

The Communications Evolution: Climb Aboard, or Risk Being Left Behind

By Barri Rafferty, Partner and President, [Ketchum](#)



Among the lessons I took away from the 2016 presidential election – and there were many – was the provocative power of visual communications. We heard and read plenty throughout the campaign, but what we saw may have impacted us even more.

Facial expressions and body language during debates, finger-pointing combatants at campaign rallies, memes and videos that exploded virally. Clearly, the public was hungry for raw, authentic emotion – and they got it.

Many of these visuals were used to stir emotion; some tapped underlying feelings of fear, especially when coupled with fiery criticism. All added to our collective impression of the candidates and ultimately to whom we would choose to lead the future of the country. And with consumers now able to select from a wealth of delivery channels, they can block out diverse points of view – oftentimes limiting dialogue to only those they agree with. That means it is even more important to use both data and content in the right context. If we want to be

heard, we need to find ways to engage and incite reaction amid ongoing conversations.

Imagery has always been central to how humans communicate, and it has played key roles in elections before (see Nixon vs. Kennedy, 1960). But this year was different, and indicative of the ongoing evolution of communications as a whole. As 2016 draws to a close, marketers and other business communicators preparing for 2017 and beyond would do well to reflect on the changing nature of our profession.

The popularity of social media, and advancements in technology and data science are transforming the industry, like it or not. Visual storytelling, short sound bites, influencer marketing and reputation management are the new muscles you need to build.

The future is visual, and short

Once, a practitioner's most important skill was writing. It's still vital – but visual storytelling stands side-by-side with copywriting headline and memorable sound bites as an essential elements of any [marketing](#) or communications campaign. Our discipline regularly features roles that didn't exist a few years ago – Video Content Specialist, Digital Strategist, Data Scientist. These are the experts on the front lines today, putting content in context.

Why is this happening? Because audiences demand it. And we do, too.

Recent studies reveal the average attention span is just eight seconds, but most content is much longer. Our job is to ensure that those first eight seconds grab viewers' attention, and that the next eight seconds convince them to keep watching. If your messages aren't grabbing and engaging instantly, you'll lose the viewers. Maybe, to your competitor.

Short, compelling, visually striking content is driving social

and other forms of storytelling.

Longer-form content remains essential for telling complex stories; but quick engaging hits are what help sell laundry detergent, concert tickets and even philanthropic endeavors.

No form of visual storytelling has more potential than virtual reality (VR), which sits at the intersection of education and entertainment. VR is not just for gamers anymore. Today, it enables realistic and immersive simulations of a 3D environment that are simply breathtaking.

Can you picture the possibilities for brands? We can.

Ketchum recently launched a specialty to create compelling VR content. Imagine exploring a virtual hotel room before you decide where to book. Or ushering fashion bloggers onto a virtual runway during New York Fashion Week. For Clorox Healthcare, we created content that allowed patients to virtually enter a treatment room and watch a 360-degree video of a nurse using new Nasal Antiseptic Swabs on a patient to prevent deadly staph infections.

The star power of influencers

The future isn't shaped only by what you see. Sometimes the best way to tell or show your story is by choosing the right influencer to lend his or her voice.

Influencers shape how people think, behave and purchase. From the days when baseball legend Babe Ruth hawked cigarettes and cereal in the Roaring Twenties, to the participation of YouTube luminaries in product release events today, the famous and the infamous have been central to efforts to influence purchase decisions and incite behavior change. But it's frequently a crap shoot. Brands often pay top dollar to a superstar, hoping his or her endorsement or participation will shine a positive light on their product or cause. It's a time- and battle-tested approach that often works quite well. Or

seems to.

Today, however, organizations are demanding to see tangible ROI beyond media impressions and “likes” to justify the value of influencer programs. Plus, Big Data and advanced analytics have hastened demand for more precise audience targeting; indeed, a hyper-local influencer campaign aimed at Millennials in a 10-mile radius around a new store may be more effective than a broad-brush celebrity ribbon-cutting appearance.

Data science has put a finer edge on how influencer programs are assessed. Will a pricey mega-star generate a greater return than a highly-respected blogger with a small yet passionate following? The answer lies in the data. As a result, companies like our partner Tubular Labs – which tracks global video content across platforms and devices – are growing in importance.

Reputation is made (or lost) in a moment

And just as influencers have the power to help brands take off, the prevalence of citizen journalists means even small missteps can incur big hits to a business.

With social media “reporters” at the epicenter of any event – including crises – corporate reputation teams must be ready for activation, 24/7. The small buffer that once existed for crisis teams in the pre-Internet era is gone; today, the time to react and respond is further condensed.

You can't wait until your initial response is perfectly scrubbed, because the rocket of public opinion has left the launching pad – and is careening through cyberspace, out of your control. When an issue explodes, leadership must act in the moment – or otherwise is assumed to be covering up something, and that furthers speculation and misinformation.

Very few senior management teams are prepared for this new crisis communications paradigm, and fewer still participate in

scenario building or crisis simulations that shape how best to react in these situations. Round-the-clock social listening and tracking tools create awareness, not an action plan.

Beyond issues and crises, corporate reputation now hinges on the new reality that – as my Ketchum colleague, Sean Fitzgerald has described it – “Businesses exist at the will of the people.” Looking at reputation through the lens of all stakeholders must be at the core of any reputation management strategy.

It has been said that there is nothing new under the sun. Maybe. But as technological advancements and consumer preferences continue to evolve, the manner in which we communicate must progress accordingly. And fast.

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