

Good morning, everyone, and happy Wednesday. I'm Julie Livingston of Want Leverage Communications, here for another installment of PR Patter, my weekly show where I have conversations with Marketing and communications professionals from across my network. I am delighted today to welcome Eliot Mizrachi

He's a member of the leadership team at Page, also known as the Arthur W. Page Society, the world's premier professional association for Chief Communication officers and other senior communications leaders. Elliot develops organizational strategy and KPIs and is responsible for all of Page's content, including their comprehensive research reports and podcast.

He has a wonderful podcast called the new C C O; I suggest you listen to it. I've been binging on it. He also oversees Page's professional development programs. Earlier, Elliot was senior director of communications for the Entertainment Software Rating Board, ESRB, which is the regulatory body for the video game industry, and he was there while I was in the toy business, so we sort of, there was, an adjacency there.

Elliot managed media relations and communications, um, working especially close with the government relations team. Um, he is an alum of Syracuse University's Newhouse School, which is where we met in the communications management master's program. And I'm just thrilled to have you here today, Eliot.

Elliot: Thank you so much for making the time. Julie, thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here. Well, you know, seeking Communications Council used to be kind of almost secondary or an afterthought for some organizations, and companies, but that role is becoming increasingly more visible and important.

Julie: Why is the Chief Communications officer such a pivotal role today in organizations? I think there are a lot of reasons, but I'll give two. One is I think the world that we're living in today is more multi stakeholder than it's been. I think the challenges that enterprises are facing require a deeper understanding of the full spectrum of stakeholder issues and needs and concerns.

Elliot: And in today's world, stakeholders are more able to share information with each other, to coalesce into groups, to exert their influence on enterprises. And so the ability of the enterprise to succeed. matters. It depends more than ever on the ability of the enterprise to balance all of these different constituent interests and needs.

Elliot: And so I think that multi stakeholder view of the C. C. O. Has always been important, but especially over the last 3 to 4 years, it's become especially valuable. Um, and I think the other thing is Our profession for many, many years has struggled with how we demonstrate the value that we're creating for the organization.

Elliot: How do we help the rest of our leadership understand that? We're not just the ones down the hall that write the press release and the speeches, but there is a very important strategic element to the way that we. Understand and identify and a thought, a thought process. And so I

think our ability to use data and insights to help the rest of the organization, understand the nature of our work and our impact, I think has just helped maybe not make the role itself stronger, but certainly help other leaders in enterprises better understand and appreciate the value that we're creating.

Julie: How is the chief communications officer sort of a CEO whisperer?

Eliot: Many years ago at our spring seminar, we had the legendary Jack Welch as a speaker, for those who don't know, or maybe too young to remember Jack Welch. I think he won like business leader of the century for the last century, just something like that.

Eliot: He was this hard nosed CEO and chairman of General Electric at a time when that company really dominated, uh, in, in the industries where it. It competed. And so he's regarded as this incredibly thoughtful and prolific leader. And when he was with Page, he said the relationship that he had with a Chief Communications Officer was perhaps the most important in the C suite that other C suite leaders were bringing. Expertise that he didn't have and they had functional areas of responsibility, but the CCO was in many respects his closest confidant, the person that he could rely on to tell him the unvarnished truth, no matter how much he didn't want to hear it.

Eliot: And I think as well, because of that broad vantage point, right? The view across the entire organization, the view across multiple stakeholders, other than the CEO, the CCO has the ability to see the entire playing field. In a way that other functions may not. And so I think for CEOs, especially today, looking for counsel on how to navigate these really complex and thorny issues, how to address what are essentially like an unending list of dilemmas.

Eliot: I think the counsel that comes from the CCO and the close relationship, the trusting relationship between the two of them has become that much more valuable and organizations that are really successful more often than not. You find a really tight connection between the CCO. Yeah. And if there isn't there, you know, things fall through the cracks.

Eliot: I imagine there are, I think, missed opportunities, you know, I don't want to name any names here, but many companies, just as an example, they, uh, one of their cultural values is customer centricity. Everything that we could do is going to revolve around making the customer happy. And as a customer.

Eliot: When you're, you know, sort of governing philosophy of the business is single stakeholder, right? Everything is about the customer. Then you may not be treating your employees that great, or you may be missing opportunities to build a more resilient and trusting and engaged workforce, you may not be engaging with regulators or community members.

Eliot: And so there's nothing wrong with having a really strong focus, even a primary focus. On any one stakeholder, depending on what your strategy suggests, but that doesn't mean you can

do that by neglecting all of the others. And so I think CCOs again, there's a multi stakeholder view and level of understanding that they bring that I think is especially important today.

Eliot: I couldn't agree more. How did the Covid pandemic and other world events change the role of the CCO and kind of elevate it. I think, in a lot of respects, it did, Julie, it's sort of supercharged the role, what I've just been describing. So if we put ourselves back, right, you've got this unpredictable situation, this public health scare, you've got competing sources of information, people understandably concerned about the health of themselves and their families.

Eliot: Some organizations are figuring out "how do we sustain our operations while simultaneously protecting our people"? Uh, how do we continue to engage a workforce that at least part of which was able to work remotely? How do we take care of people whose jobs won't allow them to work during this time? Right? How do we deal with You know, downsizing and layoffs are reconfiguring our operations.

Eliot: Right. How do we protect our talent? Like, how do we hold on to our talent? Exactly. Right. And so, or, or hold on to them. Or in some cases there were discussions about how we can, you know, we may need to furlough them, but how do we bring them back and take care of them? So. All of these questions that arose very, very quickly, they're all questions about people, right?

Eliot: They're all difficult choices about how we're going to listen to and understand and take care of the people that are enterprise employees, the people that it engages with, how are we going to fulfill our obligations to our shareholders, to our customers? And so many of these issues were immediately answered.

Eliot: We've looked at the demands of multi stakeholder decision making and what we found was that CCOs were often finding themselves in the middle of those conversations and decision points. And we heard. So at the beginning of the pandemic, one of the things that page did was we started holding almost weekly what we call page conversations.

Eliot: We brought CCOs and ideas together. What's going on? What are you struggling with? Can we learn from each other? And almost every conversation, no matter what topic we started discussing, almost every conversation, Eventually found its way back to culture. Who are we? I was just going to say that.

Julie: I mean, I do, you know, although I'm a publicist more recently, I've been specializing in raising executive visibility on LinkedIn and I can't for every, almost every client that I do this for, cause they're all senior leaders. We're constantly talking about company culture. Because it's just so important for a number of reasons for talent retention, but also talent attraction.

Eliot: Absolutely. And positioning, you know, showcasing your competitive advantage. You know, I, it's just, it is so critical today to talk about culture. I know CCO's say that the #1 topic is culture. So I'll say more about it when we get more into that. But I would just add, you know.

Eliot: Culture is absolutely all those things. It is a tool of retention and engagement and recruitment, It's also the organization's operating system. And so when COVID hit and you had different ways of working, we all went on zoom, we needed different ways of teaming and making decisions, and you just couldn't rely on the typical models and modalities of doing that.

Eliot: That's where culture becomes a sticking point, right? How is it not just how we treat each other. At play here is the nature of the work that we do and how we do it. And a lot of that needed to be evolved as well. And it's still evolving. You know, there's many companies that are still hitting a lot of bumps around it.

Julie: And how to maintain that culture on all these different communications platforms and how do you keep it true to what it should be? That's right. Page, does amazing research and, in your report, the CCO is Page center, what it means, why it matters and how to get there. Can you share some of the top findings?

Eliot: Absolutely. So that public report came out in September of 2019. And one concern would be that it's become incredibly dated since then, because so much has happened and changed since then. But actually, what we found ended up being in some ways more relevant. So the hypothesis of that report, the reason we did it was because every organization was experiencing some form of disruption, technological, demographic, regulatory, environmental, some form of disruption, and undertaking some form of transformation in response. And so we asked ourselves, what is the CCO's role in facilitating that transformation? If CEOs are looking to turn their ship, how can CCOs contribute their skill set and capabilities to benefit them.

Eliot: And there are four dimensions of CCO leadership that we found. The first three are related to this idea of corporate character. This idea of who are as an organization? And what do we do for the world? And those three are. Corporate brand, Corporate Culture and Societal Value Creation on the corporate brand side, you know, brand is not a term that's new.

Eliot: It's a term that communicators have bristled at for a while. And it's something that tends to be associated with marketing and product brands. But what we found in our conversations with CCOs is that the brand today is about every touch point that every stakeholder has. Every experience that every stakeholder has through every touch point.

Eliot: And so again, it's this holistic view of who we are and how we express that. 66% of CCOs at the time we surveyed them in 2019 actually had formal responsibility for corporate brands, which may weigh higher than we were expecting. And it's because of this holistic view. Corporate culture was the second.

Eliot: He just spoke a little bit about culture, right? What is the unique and differentiated experience of working for this organization? But also, are we enabling that experience? Are we enabling what differentiates us as an organization by employee behaviors? So I'll give you an example.

Eliot: A lot of organizations, they want to be innovative and take risks. Does your culture reward risk taking or does it penalize it, right? At the end of the year, are you, you know, if you've made more mistakes than victories. Is that a bad thing? Or if you learn from those mistakes, is that a good thing? Right.

Eliot: And are you serving up opportunities for employees to actually ideate? You know, you're giving them the time or a forum or some kind of platform so they can be innovative. That's right. That's important because this isn't just about the communications, it's not just about sending emails out that say, we want you to be risk taking.

Eliot: It's about, it's about the mechanics, right? Are you creating the platforms and venues and capabilities, the skills, all that kind of stuff. And then the other example I'll give, which is illustrative, is agility. Everyone now, you know, things are happening so fast. We need to be agile, nimble. We need to move very quickly.

Eliot: Well, you know, if you have an operating model that requires getting half a dozen people across three time zones together for a meeting to discuss every issue, you're not going to move that quickly. No. And so the systems you're using for collaboration, coordination, communication, those things enable the culture, right?

Eliot: And so you need to think holistically about the entire employee experience, the behaviors you expect, and in what ways you can enable those experiences. And so that's culture. And then the third piece is stakeholder value creation. We tend to talk about that these days as stakeholder capitalism. But it is the idea that the business exists to do more than just make business, make money for its shareholders.

Eliot: It exists to create value and there is commercial value that's created for customers. There's monetary value that's created for shareholders, but there's also a lot of value created for the communities that are in which we operate. There's also negative value that's created. There is hardly a business that doesn't have some negative byproducts.

Eliot: And so what CEOs can do uniquely again is look across all of the stakeholders that are touched by an enterprise to maximize the positive value that's created. Mitigate or minimize the negative impact and be, uh, the type of corporate citizens that are those whose, uh, offerings are making the world better and really material ways and finding a way to activate your purpose in ways that extends its value.

Eliot: So those are the three which relate to corporate character, and then the fourth is contact. Contact is what it sounds like all of the ways that we as a profession are leveraging new technology and more recently, I to do a whole bunch of things, right? Use data to extract insights to understand stakeholders and engage them as individuals to deploy and iterate on content to maximize its effectiveness.

Eliot: All of these things to manage relationships. So technology is much more central to the ability of the CCO to influence the enterprise. And that, and in terms of AI was going to be one of my next questions and what, what the implications are for our business. They are tremendous, but I don't know, a lot of people are so fearful of it, yet there are really some phenomenally helpful things that AI can, can do for us in terms of saving time with research, with, you know, ideation.

Julie: I mean, how many people in our profession get writer's block or just can't? You know, get started on something, um, that doesn't mean that you should let AI, you know, write, write everything for you, but it can be, it can really be helpful in serving up ideas and, um, kind of scanning all these digital platforms for information that can help you.

Eliot: What, what's your, what's your take on it? So I think that's all correct. You know, we were at Page's annual conference last week, we had a speaker from Microsoft sharing with us some of the things that they're doing with AI. And two things about what you said that I want to flag here. One, uh, writer's block.

Eliot: He said that when somebody opens up a Word document, the most common next action they take is to close it. Because they see the blank page and it's terrifying, they can't handle it. It's intimidating, right? To start from a blank page. That's very difficult. So I think I wrote a blog for this on page, forever first drafts.

Eliot: I think, yes, you will have this, this partner in a I that can help you with those initial stages of ideating and creating something. You don't have to start with the rectangular block of marble, right? It can start helping shape that for you and then you can refine it and build on it. So I think there's a head start that's built into a I.

Eliot: On writing content, creation, image generation, all these things, right? The skill sets will matter less and less. You know, there's a, uh, low code or no code movement where I can just ask in natural language, a GPT model, like build me a website that does X, Y, Z. Yeah. I can't code anything, but I'll be able to create these things.

Eliot: So on the one hand, there's enormous potential in our ability to create and generate things. To scale that creation to do it at speed But I think on the other side of the ledger, we all know that is prone to hallucinations that it is only able to provide information based on what has been put into it.

Eliot: Humans are deciding what data goes into the A. I. And it can only go up to what? 2020 or 2021. So the open a model of chat has information up to. I think it's September 2021, but there are other models that are more recent and their organizations as well. And I think this is going to be a big trend over the next few years.

Eliot: When you upload something, I don't know if anybody knows, everybody knows this when you put something into chat GPT, just the publicly available version, even the subscription

version, it becomes part of the domain of open AI. So whatever you've shared goes to train that model. So companies are understandably concerned that they don't want to put sensitive proprietary information into a third party domain like that. And so what they're doing is they're building what they call sandboxes, these walled off eyes that are driven by the GPT technology. Right. So there's still a chat bot and the experience is very similar, but they're able to train those models based on their data from across their enterprise sales, customer data operations, you name it.

Eliot: Right. You can train those models on just about anything. And that will become, I think, a really incredible enterprise wide knowledge resource for people. They'll be able to access. Information, knowledge, policies, practices, past experiences, all that stuff will be centrally located in this AI that belongs to the enterprise.

Julie: And so I think these proprietary safe space AIs will become a competitive differentiator for companies that build them. Eliot, you work with chief communications officers across industries. Um, how, how open do you think these individuals are to. Building their knowledge of ai. I mean, it's intimidating to people.

Do you, I mean, do you think that CCOs are tech savvy enough? Are there roadblocks? Um, I would say a couple of things. More often than not, senior communicators are very excited about the prospect of A.I. according to our research.

Eliot: They recognize that it will be disruptive in some ways, particularly at the more entry level and junior levels of the profession where. They're doing a lot of that repetitive, tedious research, writing, media postings, like stuff that the GPT models will do very well. And so we'll have to think differently about the way that that work gets done and the nature of the work that some of those people who are doing that work now will have to evolve.

Eliot: And so that's an issue that I know is on CCO's minds. I think the other thing is, um, you know, this is my, this is not pages research. This is my own point of view. Is enabling a really potent ability on the part of communicators, you know, marketing, the term concept comes from market. Marketing has developed this really sophisticated way to use data to understand us as consumers to build journeys that move us along the decision making process towards.

Eliot: Marketing is often making the purchase, right? And then using my interaction with the content to nudge me, right? To move me from, do I need this thing to, I know I need it. Do I want this thing? What things do I need? How much will I pay? Right. Communicators are using the same journey model, just not for communications outputs, right?

Eliot: Not for a necessarily commercial transaction and my worry is that when you combine the incredible amount of data we have about people, lets us know things about them that they might not even be aware of themselves, right? Because you can triangulate all this data, you combine that with brain science, right?

Eliot: So we already know things about what different stimuli produce in terms of people's behavior. And then you add AI and the ability to scale that, right? And to do that scaling in a way that is autonomous. So a lot of the concern with AI is, it's frankly stupid, right? It doesn't have any intelligence of its own.

Eliot: It has a lot of information, right? And they can show up and interact as if it's a human, but it is capable of making unintended decisions. It's called a paperclip problem, right? If you told an AI to maximize the production of paperclips, it would kill all of us. To make paper clips. Sure. We need to think about what constraints, what are the eventualities, and to me, I think that's a role that CCO is going to have to play.

Eliot: Are we deploying these technologies responsibly? Ethically, are we doing it in ways that protects against the unintended harms that they may call?

Julie: And are you using the right AI technology? I mean, I think that's another thing. CCOs are going to have to have a very strong tech partner, whether it's internal or external to help guide them on all the I think there are 11,000 different kinds of AI programs now. They're going to need a tech partner to kind of guide them based on what their organizational needs are.

Eliot: There's no question about it. You know, as I was describing a moment ago, these sandboxes, right? Yeah. These are not CCOs building sandboxes.

Eliot: They need to partner with the chief technology officer. They need to partner on the ability to get the data plugged in, to integrate it, to train these models. So the CCO is not operating as an island here by any means. I think operations, legal technology. All of these functions, HR, all of these functions will need to be involved in how AI is deployed.

Eliot: I mean, that's another tremendous value that the CCO brings to any organization is that, you know, interdepartmental communication, kind of bringing everything together and really being the eyes and the ears and the connectors. Um, so that there's more collaboration, but a sharing of information. So I don't know if that's something that a lot of companies are still having trouble with.

Eliot: Especially larger organizations. It is, it is, you know, we have, uh, there's a woman named Brittany Paxman. She runs an agency called Point 600. She did, just in the vein of CommsTech, she did this network analysis in an organization where they looked at all of the internal like Slack network. And you can plot them like all these nodes of people and all the lines or connections between them.

Eliot: And you have this visual map of engagement in the organization. But to your point about information flow and engagement and connection, Healthy organizations have lots of interconnectivity between all the nodes. There's lots of collaboration, coordination, and connection. And so it's interesting that she was able to use a data centric approach to understand that community.



Eliot: And as communicators, one of the things, just a use case, you know, you want to know who the influencers are in your organization. And so the influencers are the ones that look like cities on that map, the ones that have lots of inbound and outbound connections. And so it's, it's an interesting cross section between what we've always done.

Eliot: Which is understanding communities, building relationships, and our ability to use data and technology in new ways to facilitate that. Well, Eliot, this has been a fascinating conversation. I actually do have one more question I want to ask you. We're heading into 2024. What, how do you envision the role of the CCO next year?

Julie: What do you think is going to be, I mean, we know AI is going to continue to be a part of our world, even more so. I mean, we're heading into an election year.

Eliot: So we're actually in the middle of doing some research on exactly that question. And I can share with you what we're learning so far. The main thing is there's an emergence of what we're kind of shorthanding as the CCO plus, which is to say CCOs who are acquiring responsibility for things that are adjacent to communications. We have CCOs who are now owning HR, marketing, public affairs, government relations, brand, as we spoke about earlier, uh, ESG and sustainability.

Eliot: And so we see this expanding remit of the CCO. And I think that's going to be a hallmark of this next era for the profession. The multi stakeholder view benefits communications, but I think for all the reasons that we've been talking about on this, in this conversation, I think that. Multi Stakeholder perspective can benefit some of these other functional areas and whether CCOs will own them or whether they will work in closer partnership with the peers that own them.

Eliot: There's a greater opportunity for communications to be involved. With that spectrum of issues and opportunities. And so I think that's going to be, um, a significant trend for the CCO role, uh, in the coming years.

Julie: Thank you so much for joining me today. This has really been enlightening, um, for me and I hope people watching, um, I'll see you next time on PR Patter.

Thank you, Julie.