I had a fascinating chat with Kevin Kane about:

- Working for a large, mission driven organization
- The roles of a generalist in corporate communications
- Bringing key stakeholders together for a common goal
- The importance of quality control and communication in a large organization
- The impact of checking in at every consumer touchpoint
- Telling stories to add to localism but also credibility and trust

JL: Hey everyone, it's Wednesday and another episode of Julie's PR Patter. I am so excited today to have a colleague of mine with me. His name is Kevin Kane. Kevin is currently communications business consultant at Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield based in upstate New York where it's quite cold, I understand.

KK: It's gonna be 65 today.

JL: Oh my god. Anyway, there he provides internal and external communications support to all areas of the organization, including content development for member newsletters, crisis communications, planning and message delivery, internal and external channel contribution and coordination, and he serves as a liaison for a number of operational areas. This is kind of the topic of what we're going to talk about today– collaboration. He coordinates and collaborates with information technology, customer care, business resilience, and compliance. As a senior strategist and subject matter expert, Kevin has been instrumental in building collaborative relationships with a cross functional team. This is one of the most important functions of communications professionals today, especially in large organizations. This kind of collaboration really ensures consistent information sharing and messaging, which is so critical to maintaining a consistent reputation in the public sphere. He also has helped implement and maintain the company's new Intranet Sharepoint site. His role is not only externally facing, but really in creating community and consistent communication internally at Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield. One thing that really makes Kevin stand out is that he truly cares about contributing to the greater good. He's really active in the profession of public relations and in his local community. He's taught business communications, night classes at St. John Fisher College for 9 years and is very active with the Public Relations Society of America, particularly working tirelessly to promote the value of accreditation as an APR, which is accreditation in the practice of public relations. He really works towards our entire goal of getting public relations a seat at the management table. Kevin and I had the pleasure of meeting back in 2007 when we both went back to graduate school at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communication and we've been in touch ever since, so please welcome Kevin. It's so great to see you and have you here today.

KK: It's great to be here.

JL: Good. So Kevin, you work for a very large healthcare organization. How many employees are there?

KK: There's about 4,200 in our nonprofit plant. It's one of the largest names in the country. So if you're across the country and insured by another Blue Cross Blue Shield plan, we're affiliated but we're not one company. We cover 31 counties in upstate New York, we have about 1.5 million members. Our members live across the country. It's a daunting task, it's an enjoyable task, but it's also mission driven.

JL: In such a big organization, what is the role of communications? If you could just give us kind of an overview.

KK: Sure. We have staff centers in multiple cities in upstate New York. So we're not one building in one location, like most businesses that have other offices. Our job, I'd say, in corporate communications, is to be the conscience of the organization, to be the eyes and ears for both external and internal temperature reading. What's the temperature today? How's this going to play in our community and amongst our employees? Because other operational areas are so focused on what their primary job is, we need to be Jacks and Jills of all trades, and talking to our communities, and knowing what those communities are. I've been proud to be a Jack of all trades– I don't see it as derogatory but complimentary. As a generalist, I know a little bit about a lot of things, and I know who to go to to find out the details. I think that's part of our role, and that really helps us, certainly with the pandemic, shift to hybrid or remote work when most organizations were on site. We've survived that, we've done very well. The technology we'll talk about in a few minutes has helped that, but how we engage with our communities has to continue, even if it changes how it's done.

JL: So, you're a strategist and senior subject matter expert. As you said, you know a little bit about all different parts of the organization, which is so critical. How does your expertise as a convener provide value, and even save the company money? Your work affects the bottom line.

KK: I think the longer you're at an organization, you never know everything but you tend to know more things, and hopefully your comprehension of risk management grows. So when you see something you say something. In this case, it's this mailing or this issue might cause this downstream impact because I've seen something like this before. Or a lot of what we're doing in my work with business resilience is watching for technology changes externally. What's going on, whether it's cyber attacks, ransomware, other technology challenges, us connecting this morning through technology, our members want to communicate with us in different ways. It's our role as convener to say, hey, this is going to be an issue. Let's bring these key folks together. We may not be the subject matter expert on the topic, but we can help coordinate and collaborate the resources so we have speaking points ready for a situation, or we can ramp up FAQs on a website because that's what customer care is going to need to answer questions, and the media is going to need that, and other key stakeholders are going to need the answers to questions. Part of it is the crystal ball work.

JL: And the foresight and judgment.

KK: And that doesn't happen from day 1, hopefully I'll be around here long enough to see enough technology changes and business changes, but it's also the Strategic Why. Don't just do a tactic. Ask "why are we doing this? What's the business purpose?" A lot of younger practitioners haven't been in the workplace. I think back to my first few jobs– if you don't do something a few times in a job that is cyclical, you know, something that happens year after year, you don't start to see the trends. Doesn't mean you're always gonna see them, but you're more likely to see them and prepare.

JL: When you're immersed in it.

KK: Or you can take a step back and say, here's all the ducks moving around, how do we get them in a row to support our mission, our purpose, our question at hand?

JL: Elaborate on that a little further. How does communications protect the organization? How do judgment calls come into play? That's something we do on a daily basis. We help our clients, your company, make important judgment calls that will ultimately protect their reputation and image and relationships with their key stakeholders. Maybe you can talk a little bit about your homegrown, your external communications review process, because I think that's really fascinating and something that I think would provide a lot of value to people watching this.

KK: External Communication Review, we call it, we built more than 20 years ago. As a large organization with multiple employee centers, multiple opportunities to do large mailings or do large emails, quality control became an issue. It was no longer send it down to the print shop, have everyone look at it, and do a manual "hey, that looked good. Did you call the phone number? Yep." So we built a policy to check our work through communications, legal, compliance, and a number of other key areas to call the phone number. But also we built a workflow tool that we're still using. We're exploring a new technology to move the workflow tool, but that allowed us 20 years ago to have a piece of content approved and reviewed by a person who wasn't in the building anymore. We were using technology and then putting that content, that large mailing into a database so that if we needed to find it a few months later to prove we did this mailing, or if a member called and said "hey, I got this letter," we have a way to look up and say "okay, I see what you received, here's what this means." It's context, which any of us as a consumer expect our insurance company, our credit card company, to know what they just sent us. Years ago, that wasn't easily available. But I've seen many other companies that still don't have a policy to check work before it goes, to create awareness… Think about if we do 100,000 or 200,000 piece mailing, and how many phone calls that might be. If customer care don't know if a mailing is going out…

JL: The whole thing has been…

KK: Right. Building this process has allowed us to give those key internal stakeholders a heads up and prepare and also contribute, oftentimes, in the writing and in the messaging so it minimizes potential confusion. That has saved us money, managed our reputation, because the fewer mistakes that go out, the fewer apology letters have to follow them, whether it's media relations, social media, or phone calls to 10,000 members trying to minimize those things, because that goes to the quality of what we do and also to our members, and also to our employees, most of which are members, and live in our communities. So it's kind of like, the rising tide that lifts all boats.

JL: Talk about trust, because all the things you're describing here are put in place to develop and maintain a very important trust with your key stakeholders, including employees, like you said, who are also members. How does that play into what you do?

KK: We have worked, certainly in our health plan but in our industry in upstate New York, mostly non profit health insurance, non profit hospitals, these organizations, we've been here almost 90 years, I used to work at Rochester General which is about 175 years old, so you have institutions that are trusted because of their longevity, but also they need to show up every day and maintain that trust. I think that's the challenge with certainly our industry, because most folks don't think about their insurer until they need to use their card because they have a claim, or they have an illness. If you're feeling great, and you don't think about it, it's a transactional type of relationship, and we're okay with that. But we want to make sure that when they do have questions we're there to advocate, clarify, connect the dots between member and provider communication and some of the other touchpoints that they might have questions, and that's a lot of what that ACR process does. When a mailing is going out to a provider's office, or thousands of providers, our provider relations rep is ready to explain that, and customer care is aware this mailing is going out to the doctors offices, because members, patients, will have questions about whatever is being communicated. It's kind of looping those back, which goes back to trust. Do they trust an answer, do they trust information they're receiving? I help cover our social media channels and every so often there are posts where people just want to inflame, not inform. That was the first part of your question– when you see something that is not only hurting the trust factor but also calls into question the information…

JL: And the credibility.

KK: And the credibility– we often have to have a judgment call. Do we reply or not reply? Or do we try to take it offline? If it appears to be a member we truly try to take that offline. We truly try to assist. But we also don't want the member to add more protected health information into the public view. That doesn't support them or help them. Oftentimes there's more going on than a simple Facebook post or tweet can ever answer, so if we don't reply that doesn't mean we're not trying to, but we're also trying to look at the different areas. It goes back to trust. If you're not paying such and such claim, how come you're not doing this, not doing that, what if I look at another company? Well, they're doing the same things because we're all following the same guidelines. Like you switch car insurance year to year for cost, the health insurance industry is not only complex, but there's a lot of parity. A lot of us are following the regulations in the states you're in, so you're not going to get a significantly different outcome someplace else.

JL: So really the way that you can differentiate your brand value is by taking those extra steps to make sure that at every touchpoint, that customer is walking away with a feeling of, wow, they're taking care of me. They understand my needs and they're responding.

KK: Yeah. We are blessed in the fact that we are the larger health plan in the majority of our service area. That doesn't mean we're the only game in town.

JL: Right, people have a choice.

KK: If they do switch, it's oftentimes because it's their employer's choice, not their choice. But the competition is also good quality, nonprofit plans. If you look at the quality measures for our service area overall, regardless of which company you're insured by, there's better clinical outcomes. The doctors and hospital systems are high quality. These types of things all play in, so when it comes down to trust, we've been here a while, we continue to be here, we're locally based– those are all factors in our brand value. Our new tagline is "Everybody benefits." It's an interesting one because it's not just the member who benefits from quality healthcare coverage and quality product and quality service. The community, because we're in it, benefits. The providers, continue to be providers because they're reimbursed for what they do. They're not doing it as charity, it is their job. So it's striking a balance. Healthcare delivery and healthcare is two sides of the same coin. You have to finance and deliver it, but it's still the same coin. It's a fun area to be in. I've been in health-related jobs since I came out of college.

JL: Tell me a little more about how you create that sustainable, collaborative communications infrastructure. I think that internal relationship building is so critical to what you do.

KK: I mean, part of it, again, goes back to getting to know people around the organization. Whether it's in your operational area or not, like I said, when I came here in 2000, I was used to a health system that was covering a few counties. We had 11,000 employees in that health system. When we came here and had half that many employees, I was like, oh, it's going to be easy. It's not. Because you have offices in major media markets in upstate New York with different things going on. Different weather. You could have somebody who has a snowstorm in one area and the other part of our service area is sunshine. We've had that. So we're not all in one spot, how do you get to know people? Long before the technology where we all put on headsets for the first time and have virtual meetings all day. It's curiosity. A bit part of corporate communications and communications overall is storytelling. So how do you find out what are the cool stories? Up and down, in our case, the thruway. What are people doing in different service regions? And what are they doing in their communities? It all goes back to that community value. Are they baseball coaches, Little League coaches, who are the skydivers in central New York that we want to tell stories about, because who jumps out of a perfectly good plane unless they like it?

JL: Not me.

KK: We have employees that have great passions outside of work, that bring that passion to work, and so we try to tell those stories. That not only adds to the credibility, but also to the localism.

JL: Talk a little bit about humanizing the organization, and the value of that.

KK: I'm sure you've heard it before, but employee picks get more clicks is our internal motto. As we were going from Wordpress, 5-6 years ago as an okay internal communications platform, we were looking at Sharepoint, this is pre-Covid but again, you need to have dollars and resources to pivot from one platform to another, but we were really looking at, how do we tell more stories about employees? How do we get more engagement? By consolidating the platform, building the resources and governance, and getting to know who the writers are in the organization– not just the corporate communications writers are, but anybody who likes to write a complete sentence, tell a good story, can and should be a writer. So we have folks up and down the thruway who share their stories, they may write their article, draft their article, we may interview them, any combination, as long as there's a photo of them doing something, like skydiving, the food pantry, the habitat house, or whatever it is, our engagement scores go up, because people are seeing people that look like them, doing things they wish they were doing.

JL: That crowdsourcing of content builds internal community because people want to be a part of it, and it builds engagement. I think that it also, again, it's very powerful and humanizing the organization and making customers feel that they're not just dealing with, you know, a brick and mortar business, you know, a glass tower.

KK: We work with our social media team. A number of us in corp comm cover social media channels. We take turns. Those of us that used to work in hospitals think about the 24/7 mentality. We do that as well but we also take these stories and say hey, you know, let's draft this for external sharing. We get the approval, not only does it get internal interest but external interest, and some of those great stories are also employee recruitment.

JL: People will see that you're a people-focused organization and they're going to want to be a part of it. It's definitely an attraction.

KK: We're offering customer care entry level jobs. What's going to differentiate us?

JL: My last question for you is, how did you manage through Covid in terms of keeping the communication going and presenting the organization as one that was very much in control?

KK: Like I said, we were still on Wordpress. A number of us on the team probably spent 2 months preparing, updating, those of us who had been through other types of crisis communications scenarios saw this as similar but different. We had a cyber attack back in 2015. Many of us responded to that and managed it as most insurance companies seemed to handle it around then. This was different. Not only health related, but unknown health, unknown outcome. So we had to really put together a communications plan for internal and external, but mostly looking at the internal because up until the day we tested our VPN network remotely, we'd never had more than 20% of our VPN traffic going. Day 1, when we tested and had more than 4,000 people on their laptops all remote, we were like oh! We can do this. But we weren't done. Our internal communications plans really ramped up. We externally had to put together Covid microsites with information for our members and our providers. We had parallel plans with that going on internally, we built an internal Covid page or section of our Wordpress site. All of a sudden, we had employees coming to this platform that they had occasionally engaged with– this was now their pipeline for information. We were doing more videos than ever before. We were doing more written messages, we were trying not to just email everything separately. We were trying to consolidate everything into a searchable platform, so if they didn't see the information right away they could still find it because it was valid, accurate, and maintained. Our numbers continue in late 2020 as we pivoted to Sharepoint for the homepage. We still had about 2 years of work after that because we had dozens of old intranet sites that were very siloed. They weren't on the same platform. So the sites didn't search across each other, so it was 2 years of cleanup. Working with people we had never physically met with to assess whether the data we had on our sites was sustainable, had a business purpose, we wrote and applied governance, we set up training channels on how to communicate internally and build an internal network of those writers, so that most operational divisions have 1-2 people who are the point people for their groups and information sections. But it's all on a common platform now, so we can teach all the editors at the same time something Microsoft might be rolling out on Sharepoint, and we can also see best practices because some sites might be trying to do a little more with how their page looks than another. Even though we have general standards we're still testing those because we're always learning. It's an internal learning community as well.

JL: I think one of the roles of communications is to continually learn and expand on what we know. All of us around the world learned a ton around the world during Covid. We were forced to– it was a whole different level of crisis. Anyway, we're at time. This was a great conversation Kevin. I'm so glad you were here. Thanks for sharing your great expertise.

KK: I knew it would be.

JL: Check out Kevin on LinkedIn, connect with him, and come back again sometime.

KK: Thanks a lot.