

CIPR Podcast Episode 4 - transcription

Andy Green

Hello, and welcome to this edition of Engage. My name is Andy Green and we're in conversation about purpose. Purpose and social purpose have continued to capture the attention of the C-suite and boardrooms, but what exactly is it?

Purpose, is it a fad or profound new dimension to public relations and communications practice? Is it just fluffy, hippy talk or central to what we do? How should any practitioner engage with the issue or explore new ways of doing, and doing things differently? What role can PR and comms teams play in supporting their clients and organisations to be more purposeful?

Anthropologists have a concept called liminality, describe a time where the old rules no longer work and new ones need to be written. We aim to explore within the sphere of liminality the misconceptions around purpose and why, in a post-pandemic world, purpose has emerged as an even stronger imperative.

Andy Green 1:04

In this episode, we welcome our guest, Matt Appleby, Director of Grow Social Capital, that works to create social change and build communities of changemakers through harnessing social capital; Ben Caspersz, Founder and Managing Director of Claremont, a behaviour change communications agency that helps governments, charities, and brands solve real world problems. And Shannon Walker, founder of agency social disruption that delivers purpose-driven and disruptive digital storytelling.

If we could start maybe by way of introduction, tell us how did you get engaged with what is called purpose? Shannon, I mean, I know that you had, what many would consider a dream job, working for a luxury brand. But now you're running your own agency. Tell us how you made that journey?

Shannon Walker 1:53

Definitely a dream job, indeed, and I'm so grateful for the wonderful brands I've worked on. But to put it in a short way, my journey and purpose started with two things - frustration and a massive leap of faith. And to give a quick overview, I've been in the industry for eight years. I've worked with amazing brands, but whilst I have loved working in comms, the lack of diversity and having to market to consumers, it's kind of fuelled mental health problems, social injustice, amongst other issues, have been a real big frustration throughout my entire career. So rather than staying frustrated, a concept of social disruption was born out of my desire to create more purpose for my profession and use it as a vessel for change. I thought I want to contribute to change in the industry. So, I had a strong desire to support brands in doing that. So, I thought, right, how can I take this frustration, my lived experience, and expertise to consult brands implement more meaningful campaigns, and work with partners to tell inclusive brand stories. So, it's really amazing, now, to be part of the conversations around purpose, but also see and work with brands increasingly wanting to create more meaningful communications too.

Andy Green 3:01

That's great. Matt, what's your story about how you got in this world of purpose.

Matt Appleby 3:04

My background was agency for about 20 years, so I was running an agency here in Cardiff. And I was increasingly being much more interested and fulfilled by the behaviour change type of work that we were doing. So, we were doing quite a lot of public health and those sorts of things. Similarly, outside of work I was doing more in my local community around things like developing community news, social history projects, and those sorts of things. And doing a fair bit of volunteering also with the CIPR. That all kind of coalesced together in me leaving the agency and joining a charity called Business in the Community. So I was the director of that in Wales for three years, running what is the Prince of Wales's responsible business network, so working with essentially a charity, a membership organisation, of businesses that want to do business better. And sort of echoing some of the things that Shannon has just said, I think, that felt to me like an opportunity to actually get in there with organisations and support and encourage that sort of behaviour change that we were looking for, to start to get businesses to become more purposeful in their actions. I did three years there, and then made my own leap of faith out into kind of freelance consultancy life. And as part of that I've been involved with setting up or been involved with the foundation of two things. One, Grow Social Capital, which you mentioned, Andy, a new social enterprise that's been going for about just under a year, and something called the Dublin Conversations; a kind of voluntary pan-Europe with bits of the rest of the world-involved project, which is looking at shaping a conversation about what the future of communications looks like, largely through the lens of purpose and purposefulness.

Andy Green 4:38

Ben, how did you get into this area of purpose?

Ben Caspersz 5:02

I started when I was at university. There were a couple of important books that I consumed at that time. One was, No Logo, with Naomi Klein, which really clobbered me about how brands, and in particular brands, can change the world. And the other was Anita Roddick, who I think is the one of the real founding thinkers on purpose in this country - business purpose in this country. She wrote a book called Business as Unusual. And that, for me, just shone a light on the fact that business could be a force for good. And so those two clashed together, No Logo and Business as Unusual. And in 2008, when I set up my business, I went with Anita on that and said that we, as a business, could be a force for good whilst making a profit; we could do that through our work, we can do that through the way we treat our people. And it's really gone from there.

Andy Green 5:46

Really, if we can build upon that, I mean, this question of why is this whole subject important to you? Ben, what's the why of your story?

Ben Caspersz 5:55

Yeah, I wrestle with purpose as a thing. I'm clear that it is a force for good for business. I'm clear that it is making the world better. But sometimes, it drives me nuts, the whole purpose scene. I see the purpose-wash thing, which I know we're going to come on to, that bothers me a lot. I get very frustrated when I see people doing things tokenistically, or just for appearances. I think there's a real conversation that the PR and comms people need to need to have and keep that front of mine so that we can maintain our integrity in all of that. And so, on that side of it, it drives me mad. And occasionally I'll just chuck in the bin and just go, don't listen to purpose or read anything on purpose for a few months and sort of go cold turkey on it because I get annoyed by it. But I always find myself coming back to it because there's no getting away from the fact... what are we going to do if we don't talk about purpose? We're just all going to go to work... and life's too short for that, without thinking about the bigger picture. So, if it comes down to it, I think all of this stuff about purpose is about long-termism and the bigger picture beyond making a coin. And you know, that matters, for me.

Andy Green 7:34

And Matt, for you, what's your question of why here? Why is it important to you?

Matt Appleby 7:39

I think it's a similar sort of thing. My worry is that it gets talked about in terms of purposeful brands or talking about purpose in communication. It's not actually about the authenticity of talking about purpose within business. BITC used to use a line, this isn't about how you spend your money it's how you make your money. This is fundamentally about how you behave as a business and not just how you communicate. There's a tension there for the PR industry to be talking about purpose, and to be making sure that we're talking about it in a meaningful way. And so I think that's probably where I'm coming from on it is. I look at the talent and the creativity, and the energy that there is in the PR industry and kind of think there's a real opportunity for that industry to become agents of this kind of positive change. You know, we've got the access, we've got the networks, we've got the influence, we've got the skills to really get in and help to change the way companies are behaving, not just work with them to try and improve how they're communicating. So, I think it's about how the PR sector can get more deeply into businesses to understand that this is about corporate and organisational behaviour change, not just about better strategic communications.

Andy Green 9:09

And Shannon, what's your story, why is purpose so important, significant for you?

Shannon Walker 9:15

Well, I loved what Matt touched upon in regards to as PRs, we have a responsibility. And I've always been quite aware that as communicators, and as marketers, we kind of shape the narrative of the world. What we send out into the world in terms of representation, ideologies, people literally buy into that. You are what you eat in some regards so we're spilling out certain things into communities, are they not going to believe that? If we spin out more meaningful things into communities, do we not, you know, contribute to shaping better communities, more tolerant communities, more understanding communities, and for me, that's always been quite poignant in

my career, especially as someone of colour when often I don't see much adversity internally or externally. I'm sort of thinking always, okay, how are we empowering other groups which are not represented? And, so, it's been quite key for me in my career to sort of advocate for that. You know, who's missing from this narrative and how can we include that person in the narrative because in wider society there's implications for that. So, in my role and what I do my business is help businesses see unseen challenges, perhaps they don't have someone else with a different perspective to point out blind spots if you like, but using that to work together to creatively solve that. So that's why it's been really important to me, the more societal and bigger picture implications of not having purpose in comms.

Andy Green 10:39

So, if we can really elaborate upon that and really explore this issue. And, so, if we can create an idea of old school PR, and a new era for public relations and communications with purpose, how is this new era of a more purpose-driven world different to the old school PR approach? Matt, any thoughts on that at all?

Matt Appleby 11:01

I think it kind of comes back to my last point really, in terms of a different type of influence within organisations from PR expertise. So, actually, you know, we've talked as an industry, through our more navel gazing moments about wanting a seat at the boardroom table for as many years as I've been involved in it. And I think that was a little bit about the stature of the industry, in old school. Whereas, I think in new school, that's got to be about being able to influence the behaviour of organisations in ways that are going to be socially, environmentally better in the way in which they operate.

Andy Green 11:48

And Ben, I know with your agency Claremont, you set that agency up with a sort of very different approach and agenda. How do you see yourself different from the conventional old school PR approach, and this new era of purpose?

Ben Caspersz 12:02

I think, when we work with an organisation that is clear about the purpose, there's almost a set of guiderails that our work sits within. And it gives us an alignment with the bigger goals of the organisation. They've set that, very very clearly from the centre. And when you don't have that, which is what, as I say, was a bit like that in the old days, you just sort of crank out the coverage wherever you can. And that tended to result in a flood of very trivial and random things, really, where you just got the column inches or the airtime, but it wasn't necessarily adding to the bigger purpose of the client.

The purpose movement, in PR, has actually been a symptom of us just becoming a more strategic industry, generally. We're just a more mature and thoughtful industry that is working more to a plan rather than a tactical industry that is just cranking stuff out, which is what it was like when I first started, to be honest. It was quite a chaotic scene where you were just given stuff right at the very very last minute and said hit the 'phones, get it done. And I don't think it's like that any more in many places that are still in business. We haven't done media relations for a while so I could be wrong on that. I'll have to reserve judgement on that.

This is the type this moved. is actually being able to see this request is becoming more strategic leading to psychology, which is to relate history is to political will to textbook students, because people say is almost, which is good, because this is the

Andy Green 13:38

And now, Shannon, you're at a very exciting time in your career. You've just set up your new agency. How would you describe your approach in your agency to how you serve your clients or what you do for your clients?

Shannon Walker 13:52

So, just going back to your initial question, it's so funny because I was reflecting on when I first got in the industry, the goal was like get on the 'phones, pitch pitch pitch you know, awareness awareness. And, it was like, what was the purpose of it? And it was all about KPIs and telling the client you got 'x x x' and that was it. Whereas now it's just definitely shifted. And a lot of marketeers are now more conscious, and we are thinking bigger picture about what are our communicators actually doing and what's the implications of it? So, the first thing I do with my clients is taking a people-first approach, don't just focus on what you want to do or why you are so great. There's a bigger purpose to it. You've got your serving clients, your serving customers, so think people-first. How are your consumers going to consume it. And a lot of the time it's so funny, you find most people have a massive disconnect in what they want and what the consumers want. They want they want to do X, Y, and Z. And I'm like, but the consumers are A, B, and C. It's a complete disconnect. So the first step in any sort of purposeful comms, I believe, is thinking people-first. Make it all about the people then work backwards because those are the people that you need to, not appease, but you know, those are a huge part of your business and your why at the end of the day. So that's a key element in what I do, where it is people first, and ensuring that you're empowering people for your messages. That you're serving them. You're listening, taking in feedback, always involving. So, I think that's what that's what grounds me and something I usually initiate as a first step on working with clients.

Andy Green 15:21

We've explored this idea of a difference between, say, an old school type of PR and a new era, which is much more purpose-driven, akin to this idea of old school PR, the label of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Matt, massively involved in this area earlier in your career. What do you see, is purpose the same as CSR?

Matt Appleby 15:46

I think, no. I think we've kind of moved on. And, you know, simply put, if you want to kind of look at the history of responsible business, you went through, a century ago, a period of philanthropy that then later became that sort of people doing good charitable works, became CSR, became more integrated into the corporate body but was very much separate to the day-to-day operation of the business. So, you had a CSR department and a CSR plan that was separate to, actually, what the rest of the business was doing (often, not always). And so it was sort of separate and again I have issue with the word, sometimes, but I think what we're essentially talking about is the change to the actual operation of the business, to make it better, to make it more people-centric, to make it more respectful of community-planet-place, and you

know all of those things that are kind of pressing in terms of the big issues that we face as a wider society.

Andy Green 16:56

What about you Shannon, do you see this distinction between... is purpose the same as CSR?

Shannon Walker 17:00

I see them as two different things and I've got a bit of a story to illustrate how they are different. So, I made a quite an indulgent purchase the other day, and the guilt and shame of that was counterbalanced because when I bought the box it said 'we offset our carbon emission by planting trees'. So, the CSR is what companies can do to cut and balance their responsibility and you know, some of the responsible things that can do socially, whereas that brand's purpose isn't to plant trees, their purpose is... around cutting-edge fashion, for example. Their purpose is in being forward thinking etc. But their CSR is to ensure that some of the offsets or fallouts from what they do in their purpose is balanced by more a corporate-responsible things that they can do to offset, perhaps, if they are not being too sustainable, for example. And so hopefully, that helps to paint a clearer picture of the two.

Andy Green 17:55

And, Ben, what's your take on 'is purpose the same as CSR'?

Ben Caspersz 18:00

I'll build on what that said about the fact that CSR tended to be siloed into a separate function, and that tended to be dropped when times got tough, because you had the CSR department, and they weren't necessarily at the very very top table with the finance director, the operations director, and so on. They were more of a nice to have. And I think purpose has really moved on from that and has brought this in to a place where we're threading it through the vital functions of an organisation; across marketing, across HR, across all of these different areas. I'll give you an example, actually, if you look at COVID. Some organisations really benefited from having a defined purpose at that time. It gave them powerful resource to draw from when times got tough. There's an organisation, a very large charity called Change Grow Live. They mainly deal with providing services for people with addiction. They had a very very defined purpose statement which is simply, 'believe in people'. And they've played that out across the way that they treat their service users, the way they hire. They've threaded it very effectively into every aspect of their organisation. So when COVID hit, and lockdown came in, this charity was, like most of us... everybody was sent atomized and sent off to their bedrooms and their home offices to work. They had a crisis meeting, I believe, where they said, you know what should we do? How are we going to make sure the work gets done? And some people said, we need to have regular check-ins, we need to manage people remotely, even more tightly. But my understanding is that the Board, they were very, very clear. We say we believe in people, and now is the time to go and believe in people. And in fact, what they did is they said to their staff, 'in line with our belief, our core purpose of believing in people, we believe in you. We trust you to do your best. Now, please let's do, let's do your best'. And my understanding is that that panned out very, very, very well for that organisation. And in those really precarious few months, they went into a radical trust mode of believing in people with their staff that really paid off. They were able to lean

back on their purpose when they needed it. And that's just one example of using it in a crisis, that they have been very effective at as I said it threading it through every other aspect, like how they hire, and so on as well, it's right in there as well. And that, for me, is a million miles away from CSR, which is sort of put into annual report, pictures of painting, people painting the old people's home, or doing some other random thing where they've written a cheque. That is very, very different. And I think that isn't what Anita Roddick had in mind, is for people to have a CSR department. I think what she had in mind was what I just described, of threading a philosophy and a mantra beyond making money through every aspect of the organisation.

Andy Green 21:22

You mentioned radical trust, what do you mean by that?

Ben Caspersz 21:25

It's something that I tried to do at our place. Unless you've got a really, really clear reason, just trust people. Just believe in them, until they give you any cause or reason not to give that trust, then the default should be, trust them. For years, my company was, I think, quite ahead on flexible working even before COVID and before flexible workers became a thing. And that was rested upon that belief of default to trusting people. And as a result, I think we were able to attract and retain some of the best people off the back of that. And I think autonomy in a job, being trusted in a job, people have great value attached to that. They don't want to go somewhere else where they won't be trusted. It's more than cash, I think.

Andy Green 22:18

Matt, from your experience, how important is this issue of trust in our work in public relations and communications? Any examples come to mind of the significance of trust there?

Matt Appleby 22:28

Yeah, I mean, it's that thing about you, it's a t-shirt and you've got to earn it. And I think it's, for me, a lot of the difficulty or the sort of conflict in this trust area comes from this gap, this purpose gap, between what you're saying and what you're doing. And I think there's a sort of continuum of inadvertent to advertent-ness (if I can make a word up), in which people do that. So, you've got a recent example like brewdog, very big on purpose, make a lot of noise, doing some really exciting, innovative things in the environmental space. But then this issue emerges where people are calling into question how they're behaving with their people. So, you've got this immediate kind of tension between an organisation that had built up quite a lot of trust by setting out a very public, it's very public stall in terms of what its purpose was, and delivering to a large extent against that. But then, you know, it's not necessarily being carried through the entire organisation. And there's lots of research that shows this purpose gap emerging between businesses that define their purpose, and say they make decisions based on their purpose and values, but then don't necessarily run it all the way through the business. So, they might not be recruiting, they might not be promoting and paying, based on purpose. They might not be expecting it of their supply chain and really working with their supply chain and into the community against that purpose. They might not be talking to investors about it, etc. So, I think trust comes from that ability to demonstrate that you can show that

purpose permeates through the entire operation of the organisation, and anybody's interaction with your organisation should reflect that at any point.

Andy Green 24:36

Shannon, from your experience, how important this is dimension of trust in our work?

Shannon Walker 24:41

It's incredibly important. And we know PR is public relations, there's no relationship without trust. And what's been really poignant in this time is that trust is increasingly becoming the currency of our consumers. Consumers are incredibly more conscious in this age. And I think a recent stat showed that brands that have that display purpose or trust, I think 63% of consumers said, 'I'll shop with them more'. So, it's now becoming a more important buying decision and a buy and purchasing factor for consumers. And I believe a huge part of that is transparency, whereas brands can't just say 'we stand for this, we do this, we do that'. And now consumers are wanting brands to be more accountable and asking them questions and doing research themselves, actually to show... and that's why brands can no longer just say. They've got to do. It's important to do because that builds trust. It's the evidence now. And again, pointing back to some of the events last year, there's a huge drive towards consumers really holding brands at high regard now and they've got to be accountable. So now you just can't say, you've got to do as well, because that builds trust and transparency, and that's so important for modern day consumers today.

Andy Green 25:53

So, we explored various dimensions there. What do you say to people who dismiss purpose as a fad? Is purpose another fad?

Ben Caspersz 26:05

It has real risk of being 'faddy'. I mentioned that earlier on.

A few years ago, after we published some research into purpose, and I was at my peak purpose phase, I went to a conference and there was a managing director of a very prominent consumer agency. He took the stage and he put up a slide on the screen, it's one of those horrors, which had about 25 layers to it. It was a pyramid, of course, had to be a pyramid. And he, for the next half an hour took us through what he described as their purpose platform product. And he told us about how one of the Compare the Market-type brands, had come up to his agency, a retained client and said,

"Help, give us some purpose, we need some purpose. Everybody's getting told we're getting clobbered in the press for doing this, whatever wrong, give us a bit of purpose, will you?"

And the MD, with a straight face, told us exactly how they serviced that client and they gave them a purpose platform. And he described it, at which point I sort of tore up my purpose book collection, chucked in the bin and took a few months as cold turkey after that because it was nauseating. It made me feel sick.

It made me think, you know, what do you think you're doing? Why is does this person think it's right to go to a client like that, an organisation like that, and say we,

an external PR agency are going to dream something up, slap it on you, and you know we'll sort this out for you. I mean, to answer your question, I mean that, that for me is, faddy max, you know, that's faddy cubed, it's just fatty on steroids and that has happened, and probably is still going on.

And so I think there is that real risk, but despite that, there's also what I was describing earlier with Change Grow Live and countless other organisations like the various people that Matt and yourself and Shannon work with who are doing it properly and using it to make a difference, which is a completely different story.

There was one that I wanted to mention, if I may Andy please, which is a bit more low profile, sort of anti-Brewdog, which is Timpson's. The key cutting brand. They are a big retailer: 2000 stores, 5000 people, and they are about as purpose driven an organisation as you'll ever find. The things that they do on every layer are really above and beyond what most companies do, but they don't have a big purpose shopfront. In fact I looked around, I typed in Timpson's purpose statement; they have no purpose statement. They have no mission statement, as a company, never written anything out. They don't speak at conferences, they don't even publish a sustainability report, or anything of the kind. But the things that they do at every level, are pioneering.

Andy Green 29:20

Matt, does that story there of purpose posing, purpose being a facile superficial thing, does that resonate with you at all?

Matt Appleby 29:29

Yeah absolutely and I think there is a real danger of that and we're kind of we're kind of straying back into this purpose wash territory again of, if it looks like the next the next big thing in marketing, rather than people accepting that businesses have both a responsibility and an opportunity to sort out some of these big societal issues that we're facing, then it is just going to descend into that kind of faddy bullshit basically which doesn't do anybody any good, and actually tarnishes those organisations and those companies that are doing it well, unfortunately.

I'm familiar with the Timpson's example and I think it's an absolutely brilliant one. The work they are just kind of quietly getting on with, you know, they do a lot of work with people, supporting people coming out prison and those sorts of things. Fantastic, fantastic work.

One of the other ones that I talk about quite a bit is close to home, based in North Wales, is Iceland the supermarket. And again, not high profile in talking about the kind of purpose and the mission particularly but a very activist chief exec., very environmentally conscious and one of the reasons I like them as an example is they're very open about trying to do things, and they're very open about if things don't work, and they'll talk about things that don't work. And I think there's a real, there's two things, you know, it is absolutely authentic because they're trying things to be better and realising that actually it doesn't have to be perfect. You just have to kind of keep trying until you get it right. And by being open about the process, they are kind of giving that knowledge to anybody else so if anybody else is trying to

reduce the plastic in their packaging, they can learn lessons from them because they're out there at scale, trying to do it and share what they're doing.

So, yeah, there are some really nice, fairly unsung examples out there of people who are doing it really well and doing it for the right reasons.

Andy Green 31:35

And Shannon, any stories or experiences you want to share where you've seen it done, either good or bad this thing of purpose.

Shannon Walker 31:40

Dove recently launched the crown project, where they're looking to end and natural hair discrimination. I think in the purpose space, people are looking at the difference between brands that are jumping on a bandwagon and brands that can back up what they're saying, by their previous history of being instrumental in change. So you know, for Dove's example that was quite authentic because I know that for years they've spoken about equality, and they've made mistakes in the past, don't get me wrong, but they've stood up and said 'you know what, whoops, yeah, we made a mistake, here's how we're gonna change it' and they've continued. They haven't been like, 'oh, we've made a mistake let's hide away let's put our head in shame and not bother to do it again'. They've always continued.

And just to give an example of brand that hasn't done it too well. Gillette has recently done a campaign around ending toxic masculinity, and a lot of people were like, sorry mate, last year you've had that you had an advert about how men are strong and men or this or that, and now you're kind of cursing those men, the same men you put that narrative around.

I think when it comes to purpose, you just you just can't change overnight. You've got to - consumers are looking for you to back up what you're saying with your history, or if you know your history perhaps wasn't, in line with what you're doing now perhaps address it. You can't just sort of pretend you're something completely different. So I'd say yeah, those are two examples that show a brand that just gets on with it and purpose has always been a part of their narrative and a brand, perhaps who are jumping on the bandwagon. But they need to be careful of having backlash because consumers are incredibly smart and will say sorry, you know, you just can't have a complete personality change overnight, and expect us to believe the new narratives you're spinning.

Andy Green 33:23

So what's emerging here is a message of, listen to what I do rather than what I say. And the challenge is that Public Relations and Communications has been primarily focused on shaping the saying. So, how do we move up the food chain? How do we get up there in terms of influencing guiding the doing as much as the saying?

Matt Appleby 33:46

I think that's a really big challenge, and I said earlier on, I think there's been an awful lot of pushing for PR around the boardroom table, which I think has been more about the PR industry, wanting it for a status than it has been actually about being able to

make a positive influence around that boardroom table. And you've seen organisations now who have appointed very very senior directors of purpose to sit around their boardroom tables, and those sorts of things, to make sure it happens.

So I think it comes back to the skills that we can offer and the expertise that we can offer to help companies understand and I think one of the points that Shannon touched on earlier on is this this idea of listening. In my mind the idea of PR is a discipline becoming the sort of listening discipline, the discipline that can help you understand what your consumers are thinking, what your staff are thinking, what are the issues that matter to them. And then using the networks and the expertise, you've got to kind of help shape solutions to that within the organisation - organisational solutions. I think we've got really strong case to make for being more involved in that process.

Andy Green 35:01

Ben, how do you address this issue of getting to grips of changing the doing as much as the saying?

Ben Caspersz 35:10

I think most people at the very senior level of organisations do completely grasp that reputations are forged from what you do. And the reason the communications people might not have been at that top table is because perhaps they just didn't have the confidence to work at that level to say, to give counsel on matters of strategy and matters of essential core business.

I think we got caught in the tactical zone, you know people talk about getting caught in the friend zone, we were caught in the tactical zone in their sort of topspin finishing department. And actually we should have been upstream. And I think that people are understanding that more. One of the points of leverage that we have, I think, is the word reputation, which obviously has shot up. People at the top of organisations and shareholders and so on, understand fully that reputations can make or break in a blink of an eye. And so, to prevention and keeping people safe from the reputational calamity will put us at the top table, really. If we have the confidence to take that offer when it's given to give counsel at that level.

I think we need to look people in the eye, finance director level or chief exec level. In the same way that people in advertising have done for quite a long time and raise our ambition for what we think they ought to do. We need to get them to serve up real substantive activity that we can then go on and communicate, rather than we need to get them to give us a bit of budget so that we can do some tactical activity to spin, whatever they happen to be doing. So, I think that getting upstream is the key.

Andy Green 37:05

Shannon, how do you get your clients to do different, as well as say things different?

Shannon Walker 37:10

As I said, before purpose became quite prominent, I had a bit of experience in this, being someone, I got into influencer marketing let's say when that was quite a new thing, and I had lots of people sort of saying oh you're a millennial, it was never gonna last, etc, etc. So I had a bit of experience dealing with something quite new.

And people often thought thought that was farty tarty. And I learned some sort of tactics if you like, in terms of influencing people and that starts with speaking the language of the decision makers, because the number one thing is, I think the higher up you go in a company or the, the higher up you speak to, such as founder etcetera, the more disconnect there is with what's actually going on.

And I found a way to speak their language is bringing them actual proof, you know, making them listen to the actual consumers and that's why it's so important to bring it back to the heart of who they're serving. Because often, you know, companies, we'd get in our heads of what we want. And there's a disconnect between what's actually happening in society, and what the consumer and actual people want. So I bring it back to that. I speak the language in terms of, right you know you just said your business goals you've got to make your consumers happy and making your consumers happy is not just about, you know, a monetary thing. It's about bigger purpose about having a good impact in the world. So it also makes it makes business sense as well as, you know, just doing good, on earth as well. And so that's the kind of key things I do.

I wasn't sure if it was Ben or Matt that mentioned the kind of reputation. Again that's a tactic used to speak to individuals that don't get it the first time. Speak back to language they know, such as reputation, such as you know your consumer, such as you know, making a great impact. So sometimes you've just got to be tactical in how you deliver things to make change.

Andy Green 38:45

To build upon that, how does a practitioner listening to this say, right I want to go and start being more purposeful making our organisational client more purposeful, or what practical steps can they do as a practitioner to expand or begin this journey?

Ben Caspersz 38:50

I'll give a health warning, Andy, that they'll be able to do that. I think some things the organisation needs to make the first step and possibly the second and third step. On this stuff, you can take the horse to water but can't make it drink. However, on the basis that you're getting some good signals that the organisation is serious about it, I think the individual, or the agency have got to identify the change makers on the client side and get on their shoulder, and join their crew, and try and get some momentum into it. It is often not a - purpose doesn't happen by committee, usually happens by somebody who's an icebreaker, who's just pushing this thing through and seeing off obstacles.

So my advice would be, find that icebreaker, and get on board, you know, alongside the captain and the crew of that icebreaker.

Andy Green 40:00

What will be your icebreakers Matt, in this matter?

Matt Appleby 40:05

I think Ben's point is, is well made, in terms of identifying the change makers, the people that can really make a difference. It's then about equipping them to be able to make that change to an extent. So one of the things we talked about, we talked about through some of the Dublin conversation toolkits, is around how you can help people plan towards it. There're various frameworks that exist out there that people can maybe look at, things like the UN Sustainable Development Goals, things like B Corp certification; BITC has responsible business mapping those sorts of things. In Wales, we've got a Future Generations Act.

So, there are some structures out there which you can use to start to almost audit your organisation against, and start to look at some of the areas where maybe you can sort of pull together an evidence base, and say, look we know, our customers really care about this, our staff really cares about this issue and if you look at it, actually we're not doing enough. There's always other businesses out there that are doing some great things that we could create new a network with maybe, work together and do it under a framework so that you know all of your efforts are actually contributing to this kind of greater effort that the others are making. So I would say go and kind of start, start the framework start with a plan.

Andy Green 41:30

Shannon, you're a new, vibrant agency. I mean how do you go about getting your clients to be more purposeful?

Shannon Walker 41:35

The interesting thing is that even, while I was in house and even now, I think there's so much focus and so much effort into creating purpose. And as Ben mentioned I think it was such a great story to hear that a brand went from agency to say right, ahh let's make a purpose, right? Great.

You know and a lot of the time the brands already have it; just revisit your why, revisit your values, because values often derive from purpose, and I've been at organisations where you know the cons and the marketing. Everything is so different because there's nothing that unifies them, and you have amazing stories and have amazing values, but I think it just gets buried in CSR and like the fluff, like, oh we don't need to revisit that. I think companies forget how integral that is. That's their almost compass, if you like. To just take it back to your values rather than creating or getting overwhelmed with creating something new, or looking at what's socially desired and trying to make that part of your business and it doesn't make sense, you know, just go back to why you started your business go back to that and educate your, everyone. Your stakeholders; your employees; your influences; your PR agencies, etc. Everyone creates and speaks from the same guidebook if you like. But often you don't need to do a lot of work to find that because it's right there, it is why you started, just revisit it.

Andy Green 42:50

So, we previously referenced this idea of like purpose wash or fake purpose, people pretending to be purposeful to make themselves look good. What can we do about that?

Ben Caspersz 43:00

A few years ago I was approached by a FinTech platform, and they were offering very expensive, small loans to people. 1,500% per year interest rates but you know you've got them for like three or four weeks. Aimed at people on a low income. And they said to me, Ben, you do the purpose thing. We're giving people freedom; we're giving people financial freedom when they've got nothing and they need to pay for something we're there for them when everyone else turns them down. I mean, we're clearly purposeful organisation can you help us take it to the next level. And my answer was, No, I'm not going to do that. And so to answer your question I think that to avoid purpose wash you've she got to call it. My experience has been that you won't be the only one in the room who is feeling like that. And let's just get it on the table and sort this thing out, because he is toxic. It undermines all of the people who are trying to do something well and do something good, and it spreads around and it really just undermines things in a big way. As I said, it sort of put me off the whole scene for months on end before. And it's got to be eliminated, it's got to be called out. It's just ridiculous. You know, so call it.

Andy Green 44:30

Matt, what about your side? Anything that could be done to tackle fake purpose or purpose wash?

Matt Appleby 44:33

Same thing really and again it's one of the tools that we'll be releasing through the Dublin conversations is all around this this idea of being aware of it, as well, because it can be inadvertent it can be being done benignly, in some instances. And you know Shannon's point earlier on about kind of seeing unseen challenges, you might not even be aware it's happening, so I think this there's definitely that point about being brave enough to call it out when you do see it but also being aware enough of the various different types that might be out there, so that you can kind of see it and stop it happening. And you've got to have a structure around, you've got a corporate structure around you that is strong enough to back you up if you do call it out, and it's not always easy, if you're in a bigger organisation and calling out that decision is going to cost that business money.

So, you need to know that culturally you're in an organisation that will back you up when it does hit the table, when you do smell it and you do call it out, that someone's gonna have your back.

Andy Green 45:43

Shannon, what do you think could be done more to be done to tackle this issue of like fake purpose and purpose wash?

Shannon Walker 45:45

Matt and Ben have been really spot on with that, and it just always arrives around being comfortable getting uncomfortable. It's very uncomfortable to challenge things it's very uncomfortable to be a leader or you know, or to go against the grain but, you know, that's integral to ensure there's integrity around purpose, and some of the things I do when someone's sort of concerned, around, what can we do externally? We want to do this; we want to do that. For some of the first questions I asked before

we've informed the client is just understanding, what they are doing internally, how is this part of the bigger picture, and sort of educating them to say actually to protect your reputation, just be mindful that if you're doing something, and it looks great outwardly, you may need to show proof of that internally, or you may be questioned about what bigger commitments you're making. And if you don't have the infrastructure to do that internally, perhaps partner with organisations that are already leading something. That's something that's interesting at this time, a lot of brands are trying to just jump on things or try to look like they're, you know, the one spearheading things and, you know purpose isn't new. It wasn't created in 2021 or 2020. I think a lot of people don't realise that, as patronising at that sounds and it's not meant to come across that way, but there's a lot of amazing businesses that have been doing fantastic work for so long. I think it's actually awesome for businesses with amazing platforms to actually partner and kind of leverage the existing work that's been going on in this space rather than sort of say, Oh, we're leading it or look at us, look at our bells and whistles and taken attention away from yourself to serve a bigger purpose and perhaps give attention to something else or someone else is probably, that's as purposeful as you can get to be honest. It's not serving us directly, but actually impacting someone else or helping a bigger goal.

Andy Green 47:35

To look into the future, is the future for the public relations or communications industry one of maybe rebranding as purpose relations. How do you see the subject of purpose emerging, finding its place in our work and in our industry?

Shannon Walker 47:50

I reckon it's going to be the norm rather than the exception. I say that because I recently discovered what generation Alpha was. I heard a lot about millennials, I've heard a lot about gen zed, and I was like generation alpha, what? So they're individuals born 2010 and they're just blowing me away, really the next wave of generations. There was a report that compared baby boomers; millennials and gen alphas and they were asking questions such as, oh, how important is that that everyone's equal? How important is it that people treated fairly? Baby boomers were like, not that important, you know, nearly all of that is kind of important, then generation alpha was like absolutely is important, environmental is important.

I believe the brands and people sort of saying purposes a fad, you don't need to incorporate it, they are not paying attention to the next generation. And we're seeing, you know, in luxury industries and so many industries gen zed and gen millennial are leading the purchasing power. Every generation as they get more equity, so I believe that you know to speak to that next generation, to ensure the resume, you've got to adapt and be authentic.

Andy Green 49:01

Matt, public relations or purpose relations, where's your take?

Matt Appleby 49:03

Absolutely, I was nodding furiously with everything Shannon just said and I think is absolutely spot on. And, you know, I think it would feel to me deeply, deeply cynical, for the PR industry to try and kind of start to park its tanks on the lawn of purpose for

purely commercial reasons. So, yeah, I think my answer to that is what Shannon said.

Andy Green 49:30

Ben, what about you, public relations or purpose relations?

Ben Caspersz 49:33

Public relations, Andy. Not purpose relations. I'm with Shannon as well. I think you put that really well, Shannon. It is now core; it is a hygiene factor for us, not a nice to have. It's a bit like saying, how is the public relations industry adapting to digital. And we really need to get over that and not keep going on about digital. We don't go on about radio, TV and how we opt into those at some point or another. We're just doing it now. And I think purpose is like that, really; it's core business.

Andy Green 50:08

So we're just about to wind up our session here but before we go I mean, if there was one thing, one piece of practical advice you could advise our listeners to do, one thing different, what would it be?

Matt Appleby 50:20

Recognise the power that you have, as a professional communicator and use your powers for good.

Andy Green 50:30

And Shannon, one thing from you.

Shannon Walker 50:33

My one thing would be, let's do more empathetic listening, I think we do a lot of talking, we do a lot of doing. Let's do more empathetic listening.

Andy Green 50:39

I hear you there. Ben what about you?

Ben Caspersz 50:41

Ask why all the time, keep asking it. Somebody, some business somewhere said you should ask five whys. Just keep on saying why, and see if people can just peel away the layers and explain, what are we actually doing this for? If it doesn't stack up maybe don't do it.

Andy Green 51:00

Can I have a massive thank you because it's been an absolute delight to listen to you, share the conversation, and I'm sure really we can set the people thinking about well, we need change. We've got to do things different, and I think you've given us some valuable inspiration and practical guidance going forward there. So thank you so much, and let's go forward and be more purposeful.

Thank you. Thanks and thanks so much.

Iain Hodgson 51:31

Thanks for joining us for this latest episode of the CIPR Engage podcast. And don't forget to log your CPD points, as this podcast is worth five. And while you're there, check out the range of training and learning available from CIPR.

We'll be back with another episode of Engage next quarter. Until then, take care.