to generate.

Alison Senti:

And we were able to go back to the senior executive and say, actually, it was really good way to myth bust I guess some of what people were starting to feel. Even though something is successful, so it was still a very successful exercise, but we were just starting to get all these little pockets of grumbling around the edges about different things. And it was really important that we set the record straight to all of those stakeholder groups and say, "You have this concern. We listened. We did this. Here's the evidence. This is what we're going to do about it." That would-

David Pembroke:

Time comes into it again though, doesn't it? And you work in these environments which are very time poor. There's a lot of pressure. Responding to Ministers, things moving. The opportunity is perhaps not as often as it needs to be afforded to people to actually go and spend the time to examine the issue. There's a lot of busy things that have got to get done, so there's always that pressure isn't there.

Alison Senti:

But I think if you believe in... You're right. While I was doing that, I was still running the production of the show from the agency point of view. So I had to do both or else the other part might not exist the next year. So every year or so, I'm not sure what the cycle is now, there would be a review of the agreement between Channel 7. So I thought if we don't get something concrete ahead of the next contract review, this might not exist. I mean you can have your instincts about things, but you've got to be able to back it up.

David Pembroke:

That's great. You must feel very good when you see that still on the TV because it could have died.

Alison Senti:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

Without evidence it could have died.

Alison Senti:

It wasn't going in a good way. It was really great. But it just really reinforced to me that you can't ever... If you let things drag on like that and don't stop and pause and evaluate. I mean even though there wasn't... I mean of course in government programs where money has been committed, evaluation is almost mandatory because we are spending taxpayer's money.

David Pembroke:

Sure.

Alison Senti:

Just because this wasn't done with a funded bucket of money, there was time resources being put into it, so there is still that sort of compulsion to ensure that those resources are being used in a value for money way that benefits taxpayer. So while the actual funding and money stakes weren't massive, the consequences were for the agency because we couldn't replace that with real funding.

David Pembroke:

Now, we could continue to talk and there's another line of change management conversation that we will come back. We'll do it another time in the future because that's another longer conversation. But I'm intrigued where to from here for you? Where's the bowerbird looking now for that next... You just look for the next opportunity. What are your views around public sector, government communication at the moment?

Alison Senti:

Yeah. There's so many people, I mean, obviously your podcast attests to that, there's so many people in government doing amazing communication functions, both whether it be something exciting like a summit or supporting the next big leader level meeting, or we've obviously got things like the Commonwealth Games, the Olympics, and other big events coming up in Australia over the next decade or so.

David Pembroke:

Huge policy continues to roll, doesn't it? Important policies, whether it be net zero, climate change, trade, investment, economy, education. There's always so much. And it is so important that the comms is right.

Alison Senti:

Yeah. And the challenge is there's a worldwide trend in declining in trust in traditional institutions including government. And we've seen that obviously play out a lot, both in Australia but also around the world with big elections coming up overseas. And mis and disinformation is something we really need to consider in every government communication activity now. I think that's probably where my attention has gone to recently. And also I think all government communicators need to factor that into whatever they're doing.

How can we counter things? What is the counter to what we're proposing on behalf of government and how do we help correct that record and what tools do we have in our armoury to do that? And that's not just overseas influences. There's things happening in Australia all the time. We saw that really come to the fore in COVID when people perceive their rights are being impinged on or whatever that everyone... There's a view for everybody and that's not always the one that the government is trying to put forward to the Australian public, and so how do you factor in some of that? So I think potentially that's an issue for all government communicators to look into. And obviously, the Australian Electoral Commission are doing a lot of work in that space or starting to look into that space too. So I think, it's really interesting.

We should be all looking to some of the other agencies that are dealing with this already and how we can incorporate some of those practices into our work.

David Pembroke:

We had a guest from the Australian Electoral Commission not long after the last federal election, and looking at their strategy and the application of their strategy and their plan, it was fascinating and worth actually dialling back if you're interested, go back through GovComms and find that conversation because it was good, really good, lots of insights.

Alison Senti:

I mean, related to that is the whole concept of social cohesion and how... These are all things that government comms people need to be thinking about, but also contributing to them and participating in broadly... Because it will impact what you're trying to do. Whatever it is that you've been charged to deliver will be impacted by these things, and you need to know how your agency would respond. And that's not just you individually, but what other parts of your agency will be involved in helping you respond to that or mitigate that.

David Pembroke:

All right. We might wrap it up there because I can feel I'm about to go down another rabbit hole, whether it's change management, misinformation, disinformation, social cohesion, artificial intelligence. We got through a podcast without even talking about it. So there you go.

Alison Senti:

Next time.

David Pembroke:

But Alison, thanks so much for coming in.

Alison Senti:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

And sharing your wisdom, and knowledge and experience with the audience. Lots of great advice there for people at the various stages of their career. And whatever you do next, it'll be interesting continuing to make that wonderful contribution. And congratulations on a fantastic career so far.

Alison Senti:

Thanks, David. Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke:

And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again. What a wonderful conversation with a very talented, experienced, one of Australia's best. And so a delightful and charming person as well to come and share a bit of her time with us. Now, I do ask every week a rating or a review, come on, it won't take long. Your favourite podcast catcher, a five star review helps the program to be found and if you could do that for us, that would be much appreciated. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another guest from the wonderful world of government communications.

I was on the OECD expert panel conversation the other day, and then we're going to have a few more international guests coming up because it's intriguing that the challenges and opportunities that are here in Australia are the same challenges and opportunities that are being shared in the government communication function around the world. So we'll hear some different stories from different parts of the world over the coming weeks. So I look forward to that. But thanks very much for coming back again. We'll be back, as I said at the same time in a fortnight. My name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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