



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 9

Episode 75 – Sam Bleazard, *Inside the world's most famous corner shop*

Transcript

Katie 00:03

The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by AB, the world's first specialist internal comms agency. For nearly 60 years, AB has worked hand-in-hand with internal comms leaders around the world to inform, inspire, and empower their workforces, building great organisations from the inside out. If you'd like to discuss new, effective, exciting ways to connect with your people, please get in touch. Visit abcomm.co.uk. And if you do, I look forward to meeting you. And now on with the show.

Katie 00:50

Welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show to inform, inspire, and generally energise those of us responsible for communicating inside our organisations. My guest today is Sam Bleazard.

Katie 01:10

With more than 20 years' experience in comms largely in employee communication, today, Sam is Employer Brand Content Producer at Fortnum and Mason.

Katie 01:24

Founded in 1707, Fortnum calls itself 'the world's most famous corner shop.' "Everyone remembers their first encounter with us" the Fortnums website says, and indeed it is hard to forget the grandeur of 181 Piccadilly in the heart of London's West End. From its lavish interiors, incredible food halls, and exquisite restaurants and tea rooms, Fortnum holds two royal warrants, meaning it provides groceries and tea to the king. And as Sam explains in this show, the company's history is long, it's impressive and intrinsically woven into the history of the nation.

Katie 02:13

Sam is a passionate storyteller. He's on a mission to find the untold stories of Fortnums. Warm, authentic, human-centric stories that throw fresh light on this iconic institution. He is the host of not one but two podcasts, a freelance music journalist, and has more than a passing interest in the music legend, Prince. But we'll come onto that in due course. In this episode, we talk about how to find and share the best stories, the power of great content to traverse the line between internal and external comms, the role of data and metrics in content creation, and much, much more. So without further ado, I bring you Sam Bleazard. So Sam, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Sam 03:18

Let me say it's a real privilege to be on. I've admired the podcast from afar for quite a while, I'm genuinely delighted to be invited on. So thank you very much, Katie.

Katie 03:28



The first question I have for you really is more about your career in general, as opposed to your current job, although I'm very keen to get into your current job. What drew you to communications initially? Because you've been in comms throughout your career.

Sam 03:45

Yeah, that's true. I was thinking about this, because knowing that we would be talking about a sort of career retrospective overall. In my mind, I think I've always been a writer. So I'm always writing, when I'm not physically writing, you know, people call it content these days. But I think it's writing, its ideas, its imagination. And I think it's about keeping a little bit of the childlike persona inside you alive. There's been a lot written by more articulate people than myself about our ability to maintain our imagination or how we deprogram ourselves as we get older and into adulthood.

Sam 04:26

I've always liked that childlike sense of sort of mischief and imagination and surprise, and all those kinds of things. So, I'd like to think I've tried to sort of cling on to a little bit of that. For me personally, it's been a very liberating thing. As I was sort of trying to understand my life, my childhood, my adolescence, you know, I've always written different things. When I was younger, like a lot of people, I wrote poetry, I experimented with short plays, I had one performed at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. You know, I have written a lot of articles, reviews. And then of course, you know, there are different disciplines in the corporate world where writing is concerned, from strategy, sort of documents and all kinds of different things. But the thing is more broadly, expression that leads to connection is very special as well. I think that's where we are in the modern world. And the other thing I would say to you about my career, I suppose, and communications is that I was sort of drawn, I think, now that I reflect on it, towards the profession of journalism, as a skill and as a discipline, but not as a culture. I would, I would like to make that point, because I found journalism when I got quite close to it, after I did a vocational degree, quite cold and quite dispiriting. And so if I was to summarise, I would probably say my style is compassionate journalism, or journalism with a heart, you know, at least I hope, I hope that's what it is.

Katie 06:01

I'm smiling, I'm beaming. Because that exactly mirrors my own experience. So I feel in a way that I was always going to work with words, and like you experimented with poetry and plays and short stories and, and then obviously, was attracted to journalism – didn't like the culture at all. Didn't like the other journalists who would say out loud, "I'll sell my granny for story." I mean, they really, really would. But I love the idea of, of telling stories and sharing stories. And that– I can't explain it, but there's a moment when you get onto a story, and you can almost sniff it out. And I get so excited by that. I don't know if you know that feeling.

Sam 06:45

Yeah, very much so. In the last few days, I got the same buzz, talking to our maintenance team at Fortnums them to look after the building and repair and deal the invisible unsung work around Piccadilly, I get the same buzz interview and those guys as I would a quote unquote, famous rock star. You know, I have had the privilege of interviewing those people,



it's the same feeling, you know, it's not any different, which is one of the best feelings you can have. You understand that quite clearly.

Katie 07:19

Totally, totally, just for people who want to hone their writing skill, is there any advice you would give people in order to develop their capability and their confidence when it comes to their written communication? Is there a practice you go through? How do you approach your written work?

Sam 07:41

The thing the thing about written work now is that you have less and less words to use just because of the formats and the channels that we have. And so, I'm no different to a lot of people who would describe themselves as writers, I've had those moments, and I'm quite happy to admit it I've been overly flowery, or used far too many words. TikTok is a form of storytelling in its own way. It's just, it's just honed right into the kernel of something. And the kernel of something might be two to three seconds. It's about hooks and headlines, you know, that connects us to the point we were talking about a minute ago, which is the journalistic discipline. The one thing I remember my journalism lecturer saying, to the class that I was in, "what's the point of newspapers?" you know, and we were all in our late teens and early 20s, and everyone eagerly stuck the hands up with a grin, saying "oh you know, it's to educate, to inform, it's to start debate." And, of course, the grisly old lecturer, just laughs and says, "No, it's not as to sell newspapers." You know, it's like, leave your idealism at the door, because that's not what it's about. There's a set of rules, and there's a set of disciplines that get you an outcome. You know, that would be my advice to people is just be your own harshest critic, you know, edit, edit some more, edit, again, experiment, see, see how much you can actually cut out, see what you can express in the fewest words possible. And that's one discipline. I mean, there are lots of things we could talk about, but that's one of the most important things and it's ever more important as time passes more and more so.

Katie 09:29

Try starting in the middle of the story, I think, is what Tolstoy said.

Sam 09:33

He had a point.

Katie 09:34

Yeah. You've had a long and impressive career. And I noticed when I was looking into your background and the roles that you've had, you've really worked across almost all sectors. You've been in government, construction, retail, and I wondered in terms of your career as a whole, have certain personal principles or goals guided your career choices, or has it more been about just seizing the next opportunity?

Sam 10:03

It's a good question, because sometimes you're not always in complete control of your destiny. I would certainly say without naming individual organisations, I've definitely made a conscious choice to say no or not follow up on approaches from certain organisations, for



certain reasons of principle. So I suppose that's a long way of saying there are certain organisations I wouldn't work for.

Sam 10:28

In answer to your question, I've been more deliberate as I've gotten older, in terms of the organisations I've worked for. One thing I was very keen to do, whether you would call it a strategy or not, is I think there was a span of about 15 years or more where I definitely wanted to experience public, private sector, voluntary sector, if, if that came, came about, but also government, I think if you get that broad experience, you know, of different sectors, as you say, different types of companies, and retail and construction, and all these different parts of the economy, I think it allows you to understand, well, in my case the UK culturally, for my kind of 360 point of view, then if you're lucky, global experience follows that as well. As much as I've been strategic, I've also been drawn towards wonderful people. You can't underestimate that because there's companies and then there's people. I must just say, you know, it was a joy to work under Sarah Lazenby at the Cabinet Office, Josh Murray at Laing O'Rourke, and now Alexandra Buxton at Fortnums.

Sam 11:08

And is it something about the audience when it comes to internal comms? Or is it something about the type of roles that the degree of connection you get to business and to strategy that particularly drew you to the internal world?

Sam 11:51

I think it's easier to sort of understand these things with the passing of time. I mean, one of the things I think I've really loved about the years I spent in internal communication is just the ability to influence things at every rung of the organisation, you know, the relationship you can have with the frontline of your organisation, and then, you know, in parallel the relationship you can have with the most senior people in the organisation, if you're lucky enough, and you're privileged enough to get that time. And then you have this wonderful challenge of the Line Management community. Sometimes that can be a bottleneck, sometimes not, you can get varying levels of skill and communication in the middle of the organisation. On occasion, I've been very lucky to work in organisations where there's just an amazing middle tier of Line Management, where people have great communication and presentation skills, and they're very engaging, and they're very motivated. And then other times, it's been incredibly difficult. And that requires a lot of, a lot of really hard work. So yeah, I think that's the thing I like about it. It's just you have very different audiences, just within one organisation.

Katie 13:03

You are one of the few people who have worked inside number 10 Downing Street during your time at the Cabinet Office. What can you tell us? What are you allowed to tell us about what it's like behind that famous black door?

Sam 13:18

I will be really honest and open and transparent about what I can tell you about my own experience. So I worked for the Cabinet Office at 22 Whitehall at the time, was where it was

based. I mean, I was lucky enough to go for a few meetings in number 10 Downing Street, because I'm not sure if this is still the case, but at the time Number 10 was part of the Cabinet Office as a government department. Now I joined the Cabinet Office Communications team two weeks after Gordon Brown took over as prime minister from Tony Blair. It was called the 'managed transition' in inverted commas. And you know, this, obviously, lots has been written about that famous meeting where they had one night dinner was in our pizza restaurant or something like that. I'll let others tell that story. But I was lucky enough to attend a few meetings at Number 10. The thing that you remember is probably the first time you go, you know, that you have, you have a meeting... because obviously it's not, it's not just like having a meeting anywhere else. Before you get to the door, there's also the walk up to the door. Oh, it's funny about the first time I went to Number 10 Downing Street, there was three of us. We walked down Whitehall, walked from the top of Whitehall. At the top of Whitehall, you're fairly relaxed about it, you know, you know who you're going to meet. And then as you get closer to that world famous destination, you know, you get to the security barrier, and then when you go through the security barrier, you go through a series of security procedures, and then you walk up to the door. Now the thing is that years ago, we lived in a time when there wasn't a camera on a tripod perpetually pointed at the door of Number 10, which just runs for 24 hours, I think I think there's pretty much always a camera there. And what you don't anticipate actually, when you start to walk up to the door is the thought that was going through my mind was "don't trip up, don't step on a loose stone, don't have papers showing... you know, don't have anything on show."

Sam 15:27

And then a rather sort of comical kind of conversation started between myself and my two other colleagues at the time about who was going to get to knock on the door. And I must confess, I was quite keen to knock on the door as the other two were. So this, this hilarious conversation was ongoing. Hopefully, that wasn't picked up on any microphone. We got close to the door, and actually, none of us got to knock on the door, because the door just swings open, you're generally expected. And then you're asked to give up your mobile phone at the door. And inside it's— it is true, or certainly it was then, that is a mix of kind of stately home, and a real rabbit warren of offices. It was actually at full capacity, if not slightly overcrowded, at the time I worked in government. And yeah, it's fascinating. I mean, I remember one time I was in the kind of holding area there. And I remember Prime Minister Brown, just walking kind of past me, so five or 10 yards away from me he kind of stopped with a delegation from the Middle East. And he was sort of thanking them for their visit. And there was a you know, things like that, to me were real Forrest Gump moments, I was kind of there in the background. Looked like I'd just been painted. And I think people— I think people that used to, I mean, there were people that that worked in the external comms team, because internal comms and external comms sat together. And they used to go to the number 10 briefings every Monday morning, so I think they probably got pretty blasé about it. I mean, some of the experiences I enjoyed most in Whitehall, I briefly had the responsibility to gather other heads of internal comms across different government departments. So Home Office, Department for the Environment, Rural Affairs, Serious Organised Crime Agency, we'd gather all those internal comms heads, and we would share best practice and discuss ideas. And I used to love doing things like that. So that was



wonderful experience to get from just that pure internal comms discipline. You know, that was something that I really enjoyed.

Katie 17:35

Before we talk about your current role, which I'm keen to get on to, let's just talk about storytelling more generally. We've both shared that moment when we can kind of our spider senses consist of just literally sense when a story is in the making. I read an interview gave I think it was on Rachael Miller's website, actually. And you're quoted as saying, "storytelling is about survival." Can you share with us what you mean by that?

Sam 18:06

No amount of technology (and this is a personal view), but no amount of technology, social media, artificial intelligence, of which a lot is being written about at the moment, will change the fact that we are led by emotional decision making. To give you a very real example from the last 24 hours, if the media is to be believed, like 300,000 plus other people, I tried to get a ticket to see Beyonce in the last sort of 24 or 48 hours. I was rationalising that, I thought to myself, "Why would I want to go and see Beyonce? I don't need to." I think the motivation when I boil it down is because I know it will be an amazing experience for my daughters, and it will be a shared moment. And it could be a kind of treasured memory.

Sam 18:52

So linking all of this, this thing about survival and storytelling back to childhood, from the time before we can speak we're told stories, and that helps us make sense of the world. It helps us understand good and evil, it helps us have an appreciation for danger, life lessons... There are nuances and stories, you know, that that can be almost sort of nonverbal, that continues now. Again, I can only give you my personal perspective on this. We need storytelling in our lives right now. I mean, I think a lot of people are mentally quite exhausted. Fundamentally, I think their frontal lobes are being crushed with that fire hydrant of information, which we all acknowledge is way more than we can cope with. And TikTok is just the latest version of it. And I'm not not knocking TikTok per se, I just think it's our ability to process large volumes of information, you know, we're not programmed for it. So if there's a communications overload, that's why I think storytelling is still so relevant. And it's also why I think audio communication, like podcasts like this, it made a comeback in the pandemic, because I think people needed more of an in depth, considered conversation, you know, they wanted more connection with something, whether that was about taking a podcast on a walk in the fresh air, you know, walk with their dogs, you know, popping out for a coffee or whatever that might be. That's what I mean by survival. It's connected fundamentally to who we are and how we're programmed to understand communication and information and life lessons. But it's also just a much needed thing right now, because otherwise, I think we're just gonna be completely fried and exhausted. I mean, I write about this on LinkedIn from time to time. I'm just kind of trying to sort of partly understand and process the world that I'm living in and experiencing all the time.

Katie 20:57



Let's move on to Fortnum and Mason, founded in 1707, I believe. I think it's fair to say it is an iconic institution, as much as it is a retail destination, it holds two royal warrants, which means you've previously provided goods and groceries to Queen Elizabeth and now obviously the King. There is a story that I discovered about how the company was initially founded when I was researching this episode, which I just love. Do you mind sharing the story of William Fortnum with us?

Sam 21:32

I must say this and this is the disclaimer, we have an archivist called Dr. Andrea Tanner, who is the most wonderful individual. She's the expert on this and actually is a far superior storyteller than I am where Fortnum's is concerned.

Sam 21:46

I'll give it a go. I mean, Fortnum's was founded in 1707. The interesting thing about this is William Fortnum worked in Queen Anne's household, and fresh candles had to be provided to the household every night. But he was an enterprising footman, it was happenstance I believe that there was spare palace candle wax to sell on. So he created a very small sideline, he went into business with his landlord, who's a man called Hugh Mason. That's effectively how the business was born. Although, obviously, there were lots of twists and turns and changes along the way. One of the joys actually, of Fortnum, there are many things that are joyful about Fortnum's, but one of the things I've enjoyed most, and I spent quite a lot of time with Dr. Tanner last year, and I'm hoping to share more stories on this on LinkedIn in the weeks and months ahead, but we captured a lot of Fortnum's Piccadilly history through just talking to Dr. Tanner at length and interviewing.

Sam 22:50

Fortnum's is very known for its iconic hampers, but there's an amazing history in and around Fortnum's and it's part of the history of London too. Yes, Charles Dickens wrote about Fortnum and Mason, we provided beef tea to Florence Nightingale.

Katie 23:06

Oh, wow.

Sam 23:07

We invented the Scotch egg in 1738. We were one of if not the first business to stock Heinz products in the UK. The modern history is quite interesting as well, you know, we have beehives on the roof of 181 Piccadilly, and we sell the honey that's made on the roof on the ground floor. You know, there are so many things I was— I was very tickled by it when I joined, as you would be if you're interested in storytelling, it's just a delight. I mean, the thing about Fortnum and Mason, there are more stories than I can tell myself. So you have to create a network of ambassadors, you know, because much as I'm sure some people do enjoy my posts on LinkedIn, I get sick of reading my own thing. So you know, it's more fun if there's a collective effort and you get lots of lots of different perspectives of what it feels like to experience Fortnum from the inside.

Katie 24:02

Do you deliberately find those other storytellers? I mean, is that part of your remit to actually go out and equip and inform and corral other people to share stories? Is that part of your role?

Sam 24:17

I've made it part of my remit. Yeah, you know, we have wonderful storytellers in the business, and I could name so many people inevitably will be people I've, I would forget if I tried to list them all, but we have all kinds of people who have some amazing very specialist skills. You know, we have Tea Masters and we have masters of the culinary arts. And, you know, some of these titles and the certifications are incredibly difficult to get you know, the standards that people have to reach either in the retail or hospitality profession they're high, and that's a real joy, because some of that stuff is very unique to Fortnum and Mason and who we are. It's not that other organisations don't do it. But we take a particular pride, I suppose, in people achieving those standards.

Katie 25:14

I think people might be surprised, if they're just thinking about that amazing store on Piccadilly, the true scope and scan of the company. Can you give us a sense of that? How many people work for the organisation and actually what it is around the world and the UK?

Sam 25:30

I don't see myself as a spokesperson for the company. So this is very much my personal perspective. That's, that's the disclaimer on that. But I think it is fair to say that Fortnum and Mason to people who don't know or who have a sort of surface knowledge, or they've got the headline, awareness of 181 Piccadilly, with all that incredible history, going back to the early 1700s, it's a bigger, it's a broader, it's a more nuanced business.

Sam 25:58

It's really a mix of retail and hospitality now, because even in and around 181, Piccadilly, for example, on the first floor, you have the parlour, which serves ice cream, tea and coffee, lunch, and has, has its own menu. In fact, sorry, I shouldn't- I should have started on the ground floor. So there's a mezzanine level on the ground floor. We have Field which is the restaurant based on sustainability principles which is wonderful. I was lucky enough to be in the business when Field opened, which is a fantastic moment, and very much true to sort of forums values of sustainability.

Sam 26:37

You also have 45 German Street, which is connected to 181 Piccadilly. I mean, it's, the entrance is on German Street, which is parallel to Piccadilly, which is a wonderful restaurant. Then you have the Royal Exchange at Bank – if you go up the stairs at Bank Underground station, you'll see the Bank of England to the left and straight ahead, you'll see the Royal Exchange. And if you walk between those spectacular columns, you come into a space that was described by the Evening Standard as the most Instagrammable location in London, it's hard to argue with that, it is really spectacular. Fortnum and Mason host their food and drink awards there. Quite a surreal twist is that it actually appeared in a Hollywood movie, which is going to be released this week. Magic Mike 3, of all things. So I haven't seen Magic



Mike 1 or Magic Mike 2. But I was very fortunate to see Magic Mike 3, preview screening last night, because one of the marketing team Helen Brennan very kindly invited me along. But anyway, we digress. And then Terminal 5 Heathrow, airside, there's a similar mix of retail and hospitality on a slightly smaller scale, there's a wonderful team that work there. And then in Hong Kong, again, a mix of retail and hospitality the K11 mall.

Katie 27:58

Now your official job title is Employer Brand Content Producer. And when I read that, I thought well, that's quite an unusual job title, actually, for someone who works in ostensibly internal comms, but we'll we'll fact check that in a little while. In terms of your areas of responsibility, what your role involves, what an average day if there is one looks like, yes, tell us about being an employer brand content producer.

Sam 28:27

The key words there, there are actually employer and, and content. Most of the content, I would say that I produce, or I'm responsible for sort of generating actually ends up in the external environment. I mean, that's that's the really interesting thing for me. And I think that's because when I worked in construction, that's the way my role was starting to evolve. I was doing more than more filming content, on site on projects on all sorts of wonderful projects, like like hospitals, roads, rail, schools, transport infrastructure, and some of that content would end up on YouTube, or it would end up in commercial vids. And so that that kind of idea really interested me that, you know, if a story was powerful enough, or well told enough, or well enough produced, it would, it would also be good enough to be shared in the external environment, you know, and I think why not, you know, I think internal comms spent a period of years where it was trying to bring itself up as a profession to be more credible, and to be as credible as external comms. I mean, let's be honest.

Sam 29:40

You know, don't forget, I mean, part of the reason I think my role evolved and now existed is – this is one of the factors, it's not the only one – but you know, you have to remember that we were in the eye of a sort of recruitment and retention storm last year, and for hospitality, it was particularly awful. So that's been a big challenge. So I can honestly tell you that I was quite deliberate about pulling hospitality stories out into the ether. But you know, not least, because there's just so many amazing people that work in hospitality, front of house back of house, chefs, waiters, just some amazing, amazing people. I think you asked me what a typical day look like as well, really, there's no typical day doing what I do. So yeah, I mean, you know, the best thing I could do is just give you an example.

Sam 29:40

In terms of my current role. The responsibilities are very varied. I mean, you know, LinkedIn is obviously a part of building your employer brand, but it's not the only sort of show in town. You know, I'm interested in the lens through which people see your company and your brand, you know, do they look at Glass Door if they're thinking of joining your company? Do they look for jobs on Indeed? How does Fortnum is presented on careers website? And how does it talk about itself? There are sort of suite of channels, you know, there's an ecosystem. And LinkedIn is one part of it. Two of the main responsibilities are obviously, to think about

that, broadly, you know, what's the employee experience, like in Fortnums? But how do you tell the story in such a way that it will attract potential employees, that will attract the best talent, but also, in a way that builds pride and retains people?

Sam 31:32

So if I'd said yesterday, as an example, first thing in the morning, I would be drafting multiple LinkedIn posts in my mind or editing content I'd taken notes on or, or photos. I would then be gathering information and content for Apprenticeship Week, which we're keen to sort of highlight. Later in the day, I took part in a HR comms team away day, which was actually really interesting. It was all about behavioural insights in the team. And you know, and that's the thing, I should also say, actually, you talked about my roles and responsibilities. I have to work very closely and very collaboratively with HR, and others in the business, but it's specifically HR. And then, yesterday evening, I was invited along to the Magic Mike 3 preview screening. So that was a that was a typical, or untypical Tuesday, I guess, you might say,

Katie 32:29

just for people who are interested in the mechanics of the way that you gather your content. Is it you just with an iPhone, or, or a camera? Or is it a is a bigger team of people? Or does it vary?

Sam 32:44

In terms of the mechanics of gathering it, I prefer, if possible, especially if it's a people story, to meet people face to face. So there's a time commitment to that. There's a sort of immediacy, I think, to storytelling as well, I like stories to kind of be vital and dynamic, I find that if you sit on them for any period of time, it's not that they gather dust, it's just it's just, my own personal feeling is that a little bit of momentum is lost. And it's hard to explain it in much more detail than that.

Sam 33:16

So yeah, I do use the, I use the notes function on my phone quite a lot. I think imagery is very important. I probably, I take way more images than I need to. But that is sort of principle among some photographers, so I've heard, that you take 100 pictures to get one good.

Katie 33:36

Yes.

Sam 33:36

You know, you don't you don't sort of go I've taken two or three that's going to get something wonderful from those two or three, generally, you're you're not so it's about gathering way more content than you need. So that's my personal style. Because I probably discard about 75% of the content that I gather. And that might sound very wasteful. But it's it's a sort of it's a necessary part of the discipline. The problem is possibly that people just sort of see the output. There's a lot of hard work to it, you do have to commit the time to meeting people. And you know, sometimes it's not, it's not actually that easy to meet the people you want to meet either. The different jobs people do at Fortnums are so wildly

varied, that sometimes they're on shift patterns, or sometimes there's only certain times of the week, they work or they work in different locations, and you have to make yourself available for them. It's not the other way around, if that makes sense.

Katie 34:41

It doesn't make sense. And I've said this, I think before on the show, but we have a team of content people and in the old days when we used to all be in the office, I'd want that floor empty because I'd want to make sure that they were with the maintenance guys on London Underground on the night shift under the trains. Experiencing what our frontline audience was experiencing. And I'm just keen to dig into that a little bit more: is it that, is it that when you meet people face to face, you are more likely to get the deeper story, the next level of colour and detail than if you were just to do a cursory you know, teams or call or interview over the phone?

Sam 35:24

Most definitely, I've found more and more, I've interviewed so many different people over the years that I get to a point where there's a sort of structure and a format. So you know, you have a certain number of questions in your mind that you want to ask. And inevitably, I get some of the most fascinating insights I get are outside of the list. You know, they're in an after thought, or they're in a, they're in a throwaway comment, or it's that classic thing, and many people have reflected on this in recent years, it's like, "can I just ask you one more thing?" And then all this stuff tumbles out. And you sort of want to start the interview at that point.

Katie 36:08

Exactly.

Sam 36:08

So hopefully, that won't happen today with you and I, Katie, but, you know, you know, you know, I mean, don't you?

Katie 36:14

I know exactly what you mean. And I think also sometimes, because people don't always realise that they're sitting on a story. I mean, they do the same thing every day. But then they start to describe it to you, you realise that actually, there's something really special hear that they're taking for granted, because they see every day that someone else is just like "you do what?"

Sam 36:36

Yeah, the way I would describe that, actually, I genuinely think a lot of people don't think what they do as a profession is interesting. They just think the interest value is really low. And why would you tell anyone about it? And certainly, why would you share it in the external world? I think when they meet someone who's genuinely interested in talking to them, and who is telling them that what they do is fascinating, or their backstory is just really insightful in some some way or other. I think they sort of started to see themselves in



that experience through slightly fresher eyes. I think that's part of it, you're helping to see people through different eyes rather than their own.

Katie 37:17

You've shared some amazing stories on LinkedIn. But I think what surprised me about reading them is that there's a real richness in terms of the diversity of the people, the cultures that you have showcased in those stories that I think people might not immediately associate with such a traditional sort of heritage brand. Is that a deliberate strategy?

Sam 37:42

I would say so. But I'd probably say, I'm not a fan of the word strategy. I will, I will say that, and that's no reflection on you, because it's a word that's in common use. I've always found the word strategy, very corporate, and very cold. And so I find that hard to apply to the thing that I do. I mean, what I will say to you is that I was delighted on arrival at Fortnums to discover 60 different nationalities. And I've been quite honest about this, I, I sort of made it my personal mission, but also, more broadly the company mission, because I've encouraged a large group of ambassadors inside Fortnums to make it theirs. But you know, how can we shine a light on all these amazing people in their various experiences? Because part of it is about the element of surprise. If people are preconditioned to see an organisation or brand in a certain way, and you shine the light on it, they just weren't aware of, it may not even be that, it changes their expectation. There's a delight in that, because they say, "Oh, it's this and it's that," you know, yes, you're building a more nuanced and interesting version of something that they liked. Anyway, you're giving it another dimension that I think makes people smile. And, you know, it's very sort of heartwarming. So that's good, too.

Katie 39:04

That's definitely what you're doing. I'm curious how you find these stories. And I'm asking that because I think there will be a lot of listeners that would love to adopt a more storytelling approach inside their organisations. But I'm wondering how on earth to start, maybe there isn't a big internal comms team? Maybe it is just them. What advice would you give a listener who's wondering that?

Sam 39:31

Well, there's not a big internal comms team, I can tell you that, it's very small. It's generally you know, two to three people. The answer to your question, though, you have to be really committed to this. I mean, the reason I kind of like my title is you know about Employer Brand or, or storytelling is, in terms of how I see my work, is there's a lot of work involved in gathering stories and there's a big commitment of time. You have to be very comfortable with people at all levels and prepare to be open. And listen with genuine interest and compassion to people's experiences.

Sam 40:06

In terms of advice, I would say from day one, make it your mission to uncover the untold story of your organisation or company, whatever that is for you. To me, it was a, it was a people story, and it was a diversity story. You know, it'll be different for you and your organisation. But what's the untold story? Or what's the what's the big untold story? I mean,

so if someone else joined Fortnums, it would be different to them, you know. It could be the digital transformation story, or it could be the retail story, or it could be the history piece that we talked about. All of those things are relevant and fascinating, too. It's just that two things I've mentioned, were the ones I found particularly compelling, because it felt like that was the lifeblood of the organisation. And that's what people loved about having that special experience, you know, whether or not they're in Hong Kong, or they come into 45 German street at night, or they come into Piccadilly at Christmas time. You know, that doesn't happen without some sort of magical interaction with a person who really believes in what they do and believes in the brand. So and then the thing is, the story is like, a, it's an evolving one. And it's not, from my perspective, it's not anywhere near finished yet. I think those are the broad principles, Katie, it's commitment from day one. It's the commitment of time, you just have to- it has to be a constant in your life. You know, every day, it has to be, to me is something that is on my mind all the time, on a daily basis, pretty much when I open my eyes, maybe not when I close my eyes at night, I like to have a little bit of downtime, before I go to sleep. But most of the time, I'm thinking of the stories and in and around Fortnums.

Katie 41:58

The stories breed stories as well,? Because I'm just wondering, once people have seen the kinds of stories you're telling, does it make it easier than for them to spot their own stories, suggest stories?

Sam 42:12

Three or four stories can tumble out of one, you meet you meet someone in this "Oh, you really need to speak to, you know, person X or person Y or they've been here for 20 years. And they can tell you some amazing stuff about Piccadilly, as was, or Fortnums as was." So I think, yes, that is true. But I think again, I have more stories than I can tell. So the other thing is, well, I think sometimes thematically, when you've covered something, you can't tell 10 stories on that particular thing. You can, but it has to be over time. Because the other thing about storytelling, I think that makes it rich and interesting is variety. People have an appetite for so much of something, but it's variety. It's a bit like you know, it's a bit like food on a plate. You know, the nutritionists always say have lots of colours on the plate. And it's the same with storytelling, really, to me, there are some amazing strands of Fortnum's work. We just talked about the shop floor experience all the time, or we just talked about a restaurant or you know, if we just talked about 181 Piccadilly all the time, it wouldn't be as interesting, because there's so much more to it than that.

Katie 43:32

How important are metrics, the way that these stories perform, in order to inform your decision making? Or do you prefer just going by gut reaction and your nose for story as opposed to actually looking at what has worked, what hasn't worked, and being guided by that?

Sam 43:56

The honest answer is I use a bit of both.

Sam 44:00

I believe in I believe in your gut knowing what's right, and your instinct and I'm led a lot by that. But I honestly I use I use metrics a lot behind the scenes. I mean, I write, part of my, you asked what my responsibilities are, I have to write reports on metrics behind different platforms. And I think a mixture of both is very good, because I think if you're completely data driven, sometimes the stories that have delighted the most only get 30, 40 likes, you know, and for a company account with 1000s of followers, some people would say, "oh, yeah, you know, why would you do that?" But the fact of the matter is, it's a story that surprised and delighted someone and it's part of the rich tapestry. If you will just to repeat a formula where you got hundreds upon hundreds of likes for a particular type of story. That doesn't work anyway to be honest, and sometimes individual's stories because they're so personal to them and use the word authenticity, they drive tremendous amounts of traction engagement around the brand and a way that actually a company account can't, because a company account has a certain responsibility to be the voice of that company to appeal to a very broad audience. So, you know, to be inclusive of all staff, whereas a personal perspective can be quirky or funny, or surprising or mischievous, or in a way that algorithms and platforms like, so I am really interested in data on it, I spend a lot of time looking at it, not to the point that I'm bored. But I think it is really sort of fascinating to see the trends and the the movements behind the scenes, but I don't, it's a long winded way of saying I don't just write stuff for likes. Variety and spread and, and a broad base of content is important. I just think for the health of your organisation, because it's short termism. You're chasing like, you know, the bigger, the bigger prize is better, you know. A long term strategy, where you're telling a really broad story, and really representing all kinds of different perspectives and stories is better.

Katie 44:00

Okay.

Katie 46:25

You said you didn't like the word strategy. And I totally understand why. That said, is there a, and you talked about thematic having themes and that variety, is there any kind of message framework or house or whatever you want to say, that you have to work to, in order to ensure that your stories are supporting a wider business strategy? Or is there quite a— you're given a lot more autonomy than that?

Sam 46:55

Well, I think a lot of people in Fortnums are given autonomy. And that's one of the wonderful things about it, I feel very lucky and very privileged to have the autonomy that I have. And I certainly don't take that for granted. What I would say to your point about themes and a strategy behind it: the best way, the best way to summarise for you would be that I use it as guidance. It's not a hard and fast set of rules. So there are there are things in our, for example, our people strategy, and in our company strategy, which actually are fundamentally about who we are as a business. And that could be everything from, you know, how fundamental our people are to our belief in extraordinary food and drink, and, you know, a digital transformation of the business. It could be about that we're actually a global brand, to your point that some people don't know, but all kinds of roads lead back to



our flagship and a history at Piccadilly. It can be about the way we want to upskill and develop our people...

Sam 48:05

So all of those things are they are, and I use them for guidance. And I am always very conscious not to stray too far away from those big themes. Because they are really important, we have to be faithful to what we've all signed up to, the mission that we're on. I don't kind of nail myself to the, you know, I don't nail myself to a spreadsheet or a hard and fast plan, there has to be flexibility and movement. Because retail is so fast moving, for example, as is hospitality, I found out, that sometimes content evolves or things come out of left field and amazing stories can just land. And if, if you're inflexible to the point where you say, "Well, you know, actually, I can't, I can't move my schedule in any way it's fixed." I just don't think that's going to serve you very well. You have to be quite comfortable with the fast movement, and the fact that everything is kind of changing all around you all the time.

Katie 49:14

You've talked a lot about your content going on external channels. Do you even think about the line between internal and external now or do you think that line has completely blurred and those labels are not even relevant anymore?

Sam 49:31

For me, it's blurred, and for me, it's not relevant. And I don't I don't mean to be flippant about that. It's just that it's been happening for possibly a decade or more, maybe even longer. I mean, I was at I was at one of the simpler communicate events towards the end of last year, and we had a little bit of a sort of roundtable conversation about this and there were lots of internal comms and other comms professionals in the room, and I'm just not sure it's helpful to think of communications in that way anymore. Really, because I would say this, but it's about great content. If you had an amazing piece of content, that's just so compelling that you know, it would be beneficial to share outside of the company, is that internal or external comms content? It's just an amazing story that's been generated by your company. And it happens to work in both environments and, and in different channels.

Sam 50:33

And I think the trend I saw years ago, I think it was a good thing, you know, for internal comms, because I think internal comms finally got the credibility it was looking forward during the pandemic. And we really did have a seat at the table. And hopefully, that's kind of been a turning point, I think I think it has in a way. Prior to that, I noticed that a lot of external comms professionals, media, press, PR people who'd been heads of press and PR, and external comms, were kind of crossing the divide and coming to take over comms teams more broadly, or be the Director of internal comms. And what's fun for me is in a way I'm kind of crossing in the other direction, I just think no, content has always been king and queen. If you're an internal comms professional, I think it's just healthy for your own set of skills and your own career development more broadly. I mean, you know, I make no bones about it. My bread and butter is internal comms. You know, that's where I've learned my trade. That's where my experience and skills are gained. You know, I've spent a large chunk



of my career in internal comms. Yeah, it's just it's not how I see myself now, even though I acknowledged that's where I came from.

Katie 51:53

Yeah, you're a storyteller. First and foremost, it's about the story, it's about the content.

Sam 51:58

I have to say that the pandemic was a really interesting period of time, because I like a lot of people I had, I had time to reflect, time that I would never have had. And I think it may be too grand to say that my own sense of self and purpose because I know a lot of people thought about purpose, what is the purpose and a lot of people started businesses, left careers, did other things. I don't know if it was as fundamental as that for me, but I just looked at a lot of the things I was doing, or the sort of things that when I was at my best, people would sort of say, like, you know, when I was in flow or, you know, when I was really doing stuff well, it was all about telling stories, and that kind of storytelling content. And so I suppose I just focused much more sharply and much more keenly on that. So when I was emerging out of the pandemic, I sort of thought, if I really kind of held myself to account and looked in the mirror and say, well, that's probably the thing, you know, that I'm either known for, or the thing that one of the things I liked doing most, and so that sharpened my sense of that, you know?

Katie 53:17

Let's talk about Comm from the Shed, your podcast, just one of your podcasts. We'll come on to that in a minute. What was the reason for starting that show?

Sam 53:27

I've been quite sort of honest about this. But I had a career move that didn't work out. You know, I moved, I was in the construction district for about six or seven years. And I got an amazing offer to join an organisation and for whatever reason, it didn't work out. And I think part of the reason it didn't work out was that the thing that we talked about earlier, which was this the lack of contact with people, on face time, with people. I found the job to be incredibly difficult to do, fortunately, and actually set up an office in my shed at home, you know, at the bottom of the garden. Some people when they're being grand they call them someone knows this, but I think we all know that, we all know that they're sheds. Mine has a carpet and a stand up desk and a fridge and all kinds of things, but it's still it's still a shed, as nice as it is.

Sam 54:21

And I was kind of feeling a bit kind of well crestfallen, I think, to say the least, but quite quite quite wounded until I was thinking about how I was going to dust myself down. And like a lot of people I started writing kind of blogs about just the experience of the pandemic about you know, screen fatigue, about home schooling, about going for walks, just for kind of sanity and well being and anyway, there's a quite interesting kind of strand of something started to develop and you know, this great conversation started around it and I wanted to learn a new skill as well. I've always been interested in radio and podcasts and audio and music as well. So I just learned a bit of sound editing. And I say a bit of, I mean, it was really

difficult. Doing it from the ground up was tough, especially when you get to a certain age, but I thought, you know, challenge yourself, one of our previous bosses had been into that it had been, it's sort of challenging me to, like, you know, walk the walk in terms of being able to do the things that we should be able to do as communicators. And so I learned the whole process from the ground up. I mean, obviously, I knew a bit about the journalistic disciplines about researching people and interviews and, but there's a lot involved in it that you know, from the very first point of contact or research on an individual to the as, you know, the recording, the editing, the promoting... but, you know, it was a challenge I enjoyed, and it's been probably one of the most fulfilling and life affirming things I've ever done. I mean, I don't I don't get paid to podcast, but I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from doing it. It's been a wonderful journey. And I've interviewed some wonderful people along the way, and I'm sure you really enjoy it too.

Katie 56:21

Absolutely. Now Comms from the Shed is not your only podcast, as I mentioned earlier. Perhaps one of the lesser known facts about you, Sam, I'm not sure if this is true, but it was news to me is your love of Prince. I'm going to admit that I was 15 when Purple Rain was released. I really am that old. But I do remember its impact because I don't think we'd seen or heard anything like Prince before. But you tell me why, first of all, why are you such a fan?

Sam 56:55

When I first heard Prince's music, and lots of people say that the music you hear and your child is in your adolescence is the music that sticks with you. So I'm not railing against that. I acknowledge that's a thing. And it's true. I was between primary and secondary school. And the first time I heard Prince, it was probably the song 1999 or let's go crazy. And I have this memory of being a really young kid and hearing let's go crazy. And it was very intense and kind of manic as a pop song, you know, I mean, I don't know if people know it but it starts almost like Prince's preaching from a pulpit to the sound of a Hammond organ. And it ends with you know, the blistering kind of Jimi Hendrix style guitar solo and there's lots of sort of manic energy in the song anyway, it's like a drum machine. And I remember seeing the video as a kid, and there's some very angsty kind of home situation that is dramatised, and you know, you don't know if that's Prince's life, or it's drama. And, and yeah, it was it was just very of the 80s.

Sam 58:04

You know, I think people forget now, but Prince was really a dangerous kind of individual. He was a very rebellious figure at that time. I mean, like all kinds of artists, eventually they become more mainstream. And then there's, they have a legacy of work that everyone reflects on. But at the time you know, it was not quite 'lock up your daughters.' I mean, there are lots of rebellious things and lots of controversial things happened in the 80s. You know, whether it was Frankie Goes to Hollywood, we were worried about the threat of nuclear war or AIDS or, you know, there was an intensity and an angst to the 80s but Prince kind of seemed to be leading the way, you know, he seemed to be out there on some sort of science fiction plain. I mean, when I saw the video to 1999, as I honestly thought the guy was from another planet or something, you know, like, it's like a sort of science fiction character. We had just found it compelling. And I just loved the music as well. I just thought the music was

really imaginative and interesting, just didn't sound like anything else. You know, he had that. He had that amazing period, like the Beatles had in the 60s. And like Stevie Wonder had in the 70s, with a run of albums, and singles, that were just so musically interesting and diverse, each one became more and more challenging. And eventually that run comes to an end. But I had that moment with Prince that people had with artists like the Beatles and Stevie Wonder.

Katie 59:34

But then to go on and produce your show 'How can you just leave me standing?' It's an excellent show. I listened to your three part interview with Beverly Knight and I just thought that was absolutely fabulous. Tell me about that show. It must be such good fun to do.

Sam 59:53

Oh, it's amazing. It's amazing. And it's a thing. It's hard. It's incredibly hard work. In the aftermath of Prince's death, as time has gone on, it's actually it gets a gets increasingly hard to get people to talk for various reasons. And I don't know if that's about legality or, Prince's affairs are run by a thing called the Prince's estate now, I don't know if there are restrictions on who can and who can't talk, but it no it's a wonderful thing.

Sam 1:00:19

I think I was able to do it because I had a, I had a sideline and a side hustle in music journalism. Again, I used to do it just to get tickets for gigs, or I just did it because I enjoyed it just to let off steam. It was just another outlet of writing, you know, we were talking about different forms of writing. So I got to work during the day, whatever I worked on, I'll just stay up really late at night writing music reviews or at the weekend and I was really lucky I got I got some quite interesting assignments to interview. Various semi famous and more famous musicians over the years and so I'd establish the few music industry, music, PR type contacts, I was on various lists.

Sam 1:01:04

And the reason the show happened, it was sort of serendipity. I was doing the Comms from the Shed podcast and I was developing this skill in audio. There was a chap who played the bass for Prince and Prince and the Revolution, Mark Brown. He had a book out, called Inside the Purple Kingdom that I was contacted to do a review of it, I think my review went in Reader's Digest and a couple of other publications or websites, but I kind of approached Mark Brown's people, and I was delighted he said yes. And actually, when I spoke to him, I was incredibly nervous, because you know, apart from just how fascinated I was that he was there when Prince wasn't a star and then became a big star. And he'd been on that journey with him. I was worried about just the technical aspects of it, you know, with the recording work, would the internet be okay. But anyway, they said to me, it would be a limited time that I would have to talk to him, but he actually spoke to me for about an hour and a half, like way more and way more content than I could use. So I actually was fortunate that I had a sort of two or three part podcast. And the other thing that was good about it from a launch point of view was he was very candid. He didn't deify Prince, he'd actually had quite challenging experiences working with Prince because he was a very demanding person. He was a workaholic. And he had as far as I understand it ridiculously high standards and very



few people could meet his own very high standards. As Mark was very interesting. And very open and honest.

Sam 1:02:45

Beverly Knight, funnily enough, she's she's such a lovely person. She's one of the least starry people you could ever meet. But I actually first saw Beverly Knight at a Prince concert. So I was aware that she was a big fan. I mean, I saw if at some point in the 90s, Prince did a sort of after hours getting in a place called the Cafe du Paris, Beverly Knight was in the balcony, just a massive fan, you know, she was really freaking out is the expression. She's, you know, she certainly wasn't behaving like the rest of the VIPs. And I thought, wow, there's Beverly. Knight, you know, she's a great singer and amazing artist in her own right, she's completely awestruck. I was actually trying to interview her for quite a long time. And eventually, she had time in her schedule. I won't share the stories on this podcast, but as you know, she tells some quite unbelievable stories which are mind blowing, you know?

Katie 1:03:44

Sam, I'm conscious of time. Do you Have time for these quickfire questions?

Sam 1:03:48

Yeah, sure. Yeah, sure. yeah, come on, let's do it.

Katie 1:03:51

What trait or characteristic do you possess that above all others has most led to your career success?

Sam 1:03:59

I'm very passionate about what I do. I love communication. And I'm very enthusiastic. And I think ultimately, I'm a very positive person. It's not that I don't have my cynical and negative moments. Believe me, I do, I can be I can be the dauer Scotsman. But yeah, I just, I'm just completely committed to it and I really passionately love what I do. And that's that makes a big difference.

Katie 1:04:23

How would you complete this statement? World class, employer brand content is:

Sam 1:04:31

Oh, that's a very difficult question. I would say 100% authentic and genuine.

Katie 1:04:39

What is the best Prince track of all time?

Sam 1:04:44

He's trying to give me a heart attack.

Katie 1:04:46

We're gonna play out with it if I can get the rights, the permissions to do that. So...

Sam 1:04:51

That has to be a whole podcast in itself. Maybe I'll get you on 'How can you just leave me standing.' That's the kind of what day of the week is it question for me. I'm not going to describe this as the best Prince track of all time. But one of the tracks that I don't know why it has a very kind of deep meaning for me, it's called 'Old friends for sale.' for many, many years, it's an unreleased track. And actually, there's a demo of this track. And he wrote about feeling very let down by people he was close to or people that he allowed to be close to him who are in his inner circle, the original version of it is, is the most stunning thing.

Katie 1:05:31

Finally, then we give you a billboard, and you can put on that a message for millions to see anything you'd like. What are you going to put on your billboard?

Sam 1:05:42

Oh, yeah, well, that's a good one, I think. Well, one of the most memorable things in my life. One of the most memorable pieces of writing in my life, is a poem called Desiderata by a poet called Max Ehrmann. It begins with the words "go placidly amid the noise and the haste. And remember what peace there may be in silence." And I absolutely love that, it was in my family home, just behind the front door, in a place where people used to see it when they they came to see me and some more friends have said in subsequent years that they remember Desiderata or sections from it. And actually, it's now just behind the front door of the house I live in with my wife and two daughters. It's a beautiful piece if you get the chance to read it and it just seems more relevant now than ever.

Katie 1:06:33

Sam, this has been absolutely amazing. Thank you so much for your time.

Sam 1:06:40

It's been great fun, honestly. I really really enjoyed it.

Katie 1:06:45

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and a transcript of today's episode, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcasts. My thanks to Sam, our producer John Philip, sound engineer Stuart Rolls, and my wonderful colleagues at AB for keeping this show on the road. And finally, my thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast.

Katie 1:07:18

Do like and subscribe. We Have some amazing guests lined up for you in this season. So until we meet again, stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.

Katie 1:07:34

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast was brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like to get a short email from me never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communication? This might



be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences and campaigns that have caught my eye during the week.

Katie 1:08:02

I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news, so you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed. Hopefully a little bit more uplifted as you end your week. Now this is a subscriber only email, which was initially intended just for colleagues and clients. I don't post this content anywhere else. So you do need to sign up. But that is super easy. Simply go to abcomm.co.uk/Friday and you just need to pop in your email address. It is equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a whirl, that sign up page again: abcomm.co.uk/Friday. And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I look forward to being in touch.