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**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

EP#172 The unmissable moment of 2024

TRANSCRIPT

# Transcript

Intro:

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, a podcast about the function and practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin today, I'd like to acknowledge 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. I'd also like to pay my respects to all First Nations people who may be listening to this podcast today.

Welcome to our year in review episode. As 2024 draws to a close, we thought it would be the perfect time to look back on some of the highlights of 2024 and some of the best insights, advice, and stories that have been shared by our wonderfully generous guests throughout 2024. And so over the next 20 minutes or so, we'll revisit the highlights from some of the most popular episodes packed with practical tips, thought-provoking ideas, conversations from the leaders in government communication.

But before we jump in, I'd like to extend a big thank you to all of you, whether you've been with us from the beginning back in 2015, or if you've just joined us along the way. Next year we'll mark our 11th year on air. 11th year. Who would've thought when we started out in episode one with Alex Aiken, formerly of the UK government, who would've thought that way back then that we would be closing in on 11 years and over 400 episodes?

The interesting thing is, this is a subject, this is a well that will never run dry. Because as technology continues to change the way the world operates, the world works, the way people communicate, the way we engage, communication is becoming fundamental to the success of government. We know we operate with a massive trust deficit all over the world in public sector organisations. And there's no question that effective communication, effective stakeholder engagement builds trust. It builds confidence in our democratic institutions. And so therefore, we have such a powerful mission, it keeps us on air year, after year, after year.

This year, 2024, we have had audience members from 73 countries joining us across 33 different platforms, and we have featured 22 fantastic guests. They're great statistics, aren't they? 73 countries. How good is that? So wherever you are in the world, thank you so much for joining us. And please, spread the word, because there is so much for us to do and so much that we can learn from each other. And that is the essence of what GovComms is about. It's about learning. It's about picking up that one, two, three little ideas of, "Ah, okay, that might work for me." What we've done with this episode is to curate some of the moments that captured your attention and resonated with us this year. So sit back and relax with the year in review of GovComms.

Our first highlight comes from episode 161 with Stanley Henry. Stanley, the founder and CEO of the Attention Seeker. And he shared some really interesting insights on LinkedIn mastery and connecting audiences by understanding what truly matters to them. Let's listen to his advice on reframing your mindset to enable more powerful storytelling.

Stanley Henry:

Don't think that people care what you have to say is important. And I think if you have that mindset that people don't really care what I have to say, then it's a little bit liberating and free actually, because now you can send back and go, "Okay, if they don't really care about what I have to say, what do they care about? What is it that they want to listen to and what is a story that they want to hear?"

And then you can go out and find out, "Okay, this cohort of people that I want to talk to, what are they listening to? What are they reading? What are they watching? And why do they care and give their attention to that place? What is it about that story that's being told over there that they care about?" And then if you can just swallow your pride and realise that they don't care about you, but they care about this, well, how do I then take my story and interweave it with the things that they do care about? Then how do I hijack where their attention already is?

David Pembroke:

Stanley Henry.

So next we go to a really old friend of mine, and I know she won't mind me saying that we're really old friends. We've been kicking around in this business in the IABC and government communications for many years. But Mardi Stewart from episode 156, well, Mardi is a champion, and she's certainly a senior and much admired and respected leader in the Australian public service communications community, but more broadly across the APS.

And she spoke passionately about the need for resilience and for continuous learning, and for out of your comfort zone to grow professionally. So here's Mardi and her tips for maintaining a passion and growth mindset during your communications career.

Mardi Stewart:

I think it's all about, for me, being 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're 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.

The first thing is always have a learning mindset. 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. That is going to be where you're going to learn the most, probably.

David Pembroke:

So there we have Mardi Stewart from the Department of Social Services in Australia.

So now, let's hear from behavioural scientist Sharon Rosenrauch, who joined us for episode 165. Sharon shared some fascinating findings on how small behavioural interventions can lead to long-term change. Her story about reducing antibiotic prescriptions among GPs highlights the power of behavioural science in public health.

Sharon Rosenrauch:

For me, it was the horrifying truth that behavioural interventions can lead to sustained behavioural change. I appreciate that's a bit wordy, so let me talk you through what that means. Probably one of the most famous behavioural science applied to public policy randomised control trials, experiments, looked at nudging GPs out of overprescribing antibiotics.

So as a country, we had a real issue with antimicrobial resistance due to overprescription of antibiotics, and it was starting to build up a bit of an intolerance to the effect of antibiotics. Huge issue. Huge issue internationally, as well. Thankfully, Europe's getting on top of it. Here in Australia, we were not on top of it. And so, the behavioural economics team had been brought in to develop an intervention. And what they found through their discovery work was that GPs are very influenced by their peers. Very much so, as a profession. And they're very susceptible to something we call "descriptive social norms". So wanting to behave in the way that everyone else does.

Two types of social norms. Injunctive, which is, "I want to behave in line with what I think is the right behaviour." So it's tied up with issues of morality. And then you've got another one, which is the typical sort of herd behaviour that we think about, which is the descriptive social norms. We want to fit in. We want to mimic the behaviour of others around us.

They developed some letters that they sent out to GPs comparing their rates of prescription, not dissimilar to what you get on your energy bill, where it kind of shows how much energy you're using in comparison to other households of similar size. And they did that for the prescribing rate of GPs. They did it for the top-20 percentile. And, anyway, it proved to be very effective. Very effective. There was a dramatic decrease in the rate of antibiotic prescription.

What I wasn't expecting was, at the six-month mark, there was an evaluation that was done to see how much the behaviour had been sustained. And I was expecting minimal sustained behaviour. I thought, to be honest with you, I thought they would default back to 20-odd years of behavioural habits that they developed in over-prescribing.

No. It was almost identical to day one. There was a slight drop-off, which you would expect to see, but the behaviour change was sustained at a remarkable rate. And that's when I remember thinking, "This is very cool. This is actually having an ongoing impact in what Australia looks like."

David Pembroke:

Our next guest is Ruth Dewsbury, a former member of the Australian Public Service and indeed is now working for Contentgroup. So she was so impressed she decided to come and get a job, and is continuing to do a fantastic job. But certainly a very experienced government communicator.

And Ruth discussed the importance of understanding and addressing climate anxiety, especially among younger audiences. Ruth has a long history in environmental and climate communications, and she is certainly a woman worth listening to. Her perspective on tailoring communication to resonate with genuine concerns is crucial in today's very important climate conversation. Here's Ruth's advice to connect with audiences on this critical issue.

Ruth Dewsbury:

Climate change affects everybody in so many different ways and so many policies across government. It also is highly vulnerable to disinformation. It's highly contested. We thought the climate change wars were over, but they're not. And in fact, climate change and the environment are both being weaponised to exploit the dreaded FUD: fear, uncertainty, and dread. So disinformation has just gone wild. And different groups in the community are responding in different ways.

There's huge climate anxiety with young people in particular, with something like 60 to 70% percent of young people think climate change is affecting their mental health. You need to be aware of those sorts of concerns when you're communicating about climate change because their concerns are quite valid. And the last thing you want to do is be dismissive of these worries.

But then the challenge is, well, what do you tell people? How can you help? And really, I just keep coming back. All the work I've done across the various pieces of the portfolio, you come back to stories and you come back to people. And you come back to case studies that show how there is hope, there are things people can do, and there are things people are doing already and now, and you can learn from.

David Pembroke:

Ruth Dewsbury.

In episode 160, Dr. Nathan Borgford-Parnell shared his unique approach to motivating action on climate change by embracing diverse interests. His analogy of a climate-action buffet is both engaging and powerful, and shows how communicators can appeal to people who have different motivations. Let's hear from Dr. Borgford-Parnell.

Dr. Nathan Borgford-Parnell:

The way I frame it, it's like a buffet. I don't care why you are coming to the table to eat, so long as you're willing to accept all of the multiple benefits and impacts of action. If you are coming because you are interested in protecting child welfare and reducing the number of diseases in young adults due to exposure to air pollution, you're welcome at the table. You're going to get that, and you're going to get climate mitigation at the same time, right?

You show up to the buffet and maybe you're coming for the air pollution salad, but maybe you're going to stay for the climate change lobster tails, right? Or you're interested in protecting labour rights, right? Or you want to reduce climate impacts, or you want to improve the resiliency of populations. You get all of those things. Once you start recognising and really working with the concept of this integrated multiple benefits approach and understanding the unique components of all of these co-emitted pollutants, you can bring your own metrics and your own goals and ambitions to the table and deliver on everyone else's at the same time.

David Pembroke:

Dr. Nathan Borgford-Parnell.

Our next piece of advice comes from Strath Gordon, the old dog of the sea of public sector communications in Australia. Strath has held many, many jobs, starting back in the day as a young reporter on the Channel Seven network in Australia, but then went on to a distinguished career with the New South Wales Police, which is the police force for one of Australia's big states.

But he also was able to transition out of there into a job that I'm sure many of you would think would be the absolute best job on earth, as chief of public affairs for the Australian Olympic Committee. Now, he doesn't have that job anymore, but at the time when we spoke to him, that was his role.

Now Strath gave us a great look inside to the unique challenges of Olympic communications and the power of athlete storytelling. Here's Strath on how they use athletes to communicate, not only with all Australians, but with people around the world.

Strath Gordon:

One of the beauties of the Olympic movement is that not everyone knows who these people are before the games. There was always about 60% of the team are debutantes. We want to introduce all of these people, these 460 athletes, to the Australian community, and then really tell their story as we get into the games. Because there will be people emerge from Paris that no one's heard of before who will become household names in a heartbeat.

I've got to tell you, David, it was probably the most challenging thing I've ever done. The year leading from the time the games were postponed in 2020 through to 2021, having to learn and relearn how to do those basic communications functions in a volatile environment. So you have another 50% of the task is added on because it's happening in a COVID world. That was draining. We did have a captive audience back in Australia with large portions of the community in lockdown, and the Olympic Games brought them something special.

It brought them a sense of hope and achievement. And I think that's where we strengthened our connection with the Australian community, because then they saw these athletes and they saw what they are achieving. So I think it's always that thing around communication is you don't communicate with people just when it suits you. You've got to communicate constantly. So I think that if you're like that stakeholder, an internal communication was equally important as what we're telling the community every day of the week leading into the games. Because it was very important that the athletes had that confidence that what they were doing in preparing was going to be worth it.

David Pembroke:

Strath Gordon.

Next up, Jen Muir from episode 159. Now, Jen is the CEO of She Advocates and a very experienced public relations professional. She's also on the board of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. Our discussion looks at artificial intelligence, exploring the challenges, risks, and tensions surrounding its implementation in the government sector.

Jennifer Muir:

It is a bit of a runaway train, as human beings tend to lean into new technology when it first comes about. Mind you, AI is not that new. And we get all excited and then start having very appropriate conversations around control, and management, and all the rest of it. And then we tend to get really comfortable with it and forget the long-term implication. We take our eye off the ball, and that's when most of the impact, negative mostly, happens. And we can only look to social media for that as the current scenario.

The tension, I think, that is going to be alive as that they go about that approach is the speed in which the technology is evolving, that your audiences outside of government are on a high-speed trajectory in its use. And typically, it takes appropriate amounts of time to get all of those regulatory settings and safeguards in place. That timeline is often out of sync with the speed of the thing that you're trying to regulate and control.

So there's going to be a natural tension there. You do need to set aside time to professionally train yourself and your teams in all of these tools. And I would just put a warning on it. As of February last year, my colleagues in the UK, some brilliant leading academics, they counted the number of AI tools that are now connected to our profession and the count is going over 6,000 tools.

David Pembroke:

Jennifer Muir.

Now, our final highlight comes from guest number one, my good friend Alex Aiken, who was the founder of the government communication service in the UK way back in the day, and is now working in communications in the government of the United Arab Emirates. And Alex is someone who has led globally the government communications community for many, many years. And he certainly is a genuine and sincere advocate for the need for everybody who works in communications to always be learning.

Alex shared his perspective on the core principles guiding effective government communication today, and the framework is centred around what he calls the five Vs, which outline the essential elements of modern communications. And doesn't Alex Aiken like a mnemonic and a rubric for people to remember how to plan and execute government communication? Here's Alex Aiken.

Alex Aiken:

Never stop learning. I have the responsibility, the privilege of presenting to the most senior ministers in the UK government, including the Prime Minister. And it's moments like that I'd like every young communicator around the world in public service, but particularly in Australia and the UK. When you get that moment where you're sitting around the table and you've got to advise the chief executive, the prime minister, the cabinet minister, senior officials on a course of action, then that is when all the learning that you've done creates the muscle memory, where the advice that you give is credible, and evidenced, and will lead to action that will improve, enhance, sometimes save people's lives.

Tonight I'm going to a session organised by the Page Society, which is the group for senior communicators. It's at IBM in London, and it's looking at quantum physics and artificial intelligence. So I hope that's evidence that I never stop learning. And another point, David, I mean, thinking about modern communications, I try to express it to people in terms of, look, it's about five Vs.

And this is partly inspired by President Zelenskyy. It is visual. It is video driven. It is always at high volume, and that's the way you should deliver your communications. But it has to be underpinned by a vision of success. What will be different if your policy is successful? And it must demonstrate the values that we hold. And I think that values, vision, volume, visual, and video is a way that I use to try and frame my thinking about modern communications. If it hasn't got a picture, why are we doing it? If it's not consistent with what we are actually doing, why are we saying it? So I hope those are helpful hints and ideas.

David Pembroke:

So there we have it, the wise words of Alex Aiken.

And that brings to an end our year in review. And I do hope you have enjoyed hearing some of those wonderful voices of the people that we shared with you this year. And there will be many, many, many more voices and many, many more stories shared with you in 2025.

Now, I know I ask all the time for ratings or reviews, but there's a reason. And the reason is, it helps us to be found. Now, I know you enjoy the program. People in 73 countries around the world enjoyed our program. So let's make sure that we get more people in more countries telling their stories so we can help to build, indeed, restore trust in democratically-elected governments around the world, because we have the job in front of us. Just like the little boy with the wheelbarrow, the job is indeed in front of us as we are confronted by the challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence, and the ongoing challenges of mis- and disinformation and what that is doing to our information ecosystem.

And indeed, as we saw during the most recent USA election, the podcast election, as many were calling it, or the mobile phone election, and where we're seeing traditional media under siege, their business models under siege by the major social media platforms and how traditional media is struggling to retain its influence, struggling for recognition, struggling to find business models.

So how is it that we as government communicators can understand this evolving information ecosystems? And what are the skills, and the mindsets, and the behaviours, and the standard operating procedures that we can use to more effectively explain policy, program, services, and regulations so people can know and understand trusted, valuable, useful, and relevant information from government, which is delivered to them in the format they want, in the channel that they want, at the time that they want? We have to build trusted information so as that we can make sure that we are doing everything we possibly can to ensure that democratic government remains effective.

So there you go. That is the task, that is the challenge for each and every one of you. And indeed, I do thank you for your ongoing commitment and your interest in government communication, because I couldn't be any more interested in government communication. I find it absolutely fascinating, and I'm sure you do too.

So, indeed, wherever you are in the world, if you would like to be on GovComms, if you would like to feature a campaign that you've done, a project that you're working on, some skills that you've developed, or any sort of thinking that you might have about how to more effectively communicate at a local government, state government, federal or national government level, multilateral level. If you've got a story to tell, please reach out to me at david.pembroke@contentgroup.com.au, or indeed on LinkedIn. You'll find me there.

Just ping me. It would be great to hear from you. And I would really be interested to feature you on the program in the coming weeks, months, and years ahead as we continue to build out this community globally.

So, from all of us here at GovComms, Eliza Baker, who is our very, very fine showrunner who does a lot of the work, and a lot of the social media, and a lot of the running around, a lot of the everything, a big thanks to her for a great year of learning and a great year of delivering valuable information to you, our audience. So we're very grateful to Eliza for all the work that she's done. Now, we'll be back with you in the new year. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Outro:

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