Culture Comms 2016

Closing remarks

There are many reasons to be cheerful!

As cultural PR people you have an amazing amount of agency. Josephine Chanter said that you are in a unique position in your organisation as influencers; you have those tentacles and are outward looking in a way that no one else in your organisation is tasked to do fulltime. That's a HUGE asset - so many of these organisations can become inward looking and narcissistic and focussed, we've all had the experience of talking to people inside our organisations who just don't know what's going on and YOU read the papers every day. Similarly, you have the finger on the pulse of the news stories within the organisation; you've always had the best gossip! For example, what exhibition is going to be front page news, what is going to be staged in three years’ time, etc. Therefore you know who needs to be warmed up in the outside world. That gives you an enormous amount of power, although it might not always feel like it. The influencing capacity you have is enormous, I've seen that at play - smart savvy press people like yourselves can switch the direction of an organisation and change things.

Josephine also said 'be brave but don't be foolish' and what really struck me from that session is that comms leaders share the same traits as brilliant arts leaders anywhere. Good leaders talk about Vision and Risk. In all the different types of arts leaders that I've seen, that's the common thread - Vision and Risk. The capacity and appetite for risk is really noticeable. Josephine and Sharon Atkinson were really strong when talking about the ethics factor - ignore those naysayers, you won't please all the people all the time. You have keep most of your constituencies happy but you can't move forward and keep everyone happy at the same time.

Another thing that came really clearly was that they were aligned with the values of the leadership in their organisations. As a result you could feel the power and the agency coming off them both and Will White. If you feel like that then you have a lot of power and you need to cash it in and use it. If you don't feel like that then get a new job because life is short! You can see how much capacity it unlocks when you're aligned with your organisation.

Sharon Atkinson was clearly a comms queen because she said that Christianity started in York Minster, over claim much?! But she styled it out! And she also started the hashtag #RefugeesWelcome which is truly amazing, who knew that came out of York Minster?

Will made the point - you have to help your bosses out, you can’t be a small activity that happens separately, you can’t do marginal things almost as a hobby, you have to be aligned with your corporate objectives. If your corporate objectives are to get people through the door then the moral argument only goes so far. As comms people you are a pragmatic bunch of professionals and moral arguments may not be the language you speak, if the moral arguments don't work then use the bums on seats argument. Look at data, the commercial reality, the number of people not coming etc. He also said 'are any of your organisations so successful that you don't need new audiences?' We can all get on board with that!

While learning people came in for some bashing, I'm going to stick up for them because in most organisations that's where you will find the black people and that's where a lot of the knowledge is about non-white audiences. Learning people can be a bit drippy, a bit of a drag and cardie wearing nags! But they have a different kind of expertise and knowledge that is closely aligned to yours. The fact that a lot of learning people working in museums are non-white means they are your internal stakeholders, that's where you're going to find people who know that stuff, and if you can find a way to work with then then you can get some magic out of them - find the sparky ones!

Passion - speakers with passion and workers with passion - that kept coming up again and again. Listening too, you all seem like a very good listening crowd. Active creative listening skills are really interesting, it's thinking about different audiences, nudge behaviour and shifting things - who gets media training? Who gets listened to? Who gets heard? Listen out for that passion when it comes from unusual quarters. If there’s not one person of colour, or one disabled person, or one queer person in the curatorial department and all the media training is going to the curators then you're replicating something. But if you have a quirky visitor assistant, who’s actually really brilliant, knows loads of stuff and has got passion - can that person be used?

I'm media trained; two weeks ago I was on BBC Asian Network. The head of press at my museum had not massively thought about doing press around a small community display we have about East Asian seafarers. I was knocking on her door saying there was only two weeks to go and offering to write a Guardian piece or do some press but was told that the press team were very busy with a huge number of other projects. She finally said OK I’ll think about it tomorrow and get back to you. She dropped me a line, the BBC Asian Network (BAN) would work - bish bash bosh - I was on Friday, 15 minutes of air time. The museum had never been on BAN before, it was unusual for BAN to have an Asian speaker from the Maritime Museum talking about Asian sailors. They will never forget it and will come back to the maritime museum in the future AND now all the Asian people in Britain know about Asian sailors! The point is - a learning person might be a good talker and might be able to get different kinds of stories out.

The point about educating your managers from Bethan Jinkinson was lovely; it's about your agency and your power. Older people may have a different take on the media than Generation Y. Educating your managers is not about pushing back, but pushing forward.

The divisions between digital engagement, press, audience development, content producers, etc, seems to be melting BUT it's melting slowly. A lot of you wish to collaborate and be at the table. At some of the more traditional organisations those divisions are still there and it feels old fashioned and clunky. When Holly talked about the Royal Court it seemed very fluid there. In old fashioned organisations  the fluidity still needs a lot of oiling as they are still bit old school, a bit 20th century.

AWKWARD WAVES AND APPLAUSE ALL ROUND!