

# 4 Communications Lessons Learned During a Time of Seismic Change

**BY JAY WILSON**

As the calendar turns from 2021 to 2022, the world is emerging from a pandemic unseen in more than a century. For communications professionals at colleges and universities throughout the United States, the past 18 months have provided both enormous challenges and generational opportunities.

*During my career in communications and marketing, I've seen profound changes in message delivery methods and audience segmentation. Long gone are the days of traditional printed press releases and Kiplinger-style newsletters. In their place has been a wave of online, multimedia targeting that removes the need for traditional information gatekeepers and allows for direct, two-way conversations with audiences both large and small.*

*As rapid as these changes seemed during the past decade, they paled in comparison to the pandemic-spurred sea change currently underway in our industry. As the economy shows strong signs of rebounding and vaccines are made available nationwide at every age level, BWF spoke with university communications leaders from around the nation about the state of play in the industry and what 2022 might have in store. Here's what they told us.*

## **1. Compelling communications and marketing work has never been more important**

When America shut down in March of 2020, the workload for communicators at colleges and universities ramped up significantly. There was an immediate need for crisis-level communications to reach a diverse range of audiences.

For internal communicators, outreach to faculty, staff, and students on the latest

changes in COVID-related policies was of critical importance. Externally, audiences that included donors, friends, and alumni, among others, affected by closures of various campus outlets all needed information on the institutional response to the pandemic.

This work also demanded the adoption of new tools, bridging the divide that was now necessary for public health. For this reason, communicators were early adopters of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other video-conferencing services while pivoting to the use of social media and video to quickly distribute urgent messages.

Jennifer Boscia Smith, assistant vice president for Donor and Alumni Communications at the University at Buffalo, captures the spirit of those early days of the pandemic: "Looking at it through a lens of how we support UB, the request for our services just exploded. So much of what we did as an institution went virtual and all of those things needed communications and marketing services."

Michael Tullier, executive director of Strategic Communication and Marketing at Columbus State University, pointed out that precision in language was of critical importance in the pandemic environment of 2020.

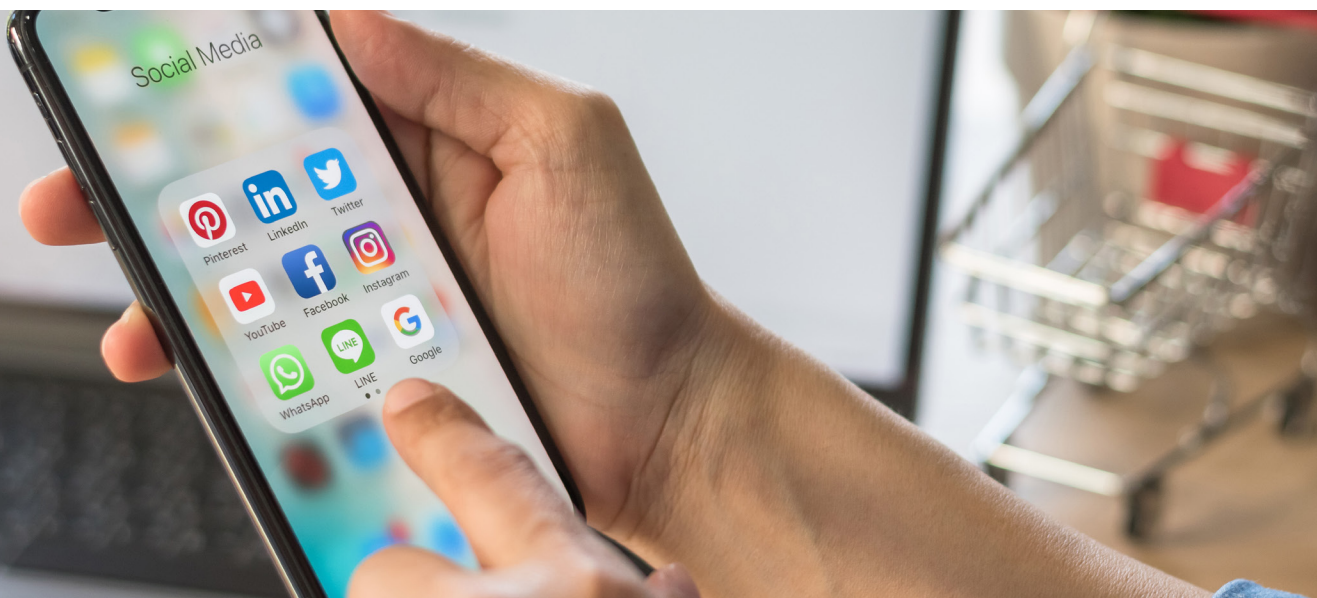
"I've been a part of COVID at two institutions: first at Tuskegee University and now at CSU. The

demand for communications of all types—internal, external, media relations, donor relations—was really high," said Tullier. "I think the ability to talk about COVID in a very clear way is where we've done our very best work."

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**—TOM DAVIS, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO THE CHANCELLOR, TROY UNIVERSITY**

While communications work has long been shifting to a virtual environment, with the development of donor portals, multimedia messaging, and the proliferation of social media, the pandemic acted as an accelerant for this move. Tom Davis, the longtime executive assistant to the chancellor at Troy University,





knows a seismic change when he sees one, and he worries many of his contemporaries aren't ready.

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If the past year is any indication, the next evolution in communications is already upon us. The ability to use technology to speak directly to donors, students, community leaders, and alumni has changed the game, likely forever.

## 2. Technology is at the heart of what's next

For all the talk of Zoom fatigue you're likely to hear today, the video-conferencing platform, along with other similar programs, had a profound and immediate impact on communications. Colleges and universities used the technology to reach internal audiences—faculty, staff, and students—but also large and extensive external audiences, including donors; alumni; local, state, and federal government officials; corporate partners; and the public at large.

Large academic medical centers, like at the University of South Florida, had a compelling message and an audience hungry for information. Davina Gould, director of Communications and Marketing for USF Health Development and Alumni Relations, believes the platform has been invaluable during these challenging times.

"Virtual events were game changers for us. On the health side, we created several forums with our deans to speak about COVID-19. We engaged thousands of people who would have never come to in-person events because we had

timely topics and an audience that was hungry for information."

It wasn't just large audiences that benefitted from the new reliance on video conferencing. University presidents and development leaders found the tool to be invaluable for direct donor communication as well. Tom Evelyn, vice president, University Communications at Furman University, told us that the use of video and video conferencing for donor outreach expanded greatly during the past 18 months.

"We've created more videos than ever before in an effort to reach our donors, using students to thank them directly for giving," explained Evelyn. "We also found other ways to connect. Our president spent more time visiting people one-on-one and was able to visit more people than ever before because we could do it all remotely."

Even as the use of technology has become all-pervasive during the past 18 months, many communications professionals are still trying to understand the impact of this transition on their overall program. A big emphasis in 2022 will be on answering this question.

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**—JULIE ENGBRECHT, VICE PRESIDENT, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI FOUNDATION**

## 3. Zoom isn't going away, but neither is the handshake

Technology and tools have been a game-changer for communications offices across the country during the past two years. While the anecdotal evidence of their effectiveness has been largely positive, a true understanding of



the return on investment is still in the offing.

For Julie Engebrecht, vice president, Strategic Communications at the University of Cincinnati Foundation, this assessment is the next step in understanding the impact of these profound changes in message delivery.

“COVID has allowed us to be more creative in the work we do and expand our toolbox,” Engebrecht acknowledged. “Going forward, it will be important to track our ROIs on these new technologies – doing so is definitely a priority for us in 2022.”

Even as effectiveness measurement is catching up with the technology, every professional BWF spoke with plans to move full speed toward using more emerging technologies and, as Engebrecht said, expanding the toolbox.

Brent Waugh, in his role as the associate vice president, Philanthropic Engagement and Campaign Communications at Washington State University, is emblematic of this trend in higher education communications.

“We’re adding a position for digital marketing; we’re planning to update and make our website more effective; we’re increasing our use of videos to have a more direct line of communications from students to donors,” Waugh explained. “Even traditional outreach, like print pieces, are going to be strengthened to add a digital or

video component. Our goal is to make sure each donor feels thanked on a personal level.”

As powerful a tool as technology has been, the professionals BWF spoke with believe that their audiences are craving a human touch again. Most communicators are planning a hybrid approach in 2022, with more in-person events planned to supplement a robust schedule of electronic communications and video conferencing.

No matter the method, the message has not changed for donor communications.

“We’re working to help donors understand the ‘why’ of giving. In the case of a new science laboratory, we’re telling the story of our students and how they may one day help prevent or end the next pandemic,” said Troy Johnson, executive director of Auburn University at Montgomery’s Office of University Communications. “Students can be the messengers but also the message. Donors are still moved by stories about people.”

#### **4. For 2022: People, positivity, and diversity**

Even as communications offices across the country are working to turn the page from the pandemic, they will do so with less staffing than many had prior to March of 2020. A combination of factors has led to many offices reporting being down as much as 25 percent of pre-pandemic staff. While many universities have seen hiring

freezes lifted, a move toward outsourcing will be part of the 2022 equation for several of the leaders that spoke with BWF.

Even as staffing remains a concern, communicators around the country are looking forward to a change in messaging tone. You can almost feel the good vibrations. After nearly two full years of crisis communications, the professionals BWF interviewed are anxious to return to normalcy. But more than that, they know their audiences are as well.

"In terms of tone, we're going for a more upbeat, optimistic viewpoint. It's been a hard few years, but as we're getting past the Delta variant, we're going to be more hopeful in our messaging. We have great stories to tell, and we're going to continue to tell them," said Gould at USF.

Another large piece of the communications puzzle over the past 18 months has been a strong emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This focus will continue in 2022. Engebrecht, Waugh, and Tullier all referenced DEI messaging to alumni, donors, and corporate partners as a key component of their ongoing efforts.

"Messaging for us next year is going to be all about impact," Waugh told us. "We'll continue to focus on DEI, making sure we tell the story of how donors can make a difference in those efforts, both on campus and across the state."

As 2021 ends, the communications landscape looks markedly different than it did at the close of 2019. In the coming year, development communications professionals throughout the country will focus on more concise, more hopeful messaging for audiences as small as a single person using technology not widely used prior to the pandemic. They will do so with fewer staff and more demands on their time than ever before.

And while the tools they use will continue to change and evolve, the story remains the same. Stories of impact—of programs created and lives transformed—will be at the heart of messaging to donors, alumni, and friends for higher education institutions across the country. Even in a time of seismic change, the fundamentals of compelling work remain.

### Continuing the Conversation

I would love to talk to you about how your communications office is assessing your organizational role as we begin the new year. BWF's team of strategic communications professionals are here as a resource for those facing the unique challenges of 2022. Send me an email or a message on LinkedIn. Every interaction we have is an opportunity to share innovation and continue our collective education. At BWF, it's our privilege to help.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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stories to drive audience engagement and achieve their communications objectives.

Jay has spent over 25 years in philanthropy and before joining BWF, was vice president for communications at National Strategies Public Relations where he led a communications and marketing team serving clients across an array of fields and industries. He has primarily partnered with nonprofits and higher education institutions throughout his career.

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