

**Dear friends,**

What a pleasure it was to spend time with you all in Pittsburgh. I hope you found our recent Ragan event beneficial, educational and edifying. I certainly did.

This was truly a wonderful group. I won't soon forget our conversations about campus activism, religion, travel, robot leaders, comms tactics, animal attacks, the rap/rock stylings of "The Dirty Heads," and a jarring number of references to "porn."

Three quick takeaways:

- There is power in collective kvetching, commiseration and problem solving.
- Higher Ed communicators have a tough job.
- Meaningful progress is possible, and your work does make a positive difference in the world.

OK one more:

- Your institutions are lucky to have such thoughtful, intelligent and articulate people on board.

I've distilled the most pertinent points of our discussions below, with the "Vegas rules" caveat set by Jim. Please email me ([robbyb@ragan.com](mailto:robbyb@ragan.com)) if you experienced any other epiphanies or if I can ever be of service in the future.

Again, thanks for sharing so freely about your challenges, tactics, victories and struggles. Thanks also to the great folks of the University of Pittsburgh for being wonderful hosts. (I am putting in a request to demand warm cobbler for all future Ragan events.)

All the best,  
Robby Brumberg

## **STORYTELLING and STORY GENERATION TIPS**

### **How can I create better, more compelling stories?**

- Don't underestimate the value of face-to-face communication.
- Producing great stories is all about great reporting.
- Talking to people is the key to unearthing the emotional center of stories. You must get out of your comfort zone and start talking to sources.
- Being busy is not an excuse to stop being a good reporter.
- Information's important; stories are *memorable*.
- It's crucial to create more space for colorful, vivid, emotion-packed storytelling.

- Increase collaboration by building trust and relationships with faculty, administrators, students and grad students.
- Talking head videos should be short, sweet and full of authentic enthusiasm. ([Here's a good example of genuine emotion.](#))
- If your video has no emotion, no one's going to connect with it. (Here are [eight ways to make compelling videos.](#))
- If you're having trouble getting respect or cooperation, producing kickass content is the best way to get execs and others excited about the power and potential of communication.

### **How can I unearth great content and story ideas?**

- Be proactive about finding stories before they get published. Create sustainable story pipelines.
- Get on lists, committees, meetings or events that share information about funding or research breakthroughs. Follow the money.
- Walk around campus, and saunter through the faculty suites. Ask folks what they're working on. Build good relationships with deans and chairs.
- Conversations are better than phone calls. Phone calls are better than emails.
- Don't just call or email when you need something. Develop your sources with personal interactions and build relationships.
- Give presentations at faculty meetings to educate colleagues on your brand journalism strategy.
- Use eager grad students as sources as well.
- At the start of every semester, ask for five minutes to give your communication spiel to faculty.
- Offer incentives (beer's fine) to cooperative faculty who can provide stories. Offer cash or awards for getting media hits. Always follow up with links for profs when their content runs and copy their dean.
- Encourage profs to build their own brand and social media presence. Educate them on the benefits of contributing story ideas: "You're more likely to get funds and recognition with the more press you get."

### **COMMUNICATION AUDIT and MEASUREMENT TIPS**

#### **Why should I conduct and audit and where should I start?**

- Comms audits typically take three to five months to complete.
- If you audit well, it gives you leverage for more staff—and proof to cut out what you don't want to produce. It's how you build a data-backed case for more (or less) video production, etc.
- You must measure a baseline of where you are and where you want to go.
- You can do an audit yourself, but it's hard to be brutally honest about your own work.
- Five steps of an audit: **surveys, focus groups, channel analysis, leadership and manager interviews** (Ask questions such as: "What're you prepared to do

to make comms better?” “How can *you* be a better communicator?”), **plan formation**.

- Start with: What do you want to find out? What do you suspect is happening?
- Start with a premise, then go disprove it. Testing your assumptions is the key to investigative reporting.
- **How often should you measure?** You should do audits once a year or once every other year. Do pulse surveys or targeted focus groups (on one big issue) in between audits.
- **Who do you show measurement reports to?** Show the data to employees to prove that their time and opinions weren't wasted. Report to leaders as well to prove ROI and progress.

### What should I measure?

- Clicks, pageviews and time spent on page/site are important. However, focus on outcomes, not just outputs.
- “Impressions” are useless. “Potential audience” is also worthless.
- Measure “behavior change,” such as increasing understanding of a particular topic or boosting awareness.
- “Are you aware of the strategic plan?” (Everyone is.)
- “Do you understand the strategic plan?” (The numbers tend to go down.)
- “Do you understand how the strategic plan fits with your specific role?” (The numbers always go way down on this question.)
- “How will you know if we've been successful?” (Most folks have no idea; communicators must close those gaps and measure outcomes.)

Find more communication audit tips [here](#) and [here](#).

## TOOLS

### Project management and collaboration

- Try [Trello](#) (it's graphic and visual, and also a good news tool), [Wrike](#), [Monday.com](#), or [AirTable](#).
- Other collaboration tools are [SmartSheet](#), [RoboHead](#), [Basecamp](#) and [Asana](#).
- [Sakai](#) is more geared toward Higher Ed.

### Video, photo and audio

- [Describe](#) is good for transcribing.
- [SoundCloud](#) is good for podcasts, and [Blue Yeti microphones](#) are affordable.
- Professional videographers tend to prefer [Vimeo](#) for vlogging and video creation, but [YouTube is huge for SEO purposes](#).
- [Facebook Live](#) and [YouTube Live](#) are good for livestreaming.
- [Tubedubber](#) can splice and dice video clips.
- Try [Daminion](#) for photo cataloging.

## **Social media, PR and comms**

- [LinkedIn Elevate](#) “makes it easy to discover and share content curated by experts at your company.”
- [Trend Kite](#) is good for PR and comms measurement.
- [Cision](#) and [Meltwater](#) and Merit can help manage press releases and digital PR tracking.
- [Falcon](#) and [Sprout Social](#) are good for social media management.
- [Expert File](#) is great but not cheap.
- [The Conversation](#) is a great forum to showcase academic expertise.
- [Profnet](#) can help you connect with the media.

## **Internal comms and email**

- [Rave Guardian](#) and [Omni Alert](#) for mass texts.
- [Dynamic Signal](#) and [Social Chorus](#) are platforms for internal comms.
- One attendee praised [My Emma for email](#), stating it was more affordable than [MailChimp](#). [Polite Mail](#) and [BananaTag](#) are other email management options.
- Two attendees said they’ve adopted [Workplace](#) for internal comms.
- One attendee uses Salesforce with a global opt-out function. (Audiences should be able to choose what not to receive.)
- [Mailchimp](#) can create an RSS feed that automatically pulls content.

## **Website and design**

- [SiteImprove](#) crawls your site and finds typos, broken links, etc.
- [Adobe Spark](#) for graphics, scrolling and rich video storytelling.
- [Canva](#) is great for infographics and design.
- [Drupal](#) and [WordPress](#) are popular web design platforms. Drupal’s more robust for programmers.
- [Ceros](#) can make your website content more dynamic.
- [Design Conductor](#) can keep everyone on brand and on the same marketing page.
- One attendee uses [Guidebook](#) for app creation.

## **TIPS FOR BECOMING A MORE STRATEGIC, EFFICIENT COMMUNICATOR**

- Get beyond the order-taker mentality. Always ask “Why? Why do you need 100 videos or a brochure?”
- Learn how to say NO, though also be prepared to redirect colleagues to side channels where they can distribute ancillary information.
- There’s still a place for print, but it’s crucial to pick your spots. Older audiences still love a good print piece.
- Piggyback off trendy current events, and newsjack hot topics.

- Use faculty experts who can showcase your brand and demonstrate the good you're doing in the world.
- Run your department like a newsroom. Newsrooms today will often run your stories as-is since they're so decimated and strapped. Package stories in concise AP style to make it easy for them.
- Prioritize spicy, compelling headlines that entice readers to click.
- Your story selection should be driven by reader or viewer choice: Get their attention, give 'em choices, and provide an opportunity to go deeper.
- Everything you create should be [mobile-friendly](#) and responsive.
- Apps are often another hurdle or obstacle to content consumption. Communicators should remove barriers, not add them.
- To boost internal collaboration and buy-in, maintain and share an editorial calendar or some visual representation of your workflow.
- Create a style guide with do's and don'ts. Set clear editorial standards for distribution, including [banned jargon](#) and [visual parameters](#).
- To slow the spigot of requests, create a creative brief or intake form. "What're you trying to achieve?" "Is a video *truly* necessary?"
- You must find someone in leadership who "gets it" and has your back. It's crucial to secure internal buy-in for the importance of communication.
- Build brand affinity through tchotchkes; it's an easy way to boost your culture. "Let the public assist you in advertising your products and promoting your name." HJ Heinz

## **CONTENT IDEAS**

- Content series are increasingly popular. They enable you to dig into larger societal themes in a more substantial fashion.
- University podcasts are growing in popularity. You can interview high-profile guests, campus employees or faculty members.
- One attendee has created curated Spotify playlists. "If you're driving from Boston, here's a mix for you." "Try this mix curated by our mascot, Herbie the banana slug."
- Solicit user-generated content. Kids are shooting video and taking photos anyway; why not empower them to create content for you? Students want to hear from other students.
- One attendee pays students \$100 per post (once a month limit). Offer incentives, financial or otherwise, to provide fresh content.
- Attendees have created a "Milestones and Achievements" or "Accolades" email that takes the place of press releases. Another option is creating a "self-service" area of your intranet with branded templates and logos.
- One attendee is packaging "30-second lectures." (For more quick-hitter/video recap inspiration, see Fox Sports' ["90 in 90" soccer game videos](#).)
- Create a digital junk drawer/channel where colleagues can dump ancillary content.
- Be selective with stories tied to holidays, awards and diversity. Empty platitudes thrown together at the last minute are not worth the trouble.

- Beware of the three Fs: food, folklore and famous people. That's how ethnicity and diversity stories are often told, but they can end up patronizing, shallow and potentially offensive.
- One attendee held an "Academic Media Day" to showcase the university's thought leadership and generate coverage.
- To boost national coverage, consider a media tour.

## **BRAND JOURNALISM TIPS, IDEAS and INSPIRATION**

- The demise of mass media is leading to the rise of brand journalism. There's a vacuum and an opportunity for brand journalists to tell great stories.
- Humanizing people has the power to shift public perception. (See [Blue Sky's stories about TSA agents](#).)
- Include a "Submit a story idea" tab on your site; you could have some great stories fall into your lap.
- Find a healthy mix and cadence between topics/story type (Opinion, longform, how-tos, explainers, interviews, spotlights, video, etc.).
- Measure and monitor external subscriptions to your content as well (journalists, civic leaders, alumni, etc.).
- Enhance your school's reputation by telling great stories about meaningful issues.
- Highlight "Our Experts" with names, faces and credentials. Also seek out student writers who are eager to get bylines and build portfolios.
- Be mindful of SEO, but don't [stuff keywords](#).

### **Great brand journalism examples:**

- [Microsoft Stories](#)
- [University of Alberta's Folio](#)
- [MSU Denver](#)
- [Advocate Aurora Health](#)
- [Here are 24 more brand journalism sites](#)

## **LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION**

- How can you help mistrusted or misunderstood leaders communicate better? One attendee holds "breakfasts with Bob," a monthly meal with 10 staffers.
- Encourage your leader to regularly visit departments for one-on-one conversations.
- One attendee has a leader who tends to go rogue. If you can't afford media training, here are [tips on wrangling tricky spokespeople](#).
- Use your leaders' quirks to their advantage and play to their strengths. Put them in forums where they're likely to succeed.
- Communicate to leaders who are wary/skeptical of your agenda: "Our job is to help you accomplish what you want to accomplish."
- Encourage leaders to do "coffee chats" with colleagues or schedule "pizza with the president" events to build rapport, trust and engagement.

- If town halls aren't her/his thing, create smaller, more targeted forums where your leader can shine.
- Employees crave contact and communication with top-level bigshots. Just a bit of communication, time and presence can do wonders for morale.
- Have leaders be interviewed by folks they're comfortable and friendly with.
- Delete hollow platitudes from CEO messaging. "Can you believe it's fall?"
- Establish an editorial process for executive messaging. Settle on timing, tone, frequency and formats that work for them.
- If your leader is long-winded, remind her that [humans now have shorter attention spans than goldfish](#).
- It's crucial to [coach managers](#) and leaders to become better communicators.
- Even if your leader is a stiff (or a weird Canadian robot-man), don't try to change people or force them into anything.
- Play faculty members' and leaders' egos against each other to get more content cooperation. "Where's the story about *my* research???"

## **CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND RESPONSE**

- Authenticity is crucial. You can't respond to every trifling incident, but you should show empathy and awareness when things occur.
- You must exercise newsroom judgment on whether to respond to campus issues.
- Reserve communication from leaders for larger issues. Find the right person who can speak with credibility, knowledge and passion.
- Create a streamlined [crisis response plan](#). Establish who's responsible for what in any number of potential scenarios.
- Anticipate incidents that have happened on other campuses and set a response plan for each type of incident.
- If something does happen, respond quickly, concisely and clearly (and with empathy). How can you bring people together with your messaging?
- In crisis, respond *internally* first.
- You don't need to issue a thorough response immediately. Hollow, robotic messaging can get you into even more hot water.
- Don't take sides in the heat of the moment. Calmly provide context and a human perspective.
- If you're beset by legal or HR red tape, "proceed until apprehended," and ask for forgiveness later.
- Use student spokespeople who can speak authentically about tough issues.
- Actively communicate to students what the university is doing to address certain issues.
- In the absence of information, everyone goes negative. Silence breeds anxiety, doom and gloom.
- Prepare for how you communicate weather events. Also determine how you decide (and who decides) whether to cancel classes, etc.
- Highlight access to mental health care and student support.

- Craft a clear policy of where and when firearms are allowed on campus. ([Here's an example provided by an attendee.](#))
- Connect and collaborate with local police leadership to build trust and understanding.

## **MEDIA RELATIONS**

- If you spot an error/inaccuracy in a story, speak directly with editors and newsroom bosses. Let them know you're keeping them accountable.
- Cultivate genuine relationships with journalists, and you'll get better coverage.
- PR folks have more power nowadays (due to shrinking newsrooms). Leverage that bargaining power accordingly.
- Don't sweat the "lunatic fringe," internally or externally. However, you should address and respond to serious accusations or slander.
- Don't neglect niche media outlets, trade publications nor bloggers who are influential among a small but targeted audience.
- Don't count on news media to cover a story fairly or with nuance. Prepare your team for how you plan to respond to inaccuracies.
- For national media coverage, find stories that fit with larger national trends, topics or talking points.
- Get to know faculty members; they have expertise and great research/stories to share. Work to build trust with them.
- Be proactive about emailing journalists showcasing relevant experts for future stories.
- Seek out reporters with a track record of covering niche topics with aplomb. (E.g. One attendee sought a journalist who'd previously covered race issues to [pen this piece.](#))
- Don't just contact reporters when you need something. Become a helpful resource, not just a selfish pitching machine.

## **REACHING GEN Z STUDENTS AND YOUNGER AUDIENCES**

- When rebranding or launching a new project, bring students into the conversation.
- [Gen Z](#) is different; they're not millennials 2.0.
- Many Gen Z kids have never been without smartphones. They're living their lives online.
- It's not that they don't know how to talk; we don't know how to talk to them.
- Gen Z are coming of age in an era where the lines between news/communication/opinion/advocacy are becoming more blurred. They want to know where leaders stand on [hot issues](#).
- Foster two-way conversations instead of issuing decrees from on high. Create more opportunities for face-to-face conversations between faculty and students.

- Be proactive about meeting with student groups. They're already on social media and approaching news media, so empower and equip them with your messaging. Let vocal student leaders know that you have their backs.
- Student ambassador vlogs are an easy way to get content and reach prospective students.
- One attendee said his school has an official Instagram account and a student-run account that's overseen by the comms department. Students apply to run the account.
- Find your campus brand ambassadors and empower them to tell authentic stories.