

Seven strategies to cut through in PR and Comms in 2021

a report from the Bluestripe Group



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Authentic comms, timely PR and insightful thought leadership are the keys to comms in 2021

7 Tips

- 1 Be authentic – no ‘in these times’ cheese
- 2 No puff – journalists’ inboxes are bursting. They need timely, interesting, targeted stories
- 3 Thought leadership is king – it shows you care by helping
- 4 Use hybrid events to show off that thought leadership
- 5 Social channels amplify, they should never be the start and end of content campaigns
- 6 Partner with trade press on paid content but go beyond badging exercises
- 7 Get the balance right between owned, paid and earned media but ensure all content is insightful

It would be fair to say that the opening line of every email you have probably read this year is right – 2020 truly was an unusual year.

Without live events to woo prospects and no face-to-face meetings to put journalists in front of executives, PR and comms professionals have had to make the most of digital channels during 2020. This was already happening, only the pandemic accelerated the trend and made the need to be effective and stand out from the clutter more necessary than ever.

As a recent report from Kantar points out, the big impact of the pandemic was advertising and marketing budgets were frozen or reduced. That has meant PR and comms execs need to step up to the plate and prove their worth to the rest of the company.

The report's key advice, echoed by experts in this article, is for brands to be authentic because companies who do not live up to the values they are extolling are in for, what they call a 'brand bashing'.

On the positive side, it found there were still high levels of attention and trust in news media, as well as (to a lesser degree) branded websites, leaving the door open for PR and comms execs to follow Kantar's advice to prove their worth to the rest of the company.

To find out how they should do that, we asked leading experts in the field for their tips for success in 2021 when the economy will hopefully emerge, but not yet freed, from the grim shadow of a global pandemic.



Katie Ingram

Trade Marketing and Insight Director
Evening Standard



Jennie Rock

Communications Director for EMEA
Essence Global



Angie Moxham

Founder and CEO
The Fourth Angel



Simon Poulter

Senior Manager of Corporate Communications
Vodafone Group



Rupert Smith

Director of Communications
Newsworks



Lydia Oakes

Co-founder
Bluestripe



Authentic comms vital for B2B

The most obvious impact of Covid has been an unassailable rise in PR, comms and marketing messages in every executive's inbox, in both their professional life and personal life as a consumer.

It is hard to give foolproof advice on standing out from the clutter and winning attention but **Katie Ingram**, Trade Marketing and Insight Director at the *Evening Standard* sums up the experience many busy media execs have and says to offer the advice, keep messaging simple and authentic.

"My inbox is full of jaunty, overly friendly, try-hard emails from businesses looking for my attention, telling me all about having to work in their daughter's bedroom with pink wallpaper or how much they are missing their clients," she says.

"This is not authenticity, it is cheese. Every business is going to have its struggles in the coming year and I think being able to reference that in a way that shows what you are doing about it is key."



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It is vitally important to grab people's attention with something worthwhile rather than long-winded puff because, as she puts it, there are plenty of other options to keep them busy.

"All virtual communications have to be shorter, more precise and we'll have to work on the wow factor to keep people entertained to stop people moving on to the other five digital meetings they could be in at the same time," she says.



Relevant PR and messaging

If you can imagine the rate at which prospects and customers have seen their email and social inboxes fill up under lockdown, spare a thought for journalists. **Simon Poulter**, Senior Manager of Corporate Communications at Vodafone Group.

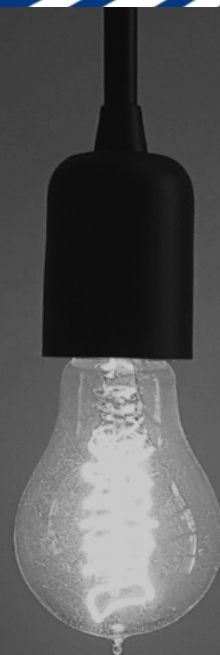
He advises PR professionals to check out the conversations on journalism online forums to see how they are all dismayed by the unmanageable spike in the volumes of messages spiking during 2020. Take a look at what writers are saying and for a reminder of how important it is not to add to the pile of messages they are deleting by the hour.

"Nothing has changed in terms of getting through to journalists - [there is still a need to be] relevant, timely and editorially interesting," he says.



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"Too many agencies, in particular, still make basic mistakes that journalists take to online forums about. But behind any agency is a client, and if that client is not making sensible choices, and not listening to the trusted advice of a good agency, then they do themselves no favours."



Thought leadership

The byword for 2020 has been to show clients that you care, but comms experts agree, it is far more useful to show that you are there to help. There are few better ways to do this for clients and prospects than display actionable insight into a burning question that a particular industry, or job role, is facing.

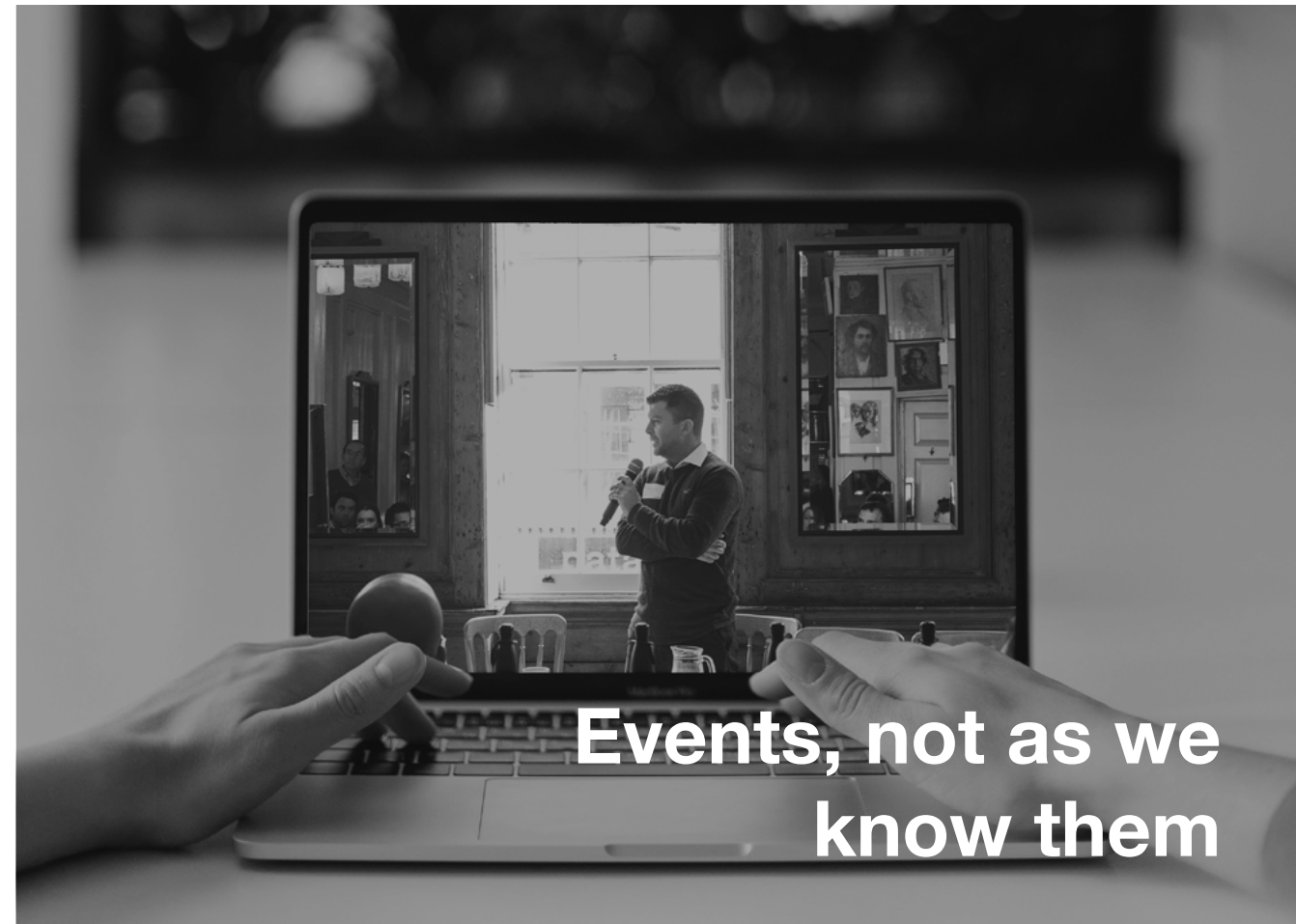
This is the central piece of advice offered by **Jennie Rock**, Communications Director, EMEA, Essence Global. If you want to cut through the noise of so much messaging, make sure your comms are led by thought leadership which journalists and execs want to take on board.

“Interesting research into new and emerging areas will remain one of the strongest forms of content marketing in 2021 – a great piece can be translated into many forms of content, from reports and videos to opinion pieces or podcasts,” she says.



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“Events help showcase interesting thought leadership and talent and are useful for getting in front of prospects and impressing industry peers. They can be a great way to convey complex messages and get further engagement and recognition around a topic.”



Events, not as we know them

In the wake of face-to-face events being cancelled for most of the year, even before lockdown was announced, it has been a time of online fireside chats and panels, webinars and presentations. Some have worked, some have left attendees logging out early, wondering when anyone was going to make a useful point.

It is unclear when face-to-face events will take place again but it is likely the impact of Covid will be felt long into 2021. A [survey](#) of event professionals in September 2020 showed an even split in forecasts. Against a backdrop of optimism at the time of asking, before a second partial lockdown, nearly a third thought some form of live event would be possible in Q4. A further third thought Q1 2021 was possible and the final third opted for Q3.

Given a possible reluctance for many executives to travel, it is unlikely events with international appeal will carry on as anything like normal in the first half of 2021. Hence, a staggering 95% of event professionals surveyed further revealed they are, or are expecting, to run hybrid events. Unlike many that we have seen so far, these events will not simply lift an event and place it online. Rather, there will be an online and a face-to-face element, so those who are unable or unwilling to travel can still take part.

Make the most of hybrid events.



This new mix is one that comms and PR experts should be willing to embrace, believe **Rupert Smith**, Director of Communications at Newsworks, the organisation promoting the country's newspaper industry.

"We have to make sure the move into this hybrid world doesn't pass us by," he says.

"For Newsworks the opportunity to do hybrid-events and conferences – live and digital blends – is an interesting one that we're already exploring (when the rules allow, of course). People certainly won't need to fly around the world quite as much any more to get to conferences or meetings, saving time, money and the planet all in one go."

These events will continue to take place as a blend of online and real-life meetings, because they are truly useful. Whether it is your own event or that of a business partner, an industry's big events – whether live, virtual or hybrid – are a golden opportunity to build a comms campaign around, he believes.

"For our organisation, both owned and third-party events are key. It's how we bring our news brands and people, in our case our journalists, to life in front of the industry," he says.



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"They are also forums for discussion. When a panel or keynote works best is when they provoke debate, create ideas and help move the entire industry forward. Being more comms clinical, we use events as a way to create a hook from which to launch our latest research, project or campaign. When we approach a project, we consider it as a 'campaign' and events will usually play an important role within this."

Don't bet on journalists rallying back to events.

Another aspect of events slowly returning is that rather awkward question nobody is willing to take on head-first. As **Simon Poulter** points out, most journalists work in reduced teams and were already struggling to get to industry conferences. After the best part of a year being released from the need to trudge along to an exhibition hall, the big question is, will they return?

"From a PR point of view, journalists have become more selective about which they attend, especially if they have to travel. The collapse of major trade shows in 2020 as the pandemic took hold highlighted this, as dwindling editorial teams were given the excuse they needed to stay away, covering pre-planned launches virtually.

"If and when the major industry trade shows return in 2021, it will be interesting to see what choices journalists make to attend them – we could see even greater selectiveness, as they've discovered that they can easily cover industry developments without having to be out of the office for days at a time."

If journalists do not swarm back to live events, it will be essential to embrace hybrid events and ensure thought leadership content is available online. Extra effort will also be needed in getting key executives in front of journalists virtually, perhaps in advance of a major speaking opportunity, with the press briefed over Zoom rather than in the green room.



Social Media

This reduction in face-to-face networking opportunities and live events is going to make social media increasingly important post pandemic, **Angie Moxham**, Founder of pr agency, Fourth Angel.

"We're all going to need to be doing a lot more direct comms via social media in the absence of networking," she says. "It needs to be integrated into everything we do. Social media is highly effective as a channel through which you can amplify campaigns."



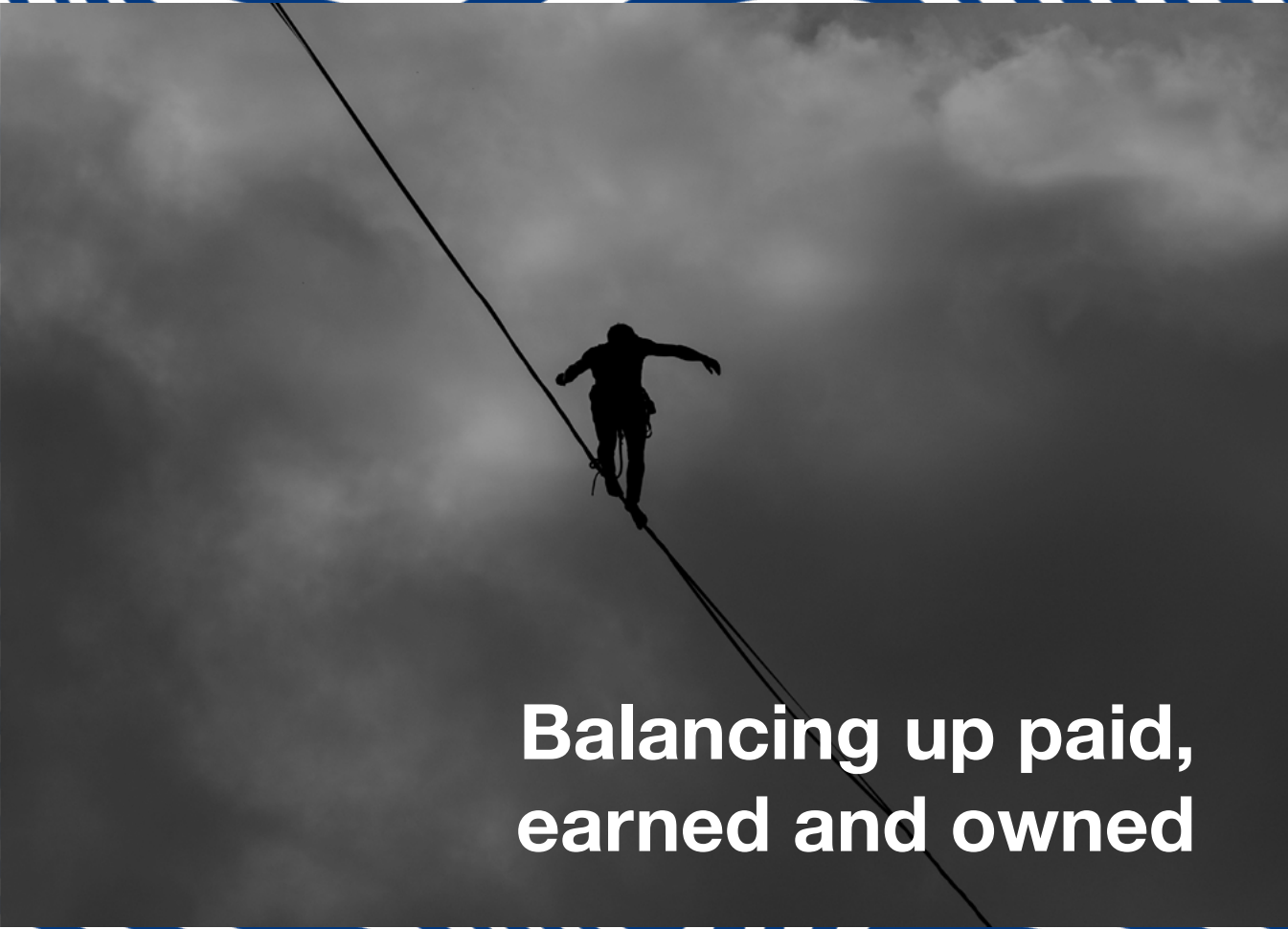
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There is, of course, an issue of trust to be overcome first. When Kantar asked the public what they thought of the various digital channels through which they have been receiving news and information in 2020, social media was the only channel to get a negative score. It may be where comms and pr execs are chasing likes, but it's also the least trusted of the channels they can use.

It has to be said, of course, Kantar's research was carried out among the general public who are wary of scams and fake news being propagated on social channels. It is not specifically looking at crafted messaging from media professionals. However, it does raise a serious point that business viewers of social media posts are going to be sceptical of claims. As **Katie Ingram** points out, it brings us back to our old friend, authenticity.

"We are a long way beyond the simple 'tag for attention' use of social media, but I would never underestimate the effective simplicity of this as a method to draw people in," she says. "Again, that authenticity word creeps back in. My audience can smell the spin a mile off, social needs to be simple, targeted and functional to be effective."

According to **Jennie Rock**, what comms specialists assume about social channels still holds true. While Facebook and Instagram may work for B2C brands, B2B messaging can seem a little uncool. LinkedIn is the place to reach B2B professionals, while Twitter, which she calls "the modern newsroom", is a great platform to get journalists interested in a company's opinion on events.

Balancing up paid, earned and owned

Social media is the archetypal channel used by PR and comms experts wanting to get the most out of their owned media. Posts and responses to posts are great for creating debate, and social is a receptive channel to share blogs and publish thought leadership.

Hence, there will always some PR and comms execs who champion owned channels over earned and paid media, while others will have the opposite view. In a time when the big newspaper and magazines titles are highly trusted, they are the best places to be seen, the argument goes.

For **Simon Poulter**, the key is to admit you have a favourite – his is owned media – but then set about striking the right balance for your business and clients.

“In the early days, some companies I was involved with still had mixed views about using channels like LinkedIn and blogs,” he says. “Then there was a tendency for other companies to go

too far and treat these channels as substitutes for press releases, especially when marketers have been told that it wouldn’t make a PR story.

“There’s a happy medium to be found, and some companies have been just as effective only using owned channels. As with everything – owned or paid – good editorial thinking is essential, and that means having an integrated approach between marketing and communications functions to ensure good balance.”



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Supporting trade media vital

Part of getting the balance right between owned, earned and paid is to support trade media, says **Angie Moxham**. After a harsh year for B2B titles, it is important to help keep them going because they will be sorely missed when they are gone.

“Always take a through-the-line view,” she urges. “Whilst great editorial always matters, we all understand the need for paid support. Otherwise platforms will perish.”



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Rupert Smith agrees that partnering with publishers is an essential strategy to get messages to a B2B audience and support titles in their greatest hour of need. However, he points out that this does not have to be entirely altruistic. If a partnership works well it will serve both sides and bridge the gap between thought leadership, content marketing and event success.

“A fundamental part of our strategy is to partner with our trade media as much as we possibly can. And we will continue to do this in 2021,” he says.

“We don’t just carry out sponsorship badging exercises. It’s got to work much harder for us, so we like to create partnerships and collaborate on projects and opportunities that have relevance and a clear return for us, whether that’s an event speaker platform, sponsorship partnership or content marketing collaboration. Or all three.”



Going back to basics for success

Comms and PR execs are probably a little over counting 'likes' and 'shares' already but 2021 is most definitely going to be when they concentrate on more solid values-based, authentic comms.

After a year of unforeseen change, execs need to help lead the way with B2B clients and prospects with truly insightful thought leadership. With journalists, they need to end the clutter and go back to the basics of providing well-timed, newsworthy stories and access to clients' execs whose input will take features to the next level.

PR and comms professionals should seek the right balance for their company or clients between earning coverage in the press, taking advantage of paid media opportunities with trade title sponsorships, while all the time working their owned media channels hard.

Hybrid events are likely to be the way forward, at the very least for the first half of this year and even beyond. As ever, the key is to have some thought leadership to share to ensure people come away thinking their time and attention has been well spent.

This is not a revolution in comms. In many ways it is using new channels to put out content that fits the oldest PR task all professionals must deliver on. That is, to show that a company is so interesting journalists cannot help but cover it, and so advanced in its thought leadership that businesses have them down as a 'go to' for insight and later a must for products and service enquiries.

Lydia Oakes
Co-founder
Bluestripe

Bluestripe Group works with companies from across the technology, media and telecoms sectors with a particular expertise in the marketing/advertising, media owner, fintech, edtech, agency and mobile industries. By bringing together PR, media and content under one roof, Bluestripe Group can offer clients creative, impactful and integrated B2B PR, content, marketing and lead generation campaigns that reach key decision makers.

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