

Adapt or die



By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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"Communicators who are most adaptable, agile and change-ready will survive, as the past is no longer a predictor of future success." So says Ann Andrews Morris, managing director of Association Communication at AAA National in the United States, speaking at the IABC World Conference in New Orleans this week.

The 2016 World Conference theme was "RISE: Innovating global communication". It hosted tracks that highlighted the global rise of communication as a business-crucial part of an organisation. Morris went on to explain that no communication principles have changed, rather people and tools have. "...so you have to be quick to adapt and adopt new technologies and ways of thinking, or get left behind".

Her presentation, alongside many others this year, focused on the growing need for communicators to be more flexible in their profession and willing to take on new ways of doing things more quickly. We work in an interconnected era that is fast moving away from comfortable hierarchy towards a complex interconnected web of relationships.

We have also witnessed the rate of change and response times needed to engage stakeholders, internally and externally. A journalist reminisced back to the days when public relations practitioners would fax him a press release! Today, he picks up news from company tweets. How times have changed. The days became hours and the hours became minutes, "and I expect the company to respond to me, as quickly as I can pick up a story from them," he told me.

Common-sense communication

Morris shared a solid narrative, highlighting the fact that common-sense communication hasn't changed, and it is still human storytelling that gets a communicator's point across. "It's no longer about the products and services we offer. Those, which used to be the focus, are now hygiene factors. It's how we go about telling the story".



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In a 24/7 media cycle, there's no such thing as 'let's wait until tomorrow'. Morris used the analogy of how the world is traveling at 100km/h but most companies travel at 30km/h. "The real question is, 'will they survive?' The answer is probably 'yes', but their reputations won't be the same."

Today, in a large number of instances, customers are leading companies and companies are merely responding to the consumer world instead of setting the agenda and being the drivers and custodians of change and service.

Research done in the United States shows that no fewer than 62% of people use social media to get breaking news. Five years ago they would have used television as their primary source and 10 years ago they would have waited for the morning newspaper.

Today, social media is a business tool used by companies to drive connectivity to multiple audiences on a variety of platforms. The end objective is to increase engagement in an era where “organic content is almost dead, as curated content becomes agenda setting. Companies are losing opportunities to become part of conversations, at a time when most comments are consumer-generated”.

From annual reports to real-time tracking

On the measurement front, Morris noted that the monthly and yearly surveys and reports are all but obsolete, as companies need to track content and brand in real-time, showing care for customers’ voices – it’s an era of the listening architecture. It’s about hearing AND responding to customers in real time to manage medium- to long-term reputation.

Morris suggests communicators should be big on planning, too. “It’s all about the planning. Get the plan right! The rest will fit in”, she says. The reason planning has become so critical? “Trends can change by tomorrow... Stay on top of it and adapt. If you take longer to adapt than consumers, you start losing them. You need to be flexible enough to change in real-time. And you have to be seen to listen, engage, and react”. If you have a plan in place and follow it, you will get the rest right as it’s a case of adapting tools and technologies to strategy.

This type of planning also helps communication professionals be proactive and watch for audience trends; not to mention keeping an eye on competitors and what they’re doing. “You cannot do things the way you’ve always done them. Be nimble and opened minded”, says Morris.

After all, a wise man adapts himself to circumstances as water shapes itself to the vessel that contains it, says the old Chinese proverb.

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MCC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators’ International Executive Board. He has 16 years’ experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

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