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Communications, career, and industry: The journey and the lessons

Tonie Chaltas★

Hill+Knowlton Strategies, Toronto (Canada)

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ABSTRACT

Remarks by Tonie Chaltas, COO, Hill+Knowlton Strategies Canada, delivered on Saturday, June 13, 2015 at the Summer Gala Dinner of the Master of Communications Management program, which is offered in partnership between McMaster and Syracuse Universities.

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Alumni, faculty, students, and graduates, it is an honour to speak to you this evening. My instructions for tonight were twofold. Alex¹ asked me to speak about my own journey as well as where the communications profession is headed. So let's begin with the least interesting of the two topics – my own journey, with some of the lessons I've learned along the way peppered into it.

Reflecting, I realized that my journey, like many, can be encapsulated in John Lennon's quote, which accurately declares that "life happens when you're busy making other plans."

There are two major life-defining moments in my journey. First, there was my time working on a tall ship, where I witnessed discrimination for the first time, defining me in many ways but most powerfully as a staunch supporter

1. When Ms. Chaltas gave this speech, Alex Sévigny, PhD, APR, was director of the Master of Communications Management Program, offered in partnership between the Universities of Syracuse and McMaster.

★ Corresponding author (Tonie Chaltas)

Email: tonie.chaltas@hkstrategies.ca

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of women and women's causes. The second was politics, which set me on a career path that's led to twenty-five years in the communications business.

On the ship, it took me a while to realize what was happening. This was during my days in university, so I really hadn't experienced anything like this before. Some days, the discrimination was subtle. Other days, it wasn't. But it was the reality and something we all navigated in our own ways. Working through these challenges, I figured out that it was okay to challenge some conventions, but not just for the sake of it. I learned that fairness isn't always enough and that arguments needed to be rooted in logic—not simply articulated with passion and conviction. I learned that heritage and tradition can still be honoured while challenging the status quo.

Having said all that, my time on the ship was the experience of a lifetime. It taught me early on what team work was really about and what can be achieved together. It taught me how to tune out the noise and focus on what really mattered. It taught me to choose my battles, one of the most important life lessons of all: save your energy, your credibility and capital for the battles that matter most—then fight hard.

Realizing it only in hindsight, I spent the next 30 years championing causes, groups, and programs that support women.

I was a founding member of a political group that became a powerful source for fundraising and candidate recruitment. I was also a founding member of Women Against Multiple Sclerosis, joined Verity—a women's club in Toronto where I was a founding chair of a business group—sat on the YWCA Women of Distinction Dinner Committee for several years, supported women candidates and elected officials, and was an executive member of the Toronto Chapter of the International Women's Forum. I am also currently sitting on the Women's College Hospital Foundation Board of Directors.

What I learned was that it wasn't just about the importance of giving back—don't get me wrong, that is very important—but also the importance of delivering. And building a reputation as someone who could be counted on to deliver opened a lot of doors and forged many relationships.

And then there was the second moment. A car accident. It was minor as far as car accidents go, but I needed something to do temporarily while I recovered. So I turned to a familiar place: politics. Although I'd lost touch with the Ontario political scene after leaving both the province and Canada, I grew up in Tory politics.

I called my riding president and volunteered. That turned into a paid position—one that I never intended to keep long-term. Because I had a career plan, and it didn't involve politics. That said, I found politics to be a refresh-

ing equalizer, free from discrimination. It was about dedication, hard work, passion in a common belief system, and comradery.

Seven years and a few elections later, I left to join the agency world. And as I reflect on that time, I have two lessons and one revelation to share.

The first lesson is that connections matter. Politics taught me about the power of a network; working in the corporate world reinforced how critical it is to diversify, maintain, and grow your network. Why? Because you will never face a world of 'sameness;' you need different perspectives, communities, and points of view. I learned how to leverage my network: you stay in touch, ask for help, share information, and lend support when someone else reaches out for help.

And the second lesson is also a revelation: have a point of view and share it. Although my voice was always welcome in politics, I failed to use it in the early years. I watched others step up, share points of view on issues that had nothing to do with their expertise or even their own roles—and I restricted my comments to the things I was responsible for. I was young. I was intimidated. I assumed that if I did a really great job—my job—that I would grow and rise in the ranks. But others grew faster and went farther. I certainly was recognized for being good at what I did, but I realized that the 'seat at the table' was reserved for those who had a broader perspective and therefore added more value.

There is a lot of noise in politics; everyone's an expert on everything and nothing. However, those with a well-considered, well-articulated point of view were heard, recognized, promoted, and respected.

I saw that play out in business, too, where there are generally three kinds of people: those who like to hear themselves speak, those who paraphrase and offer nothing new, and those who advance the thinking of the group.

This means there are a lot of opportunities for you. You won't always be right (sometimes you may in fact be very wrong!), but you'll be practicing a skill that's critical to your success: developing your point of view. How to think through it, articulate it, figure out when and where to share it, and how to tailor it to your audience so it adds value.

I used to think my career was going to take the shape of a triangle; starting out at the bottom of the triangle, I'd learn a little bit about a lot of things and eventually make my way to the top of the triangle, where I'd know a lot about only a few things and be a subject matter expert. Sitting at the boardroom table, I figured out that it's actually more like an hourglass.

Hitting the top of the triangle simply allows you to take the next step. It's no longer good enough just to be a subject matter expert in one area. You

have to widen your perspective again. You will be asked to provide comment or insight into a wide variety of topics—in many of which you may not have any experience. You will need a holistic view of the situation, and your point of view should be informed by your both your experience and expertise. And that point of view also needs to be strongly articulated, well-considered, and balanced.

Since an important part of performance assessments is one's contribution to the overall success of the business, you will be judged by the impact you have at the table. And you will be compared to your peers. So find your hourglass. And be nimble when the time comes.

That shape-shifting, from triangle to hourglass, essentially reflects where the communications industry is as well.

We don't need to be subject matter experts only anymore. We need to be business people and understand issues in that broader business context. We need to be able to tie communications objectives to business objectives and strategy. We need to take advantage of new opportunities—those “shiny, bright objects”—but only where they advance both communications and business objectives. It has now become essential to put communications through a business lens like never before.

So how does this translate into what we do and how we do it?

Measurement continues to be important, but what we're measuring needs to change. KPIs (key performance indicators) are tied to business objectives such as customer and employee retention, sales, market-entry presence, and net promoter scores—not impressions, ad equivalencies, clicks, views, or the size of a community. And this is where communicators struggle. But our world has changed, and to be successful in communications, we need to change, too. We need to understand what story financial statements and stock market trends tell us as well as how to tell that story to a wide range of audiences. At the end of the day, we need to be at the table as a peer, which means we need to talk their language and understand business.

So don't shy away from business discussions. Ask questions (How does this fit into the business strategy? What are the business implications of success and failure? How does this impact shareholder value?). Make a business case for your proposals. Write a business plan for your unit and tie it to company objectives. Articulate the value of communications in a way that a CEO can understand.

Communicators have a very real impact on the company, so everything we do needs to be inextricably linked to the business strategy, overall objectives, and direction.

I mentioned “bright, shiny objects.” They're something we see a lot of in this business. Now, I'm not diminishing their value, but communicators sometimes get caught up and overly involved in them, forgetting that they're a means to an end. A tactic. And not even always the best one!

Social media is a great example of this. Everyone jumped on the bandwagon and had to have every channel, every platform. Even though they weren't quite sure what to do with it all. Ultimately, of course, it was a seismic shift, because it truly transformed how we communicated and how brands and companies engaged with people.

It took a while to unravel and find focus, though. We eventually figured out the community management piece. And in many ways, we now see community management as a commodity business, reminiscent of media monitoring—which has long been a PR staple in the measurement toolbox. It's easy to acquire for a relatively small investment.

What's the big takeaway with social media? There's an increased need for transparency and collaboration. Companies and their leaders need to be strong communicators. The good news is that the value of communications and communicators has increased as a result.

The next “big thing” hitting public relations right now is content marketing. Content obviously isn't new—news releases, blogs, a speech and even a tweet is content and falls into this “content marketing” bucket. But now it's about how that content is being delivered, consumed, and shared.

At H+K, we're investing heavily in content marketing, but we're doing it in a way that connects the insight, content, and audience to specific and measureable business objectives. It's more than just good old-fashioned copy. It's videos, GIFs, graphics, stories. It's micro-targeted to speak to specific audiences. It has a cadence. But it's always tied to the strategy. And let's be honest: in two or three years, this too will be table steaks, and we'll be onto the next big thing.

For us, another important question is the “what.” What is the role for communications? We believe the answer is engagement. As communicators, we can own this because we understand relationships. Driving higher engagement with audiences through communications changes behaviour, informs beliefs, creates buy-in, adjusts relationships, and—when we get it right—ultimately creates trust.

When we think about communications and how it has evolved, consider a scale that starts with one-way dissemination, designed to inform. Then we started consulting to seek input until we reached a higher level of engagement, which involves collaboration and deeper engagement. And at the end

of the scale, there's co-creation with a truly joint outcome.

This natural evolution of engagement offers new relationships to be formed and maintained with audiences—think employees, customers, partners, suppliers, regulators, and other stakeholder groups. It ties them to you and what you're trying to achieve in a more meaningful way. Through co-creation, they have a stake in the success of your project, brand, or business. This process allows for a deeper understanding of their points of view, which help inform how you engage them and what you can realistically expect from them.

Social media, content marketing, advertising, media relations, government relations, thought-leadership. They're all tactics. They're all ways to achieve your engagement goal. It's how you use them with that business lens in mind that matters.

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