



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 11

Episode 99 – *The communicator's communicator*

Katie 00:04

Welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show dedicated to informing, inspiring and generally energising those of us responsible for crafting communication inside organisations. Sitting in my podcast hot seat this week is Linda Zebian, the first ever Director of Communications at a public relations management platform Muck Rack, where she is responsible for setting strategy for both internal and external comms. Before joining Muck Rack, Linda spent a decade at The New York Times where she held various key comms positions, helping to transform The Times from an ad supported print newspaper to what it is today, a top global digital media news brand, with one of the most successful digital subscription businesses in the world.

Katie 01:04

Her expertise and dedication has not gone unnoticed. She's been named a woman to watch by PR Week, and a top woman in PR for leadership by Reagan Communications. Now we cover a lot of ground in this conversation. Linda gives us a behind the scenes look at her decade at the New York Times, we discuss the challenges of communicating with such a diverse workforce there, and the particular challenges and opportunities of creating internal comms for an audience of journalists. We discussed how Linda tackles information overload and Muck Rack, the importance of brevity and plain language and the innovative ways that Muck Rack keeps its remote team engaged and connected. I also asked Linda to share her thoughts on the state of journalism today, and the role of a free press in a democratic society. We even touch on crisis communication, and Linda explains the delicate but vital balance between speed and accuracy. Linda's passion, insight and experience really does make this both a fun and informative conversation. So without further ado, I bring you Linda Zebian. Linda, welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Linda 02:33

Thank you, Katie. I'm so excited to be here.

Katie 02:36

Why don't we start near the beginning, Linda, can you tell us about Navy, your grandmother and the influence that she had on you growing up?

Linda 02:45

I would love to NiFi is my maternal grandmother. She is originally from Lebanon and emigrated to Canada at a young age and she was and still is unable to read or write in any language. They did not provide schooling for girls in the 1930s in Lebanon. So she came to Canada and actually met her husband, an American, via her teacher who would write love letters back and forth with him. And she would tell her what to write, and she would write the letters. Yeah, so storytelling became a thing with us. She was very much a part of my raising. And so because she couldn't read or write, she would tell stories. Tell the stories her mother told her she would pass them on to us and they were like these twists on fairy tales you've never heard of. But I think that the beauty of it is that the power of storytelling is the great equaliser right? Stories can reach everyone in all corners. No one is left out. No one feels they meant they're not smart enough to get it, all ages, all walks of life. It equalises all of us to come to the same understanding or feeling. Yeah.

Katie 03:59

What does she think of the work that you do? I'd love to know. Does she understand exactly what your job is?

Linda 04:05

No. And nor does that have to do with her inability to read or write, I think my own family doesn't understand what I do, right? That's like the running joke and communications. What do you do all day? Some people think I'm a journalist. I've gotten that one a lot. I think PR and comms is hard for folks outside of business to understand. But she's incredibly proud of me just generally. It's a blessing she's still with us and still as tough as she's always been, so fantastic.

Katie 04:38

While I was researching this show, I discovered your early passion for creative writing. I'm just wondering, is that still a passion of yours?

Linda 04:48

Yes, absolutely. I do a lot of writing in my day to day work. And when I have had some time I do dabble in creative writing a little poetry, I've written a children's book that I'm working to get illustrated actually at the moment so I can, I don't know do something with it. Everyone I read it to thinks it's delightful. And it is delightful. It's a story I actually created in my mind when I was drying dishes when I was about 13 or 14 years old. And I brought it back to life in my adulthood. My mother reminded me of the story, she said, it was brilliant, and you should just put pen to paper. So I did. So yeah, I try. I do try to take some time to write every now and then and keep those creative juices flowing.

Katie 05:36



Any advice for those of us who stare at a blank page and just think, why will the words not come?

Linda 05:43

Yeah, well, I think you know, my experience that comes from putting pressure on ourselves, right, to have some kind of final version for an external audience besides yourself, from the get. My process starts just with a brain dump, which we all try to do. It doesn't even have to be coherent. Forget the punctuation. Just write the words that come to your mind. And you're gonna give it a hard edit at least three or four more times. The thing is, don't leave it to the last minute, if you know your process is a little lengthy. And in that vein of we're too hard on ourselves, the really the most engaging copy is plain language, that is brief. So we don't have to expand ourselves to such a degree and use complicated words and complicated language to make whoever you're writing for whether it be yourself or another person, to make them sound like super smarter than they are... if you're writing for an executive they're an executive for a reason, but for that executive to connect to their audience, they need to use plain language. I would say, in cases where creativity is needed or useful, like a speech, remarks, again, it goes back to that storytelling, right? That equalising medium of storytelling will create colour and vibrancy to your writing if you use stories and I say combine with data, right, so the art of storytelling combined with the tangibility of data, engages your audience and also leaves them with something to take away that's rooted in science and rooted in numbers that is tangible.

Katie 07:26

I've had a guest on the show, Steve Crescenzo, who trains communicators and how to write more effectively and his advice, which I've never forgotten is he tells people over and over again, 'use your weekend words'. And I think that's such a great way of explaining we don't need the jargon, the terminology, the acronyms or the technical terms.

Katie 07:47

We've got to talk about your current role, because you are the first Head of Communication at Muck Rack. But before we do, I'd love to ask you about your 10 years at the New York Times. There is an obvious question, as I say that, and I'm going to ask you the obvious one, how tricky is it to craft communication for an audience of journalists?

Linda 08:11

Yeah, it's a really good question. And the thing is, you're not just communicating to journalists, you are communicating to journalists, you're communicating to business people, you're communicating to technical engineers, you're communicating to folks who work on the printing presses.



Katie 08:27

Yes, yeah.

Linda 08:28

So talk about diversity of perspective and experience, right? So I think it definitely comes down to, again, that plain language and then diversifying the medium to visual learners, audio learners. How do you get your messages across just these audiences? So using video, using live events, when to use email versus a messaging system like Slack. How do you build an intranet? An intranet, I know is like a taboo word. But they are useful when you have a workforce like that. How do you build an intranet that that has hierarchy and editorial judgement to help people know what the most important thing is that they need know at that moment?

Linda 09:10

So I think each had their use case and folks got used to looking to certain channels for certain messages. I don't know that we were successful, ultimately, while I was there, because it was really hard to unite a workforce of that kind of nature. We did end up doing a daily email, because there was so much happening at the New York Times, a daily morning email would go out of all the things that were going on that people need to know. And the employee base really responded well to that.

Katie 09:41

How important do you think is that predictability, I suppose? Everyone knows a certain time every day, I'm gonna get something that's probably a similar length, its objective is clear. It covers these things. Is that familiarity really key? I'm guessing it must be.

Linda 09:59

Yes I believe that it is. And then because if you talk about attention spans and workloads and information overload, that predictability is that comfort. It goes back to how children are on a schedule in their classrooms, and how teachers keep children organised and comfortable. They have the same schedule every day and to set an expectation and to meet that expectation on a regular cadence is so essential, because people are busy, they're in a meeting, they miss the email, but they still know what's there. So when they do have a moment, they'll go back and say, I know that I'm caught up, because I know that my internal communications team is gonna set me up to be informed about what's going on. And I've actually translated that some of that work over to Muck Rack, which we could talk about as well.

Katie 10:47



Of course, many of your employees at the New York Times, they will have been high profile, influential comms people in her own right with their own audiences, and so on. Did that shape your approach to internal communication?

Linda 11:00

Certainly. It's interesting to communicate to what 14, 1500 journalists right? The New York Times tended to be a rather leaky organisation. Obviously, if you've got some juicy things happening in your business, and half of your employees are journalists, of course, it's going to leak, right. And so that was something really interesting that we had to deal with, because it's a public company. And financial information, for example, cannot be shared with employees, because it's basically like you're sharing it with the press. So that was a really interesting challenge that we had there. But on the flip side of that, like like you said, a lot of our journalists are celebrities or celebrities. So they're they have this giant audience and giant platform to share good positive news with so that you give them the tools to share positive news and information on their socials was like an obvious no brainer for us. And so how do you do that? You equip them with really easily cut and paste-able copy, or announcements and things like that, and not all the same, right? You give them a bunch of options, and you say, you can make this your own. But here's a baseline of what we're doing. It's designed to help you get that LinkedIn post up easy. And the beauty of it is that your employees are your advocates and to not use them as a channel, you're really leaving a communication channel on the table by not using your employees as advocates. Of course, they it's also a risk because employees have platforms and audiences and they can certainly air grievances. And that's a whole nother kind of crisis thing.

Katie 12:38

Yeah, my experience of working with journalists over the years is they can be a fairly cynical bunch. I don't think any journalist would be upset by me saying that. They're they're questioning... how was it internally culturally? Did that ever cause a problem? Did you have to have very frank, open discussions, otherwise, they weren't happy? I'm just curious.

Linda 13:02

I think that they, for the most part, understood, certainly, unless they were a media reporter covering the Times organisation, that's like, where the difference is. I think that there was just an understanding of what was going to be shared widely and what was not going to be shared widely. And we never really had like too big of an issue. Of course, some things just got, the cat got let out of the bag early, or when leaks would happen. And then as a communications team, you have to figure out how you're going to respond in the moment. But for the most part, it was a harmonious relationship. I mean, it's their job to pull on threads, right? Like they find a little loose thread, they're gonna pull on it until, and they'll pull til it unravels. That's their job. And I think that there's just so much respect for their



ability to investigate and the power of independent journalism, that it just was the way it was.

Katie 13:59

Yeah, no, that makes perfect sense. Over those 10 years, you helped transform the Times from what was essentially an ad supported print newspaper, to what became a top global digital news brand, with this hugely successful digital subscription business as well. I'm just wondering, when you reflect on that achievement, and the building of this compelling, successful news platform, are there any transferable lessons that might apply to our internal channels?

Linda 14:34

Yeah, I think 100% absolutely. I would say news judgement, and that hierarchy of information. So as an internal communicator, your job is to figure out what information is the most important, who needs to know it, when they need to know it, and what channel you're going to deliver it on. It's just like putting out a daily news report. Okay, I think that's something that definitely is transferable.

Linda 15:05

And then also like the idea of humanising communication. So the New York Times kind of went through this when I was there. And I think the rise of fake news and the distrust in media that's been rumbling in all corners. They realised it's not just enough, really that we are this storied news organisation that most people believe is the newspaper of record or whatever you want to call it. We have to show folks how the news is made and who's making the news. So if you go to the Times now you'll see so and so reporter reporting from Washington reporting from Cabo reporting from Mexico City, wherever it is, with the face. Everybody has headshots now so it's like that humanising and not just this big... you think of this big tall skyscraper talking at you, right?

Linda 16:01

So I think that you got internal comms and I get it if you're working for a large enterprise matrix enterprise organisation, it may make sense to be sending emails out from you know, ACME Corp company mail, right? Okay. Like and yeah, okay, here's an update to our health insurance. But if you're sending something from the C suite, because everybody knows where the messages are really coming from especially if they're contentious, I think as internal communicators, our job is to advise those C suites to live in the discomfort of sending uncomfortable messages with your name and face and signature on them. And it's our job to push them into that discomfort of leadership. And I think a lot of people may go into internal comms and not necessarily think about it that way. But I think humanising



communications, whether positive or negative, is something I definitely learned while at the Times and I try to push leaders to put themselves out there in that way.

Katie 17:05

I completely agree. I understand why emails come from the internal comms team, for example, some sort of bland, faceless email. But I do think even within the internal comms team maybe putting your name to something would just get more engagement and traction, and connection.

Linda 17:28

Exactly. They want to know who's putting that note together. When we send out our weekly internal comms email. I send it. I'm the head of comms. They should know that this is my thinking, and I'm responsible for what's in there. They should be able to reach out to me with feedback, all of those things. It's building connection. And when you build connection, you build trust, understanding, support, empathy, relationships, which is what you're really trying to do as an internal comms person.

Katie 17:56

Yeah.

Katie 17:59

This episode is brought to you by my IC Masterclass. This is an on-demand, self paced learning journey for internal comms professionals looking to turbocharge their career. It draws on my 30 years of experience, and includes many insights from the wonderful guests that I've had on this show. The IC Masterclass launches later this summer, but you can sign up today to get updates on the launch and exclusive early bird discounts. Simply visit icmasterclass.com. This is a comprehensive programme, eight work streams, more than six hours of content, all designed to give you confidence, capability and inspiration. Register your interest today. That website again, icmasterclass.com.

Katie 19:02

Let's talk about Muck Rack where you are at the moment. I am going to guess that quite a few listeners will recognise the name. But just in case they don't. Can you just give us an overview of your typical services and customers?

Linda 19:15

Yeah. So at Muck Rack, we try to help our customers build trust, tell stories and show the value of earned media. We do this through communications management software platform that has a media database, pitching tool, media monitoring, reporting on media efforts and brand sentiment to protect your brand reputation. And then efficiency and



collaboration tools you can work with your team. Some of our customers – we work with more than 5000 companies all over the world, ranging from big organisations like Google and Pfizer to agencies like Golan, etc etc. Yeah.

Katie 19:59

Wow your internal audience, describe them for us and any specific challenges that you might face in engaging the workforce at Muck Rack.

Linda 20:09

Yeah, so Muck Rack has been remote work friendly since its onset in 2009, we are turning 15 this year. We had offices in Soho, New York, before I joined the company, and then after COVID, because we had this like flexible 'come in if you want, don't come in if you don't want', we were hiring people outside of the city and stuff. Our leader, our CEO, Greg Gallant said, "you know what, let's just work remotely forever." Right. And he started this pledge, more than 75 companies have signed it, to never force their employees back into an office, the 'work remotely forever pledge'.

Linda 20:48

And so we are obviously one of those companies. So the remote work poses a challenge for communicators. Certainly, of course it does. But there are ways to ensure that folks are aware of what's going on, that they feel connected to leadership, that they feel connected to the mission, to the work. And when you have a workforce all over the world too, working in different time zones, again, that's a challenge.

Linda 21:17

I mentioned this earlier, when I came to Muck Rack, I took an analysis of what was going on in terms of internal communication. And the biggest challenge was just like information overload and where to go for information. Oh, we were like a 200 ish person company. We've grown a bit since then. So like a mid sized company. And so what I did was I took my lessons from the Times, and I proposed a weekly email newsletter of all the things that you need to know this week. And that way, folks who just missed Slack messages – we're a very Slack heavy organisation – could feel like they could go back to this email or look to this email. And how Muck Week is organised is it starts with action items, here's the things you need to do now. And it moves through a wins section. So here are the things that happened this week that we're celebrating. And then it closes with a longer stuff to share section. Because we are obviously a SaaS software as a service, we sell software. So we've a very large go to market team. We have a lot of folks managing customers talking with prospects and customers all the time. So what do folks need to know about? What are cool things they can share? So you've got product updates, you've got any press coverage that Muck Rack's got, and that's great to share. Any social media love, one woman said that she's in a



relationship with Muck Rack... like that's a great, that's something that's great to share, right? Why not? So how would they know about it otherwise, if they didn't read Muck Week? And then we offer a what we're reading section. So like the industry news that we think you should read that week, a good read for the week, right? And then what's coming on our content calendar, we have any events coming up if we have interesting blogs, and content coming up, and then maybe something fun, if there's something fun to share, like a photo of an event or an employee event or something that folks can just have fun with.

Linda 23:21

What it is not, it is not something that includes information for a subset of employees. It's not, we're doing a baking challenge, come join the baking challenge, it is not those things. If you want to do a baking challenge, you can find that information. And when we know that. It is information that you need to know that applies to the vast majority of employees. So that's been extremely successful. It has a 90% open rate. And it stayed very consistent for about a year and a half and people love it. That's been really successful.

Linda 23:58

And then we also launched brown bags. So we do virtual brown bags, and you don't have to bring a brown bag or you don't have to eat anything. We first had our CEO go around to every department and do brown bags with the department. It's small group access to the CEO – again, you don't see the CEO walking in the hallways or in the cafeteria or in the elevator. You got to create those intentional moments virtually. So he went to every department and met with them. They could submit a question in advance if they were not comfortable going off mute and asking, they could ask a live question, we did icebreakers... it humanises the CEO, and it helps him understand the teams. They talk about grievances, challenges, questions, being open like that is so effective and we found that from company surveys that we decided to break it down by function. So now you got like the marketing team. We have so many questions from marketing, but we never have access to you. How can we... you know. We had the marketing team do it, the product team do it etc. And even more so... project level. We are launching this big thing. I don't know I'm hearing about it. I don't know enough about it. You may have talked about it in the all hands. But it was a five minute presentation, I have so many questions. "Hey, we're having a brown bag with this project team, so you can find out all about it." And these kinds of interactive discussions are super useful when it takes way too long to write a Slack message or an email to find out these kinds of things. It's just not dynamic enough. So that's what we've created.

Katie 25:31

A couple of follow up questions to that because it sounds brilliant, I'm just thinking about the culture, a couple of things spring to mind where I can imagine some clients over the years would worry about that quite loose agenda, because there'd be a tumbleweed moment.

And no one's asking questions. But I think you've answered this already. Because you said you could submit a question in advance, which means you don't necessarily have to be the first one to put your hand up, there's already been a question that someone can get their teeth into. But I'm just wondering about the culture and how you make it okay, just to have that very open interaction with the CEO.

Linda 26:11

Great question. So what we do is I meet as the Head of Internal Comms with every team lead before every brown bag. And what we do is we talk about, who's going to be the MC of the event, what the icebreaker is going to be. This is how you introduce Greg, our CEO. And why gather information? What are your priorities for the year? What are tricky questions that might come up and who might ask a tricky question? And what might they ask? Right? And then I present it to Greg, and make sure that he goes in prepared and he has a minute to be like, Okay, this tricky question, how likely is it to come up? What's a good response for it? How do I handle something like this? And it's not just me, he's got lots of people. We've got lots of people that we work together to ensure that and not even just that, make sure he knows how to answer it. If it's a little bit distant from his universe, right? You want to equip your leadership with the information they need to know. And then we do ask folks to submit questions in advance. And we also sometimes ask our leaders to ask a certain person on their team to maybe launch the conversation like, hey, like, you guys, so many great questions of me, I would love for you to ask that same question of our leadership or whatever. And it gets the ball rolling, it breaks those walls down those fear walls down. So... and frankly, they went really well. Listen, like tricky questions are going to come up. And instead of acting like, I'm this untouchable ivory tower leader, you can't ask me those questions, create forums of respect and comfort that go both ways. So that we can just get the tricky questions out. And listen, they may not get the answer they want. But at least you're addressing it and giving them a forum to ask you. Absolutely.

Katie 28:09

And you want the tricky questions out in the open, the last thing you want is the tricky question being asked of somebody really doesn't know the answer around the virtual water cooler, where it's not even going to be addressed properly. So I'm gonna guess you're going to say that Greg was absolutely up for this and wanted to do it. But how would you convince the CEO who says, Look at my diary, look at my schedule, I haven't possibly got time for something like this. Is there an argument that you can make to say no, actually, this is really valuable, you're gonna get something from it as well?

Linda 28:39

Yeah, I think it comes down to, again, internal comms is one of those things where it doesn't necessarily have a direct line to the bottom line. It's about convincing leaders to understand

how important it is to have strong communication with your team. So if they care about talent, and work culture, then they will care about this. You may get someone who really doesn't want to do it. And I'm gonna say if you have someone who's not willing to do that, you probably don't have much of a healthy internal communication function at your company, probably right? Because these are the kinds of things are table stakes for good internal communication. So, you know, if you care about talent, you'll invest in your internal comms, including something like a brown bag. And again, if you don't want to take live questions, say, we're going to prioritise questions submitted in advance. Yes. And then everybody will submit their question in advance, and they may have a follow up. I think taking the time to prepare for tricky question is essential. And the other thing is as communicators, we have to remember that just because someone's in a leadership C suite leadership position doesn't mean that they are good at handling hard conversations. And so in the same way that you would media train someone who was going out to publicly represent the company, that person needs to be trained to speak internally in a way that connects with your audience, connects with your employees, is genuine, and is open minded.

Katie 30:20

Yeah, so important. You moved from a very established business, I think the New York Times was established in 1951. And here you are a very young, fast moving, very dynamic company. How was that transition? Did it impact your thinking and approach?

Linda 30:39

I don't think I was ready. I took me a while to learn, I think I'm still learning. I'd say the things that are not the same between a place like the Times and a place like Muck Rack is obviously the Times was a public company, and we're a private company. The Times was very leaky walls, versus so much transparency here. I'm like, shouldn't we put that this is confidential and for internal use only, I can't believe y'all are putting this out there. These are you're putting revenue or whatever it is numbers out there. And everybody knows! And sometimes folks who they're like Linda, it's okay. No one's gonna leak this to the press. And so that was a big one when like, just the formality of the Times and a little bit of informality at Muck Rack, and then speed, which you mentioned, as we are growing very fast. We're definitely moving more towards a less startup, more, you know, your standard business. But certainly when I started, I think there was just so much latitude to create and build and have ideas, and so many holes or wanting holes, like holes that are just like, I need to be filled. I mean, we need policies, we need standards in place. And so there was a lot of things that you I could do to help having had the experience of working in an established business for so long. And so that was lovely, because it did feel very creative, in terms of things that are the same: information overload. Yeah, it's a universal problem. So that came right over with me, people working in silos also. You can't, especially because we're remote, that's a huge threat. And that people don't read, don't read. And so those are the things that I noticed from an



internal comms perspective that were the same. So that means brief, very brief messaging resonated there and definitely resonates here.

Katie 32:36

The silos thing is interesting, because silos, I'm thinking might be slightly easier to break down in a physical environment, because you can look at physically where people are sitting, and whether they're sitting together, create breakout rooms, and all sorts of things to encourage that collaboration and connection. How do you do it, though, when you're not physically together in the same building? Is it back to what you said before about having sort of intentional initiatives to break down silos?

Linda 33:07

Yeah it is. I know, nobody wants to be in any more meetings than they already are. But I do think it's those meetings, even virtually, that create connections. And then also the another thing that we do is, because we don't have an office, we are very intentional about in person events together and bringing us together in person. The company sent the entire team to Mexico last December, and a lot of people have met for the first time, they've ever met their boss in real life. Maybe that's someone in Arizona, you've got someone in London they've never met. And then each team also does off site. And then you've got cross functional off site. So just because we don't have a physical office doesn't mean we don't ever meet and I think those off sites, you know, especially in cross functional sense, where you've got say, marketing, sales, customer success, leadership all coming together a few times a year to talk those, it makes the in person experience so valuable and so productive. Yeah. So productive. I would say if you're remote team, you're not paying for an office. So invest in your... our CEO always says that, he says invest in your remote work culture, the way you would an office. You get the coffee, you get the furniture, you get the you get all the things you need to make people comfortable and want to be in the office. Do the same with your virtual experience. That means sending people to one central location where you can get face time and talk about the most important pressing things, and also get to know each other and have a little fun. Yes, those the bonds that are created in those environments are essential to working well together.

Katie 34:51

Just touching on the first challenge you mentioned there, which is information overload. You talked about the importance of brevity and we've talked about the importance of plain language. Is there anything else around this that's helping with that information overload?

Linda 35:05

I think hierarchy of information, and to be in the ability to say this is what is important. Because if you're an employee, and you're not really tapped into the strategy of the

company, or what leadership was talking about, you don't know. So it's organisation of the information matters as well. Using your editorial judgement, that kind of inverse triangle kind of thinking, like a journalist is really helpful too.

Katie 35:34

Just a slightly broader overarching meta question here. I read a statistic recently that 80 countries around the world, that's more than half of the world's population, are holding elections this year. I've always thought and I'm not the only person to think this, obviously, that professional, independent journalism is an absolute, foundational building block of all democracies. Given your experience at the New York Times. And now at Muck Rack. I'd be fascinated to hear your take, your analysis on the state of journalism today.

Linda 36:08

Today at this moment, I would say the state is sad. And I'm sad for the state of it. I think that we as a people need to protect journalists and freedom of the press so much, and I don't know that the average person understands the role of a free press in a free society. And I think that starts with like news literacy and education. How journalism is made. So on a personal level, I do this by trying to show folks in my communities, my friends, family, etc. What wouldn't we know if it weren't for journalists? So I always use the same example. I said, we wouldn't know about Watergate. We wouldn't know about Me Too. We wouldn't know about the local kids soccer game. How are you going to know about things in your community, everything from your community to the global scale if it's not for journalists? Influencers cannot do this work. Influencers aren't held to a higher standard. Instead of being so obsessed with your influencer obsession, be so obsessed with a journalist. And I actually spoke on a panel to journalists with journalists about how to become an influencer using social in a way that is, of course, standards and things like that. But how to create influence as a journalist, or just build audiences, on the platforms where people are looking for information. Because the blind between what is and what isn't opinion, and what is a reported truth on the ground story is so insanely blurred. And I also think, and I also try to tell folks too, that you can get your news that you want to hear and that aligned to your belief, all day, every day on social media, by watching your cable network, whatever it is, but the challenge is getting people to read independent news that challenges their beliefs, doesn't agree with what they want to hear. And I think that is the source of some of this distrust in media. I don't want to hear it, therefore I'm going to call it false. And that is really concerning. And I'll add to that, just getting people to pay for quality, independent news. And just holding ourselves to the highest independent standard for news creators and stop trying to lean left or right or wherever to accommodate the paying audience. If I'm a cable network, and I'm starting to create this audience of people who have certain beliefs, then my news starts to change whether you believe it or not, to keep those people coming, because the truth is that these news organisations need funding, and they need audience,



so they're coming up with these kind of funky tactics to keep people loyal to their brands. If everyone paid for independent news, the way we used to go the newsstand and give a quarter, I think we'd have a more impartial press and more folks reading a diverse number of outlets to broaden their view.

Katie 39:27

And can we just say at this point, because I have a subscription to The New York Times, it is peanuts cost wise for so much quality content. So that's my little plug for the NYT.

Linda 39:43

What's so funny if you're familiar with David Carr, there's like this famous clip of him at South by Southwest when HuffPo was the biggest thing and HuffPo got all the ad dollars and the Buzzfeeds were coming up, and he held up a printout of HuffPost homepage and he'd had a bunch of holes cut out and he said, This is HuffPo without everybody else doing the reporting. Half that was an aggregator. And if you don't want to pay for news, and you just want to go to HuffPo, and get your free news, HuffPo is not going to have any news to share. And I think that's still true. That's still true, except for HuffPo's. Now being replaced by Instagram, and Tiktok, whatever.

Katie 40:27

And with that lack of quality input in terms of data and information and insight and perspective. Of course, then the public debate just degenerates as well and you've got a situation where the blind leads the blind. I suppose one thought that I've had is, obviously New York Times subscription based, you've talked about the SaaS model for Muck Rack. Do you have anything internally at Muck Rack for your employees that subscription based? Because I've often wondered with internal comms, we send to all or we send to the target audiences. But might we gradually get to a stage where we offer up a selection of different channels with different content for different interests? I suppose in a way your Slack channels probably cover that often that do they?

Linda 41:12

Yes, we have special interests Slack channels and groups for people to engage with other employees, other colleagues who have similar interests. Pet, music, pets is the most popular one, let's just be real... caretakers, if you're a caretaker, which is a beautiful channel to be a part of, and there's a lot of non caretakers in that channel. So I think those are ways that we build connections for not being in an office, and we have an amazing culture and events team that sit in our people organisation that create bonding experiences that are like just wonderful. Weekly yoga, weekly meditation. We just did a chopped challenge. I couldn't believe I got picked to do it. They sent us five ingredients, five contestants, everybody had to make something, you had, you know, upload it, everybody voted. It was adorable. You



know, these kinds of fun things, again, to bring people together in a creative way. And there are people who are experts like this gal Katie on our team, this is her bread and butter. All day She thinks about creative ways to bring us together culturally, and it's— her work is fascinating. What a fun job, A, but also like, how creative right? You know.

Katie 42:30

So clever.

Linda 42:31

Yeah, we have a skincare channel now. Yeah. All the folks sharing tips for skincare. Come on now, that's wonderful.

Katie 42:42

That's fantastic. Sign me up. Might be too late for me. Before we had those quick fire questions, I'm just wondering, you mentioned earlier on, we've all seen a few crises in our career. You're sort of top tips to your fellow comms professionals on dealing successfully with a crisis. What would you say?

Linda 43:02

Yes. So I love to talk about crisis. I created a checklist called the five As of crisis. You can download it, it's free on the blog, just saying, shameless plug. Okay, I have two pieces, I believe it's the pre prepared for crisis, what to do in case of a crisis. And don't say in case of what to do, because you will have a crisis actually, is more the vibe. And then it's here's the checklist of what to do when a crisis occurs. But thinking very specifically, the best piece of advice I have, is to balance speed with accuracy is very, a very difficult thing to do. Time is your enemy in a crisis because it starts to bubble. And if you don't say anything, it gets worse. However, if you get it wrong, it's worse than not saying anything, right time is your enemy. Everybody wants to respond as soon as possible. But there's this fact finding stage that you have to go through to make sure you know everything before you say something. It's a balance of being quick versus being right. I think it comes down to, ironically, just communication. So even when you don't have the facts, this concept of a holding statement or an acknowledgement, which is one of the five steps to to address a crisis, to hold people over and keep the hysteria down. The acknowledgement of, we know this is happening. We're not again sitting in an office somewhere acting like it's not happening. We know what's happening. We're working to find out what happened. And we'll get back to you. That's all folks need. External crisis. internal crisis, whatever it is, do not let time pass by. A weekend a night where people, I mean, I think the funny thing is, we all text each other we're employees, we work together, we're colleagues, we're texting, you know, if a crisis is going off, people are texting, they're not using company slack and email to talk about it. They're texting on the side. You got to calm those nerves, control the gossip, put the statement out



there, we're aware, I'm going to figure it out. And then when you figure it out, then you come back and say, here's what happened. Whether or not you need to apologise, and show empathy for what happened. And here's the solve, or here's what we're going to do to get to a solve. Right. So again, don't say anything without having all the information because having to backtrack. That's a reputation dinger, you don't want to backtrack. But saying nothing at all is actually worse than having a backdrop.

Katie 46:00

I can imagine. This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday Update. Would you like 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 communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. 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 uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber only content, which was initially intended just for AB 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, we just need your email address. And it's equally easy to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a go, that sign up page again, abcomm.co.uk/Friday. And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

Katie 47:40

Let's use these last few minutes of the hour that we have together to ask you these quick fire questions if that's okay. What skill or personal characteristic has most led to your career success?

Linda 47:53

I want to say trying to live every day without ego as much as possible. And that helps me not take things personally at work. There's a great book called The Four Agreements. It's a relationship book, one of the Four Agreements is to not take things personally, it leads to more empathy. And really, those things really do help in business. And not everyone has those skills. But I think it's certainly helpful.

Katie 48:20

Is that just about separating in your mind yourself from your work? Is that sort of creating some sort of air gap?

Linda 48:26

Myself from the work and myself from other human beings who are flawed and going through their own stuff,



Katie 48:33

Right.

Linda 48:33

So instead of taking things personally, which I haven't always done, by the way, I think I was on the extreme end of this. And I was taking things personally. And then I started really looking into this concept and doing some self work. And I freed myself from the pressure I was putting on myself from people and from the business. I don't own the business I work for. This is not my company. And frankly, if I mess up, I'm a human being. And I'm just not going to... and even if someone else doesn't see you as a human being, you can love yourself enough to say, I'm a human being and I can make a mistake. Where you try to live without ego you just have a lighter ease to going about facing challenges that are absolutely going to come in your life and work.

Katie 49:24

Thank you for that, Linda. What books should all comms professionals read?

Linda 49:30

You're not going to be surprised, Smart Brevity. By Axios co-founders Jim VandeHei, and Mike Allen and Roy Schwartz. I live by that book. Frankly, I live by that book before it was a book. But I think for someone to put it in writing is really useful.

Katie 49:50

I can imagine that all links as ever, listeners, in the show notes to this and particularly the five A article as well, which I yeah, I'm going to be fascinated to have a look at. What piece of bad advice or unhelpful thinking do you think has consistently dogged the comms profession?

Linda 50:08

I think that comms is just media relations and pitching prep. Yes. Is the worst one. It's like, that's such a I don't even barely do that anymore. So, I think it's so much more strategic and critical to business success.

Katie 50:26

Yeah. And you could say the same of internal comms when it's the sort of the post man or woman, it was just sending stuff out, pressing the send button.

Linda 50:35

They were updating the health insurance, you know, or the office is closed for, you know.



Katie 50:41

We've got bagels on the menu.

Linda 50:43

Yeah, like, Give me a break.

Katie 50:45

Yeah, yeah. So much more. And finally, as we do for every guest, at the end of the show, we give you a billboard, a bit of a metaphorical billboard for millions to see. And you can put on that billboard any message you like. What are you going to put on your billboard, Linda?

Linda 51:02

Okay, so the message for the billboard, "what you just wrote could probably be cut in half and have the same impact."

Katie 51:11

Love it.

Linda 51:12

That's my billboard,

Katie 51:13

Make it shorter.

Linda 51:15

"Make it shorter" would be a way to cut what I just said in half and have the same impact, you win the conversation!

Katie 51:24

Oh, no, I love it. I love it. That's fantastic. This has been a great conversation. Linda, thank you so much for your time and your wisdom.

Linda 51:32

Thank you. It's been so fun to talk about these topics with you today. Thank you.

Katie 51:40

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. All the links you need for this show, including a full transcript can be found on AB's website, head over to abcomm.co.uk/podcast. You'll also find that our entire back catalogue of nearly 100



episodes. If you did enjoy this episode, I have a small favour to ask. Please could you like or rate the show on your favourite podcast platform that just gives the algorithms a little nudge makes it easier for your fellow comms professionals to find our show. Coming up, we have senior in house internal comms practitioners at some very well known and successful organisations, including the Head of Internal Comms at Reddit, the senior director responsible for corporate comms at Iron Mountain, and until recently, the Global Head of internal comms at Spotify. So you may want to hit that subscribe button today. My thanks to Linda, my producer John, sound engineer Stuart, Content Manager Madi, designer Rob and the rest of the fabulous team at AB who keep the show on the road. And finally, my heartfelt thanks to you for choosing The Internal Comms Podcast. This show would be nothing without you. Please continue to get in touch via LinkedIn and Twitter. I love hearing from you. And a special thanks to those who are posting their favourite episodes on LinkedIn for their own community to find, that is a very special endorsement. Thank you very much. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well. And remember, it's what's inside that counts.