

Join Julie Livingston, founder and president of WantLeverage Communications and host of PR Patter, a series of talks focusing on relevant topics in marketing and public relations today, in conversation with Helen Hannah Evans, founder of The Listening People, a brand marketing and communications consultancy based in the United Kingdom. Before starting her business, Evans spent 20 years at some of the world's leading professional services firms, including EY, Latham and Watkins, and Willis Towers Watson. She works with business leaders on strategies and campaigns that deliver vision and strategy, amplify brands, increase employee engagement, and grow company reputation and relationships.

Livingston and Evans discuss getting to know your client and audience needs, the effect that deep listening has with stakeholders and with achieving the bottom line, what makes people nervous about deep listening, and the value of consumer insights in the marketplace.

“One of the things I'm always looking for is the nuances of the language executives use and how they actually speak, so when I do my ghostwriting, I can actually capture that authentic voice.”

“I think a lot of companies forget their employees are their most important brand ambassadors—that those people go out and they speak about where they work, what they do to friends, family, wherever they are.”

—Julie Livingston

“A brand narrative, a value proposition, whatever type of communications it is, should tell the whole story. As an agency or consultancy, it's our job to do the hard work to really understand how to work it into the story in a way that is engaging and meaningful.”

“We put a filter on everything that comes in based on our own experiences, our own training, in whatever profession we're in. I think listening, deep listening, when we're really listening for the meaning and not just to the words, we're taking off those filters and we're thinking about what we're hearing despite how we were trained to listen. We're investigating a little bit more and getting to the full story.”

“Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room.”

“In B2B communications and business, 70% of your brand is what your people are doing, what they're doing with their customers, what they're doing in their community, what they're doing with each other, and how they're treating each other—that makes up the employer brand. And then 30% is that brand amplified through brand marketing communications. Communicating and engaging your employees in the experience that you want to give to your clients so that they're clear on it and can actually execute on it is critically important.”

—Helen Hannah Evans

Edited Transcript:

Julie Livingston:

Happy Wednesday. How are you, everyone? I'm Julie Livingston of Want Leverage Communications here for another edition of PR Patter, where I interview great people from my marketing and public relations network. Today I'm thrilled to have Helen Hannan Evans. She's the founder of The Listening People, which is a brand marketing and communications consultancy based in the UK. Before starting her business, Helen spent 20 years at some of the world's leading professional services firms, including EY, Latham and Watkins, and Willis Towers Watson. Today she works with business leaders on strategies and campaigns that bring leaders that bring purpose to life, deliver vision and strategy, increase employee engagement and grow company reputation relationships that affect the bottom line. All of her work is founded on deep listening. So Helen, welcome. It's great to have you here with me today. Thank you for jumping in. I know it's late there in the UK.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Thank you, Julie. Thanks so much for having me.

Julie Livingston:

In the public relations and LinkedIn work that I do for my clients, I myself engage in what I call hyper listening. I think it's probably similar to what you do and it's really like having this radar. That's what publicists do. We have a type of radar, it's kind of like reading between the lines, you know, kind of listening in a way that you're getting something beneath what people are actually saying. That helps me to identify their key brand messages, how they should position themselves as thought leaders and how their company can promote their competitive advantage. One of the things I'm always looking for, because I do a lot of my work on LinkedIn to improve executive presence, is I'm looking for the nuances of the language they use, how they actually speak so that when I do my ghost writing thing, I can actually capture that authentic voice. Tell me a little bit about what you do and what you are talking about when you say deep listening.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Sure. We call The Listening People a brand marketing and communications consultancy agency hybrid. When I co-founded it with my late business partner, one of the things we had recognized about agencies was they didn't always listen to their clients. That important content got left on the cutting room floor in the name of creativity.

Julie Livingston:

Interesting.

Helen Hannan Evans:

It was easier to not have to work with what might be dull or not as sexy or engaging as some of the shiny new things. I thought it was important that a brand narrative, a value proposition, whatever communications it is should tell the whole story. As an agency or consultancy, it's our job to do the hard work to really understand how to work it into the story in a way that is engaging and meaningful.

Julie Livingston:

To kind of cut through the speak that sometimes the clients have— clients are very close to what they want to promote and what the messages are that they think they want to promote, but that's why they bring us in to really do that critical thinking and that competitive research, right? To see how we can help them to stand up against their competitors.

Helen Hannan Evans:

That's exactly right. The way I like to think about it is if you think about a company founder, they had to do a lot of work there to create the story that was going to be compelling to take out, to market, to take to investors to customers, etc. So they get their script down and then the company grows a little. Things change a little and they don't necessarily update the story that they're telling, which might have been quite aspirational. They might be doing things a bit differently. They might be adapting to how customers are receiving an experience from them. For us going out and listening then to key stakeholders around you, their experience of that particular company and the employee's experience of that particular company and then getting to the authentic story that is reflective of the experience that the stakeholders are having, but still has the founder's vision at its heart...

Julie Livingston:

Right? Because those perspectives can actually be quite different.

Helen Hannan Evans:

That's right. The perspectives are different. The other thing that we like to think about from a listening perspective is you know, we're all conditioned. We all put a filter on everything that comes in based on our own experiences, our own training in whatever profession we're in. I think listening, deep listening, when we're really listening for the meaning and not just to the words, we're taking off those filters and we're thinking about— what am I hearing? Because this is how I'm trained. What would I be hearing if I was in the shoes of my client, or if I was in the shoes of my employee? Just really investigating a little bit more and getting to the full story.

Julie Livingston:

How difficult is it to have those conversations though with clients with what you're hearing? I know that's tough, right? When you're hearing what they want to promote or what they want to say in terms of their brand identity and the brand value that they're delivering— what happens when it conflicts a bit with what employees or other stakeholders are saying?

Helen Hannan Evans:

That's the beauty of listening exercises, particularly with the market customers and employees in that you have the hard evidence. They're telling you their experience.

Julie Livingston:

You have the facts.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Absolutely. Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room. When we do listening exercises ahead of a brand narrative or a value proposition or something like that, they're a little bit nervous about what people are going to say about them. Will I hear something I don't want to hear? You know, will somebody call my baby ugly, all of that sort of thing. But the truth is that for all the work that we've done, not one client has ever said, "I wish you hadn't done that." We've had clients where we've done their listening exercises and they've printed them off and bound them and used them as onboarding tools for new employees because what they heard back is reflective to a greater extent of the brand and the experience that they're giving. What the listening does is really help fine tune the narrative to what for instance, a client really values, and that's what can sometimes be out of alignment, that what the company thinks is adding value, and might not be the thing that's adding as much value as something else. We're really getting clarity around that sort of thing. You know, often our clients are just pumped with confidence after they do get the listening exercise pumped that they are doing many of the right things. Then when they're hearing it back from their clients and we're recommending a value proposition or a brand narrative or we're re-articulating their purpose, etc. they are confident because they know it's completely based on their business and their clients and employees experience of that business. We're bringing clarity to the message that they know is resonating because they've heard it from their customers. Then that gives them great confidence to go out with an even louder voice and clearer message to the market.

Julie Livingston:

You're absolutely right, and I really love the fact that you're that you're able to provide this information to clients and that they're actually using it in employee onboarding because I think a lot of companies sometimes forget that their employees are their most important brand ambassadors, that those people go out and they speak about where they work, what they do to friends, family, wherever they are. It's so powerful.

Helen Hannan Evans:

We have a tagline of building brands from the inside out. We predominantly work with B2B businesses and professional services. In those people's businesses, your people are your brand. So 70% of your brand is what your people are doing, what they're doing with their customers, what they're doing in their community, what they're doing with each other, and how they're treating each other, makes up the employer brand. Then 30% is, you know, that brand amplified through brand marketing and, and communications. Communicating and engaging your employees in the experience that you want to give to your clients so that they're clear on it and can actually execute on it is critically important.

Julie Livingston:

What are some of the roadblocks that could get in the way of listening? Is it a mindset thing?

Helen Hannan Evans:

I think it's a mindset that people are nervous about getting feedback. They are genuinely anxious that they might hear something that they don't want to hear or they may feel we're just not at that point in our evolution to go and get the feedback or get the input or we haven't done

enough to help them understand. There's no point in asking them for feedback yet on, you know, our product or our brand or whatever it might be. I think that's probably the biggest barrier.

Julie Livingston:

Right. How do you help them break through those fears?

Helen Hannan Evans:

I guess now that we've done so many, I think bringing case studies of where it made a huge difference to organizations and being able to point to crisp, clear messaging and crisp, clear campaigns value propositions that are clear and that cut through, and being able to share some of those case studies. The listening exercises that we do, for the most part— they're not big huge beasts. For some of our female founders for instance, we might go on to interview maybe eight to 12 of their clients in process. That's a great prospect. I think in those interviews little of what you were saying is that you get really rich language and you can delve into it, and you dig in a little bit more to what's behind some of that language and the words that they're using. And that's what then really helps bring the authenticity to the story.

Julie Livingston:

It's capturing that voice that I find is really critical and is a big differentiator. What are some of the techniques you use to do this kind of deep listening exercise?

Helen Hannan Evans:

So we know all the sorts of research tools that you'd imagine the desk research for the competitors and what's the trends that are going on in that particular market. And then interviews for sure. It doesn't have to be a huge number, so we might typically have between eight and 12 interviews, they tend to be about 45 minutes long. We use a discussion guide to shape it, but we are allowed to go deep on particular topics depending on what scene we want to go down.

Julie Livingston:

One thing that I'm curious about, Helen, is when you're actually doing the research part and speaking to people, do they ever have any trepidation about sharing what they honestly think?

Helen Hannan Evans:

No, they don't. And that's great. We try to be and always use positive language. We are always making sure that we're asking unbiased questions or we're not trying to lead the witness as it were. Also giving them the space to answer and not trying to put an interpretation on what they're saying. Just let them, just let them go. And in that discussion, I think people do warm up. We invite them to be authentic cuz we want the authentic story, so we want to hear warts and all. But people are, you know, the people. The other thing that's worth's saying is where founders or business leaders have gone out and said, you know, we're conducting this exercise. Here's why we're doing it. We really value your insights. For the most part, people say yes and they give 45 minutes. It can be astonishing.

Julie Livingston:

It's sort of like you're giving them an opportunity to be a part of this branding exercise and to really give input. I think people do like to have their voices heard, and they like to know that they're being heard.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Exactly. And they appreciate it. For the most part, they're hugely supportive of whatever business it is that we're talking about. When we get the findings, we try to find what needs improvement, where the gaps are as well as all the things they're doing well. We are mindful that we've got somebody's confidence in our hands and we report it back in such a way that's helpful and value add that they're not going to end up dwelling on the one little negative thing that came out but we're also not going to sugarcoat it. It is doing that respectfully and getting to the insightful actions and, and recommendations. We're not just saying, here it is, but here it is and here's what you are, here's why.

Julie Livingston:

Could you share with us some like before and after? I'd love to know, like, working with a brand company, where were they when you started and what happened after you did this exercise? How revelatory was it and how did they put the findings into action to really fine tune their brand positioning?

Helen Hannan Evans:

I'm thinking about one client at the minute. She runs a gender equality consultancy. She came to us as she was getting ready to scale her business and was getting ready to invest in marketing. She really wanted to test whether she had the right value proposition and how that value proposition compared to her competitor set. We undertook the listening exercise. We also did a scan of the market and the trends in that particular area. Conducted our interviews, did a very detailed report. We also looked at each of the competitors. What the exercise did tell us was who she thought was her competitors weren't just her competitors. Wow. And that it was a bigger playing field, but also it was very big brands that were her competitors.

Julie Livingston:

Right. Because everybody is there. Most big companies now, most companies now are dressing the gender identity issue and how they how they handle it.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Yeah, exactly. Better understanding the landscape that she was operating in hearing really fine tuning the value proposition, really thinking about what to dial up and, and what to dial down. When she had that listening report, she felt that we had such a good understanding of our business that she really wanted to see what we could do for her next. By her own admission, she would say she'd been out and spent money on marketing. They hadn't understood. So it hadn't turned out to be a good investment, but with our understanding, we then went on to create her brand narrative, the purpose— her why, who, what, how— the value proposition. We

then redeveloped the website. With a clear value proposition and the purpose, I think she got even more confident in her own voice.

Julie Livingston:

Wow. It really helped her to sell her services better. Yeah.

Helen Hannan Evans:

The engagement went up— then we went on to do the marketing strategy and are activating or actioning that on an ongoing basis. I think what I'm getting at is that the difference was getting the clarity around what the value proposition was, how it sits with the competitors and how it lands with clients just unlocked. It helps her to also think about where to focus her marketing efforts. Another client— she probably had gotten herself in a model with so many different products and things. So again, we did a listening exercise that did lead to doing the brand story again, but also led to doing the customer journey and the personas of the people that she was after. We took her products and looked, you know, put them in the context of the listening exercise and just again, brought a whole load of clarity.

Julie Livingston:

It helped her to kind of focus instead of being everything to everyone.

Helen Hannan Evans:

Exactly. One of the big benefits that she's seen was it kind of cut away people that she shouldn't even be talking to.

Julie Livingston:

What are some of the things Helen, that start to bubble up for organizations that maybe having difficulty identifying their brand proposition, their brand value?

Helen Hannan Evans:

I think it is that the message isn't clear enough and customers don't understand the value that they bring or, you know, what they're offering— where they might have a customer for a client for one particular area of the business, they don't understand all the other offerings. And wouldn't think of them in that, in that respect. That they are spending money with various different marketing agencies and they're not getting the results. One of the things I would say there is, I think the foundation of any marketing activity, whether you're going to somebody for SEO, social, your website, whatever it is, is having a clear, confident story that really matches the organization and the experience that you want your customers and employees to have. Because the case is, if you don't have that story clear, then it's impossible to have a good website, or it's impossible to have, you know, you're just throwing seeds into the wind. I think that's it. The big thing is their story is no longer clear and they need to take a step back and get it crisp again.

Julie Livingston:

And your story can change over time,

Helen Hannan Evans:
Of course.

Julie Livingston:
Right? You might start seeing your social media following and your social media engagement kind of stagnate. You know, maybe a competitor is starting to capture some more market share, so things around you that are affecting your business start to happen. And then it might be time to kind of reevaluate.

Helen Hannan Evans:
Exactly that.

Julie Livingston:
Helen, thank you so much for being here today. This is a wonderful conversation on branding and everyone, if you would love to talk to Helen, she's helen@thelisteningpeople.com, and join me next week again for another edition of PR Patter.

Helen Hannan Evans:
Thank you very much.