

18 lessons in marketing and communications

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The marketing and communications industry is constantly evolving. Back in the days of ancient Greece, Heraclitus observed, “Change is the only constant.” Nothing’s changed since then.



Image supplied. Tara Turkington and Tiffany Turkington-Palmer of Flow Communications reflect on 18 lessons in marketing and communications

Our agency, Flow Communications, has just turned 18 years old, so we figured it's the perfect time to reflect on some lessons we've learnt in this industry, and how change has been our perfect propeller over the years. Members of our team have also slipped in a few fun reflections.

18 lessons in marketing and communications

1. When it comes to the news cycle, if you snooze, you lose

Being agile and on the ball has become our *modus operandi*; the news cycle waits for no man, woman, child or bot. In the communications world, X will break the latest news and you need to swiftly understand the story and decide how and if your brand will engage with the topic. Dropping everything to follow a story that aligns or affects your brand can be worthwhile; it can also be a waste of time. Agility and sticking to your strategy are key.

2. The “so what?” factor is key to any piece of content

It's less about what the organisation wants to say about itself and more about tying messaging to the relevant, current concerns of the audience it's trying to reach. Our team has had to stop and ask, “So what?” many a time when crafting a piece of content. Why is it important to the audience? Why is it important for the client? If it's not important to the person receiving the message, it simply won't land.

3. It's a very, very small industry

Almost everybody who has been in marketing and communications for longer than five or so years knows almost everybody else. You only need to attend a single PRISM Award event to see this: bitter competitors greeting each other like long-lost brothers and sisters. It's one of the things we love most about this business. We're all in it together.

We know and respect each other. We compete. We collaborate. We're fierce rivals and we're friends.



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4. Choosing culture over strategy

In an iconic Harvard Business Review article back in 2011, academic and strategist Nilofer Merchant wrote, “Culture will trump strategy, every time. The best strategic idea means nothing in isolation. If the strategy conflicts with how a group of people already believe, behave or make decisions, it will fail. Conversely, a culturally robust team can turn a so-so strategy into a winner.” We’ve learnt that building a strong culture takes time, care and effort. It’s not rocket science: happy employees produce better work. Building strong teams means seeing and understanding one another, and building strong personal relationships and good memories together. As we’ve always said, having fun is serious work.

5. Content is king, but engagement is queen and she rules the house

High-quality, relevant and meaningful content will make your work noticed, and will create engagement. It’s getting harder to cut through the clutter as so many platforms become more monetised. Remember those old days, about 10 years ago, when every Facebook fan saw every post? Now, Facebook and other social networks have throttled who sees what to such a degree that only a few percent of your audience will see your posts (unless you pay to promote them). Quality content is more important than ever, but quality content produced in quantity will build your brand exponentially.

6. Email is not dead

Did you know that there are four billion daily email users? Strategic newsletter marketing remains relevant and affordable, and when done well, it has the potential to convert a lead into a customer. We have a saying at Flow: “Email is the killer app!”



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7. On staying ahead of trends

Staying ahead of the curve ensures that a team remains relevant, adaptable and equipped to tackle challenges. You’ve got to constantly be scheduling time to research, mosey around the internet and engage with good work here in South Africa and elsewhere. We run a weekly internal “Flow School”, where we learn from each other about topics as diverse as AI, new social media platforms and design trends.

8. When it comes to hitting your audience in the heart, AI won’t cut it

Human words still matter. How we engage with our clients still matters. Sure, we can use different apps and AI tools to spark ideas, but we’ve seen it time and time again: only humans really know the human heart. For now, anyway.

9. Creative ideas

It's important to keep honing your ability to come up with creative ideas. While it's always lovely to have the luxury of some time, often it's in the pressure cooker of a pitch or when facing a looming deadline that we come up with our best ideas. Stress isn't always a bad thing.



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10. Variety (and a little danger) is the spice of life!

Our team loves to be adventurous and explore creative ideas outside our comfort zone. Doing things the same way each day and hoping for fabulous new results is a sign of insanity, right? If the Covid-19 pandemic taught us anything, it's that you need to be ready to change – and quickly.

11. Dot your Is, cross your Ts

A sub-edited article, Instagram post or web page can make all the difference to communication objectives and execution. Our team of in-house sub-editors have seen it all. Incorrect attributions to images, wrong links with a social media post, articles that have misleading headlines, you name it. Basically, we're trying our best to not become a meme-like in these instances.

12. You are not (usually) the target market

This is a handy thought that we keep in our back pocket: don't use yourself to test the relevance of a concept. We try to think about what our audience or users want, and not what we think they want. This takes research and time. The audience should always be top of mind when creating marketing strategies because knowing their pain points and what they need can make or break a brand. Using a reliable and responsive research house to test concepts can save you a lot of time and money, and give you and your client peace of mind that it's going to land well.



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13. Accept that you will learn something new every day

New apps will pop up, updates will alter website back ends, and new digital tools will emerge. When it comes to change, we've had to learn quickly and become experts not only for our team's sake but for the sake of our clients.

14. Is the client always right?

A lot of people will say that "the client is always right". We don't agree. Sometimes, it's the agency's role to point the client in another direction, if what they're looking for in terms of marketing and communications products is not going to attain their business goals. Honesty is always the best policy.

15. Marketing is about connections and trust

Successful marketing and communications is about so much more than just the original four Ps (product, price, place and promotion); it's also about peer-to-peer connections and trust. Messages that come from individuals who people can identify with and trust resonate much more with an audience and have a huge influence on decision-making. Even strangers can hold more sway over an audience than the brand itself – witness the rise of sites like TripAdvisor, where ordinary people do the reviews.

16. The scope will always creep

Know your budgets as well as your objectives, and make sure you deliver on both. Sounds easy, but it's rarely so in practice.

17. Smart campaigns are the name of the game

Objectives, goals, the execution of a campaign and the results are important when planning a marketing campaign for a client. Ask yourself, what do we want to achieve and why? How will our team measure the success of our efforts? We have learnt to keep goals SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

18. Learn from each mistake, big or small

We're all human and at some point, we've dropped the ball while working on a client's campaign. We've learnt to apologise, learn from our mistakes, move on and avoid making those mistakes in the future. Transparency is one of our values and we encourage our staff to acknowledge mistakes honestly and without defensiveness, and to rectify them promptly.

Life is short. Our motto at Flow is, "Do work you love, with people you like, to make the world a better place." And have a lot of fun doing it!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Turkington is the CEO, and Tiffany Turkington-Palmer is the MD of Flow Communications, an independent marketing and communications agency.

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