

Communications Issues

Issue 28



A Community Service of Harley House Consultants Inc.

A Conversation with PCO's Christiane Fox

Introduction



Harley House Consultants Inc. is working on a series of articles for *Communications Issues* that explores the current state and future of federal government communications. At the end of January, we sat down with Christiane Fox, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet (Communications and Consultations) to get her perspective.

In the following article, we capture the essence of some of the key points raised during our interview.

Transformation

If there was one word that could be used to summarize our interview, it would be transformation. *"We have done a pretty extensive transformation within the community in the sense that we took a pause and we looked at how we were communicating with stakeholders, Canadians and media outlets and then decided that we needed to improve on how we were reaching them."*

This involved an internal exercise of looking across government departments to identify niches doing great things, why they did it well and how they were doing it. They then looked at other organizations that had a harder time with this transition from traditional communications to a more digital by default model and identified the hurdles that existed.

Engagement

A considerable amount of time was spent discussing how the government engages with stakeholders.

It was noted that one of the most important gaps within the community is understanding the environment that government is operating in. *"We need to improve on how we engage Canadians through various channels."* A positive example is the Syrian Refugee file, where the government has been tracking how aware Canadians are, how they can help, their level of support or where their concerns lie. *"This understanding has really helped us advise the government on how to share information with Canadians on this important Government of Canada initiative."*

It has been the Harley House experience, that it is not just about launching an engagement process, it's about identifying the people you need to reach, the tools you use to reach them, and how you interpret the information collected relative to other ongoing public environmental analysis data such as media monitoring, social media analysis and tracking surveys. How do you bring that all together to paint a clear picture about an issue across the country and over time?

It was acknowledged that engagement needs to become a big part of the community's focus. *"I feel we need to do more work on the engagement side, so that we have two-way engagement, meaningful engagement."*

Research and Evaluation

It was also noted that we Government communicators need to focus their efforts and attention on research and evaluation to a greater extent than we have done in the past.



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To ensure success and measure our results, we need to ask ourselves what worked and why, ensure research is done at the front end and then dedicate time to evaluate our campaigns. “*what worked?, did it change a behavior?, did it change an opinion,? did it increase activity to a website? did it increase enrolment into a program? These are the questions we must ask ourselves to measure our effectiveness.*”

“We really need to understand the environment we are operating in and know how to reach people with the tools that we need to deploy. We need to have better data and research and metrics to form our decisions to be able to have successful campaigns and to be able to evaluate those campaigns from a starting point to a finishing point.”

A big part of what PCO does is intelligence gathering and sharing. “*We go to cabinet committee...we can have a sense of the discussion, we know where it fits. We are sitting in a unique place here in a sense that we know the priorities as a whole and therefore we can talk to people about the best opportunities for them to bring forward their priorities so that they are not overshadowed by other things that are happening in our context.*”

New Media

The transition from traditional communications to a more digital by default model is one of the greatest hurdles facing government communicators. “*A big part is getting our folks to realize that we need to be doing our business differently. And that meant things like we don't have a new media team and a strats comm team anymore because now new media is strats comm. It is about breaking down some of those silos to achieve some of the end results that we wanted to achieve.*”

“What can we be doing more of, so whether it is twitter chats, google hangouts, or live Facebook chats, how can we actually incorporate that into our day to day communications?” We have seen excellent examples of this at Environment Canada, Finance, etc. Using new tools to communicate programs, policies and priority initiatives.

Communications Policy

The work continues on updating the Communications Policy, which will facilitate this transformation. “*We are guided by the communications policy that had not been updated since 2006. We definitely need to update it just because of the rapid change that we are living within the community.*”

In Conclusion

It is not going to be easy getting the communications community from where it was, to where it needs to be. “*It is a shift in behaviour, it is a shift in how we do our jobs on a day to day basis. So for us it has been a big change management exercise to bring our folks to the way they were doing their jobs, even a year and a half ago, to the way they are now expected to do their job today.*”

(Dale Harley is the President of Harley House Consultants Inc. Over the years he has consulted with virtually every federal government department. He has also provided strategic communications advice to many provincial and municipal governments, along with various leading private sector organizations.)

“At Harley House Consultants Inc. we believe that effective communications involves meaningful, constructive and thoughtful engagement with internal and external stakeholders. You have to be strategically positioned to provide timely, complete, honest, open and sincere information about the policies, programs and services of the Government of Canada.”

For more information about how to improve the effectiveness of your consultation and communications strategies,

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