

## The New Age of the Communications Engineer

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to another edition of PR Patter. I'm Julie Livingston, president of Want Leverage Communications, and I'm here for a really exciting conversation on artificial intelligence. I want to introduce you to my amazing guests. Aaron Quicken is founder and CEO of PRophet, the first ever generative and predictive AI SaaS platform designed by and for the public relations community. The platform uses AI to help modern PR pros become more performative, productive, and predictive by generating, analyzing, and testing content that predicts earned media and sentiment. All of the things that we're always vying for.

Aaron is also CEO of the comms tech unit for the Stagwell marketing cloud, a suite of AI SAS solutions for PR, social media, and content creators.

A serial connector, Faye Shapiro launched CommPro, a B2B digital media platform with the mission to become an educational resource for anyone seeking the tools they need to build and promote their company message because successful companies need to be able to tell their story effectively. The content and events offered via CommPro provide the foundation for a communication company's success. Topics include artificial intelligence, blockchain, cryptocurrency, crisis communications, digital marketing and financial comms. So welcome to you both.

I'm really excited about this session because I have dipped my toe in the water of AI. I mean, you have to today. We all use it even though we may not even realize it. LinkedIn certainly - where I do a lot of my work - has a lot of AI tools. They can now even write posts for you. I'm very mixed about that, so let's start by, uh, learning a little bit about your backstory, Aaron.

How did you start PRophet and tell us more about your background?

Aaron: Well, Thank you for having me on, Julie and my friend, Fay. I'm president and a board member of Fay's fan club. Fay's the ultimate connector.

Fay: Well, vice versa, Aaron.

Aaron: What people don't know is that, you know, Faye knows when a volcano is going to erupt before a volcano actually erupts... So, I've been in the business for 32 years.

Aaron: I'm not a tech guy, even though I'm dressing kind of like one today. I'm a PR person, who has worked in corporate reputation management, crisis issues - a rand purpose guy. I left my agency four years ago. I felt as though AI would be super important, albeit even consequential in our business, to help us perform better.

Aaron: Our business is one based on gut instinct and obviously relationships. I'd like to replace guessing with knowing using data. How do I know who's going to be interested in my story idea and how do I make my story more interesting? The first is predictive. The second is generative. Aaron: People thought I was absolutely insane when I said I was going to leave my day job as an agency founder and have someone succeed me and my former agency(called KWT Global) and focus on AI. But you know, I think this is probably the one of the most exciting, most pivotal moments, in our business, in our, it's kind of like we're starting, like the first time we used email, right?

Aaron: It's so revolutionary. It's going to change everything. I often say that our business is one of innovation and starvation. The last major innovation was probably email which impacted our workflow and our productivity and our ability to perform.

Aaron: I'll start with this, which is generative AI. Like you said, having somebody write a post for you, whatever is completely overhyped. That is not where the value is. It's cool. It's interesting. But, that's not where we started. It's really about using AI to predict, to help, understand and thwart threats or, you know address brand safety, lean into trends, understand which audience will engage in what type of content; the generative stuff will settle down eventually.

Aaron: Nobody. is going to replace people. It'll help us in the same way that an assistant intern can help. It's not going to replace us. We still need humans. You need the human touch in what we do.

Julie: Fay, tell us a little bit about how you got started with CommPro because this is a go-to platform for any communications professional. I mean, if you're looking for information about what's going on in communications, then CommPro is your place,

Fay: Julie, thank you. And Aaron, the mutual admiration. I am your roadie and president of your fan club and it's great to be here today thinking about starting CommPro more than a decade ago.

Fay: There are a lot of similarities of then and now specific to AI and its impact on this industry and people being risk averse. I've grown up in this industry, had the great good fortune of being mentored by people of the greatest generation in PR, like Dan Edelman, Al Golan and of course, Harold Burson.

Fay: And being publisher of trades, including Jack O'Dwyer's. Newsletter, the Bulldog Reporter and then launching The Daily Dog. So my history is this industry and watching the evolution of this industry greatly influenced me. And when we talked about the impact of email on this industry and the different silos and such. When I was with Bulldog Reporter, I was having a conversation with Harold Burson, the man who brought together advertising and PR.

Fay: And he said, kid, it's time for a change in this space. It's time to break down the silos and provide a platform, communication and education for people across the communications

disciplines and you can't be risk averse and show people they cannot be afraid of change. That's how CommPro started.

Fay: started to be this platform where we're talking about the big issues and the changes that are needed. And Aaron Kwittken, the man who dubbed the term "comms engineer" which we're going to delve into, has been extraordinary for CommPro and our community. Aaron and I, for example, this past year did a roadshow of events where we talked about generative AI, about what PRophet is doing and how it's tapped into his innovation.

Fay: In your description of Aaron Kwittken, I think at the heart of it, he's an innovator. Aaron you're not just a communicator, you are leading the charge and of the many questions we encounter from the thousands of people this past year in the events we did in Chicago, Los Angeles, DC, and in New York, people want to know, they know they need to address artificial intelligence and its impact on what they're doing, but they're not quite sure yet how to grasp it.

Julie: And I look forward to this morning hearing your thoughts about where we are today versus a year ago when you first introduced the topic. Oh my gosh, the world has changed so much since a year ago. It seems like forever ago. So, Aaron, my first question is how can we all, how can communications professionals view AI?

Fay: As an ally for public relations, not an adversary because a lot of people I know are just freaked out. And I think a lot of it is because they don't, they just don't know exactly what I can offer them in terms of predicting predictiveness. And being able to target the media more effectively, do research.

Aaron: You know, as, as Faye was saying, we have, we're an industry of innovation starvation. And so this is the next step, the next phase, that we all must embrace. You know, if you widen the aperture just a bit, historically, we sell people in process, whether you're in an agency or you're in house.

Aaron: And trust me, I'm guilty as the next person. I have created all sorts of fun processes to get to the best narrative and how to come up with a resonance with the right audience. And that's still very important. What we haven't done is adopted a mentality of people/process/technology, and that's where engineering comes in.

Aaron: And I think agencies of the future and agencies now as well as comms departments, they're waiting for them, not as a cost center, but as an investment. And that's a huge cultural shift. Inside of our business, and it's going to take some time, it means that you need to be comfortable with data and actually recognize that data, because that's what we're really talking about right now, is your friend, because we're also using that data to help backstop historically in addition to generative data.

Aaron: This has been an industry of instinct, right? And communication and fear of data because, because, you know, we always like the joke, like people conflate data with math, like I

don't do math. Well, this is not math. This is how we become a little bit more declarative, and understanding whether or not a story is going to land, where it's going to land, how it's going to land, otherwise, you know, here to date, we just don't really know.

Aaron: So AI can do that because AI is iterative. Our business is iterative. We're, it's almost like we have a tool that's helping to iterate alongside of us to help us perform faster. But we shouldn't just focus on speed -because that could be dangerous- or workflow. I hate the whole automation thing because we're in a business of articulation, right?

Aaron: But it is going to be faster, but also can we perform faster and better? And will this be the same kind of force multiplier that email was interestingly, but at a higher level, and will it even force a business model change. I mean, I'm a recovered agency guy. Doesn't mean I'm not going to go back to the agency.

Aaron: I probably will one day because I love the trade craft. I love consulting. But I also see how it's hybridized right now. And what's interesting about the old agency model is that we take the long way of doing things because that's how we're compensated. But actually, if we can do things faster and be compensated for outcomes, not outputs, everybody wins.

Aaron: There's a mutuality there between a corporation or a client and an agency. And I think that AI is going to force that. I really believe that.

Julie: So what are, and what will be, what do you see as being the most practical uses, uh, use cases for the communications field?

Aaron: It's really about prediction. It's about iterating on content that you're creating, or you might be co creating with a generative tool. And there's plenty of generative tools out there right now and trying to figure out what's going to land and with what impact is predicting who's going to be interested in my pitch.

Aaron: Forget about press release generators. Those are BS. Press release generators write large, unless it's for a small business. It's actually offensive that people would even create one for large enterprises because that's like less than 1 percent of what we do. It's all about the art of the pitch.

Aaron: AI is going to. Force more perfection and greater placements in the art of the pitch. That's really what, why I built profit. I believe in this concept this year, if last year is the year of the communication engineer this year is going to be all about vertical AI and private AI.

Aaron: It's how you ring fence your content so you can stay compliant and you can also stay on the narrative that you created and create a little bridge to what's resonant in the marketplace. That's what, that's, that's the art of what we do as PR people, right? And how do you ring fences so you're not violating copyright, that you're staying compliant.

Aaron: And that you are improving your ability to engage with your key stakeholder, key stakeholder audiences. That is private AI. And I think some people call it custom GPT, whatever it is. That's going to be, it's going to happen this year. And it's all about verticalization. Faye, what are people saying on CommPro about AI?

Aaron: I mean, you, you always have your ear to the ground.

Julie: Faye, You talk to people from across the industry. What is their response to it? And maybe you know how they're using it.

Faye: It's a great question, There's still that risk aversion, an attitude that needs to be overcome. And I'm wondering within the agency world, if there is a willingness, what tools are you looking for? What resources, what kind of conversations are you having within your organizations? To address the willingness of people to start working with AI tools and build that into what I think we're calling structured storytelling or unstructured, right?

Aaron: Only in that, you know, the beauty of AI is you can dump a lot of ugly data, just word fragments, segments, things like that into a blank slate. And it can try to craft hallucinations about, by the way, a good thing, as long as there's a human that's the editor in chief. Faye, you know, you and I have known each other a long time, but what's interesting is agencies are reacting in a kind of stereotypical way.

Aaron: It's like when social media came on the scene, they're like, we can't have people on Facebook at work. I'm like, well, but clients are going to want to be on Facebook and Twitter and, or X or whatever. It's so weird. Now I look back on it. Even though I was one of those guys.

Aaron: I'm like, no Facebook at work. So agencies are like, Oh, here are our guidelines. We need to come up with a committee. We need to study this way. That's important. That's great. And then the larger holding companies are now like, Oh, we could do this. We can build this. We can do this ourselves. Some of them can. Most of them won't be able to.

Aaron: Why? Because if they are a publicly held company and they're not sequestered in their own kind of unit, They're going to very quickly recognize that software is not "set it and forget it." Software is a 24/7 endeavor. You're constantly enhancing, updating, and securing it. And it is expensive because you have to maintain it.

Aaron: And that's going to eat into billing hours. It means that eventually, if you're not going to have your own kind of lab to be able to create this, you need to co-create. You need to work with vendors. You need to work with partners. You need to actually customize what you're doing. And we need to get over the whole "us versus them" mentality.

Aaron: We're the only industry where it's like "winner takes all." Like Cision is the number one platform for everything. No, it's not actually. No platform, including PRophet, is the number one

platform for everything. That's impossible. You can't be good at all. You need to actually put it together into a tech stack.

Julie: How do you pick the right partners?.

Faye: There needs to be a willingness to play well to one another and find balance being able to plug in where there's great mutual support. One of the things that CommPro has done and what we're hearing is that we are inundated with people saying, writing about AI and the fear of losing their jobs and this is what you have to do, you have to have the conversation within agencies, you have to be talking internally, we're going to be, if we don't embrace it, if we don't come up with our own solution, as Aaron is saying, we will be left with.

Faye: So one of the things that CommPro has done, speaking about co creators, we started a new label for content called Co Creators. It's part of CommPro, where we're addressing a lot of these issues, specific to new partnerships, and new ways to factor in storytelling and just to start cost-justifying your existence.

Faye: That's the biggest question I hear. And Aaron, I heard this past year when we were on the road together that people are wondering, how do I validate my job? How do I validate my team? The whole idea of billable hours. Is this, is AI going to be that conduit to reimagine the whole agency billing model? Something that I know you've been talking about for quite a while.

Julie: How do you, Aaron and Faye, talk about partners or co creators? How do you identify the right kinds of partners to develop your AI capabilities with?

Aaron: First and foremost is making sure that, -in our world, we call it InfoSec - information security is in place. You make sure that your partner gives you all of their documentation that they had, they do something called penetration testing at least every quarter.

Aaron: And that's very simply where, you know, we hire white hat hackers to try to hack our system. I'm going to remember you're uploading, potentially and likely, you know material non-public information onto these platforms in the same way that you do for a wire service, right? So you need to make sure that security is important and also that there's an indemnification around.

Aaron: Plagiarism and violating copyrights and things like that. There are a lot of cool tools out there that are becoming more and more mainstream. We're building it into our platform as well as to make sure that if you are, attributing someone else's copy that you're actually putting it into quotes. Wherever you're citing it, you're sourcing things like that.

Aaron: I also think it's important that you never work on a platform that will email a reporter from that platform. That is insane to me. It is super lazy. I think a lot of people do it, though. You should always go back to your native email environment or however you communicate with

reporters. Do not allow a platform to communicate with a reporter on your behalf because then they have access to that information.

Aaron: It's like, it's like giving someone an opportunity to eavesdrop on your, and by the way, they're going to data mine that. And they're going to say, Oh, we're going to use it for good. Cause we're going to learn. That's proprietary. You own that very, very important information. We don't talk about that enough.

Julie: What, so what the hell is a communications engineer and how do you, how do agencies of all sizes kind of develop that role?

Aaron: Some of it's upscaling. Some of it is also making sure that in agencies, professional development initiatives that people understand they're comfortable with learning how to, um, put prompts together, whether to try to generate copy or content, that they're very comfortable looking at data around trends, and that they also have this mindset that before they do anything, before they send a pitch out, that they test the pitch first.

Aaron: To me, it's like pitching in the cloud. That's huge. And remember when we got into this business, I'm going to say this cause we're a similar cohort. I used to actually read what reporters wrote. I would take my time back then I would actually have to, you know, pick up the phone and call them.

Aaron: Nobody talks to me. Nobody picks up the phone anymore. I remember what my boss said. What are you afraid of? They can't punch you over the phone. I'm like, well, that's true. That is that being able to take rejection and being able to pitch something verbally is a lost skill. And it's never going to come back. It just isn't.

Aaron: So we're trying to replace that by going fast, going slow to go fast, right? We're going too quickly right now. We're just spamming the crap out of journalists. It's like throwing, you know, darts at a dartboard and we're sending press releases that we're not sending pitches out, you know, say we, it's not everybody, but I, because I wrote for The Drum and for Forbes, I had my own podcast.

Aaron: I still get pitches and they're terrible and their press releases and they don't do the research. They don't customize it. They don't personalize it. So a lot of this has to be a mindset that you are using technology to test what you're doing before you actually do it. And interestingly, my.

Julie: I have to ask you this, and I probably should have asked you earlier, but what led you to start PROphetin 2020? Well, was it before the pandemic? I'm just wondering.

Aaron: I thought you're going to ask me if this is my natural hair color. Because it is.

Julie: That was my next question.

Aaron: There was an internal competition at Stagwell - Stagwell merged with MDC. I'd sold my agency to MDC. Back in 2010, someone named Mark Penn came over, merged, created Stagwell, merged it with MDC. And he basically did this in an internal Shark Tank type competition with all the agency heads, advertising, PR, every social come up with an idea.

Aaron: It sits at the intersection of marketing technology. And I've been thinking about PROphet for a long time. And, I pitched it and they said, well, you know, whoever wins, we'll have an operating budget, the healthy operating budget to create the MVP -the minimal viable product - which we created in 2020, during COVID. I was still managing the agency at the time. . I was also president of my temple at the time. So there's a lot going on. It's like an octopus. And then we commercialized it and we started selling in 2021 and we really had a great tailwind in 2023. It was an incredible year. We have about 1200 users on the platform, about 40 customers. So it's really been an incredible and very, very humbling, very, very challenging venture because I'm trying to put everything that we do as the art of what we do and trying to back it with science.

Aaron: And I put it into a very intuitive, natural kind of workflow, which is very, very challenging, but I do believe it's the future.

Julie: That's great. So what are some small steps that comms professionals can take in, in getting more immersed in this space?

Aaron: First of all, subscribe to Bloomberg's AI journal. I think it's awesome, and also on LinkedIn, actually. It will help you to stay ahead. We have a newsletter called Sunday Brunch. If you go to our website, [PROphet.ai](https://PROphet.ai) you can sign up for our newsletter and it's all things. My favorite section is. Talk Nerdy To Me, just like talk dirty to me. I've got to explain that to everybody. It's like a very practical application and guide to what's happening in both our industry, the media industry and then outside industries of AI. Andrew Bruce of Publicis is somebody you'll want to follow.

Aaron: Experimentation, I think, is at the heart of it. Just don't, you know, chat GPT is a toy. It's fun. It's becoming better. People are not creating custom GPTs. But just be careful and don't put anything that is confidential unless you sign a large kind of S. L. A. Or agreement. I know it sounds obvious, but you know, people get caught up in it.

Aaron: Also, we haven't talked about this, but play around with tools like [beautiful.ai](https://beautiful.ai), I put together my PRSA Presentation in about an hour. It wasn't perfect. They got me 60, 70 percent of the way there before I had a professional designer make it a little bit better. I think that Adobe has made great strides with images as well and also it's ring fences, copyright protected. So play around both. With visuals, with video, with text, all these kinds of tools and just enjoy it and have fun with it and you'll set a line, you'll figure out what's going to be the best tool for you.



Julie: And do you believe that is the best way for agencies to dip their toe into, have everybody on the team kind of experimenting in a certain way? Or just the comms engineer?

Aaron: I think it's everybody. I don't believe in, "I only do social media." Everybody should be able to do a little bit of everything.

Aaron: You'll find your super skills somewhere, right? But I think everybody should be able to do a little bit of everything. Everybody should be exposed to this because if you are a social media person, there are influencer platforms out there. We have one, it's called PRophet Influence, where, you know, you're using AI to not just figure out who's, for discovery, who's the right influencer for your brand, but also for compliance and brand safety.

Aaron: There's a bunch of different platforms out there that can do that. We're talking about it more so in the earned media space, but there's research, there's earned, there's visual, there's video. There's influence. There's all sorts of different applications of AI right now that are out there.

Faye: So agency folks, what, what is the generational acceptance of AI we're talking about? And I think about people who come to our events, Aaron, we see from the top management to the practitioner to the assistant AE, what are the differences that you're seeing as far as the acceptance and embracing of AI.

Aaron: AI and tools within an agency or in-house team, you know, I hate to stereotype or to broadly generalize any cohort, but I will say that with some of the larger agencies, I think it's fear and complacency being replaced by greed. So senior people are gonna be like, how can I make more money with fewer people? I'm just being honest. Originally it was complacency and fear. And now it's like, wait a minute, wait, can I actually hit my EBIT (earnings before interest) goal? Younger cohorts, mid to junior, are recognizing that it just, it needs to be a skill like any other skill so that they can have a job, not because it's going to replace them, they recognize it's not going to replace them, but they recognize too, that it's a skillset, that they need in order to be able to land a job. And a good job. So that's, I think the differential I was pitching as one very, very large agency. I will not say their name. And they're like, Oh, this is so cool. They're like, we can't let our junior people see this or know about that. Really? They're already on it. Are you kidding? Like we had a free version for a while and I know exactly who was on it.

So, but that's all changing. It's all happening very, very quickly. Um, the speed at which this is happening is amazing. But again, I would caution to not worry so much about the generative. I think it's, I think the predictive stuff is particularly exciting.

Aaron: What's next is prescriptive and voice skills. And I think that's going to be really neat. You're already starting to see some of the voice skills, but prescriptive meaning. Can, after you generate a piece of content, after you test it, can the AI tell you how to change it so that one or two reporters or, or cohorts or influencers are going to be more receptive to that message?

The AI is going to be more prescriptive. We're not there yet. That neural network, that learning loop needs to actually be in full force. We're at the very beginning of it, but anytime I think, Oh, we're five years away, it happens to be like a year away.

Julie: That's pretty exciting. That is pretty exciting. Yeah. Well, thank you both so much for being with me today and talking about this important topic. How can people get in touch with you? Faye? FayeS@Commpro.biz. And if they have ideas for content, to contribute content? We welcome it. Editor@Commpro.biz or FayeS@Commpro.biz. We are always looking for content, both for CommPro and for the new publication, [cocreations.ai](https://cocreations.ai). I invite you to check out both of them. That's great. And Aaron, how do people get in touch with you? That Island of Anguilla is just killing it on domain registries right now. Great place to vacation too.

I am Aaron.Kwittken@PRophet.ai or aaron@aaronkwittken.com. Thank you both for your time today, and I'll see you all next time on another edition of PR Patter.