

I had a fascinating chat with John Della Contrada about:

- Crisis communications in higher education
- Aligning large communities with an overall strategic goal
- Brand management in higher education
- The balancing act of issue management in higher education
- How technology has changed and evolved communication in large communities
- Making judgment calls in times of crisis
- Being empathetic to universal issues while maintaining a brand's core values
- The intersection of digital communications and crisis communications

JL: Good morning everyone! I am so thrilled to be here with you today. I'm Julie Livingston of WantLeverage Communications, and I'm here for another installment of PR Patter where I have conversations with friends and colleagues across my public relations and marketing network. I'm thrilled today to have John Della Contrada. He is Vice President for Communications for the University of Buffalo. My husband is an alum of Buffalo so it's a school very near and dear to my heart. John was named VP for a University Communications in 2018 and he previously served as Associate Vice President for Media Relations and Stakeholder Communications. As Vice President, John serves as the university's spokesperson, and he's responsible for UB's strategic communications, including branding and marketing, digital and social communications, media relations, internal comms, crisis communications, and issues management. He holds a masters degree in Communications Management from Syracuse University's Newhouse School for Public Communications, which is where we met, and a bachelor's degree in English from SUNY Oswego. In case you didn't know, the University of Buffalo, UB, is the largest school in the SUNY system, with 32,000 students. UB is SUNY's flagship institution along with Stonybrook, as designated by governor Kathy Hochul. John's department is pretty extensive. It's composed of about 40 staff, and their responsibilities again include branding and marketing, internal comms, issues management, crisis comms, digital communications, including social media and web for the school. Today we're going to be talking about approaching issues management and crisis communications in higher ed, which is a pretty specialized area. John, I'm so delighted to have you with me today.

JC: Happy to be here.

JL: Your school is humongous. There are so many students. There are so many issues that come up. How do you define issues management in your world?

JC: Yeah, there are so many issues. That's the way it is for universities these days, especially public universities. We have a responsibility to communicate on a range of issues, we deal with many issues each week. In fact, just walking into the office today I was stopped by a person who said, "John, there's an issue we want to give you a heads up on. Can we connect with a member of your team so we can start strategizing the following message?" So issues management... An issue is basically a matter of concern that could be controversial, related to the university's position on a certain matter, but it also is something that has the potential to

impact a university's reputation or its operations, and its financial health. It could sidetrack strategic goals, affect your relationship with the community or elected community.

JL: Students, parents, I can imagine.

JC: Students, parents, with social media we hear from students and parents a lot when there are issues that affect them. Issues management basically is just sort of scanning the horizon, trying to be as aware as possible as to what those issues are and trying to get ahead of them as much as possible. It's a process for trying to identify those potential issues, those vulnerabilities that could affect the institution. And you're trying to plan to get ahead of the issue, or trying to understand the university's position on that issue, so it's in the early stages... an effort trying to resolve an issue before it gets to the public.

JL: Right, before it bubbles to the top.

JC: Before it bubbles to the top. We spend a lot of time trying to learn about an issue so it's important to have good relationships with people around the university. The process involves... We have a social media team that's on 24/7 that's monitoring social media, what issues are on social media. We work closely with university leaders and administrators across the university, who, as I mentioned, early on in this conversation they come to us every day or what seems like every day with things within their area that might bubble up as an issue. We try to strategize with them about taking steps to resolve the issues with the stakeholders, and if that's not possible, then what's the university position on the issue, let's get our talking points together, let's get our position statement together, let's be ready to communicate in case the issue does become public and become something that's affecting the university.

JL: So for how long have you had a role for issues management at the university, and how do you start that up? How do you, obviously you saw a need for it, but I'd love to hear more about how you developed that role.

JC: Yeah, issues management in higher education has been gaining an importance and resourcing for the last 15 years. Probably about a dozen years ago, one of the pioneers and leaders in the field was University of Michigan's Public Affairs office. We talked to them closely about how they staffed their issues management functions, so I would say probably in 2011, 2012...

JL: So really when social media started to become unavoidable.

JC: Right. There's a lot of scrutiny of higher education. What's its value, what about debt, what's your position on social issues, that sort of thing. Now that faculty, staff, students, stakeholders, community members have access through social media to describing their positions, we found ourselves more happy to respond to those issues and help build those relationships and help explain the university's position on those issues. So we started an issues management council at the university, which brings together people around the university who have responsibilities in

areas that might involve issues or controversies. There's members of our student life team, there's members of the university's police, our legal counsel, there's community relations people. So we would meet monthly and discuss what issues we're seeing on the horizon. And then I was on the council as well, and we had a couple of staff people. And at the end of the meeting we would say, these are our most pressing issues, let's get a team together to focus on that.

JL: So the importance of that, that group, was to bring together different perspectives. All of those people, ear to the ground, really listening and doing deep listening to really get to the heart of what's going on.

JC: Yeah. And when you're in isolation doing that, you don't fully understand an issue, and we found previously there were gaps in our response, we didn't realize that certain stakeholders were affected by an issue because we didn't talk to enough people in the university to get that perspective. So it really helped for fully understanding an issue and the potential impact. It was really beneficial in building trust in relationships around a big university. And so people would trust us with confidential information knowing we could help them get ready.

JL: Do you think that the branding of higher ed institutions has come more into the fore during this time? The time period that you talked about, the last 15 years, than ever before?

JC: Oh, definitely. You have to more clearly communicate your value proposition to parents and students. They have access to a wide array of information to compare and contrast universities and colleges so you have to tell them in more emotional terms, in more definitive terms, what the experience will be like at the university, and build your brand from there. And as you mentioned there's so much more social media out there, there's so much more information about statistics about a university— graduation rates, crime on campus, that sort of thing. So you have to pay attention to that as well. And as a part of your brand you have to show you're empathetic to those issues and that when a parent trusts their child to come to a university you have resources in place to make sure they thrive.

JL: I must say that I've been so impressed by UB's marketing. As I mentioned, my husband Peter is an alum. When we get the print magazine – it's funny, it's print – so I don't read it online. I literally read every page. I find that, you know, it's all about innovation. And I really just find it riveting. I don't even read my own undergraduate newspaper.

JC: We do a lot of work with it. We did launch a brand initiative for the university in 2016, really our first comprehensive brand initiative. We found that there was some confusion about the university's place in higher education. People didn't realize we were one of America's leading public research universities so our brand has really built upon some of that innovation that takes place at the university and how it improves lives, how it provides opportunities for students to pursue some really interesting academic projects and programs, etc. And telling those stories about the innovation and impact on the world.

JL: The stories are great. It really makes you feel so excited about like, if I were looking for a university to go to for my child or if they were looking, I mean, it's like, wow, I want to be a part of that. That is like a hub of thought leadership and future thinking.

JC: That's great to hear, Julie. It's about the people, too. We have some great people here. They collaborate across disciplines. They have a passion for what they do, so we try to bring out those stories too, about what motivates them at the university.

JL: Well, you do it really really well I must say. You deal with so many different kinds of issues, broad spectrum. What are some of the most challenging ones that you've dealt with recently on campus?

JC: You might have seen that a lot of universities and colleges in national coverage that there are controversial speakers that come to a campus often with political agendas, and their goal is to talk about their agendas but also to stir the pot. As a public university we've had a few of those instances over the last few weeks, where speakers are invited to our campus by student groups with certain political persuasions and as a public university we have an obligation to uphold freedom of speech and the first amendment, so we can't tell the students to cancel their event. But at the same time we fully recognize that these speakers don't, some of the values, some of the statements they make, some of the divisiveness...

JL: Right. They're not in alignment with UB necessarily.

JC: Yeah, not in alignment with our core values around diversity and inclusion, etc. So it's kind of a balancing act. We have to say we're obligated to uphold under law freedom of speech, and that at the same time we're also free to express ourselves as well as a university and state very clearly that these speakers don't represent the values of the university. Long after they're gone, the university will continue to uphold its values. But when you're in the midst of it, it creates a lot of disruption on campus.

JL: I'm sure it does.

JC: Students intellectually understand the first amendment. But they also have real feelings of threat and emotional harm at times when a speaker comes to campus and is saying things that they find threatens their security or their beliefs or way of life, so we find ourselves trying to reassure students that we're protecting freedom of speech and that's a tough balance to strike sometimes. You have to recognize that emotionally these are issues that are really going to affect people in different ways, so you have to really communicate to students that you're there to support them and that the campus remains a welcoming place for them. That's been one of the tougher ones. I'm sure you've seen the news coverage at other universities.

JL: We live in such a polarized society now it's not surprising. The other big issue that we read about in the paper is mental health and this has become so challenging for parents, students,

and kids. I'm sure for universities, because first of all, you have such a big population, how do you serve all those students? And how do you handle that?

JC: Well, you're right. There's definitely an increase in student desire for mental health resourcing. Students today that enroll in the university have more stress in their lives for striving to achieve academically, socially, trying to fit in...

JL: Trying to be perfect, like what you see on Instagram.

JC: Right. The social media certainly makes matters worse. The pandemic exacerbated things as well, they're kind of isolated, so some of it is getting them back to an in-person experience which leads to some stress as well. So we did hear from our students that they wanted more mental health resourcing. So that was part of our sort of issues management's scanning and we talked to our student life team about what resources and how they're addressing this sort of epidemic in higher education with mental health, what resources they're investing in, how we can help communicate to students what those resources are and how they can access them. For example, in the pandemic we focused a lot on obviously protecting yourself from Covid, and we had a lot of messaging on hand washing, and vaccination, etc. Very public on campus. It helped us really respond well to the pandemic. But we heard from students, your messaging does not include enough messaging about mental health.

JL: Wow.

JC: So they told us explicitly that we need to do more. So my team expanded our messaging to include public messaging about public health and what resources there are and we made sure that we had some digital signage around campus. We talked to the student newspaper about resources that were available, we worked with the marketing team in our student life division to help develop some additional marketing messages. We did a deep dive with the counselors on campus to learn what they're doing. Of course you have to recognize that this is a national phenomenon as well.

JL: The pandemic did not help.

JC: The pandemic did not help. We're obviously back fully in person now, but students are still coping with that. Some students, you know, obviously some of their high school careers were interrupted, and they spent a lot of time at home so they're still getting their footing with in person instruction. And perhaps there were some gaps with their in person high school instruction as well. So there's a range of issues that are resulting from the pandemic that we're dealing with.

JL: I think what you're saying here is that it is so important for communicators, whether you're working in the public or private sector, to really listen to your key stakeholders and what they want, and continually ask them and notice what they're saying back to you and then respond to it.

JC: Yeah, exactly. It's the two way communication thing. We have to really listen to what they're saying. And you have to surface that with leadership. So they're informed as well, and then you can help guide them on what messaging leadership may want to convey. We have a great relationship with the chief of staff, the office of the president, and the provost, and we're constantly talking about what we're seeing and what we're hearing from our stakeholders.

JL: So you're constantly fine-tuning it and refining it.

JC: Constantly doing that. We're always vetting information. We don't want to have information that's incorrect. You know, as a public university, we understand that our information is available to the public. If you want information about the university, you can file a freedom of information request. So that kind of keeps you on your toes as well. You realize you might need a lot more transparency than a private institution would.

JL: Right. So John, tell me how issues and crisis management intersect? Sort of like a Venn diagram, if you think about it that way.

JC: Yeah. I mean, a crisis is something that consumes a lot of your time and resources. It's something that comes very public and has a major impact on the life of the university. So if you're not managing an issue well or you're not aware of an issue percolating on campus or the community it could become a crisis very quickly. So issues management as you say is kind of an early warning system. So my team, we do oversee the crisis communications function at the university and the issues management function. So we're able to sort of give advance warning about some issues that might turn into crises, so we can quickly pivot to crisis mode if we need to. But our goal is to really keep things from escalating and making sure that a crisis is not interfering with operations. One really great thing about issues management— when you're managing it correctly, when you're monitoring, when you're getting ahead of issues it frees up the time of your leadership to focus on your strategic objective. And they're not devoting their resources and mental energy to something that could have been prevented if you'd just done a little bit more of advance work.

JL: It's a time saver for sure. A resource saver.

JC: Yeah, it's a resources saver, and it helps you move ahead with your key objectives. It's very valuable to this university and I'm proud of the work we've done. We've hired new people in my division just to focus on issues management, that's how important and how seriously we take it.

JL: Things happen, right? Sometimes we can't forecast, you don't foresee a crisis happening. For example, the shooting last year in Buffalo at the supermarket, which was so tragic and awful.

JC: Terrible.

JL: So how does your team staff up for crisis communications?

JC: Well, you know. Everyone on my team has a role and it might be a primary role or it might be a backup role. So it's clearly defined the roles and who has staffed those roles. We have a crisis communications manual that we update every semester, and so we drill on those roles. We do at least two tabletop drills a year. We also do drills with other units across the university. When you're doing that, drills can be a little bit stressful, but it gives you a chance to sort of think in real time and under a stressful situation. My office helps out a lot with emergency notifications. We have a system for sending out emergency notifications if there's an issue that threatens people's health and safety. We have a whole procedure for that working with the university's police or incident management team. So we drill on that every week— somebody will take a turn sending out messages to a select group of people, and it helps you perform in a real emergency situation when it's very stressful, when you have to think and operate the software and get out the message to people in the correct way so every week you're practicing that and it really helps when you have to use it in a real situation. We take crisis communication very seriously. Our division has risen to a level where we're viewed with a lot of confidence with the university's leadership where we're constantly preparing, constantly drilling. You have to recognize too that it's stressful for people too so you need backups, people have their lives, so you have accommodations.

JL: Sure. You talked about some of the best practices you put into place. What are some of the others, the pitfalls, that occur? That you try to prepare for the best you can?

JC: One of the things we do which is a little bit unusual I think is we publicly post our positions on a wide range of issues, our policies around alcohol on campus or on hazing on campus, around the use of animals in research, etc. and we publicly post our position on that. So if news media or members of the public become aware of an issue on campus want to find out more information they can go right to this public information, learn more about the university's position, it keeps us and helps us respond quickly. News media for example, will go right to that page and they quote from that without having to call us even on a weekend so it helps us respond as quickly as possible. You know, the pitfalls— just this past weekend there was... social media creates so much...

JL: Angst.

JC: You've gotta really think carefully on how you want to respond. We had a rumor that got generated with a person with a gun on campus that quickly through text messaging and on social media that became an issue that we had to respond to. I happened to be on campus for an event and we quickly huddled with university police and we quickly decided that this is raising to a level where concerned parents are starting to call in that we should put out a university alert. We did put out an alert, just saying it was a false rumor, the calls stopped coming in right away. There's also judgment calls. We don't want to overuse the emergency notification system because people stop paying attention to it if we use it too much, so we're kind of careful about how we use it. And as you know, as someone with experience in crisis

communication, that you're not speculating. You want to make sure you have the information as accurately as possible before you start communicating about it. You want to make sure you're speaking with one voice. We work very closely with, all of our schools have communicators... One of the mistakes we made early on in our issues management process we weren't keeping them abreast of the university's positions or our talking points so we learned that sometimes we have to share that information. Sometimes there's trust involved, you're sharing sensitive information sometimes. But it helps them respond on their own when they get calls from alumni or faculty, staff, or students who start asking, what's the university doing about xyz?

JL: John, you are just a fountain of information and knowledge and I'm so grateful to have had this conversation with you today and reconnect.

JC: Definitely.

JL: Thank you so much. I will see you next Wednesday for another installment of PR Patter.