

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 Melissa Vela-Williamson, an accredited, internationally recognized public relations expert, national industry columnist, podcast host, and author with two decades of multicultural and integrated communications experience. Currently, Vela-Williamson serves as a consultant, trainer, and account director at her public relations firm, MVW Communications.

Livingston and Vela-Williamson talk about the importance of inclusivity and representation and how it relates to public relations today, authenticity in diversity, equity, and inclusion messaging, and how identity is reflected in the workplace.

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“Our job as communicators is to make sure that the silent, unheard, quieter, midstream voices are heard, because we are the mainstream. And that’s the big “aha” for a lot of people– where people ask, ‘Why are you getting into the space of intersecting diversity, equity, inclusion principles with PR principles?’ Because if you look at it by the numbers, the United States is more multicultural than ever based on our last census results.”

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“If you are doing public relations in a proactive, intentional way, then that means you’re focused on building relationships.”

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“Don’t go online and get stock photos. Take photos of real life mentors and volunteers and teachers and whatnot, so that people see themselves and know someone and connect to that story better. Because there’s so much power in knowing someone like you who’s doing something.”

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“Asking really matters because that’s so much great data that you can do something good with.”

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“If you put yourself in different environments and dynamics, it gets you really thinking about them more consciously.”

Transcript:

Julie Livingston:

Morning everyone. It's Julie Livingston with Want Leverage Communications. I'm thrilled to be back for another edition of PR Patter, my weekly podcast where I speak to marketing and public relations experts from across my network and beyond. I am so thrilled today to welcome Melissa Vela Williamson. Melissa is an accredited, internationally recognized public relations expert, national industry columnist, podcast host, and author with two decades of multicultural and integrated communications experience. Melissa serves as a consultant, trainer and account director at her boutique PR firm, MVW Communications. She has directed communications initiatives for more than a hundred brands over the course of her career. And with unique experience in internal communications and diversity, equity, and inclusion in that sector, Melissa leverages her PR expertise and acumen as a certified diversity professional to create social good. Her book is called Smart Talk, which was published in October 2022 and quickly became an Amazon bestseller. Go Melissa! For more information on her services, go to mvwthreesixty.com. Welcome to the broadcast! Melissa, I'm so glad that we could do this today. You know, diversity, equity and inclusion, we call it DEI, in our business has become such a hot topic right now, and we're seeing it in the workplace in a way where companies are trying to carve out opportunities for women, creating a pathway to leadership positions for women, but also for people of diverse backgrounds, including sexual orientation. All of this has come to affect the way we communicate– the way companies communicate to their employees, as well as other key stakeholder groups. It's a tricky and slippery slope– let's put it that way. And companies really need to get it right. We've certainly seen so many that don't get it right or hit some bumps along the way. Talk a little bit about the importance of inclusiveness and communications today, and why it's finally on the radar of companies and brands.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Thank you, Julie. First, thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be your guest and have this conversation with you. It pains me that this still seems like such a novelty, or it's finally on the radar. I'll be very forthcoming in saying that throughout my career, which is two decades now, the popularity of diversity and inclusion and now equity just kind of ebbs and flows. For a lot of us in the communication space, I've seen some awakening, particularly after the Black Lives Matter movement and whatnot. I'm in Texas, and literally this morning in the newspaper, I read about how our governor is trying to do away with some DEI initiatives and public entities, and universities. There has been this push-pull dynamic probably forever. Where it comes from, in my opinion, is that we're still wired. Yes, we've evolved as humans over the years, but our brain is still wired to look for safety, right? Part of that is that we've got that tribal mindset like we want to belong to a group and we've got cave people brains that are still looking for... “Am I part of this group, or that group? You're different than me. Is that safe?” That's kind of the basis of where all this angst comes from.

Julie Livingston:

We're living in such a polarized society now. Politics are so emotionally charged. People are

saying they can't even be friends with people who have different political viewpoints than they do. It's a really intense time.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

It is, but it also isn't, Julie. Here's what I wanna share, which is why I'm delighted to be talking with you about this topic. I do a lot of research about diversity and inclusion, and underneath that culture and how people think, what they value, which drives how they operate, right? So if we understand human motivation and behavior, we will be much better communicators because we can move with what drives people. I will tell you, if we're just talking about those of us in the United States, most people live right in that middle. It's really a case-by-case basis on how we pick and choose who we vote for, sometimes even when, and how people, you know, choose to align with a brand or organization, whether or not they vote, get engaged, or get vaccinated, right? What we hear are the extremes and the louds in our society.

Julie Livingston:

That is very true.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Our job as communicators is to make sure that the silent, unheard, quieter, midstream voices are heard because we are the mainstream. That's the big "Aha!" for a lot of people. Why are you getting into the space of intersecting diversity, equity, inclusion principles with PR principles? If you just looked at it by numbers, the US is more multicultural than ever, especially considering our last US census results. And that's with an undercount. A lot of people did not identify. It was a pretty tricky time with the president who was at the helm at that point to come out, especially if you were in the Latino community and necessarily raise your hand to put in that data, right? There were a lot of question marks about that. Even with the undercount, for those who did report, we're more of a multicultural society than ever.

For those who identify as white— that population decreased in states like Texas, there's no longer a Hispanic minority. Exactly. We're exactly even. When we're just looking at terminology, the US census dropped the use of majority minority as a noun, right? If we were talking about the number of people or a group, we might say the majority of people, but we wouldn't say minorities anymore. I'm monitoring public sentiment, but also terminology and how that's being used. As we change as people and evolve and identify with multiple identities, some things are gonna resonate with us that are new and some things are gonna no longer work for us that, you know, we've been doing for a long time.

As PR pros and communicators, we have got to continue to tailor our approach, our strategies, our messaging, and the channel usage based on who we're working with today and who those people will be tomorrow. I'll tell you, it's a plus society, and we all have multiple parts of being in our identity. We have to find the parts that resonate with people. I focus on inclusion amongst all these things because that's where most people feel like that change is made, when you make people feel like they belong. Everybody wants to belong.

Julie Livingston:

I've been doing research on belonging. I write a lot for C-level executives, and strategize on their LinkedIn content and do their ghostwriting. Belonging is one of the most important topics that we get so much traction on, especially on LinkedIn. Audiences want to feel they belong to an organization or a particular group within their company they work for. It's such a key factor in motivation and ultimately productivity and engagement. So I couldn't agree with you more. You talked about this a little bit, but maybe you could elaborate on your book. You present a Venn diagram which illustrates the intersection of PR and DEI communications. Can you explain that in further depth for us?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

I actually have two different models in the book, and I absolutely was inspired by Jeanie Dietrich's peso model. I'll say that because sometimes you just need to make an infographic for people to get it.

Julie Livingston:

Lovely.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

We're visual beings, and you know, like Jeanie, I thought, well, let me just show how these work together. I will release the Venn diagram on my blog officially next month when we do a sneak peek of chapter six. If you can see it here, it's on page 144, in the chapter about tailoring for multicultural needs. Essentially, I'm showing you that if you are doing public relations in a proactive, intentional way, then that means you're focused on building relationships. You're focused on ethical advising. You're doing strategic marketing communications, which is multi-channel tailored messaging for those channels and the different cultural groups on those channels and how they behave. Right? DEI principles, like appreciating and leveraging differences as well as providing resources to bridge any gaps and shore up needs.

We certainly don't want to tolerate people. We want to respect them. That's where I'm pushing our industry to think a little differently, right? When you do both sides of that communication it intersects naturally to make better, stronger relationships. It builds goodwill that helps build sustainability for businesses because people are changing. We have got to evolve our organizations and our communications to show and illustrate who our organizations are in order to be more aligned with people and what they care about. That also helps with reputation management and avoiding totality.

Julie Livingston:

I have found in my work that and perhaps you have too, that one of the things that really helps with developing stakeholder relationships and making sure that communications is in alignment with their needs is when the human resource department and the public relations or communications and marketing department collaborate and work together. Because the HR team has a certain perspective of the people, right? As in, who's being hired and who's on the team and what their attitudes are, what their engagement level is, etc. Then the communications

team knows about how to kind of develop that messaging so it's in alignment.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Well, let me add to that. So I worked inside a corporation, and the larger the corporation and the larger the employee base, the more likely you are to have separate departments. I talk a lot about moving forward in this concept of integrated marketing communications, to not only integrating the parts that we think about externally, but internal communications, right? We have to build those brand advocates, and build belief from the employees who illustrate what we do and what we care about as an organization, but also integrating with DEI because I, those corporations often have a communications department, and then that's usually internal communications or maybe benefits communications or HR communications, right? Then you have human resources, then you have public affairs or public relations, then external communications. Then you have advertising and marketing in their own department.

They do not often work together. And a lot of the work I do as a consultant is bring together different departments and say: "We should plan this together. What does that look like in your world? And can we make space for it on social? Can we make space for it in the employee newsletter? Where would this best be served up?" But then DEI is often on the island all by themselves. A lot of organizations, DEI professionals or that department, it's going to be more closely aligned with human resources. And let's be honest, human resources are often in place to protect the organization, right? Not always the employees. That was certainly my lived experience, and it's also been other types of experiences that I've researched and learned about. That was really tough for me when I worked in DEI departments in a corporations. I think I was just a little ahead of my time. A couple years ago I noticed that about me. I'm a kind of a pacesetter, which isn't always comfortable. But I'll say that, you know, having these big ideas to really make change— there's times where our organizations are not ready for it. But it's our job to keep having them make those educated choices.

Julie Livingston:

It's important to actually ask the tough questions. Whenever you prepare anybody in an organization you know, for whatever they're doing, whether it's writing a memo, or sending an email blast, or giving a presentation or setting up a new employee initiative, you know, it's our role as communication specialist to pose those tough questions and make sure the people who are sending out those messages are doing it the right way and are comfortable doing it. Talk a little bit about authenticity, because I do find that some companies are better at dealing, you know, addressing the DEI, and certainly the inclusiveness issue better than others because it really has to come from the top. And it has to really be embedded in the culture.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

That's very, very tough because organizations are made of people and people are flawed. We all are. Right? In fact, I remember I was telling my husband just this morning, you know, we always talk about our lived experiences and our families and, and our mother and our father, and there's always jokes about that. But, you know, I'm a mother and I say, you know, I hope that one day my kids aren't saying x, y, z about me. But I am flawed. I expect some of my

mistakes will come up. That's the way our organizations are too, right? So yeah, the authenticity for me— it's what can you do in this space that is aligned with your organizational values and is sustainable. So many people made these commitments in recent years that now those of us who are kind of watching and measuring for that are noticing that those commitments aren't being fulfilled. You didn't walk through that path that you set out. And so it's really about, you know some of the origin principles of PR that Arthur Page has. Those seven principles. One of them says that building trust is a matter of not just saying something, but actually following up and doing it. Sometimes it's these little bitty baby steps that we can take that make all the difference. One of them is representation, and how you actually show it.

Julie Livingston:

Are you walking the talk?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Well, sometimes it's so easy, right? There's a lot of low hanging fruit in this face. So part of it is visuals. Like, when's the last time you looked at your marketing photos? Is that photo library representative of actual customers or students?

Julie Livingston:

Right? What are the optics? What are the optics of your initiative?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

I was reading a book to my son just the other night, and this hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt pretty bad about it as a person, but just more about where our society is at. Just reading him a book about a little girl in the book writing thank you notes to everyone, and she wrote a thank you letter to her teacher and the illustrator drew a male black male teacher. My brain went, oh, different! Before my unconscious brain did. Why are you recognizing that it is different? Right? I appreciate the illustrator and author and publisher from going, we're going to change that narrative in our small way by showing this— as in, what we want to see more of in this world. For example, as I know there's a big call to action from even nationally, like My Brother's Keeper and there's different organizations in my market that are looking for more male teachers, men of color to teach, right? Because there's so much power in knowing someone like you who's doing something.

Julie Livingston:

Role modeling.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Exactly. So sometimes as communicators, the images we use, and the talent, you know, that we put up in our stock photos that we make for our organization... Like, don't go online and get stock photos— take photos of real life mentors and volunteers and teachers and whatnot, so that people see themselves and know someone and connect to that story better. The words we use, just be more careful and thoughtful about them. There's a spectrum of DEI and I am, I believe, in the middle. I'm looking for majority consensus, because you're not gonna make everyone

happy in this world, especially when it comes to DEI or a more inclusive type of communications. But you're looking for tailoring for your stakeholders, for your target publics, who you want to connect with, and then you research them and even ask them, right, what channels do you like? What programs would resonate with you? What makes you feel like you belong and are a part and respected in this organization? Asking really matters because that's so much great data that you can do something good with.

Julie Livingston:

How can companies sort of take a DEI audit to get started and take baby steps toward really making a difference and positioning themselves well?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

I will say, it's just communication, planning and strategic planning. There's two very different things we're talking about here. A DEI audit may have to do with the makeup of your organization. Who's in that C-suite room? Who's on your board, right? Who are the real influencers within the organization? Who can make that kind of change? That's kind of the people or human resources approach. And then there's the actual communication approach, right? Where we're looking at the terminology, the copy, the messaging, the visuals, right? What we're actually promoting here. There are tools for DEI communications approach and frameworks, and I can work with clients on that. But essentially it's just really looking through visuals, copy and thinking about diversity as more than just skin color, or what we see.

We want to respect diversity in terms of education. Most people in the US don't have a bachelor's degree or above. About 70% of those in the US do not have a bachelor's degree. A lot of communicators who are in professional roles do have their bachelor's or above, so you're talking about a smaller subset, right? Of those in the US who we are writing for and about, and two, those who don't have that same education level. Are we even appreciating educational diversity within our stakeholders or our employee group, for example? You're trying to be too smart in your writing or your communication, and people don't understand. Can we be more literal? Can we be easier to approach and understand? So there's a lot of different pieces and I write about a lot of them.

Julie Livingston:

What companies do you think are doing it right?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

I think doing it wrong that's good. Yeah. It's very tough because by whose standards, right? I'll say that I really like the attempts and the efforts that I see Disney trying to do. They're not gonna make everyone happy. They make amends for it, but that makes other groups upset, right? But I would say the majority that are mainstream— those theme parks are full, those movies are watched, I like the effort they're making in having more heroes with different backgrounds of different colors.

Julie Livingston:

They're seeing that a lot.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

They're making those effort. And I think that it's as it's making people question, why am I reacting to that? So for example, the live action little mermaids coming out, and I'm excited to see it, and I know it's really interesting the conversations that I've had and I've seen online and had with others about, well, why did they pick, you know, for Ariel the Little Mermaid to be a different skin color or tone than what the original drawing was? That can be very hard for people because you read a story book, you watch a film, and let's just take like any ugliness out of it. You're asking us not to take what we saw in animation and make it literally the same.

Julie Livingston:

Not to replicate it.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

If we just put the emotion out of feelings of racism, if we're just thinking that way, then there's a reaction, but I think there was intentionality for why they did that and having us question and say, why can't we change this up? It was a drawing. Right? Or maybe the majority of drawings back then were like this. I like the effort they're making and I appreciate that. They're not always going to make everyone happy, but I think they are revolving with society, so I appreciate that.

Julie Livingston:

They really set the tone for so much of the entertainment industry and certainly the toy industry. You know, it's going be interesting to see what happens as a result of that film's release anyway.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

I've seen some Black-focused organizations, Black community organizations, like there's one called the Lemonade Circle. I'm so sorry if I got that wrong, but I'm seeing your logo. Yeah, yeah. They're in San Antonio, and they're having a fundraiser around it for their girls.

Julie Livingston:

Isn't that great?

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Black girls in the community. When the Warrior came, came out, like we went and saw it, and I thought that was one of the most inspiring, empowering films I've ever seen in my life as a woman. I brought my daughter to it and color had nothing to do with it, right? I identified strongly with the female character. So every day there's different points where the dominant factor of our culture or identity piece is going to come out in us, right? Maybe today you really feel like a PR pro, or you really feel like a mother or a parent, or it's really about being a good partner, whatever that is for you. It's interesting to see if you put yourself in different environments and dynamics, it gets you really thinking about them more consciously.

Julie Livingston:

Melissa, this has been such a great conversation. I've learned a ton and I recommend Melissa's books. So go out and get your copy if you haven't read it already. I hope you'll come back again so that we can continue this conversation.

Melissa Vela-Williamson:

Would love to, Julie and I look forward to having you on my Smart Talk series podcast soon.

Julie Livingston:

Great. Thanks so much everyone. See you next time on another episode of PR Patter.