

2015 IABC Annual General Meeting Inaugural Comments – Michael Ambjorn, Chair 2015-16

With thanks

Thanks Russell – and thank you for your visible leadership in the last year.

Robin McCasland: You kicked off the search for a new Executive Director; you kicked off the rebrand. Thank you for that.

Dianne Chase: Thank you for stepping up – I’m excited about working with you.

Terry Cerisoles: You have worked tirelessly and terrifically as our Treasurer to drag our financial infrastructure into the 21st century. Ginger Homan, thank you for stepping up to continue that drive.

Sharon Hunter: A tireless member of the Executive Committee focused keeping us all on our toes with a strong focus on value and impact. Thank you for continuing.

Also thank you to the rest of the 2014-15 board. Your service is appreciated.

Carlos Fulcher: I can’t think of anybody more keenly awaited. In fact, time flies, it is already your first anniversary at IABC and you have done a lot in a short time. We have a hard working and talented staff, and they have a terrific leader in you.

Facing the direction of travel

Things have been interesting recently.

That’s what happens when you hit a mid-life crisis. Things go a bit haywire.

IABC has been in a full-blown mid-life crisis.

So, should we go off and get ourselves a Porsche?

Luckily, that’s not on the cards.

It is easy to lose confidence.

As the hardnosed will tell us: never waste a crisis. And as an old British bulldog once said: ‘if you’re going through hell, keep going’.

Make something of it. Use it to take stock, prioritise. Fix. Set things up again for the future. Stronger. Better. Aligned and with a clear direction.

That's hard though when you're knocked for six.

A famous boxer once said: 'Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face'. We had a triple blow:

a global recession

a changing market

an out-dated infrastructure.

'We've been fixing to get ready' as the Texans might say, and today I want to talk about where we are on that journey – and where we can go next if you want to.

Now before we dive into that, you're probably wondering what I'm doing up here on the stage. Who's this fast-talking espresso-addict? Well, for starters, correlation does not necessarily mean causation and I hate to admit that I've been fast-talking long before I learnt how to make a decent espresso – nevertheless, a couple of extra shots certainly does not make it better. So if I get carried away, please do signal me to slow down.

I've got something to say.

It is about the future of our profession.

It is about the future of our association.

It is about our future.

It is about you.

And me.

Those who have heard me speak before will have heard me say: that the intersect between the two are the sweet spot of action. That's where the interesting things happen. That's where the good stories come from.

You are in this room right now because you're a leader.

You can make a difference to the person next to you, to a fellow leader, to the association and ultimately the profession – and society.

You are uniquely positioned to impact the world.

If you want to.

If you will give me your ears for a few minutes, I will propose a way for how we can do it together.

Before that I want to tell you a story.

It is a personal story – it starts in the battleship-grey headquarters of a large corporation. I've worked at a few; I've also run a small foundation; headed up a 260 year old Fellowship focused on social change – and these days I help boards and teams establish, align and execute purpose-driven comms and engagement strategy.

This corporate. Imagine you're at this HQ building. You have a brief moment between conference calls.

That's when you get the call. That's when a well-established industry leader calls you and says: 'you're it.'

'I need you to do one more thing.'

Don't worry about the fact that you're at that time commuting every three weeks to Chicago, from London. Leading a team spanning four continents.

Standing there you're told: Don't worry about that. Don't worry about that at all.

Because you need to run something.

Something for the association.

Something that will advance the profession.

It won't be easy. But you will enjoy it. And be better for it.

Standing there in that battleship-grey headquarter building with low ceilings – too far from daylight really; and coffee really unworthy of consumption – although always served with a smile – that's when you, against logic, common sense or indeed sanity, take something more on.

Whilst the details might be different, I am sure many of you have had the same experience. You get tapped. You step up. You deliver.

That was my first. It wasn't my last.

Why do we do it?

I can tell you why I do it:

- I believe that in today's world, communication can be a force for good.
- I believe that we have a unique way of connecting people for this purpose – a certain *je ne sais quois* – which I haven't seen in any other organisation that spans the world like this organisation does.

And I know: that with thousands of members worldwide, across diverse industries, sectors and disciplines, this is a community alive with knowledge.

Alive with experience.

Alive with ideas.

All of which are freely exchanged.

A community I love being part of – and people I can't do without.

A community that has a real and tangible impact.

It is a force for good – through the Global Standard for the Communication Profession, our Code of Ethics, our educational offerings, our mentoring, our leadership development.

I could go on.

Most of all though, for me: it is about the connection – and the connections – that it enables.

Because it is in that intersect the magic happens.

The sweet spot of action.

Let's be clear – the ask that was made, the ask to step up, was based on social capital – it was based on a connection. A connection who could vividly paint the possibility of experience ahead.

I've seen it in action.

Again and again.

I can't count the amount of times when I have been up against it with a tough comms challenge – or a question from a mentee, perhaps outside my own field of comms strategy and facilitation, that I could not answer – or something entirely

third – and have received emergency assistance from many a generous colleague in this organisation – and vice versa.

You know who you are.

Thank you.

I will always endeavour to do the same for you.

Because there's a u in endeavour.

Now let's take stock.

The smoke has not entirely cleared. Some will in fact say that we're on a burning platform. One only we can fix.

What's happening?

These days I pay my own way for membership, yet when I joined, membership was an employer-provided benefit. For me; for many.

The CFOs of the world removed that budget line. It isn't coming back.

Meanwhile on the interwebs indirect competitors are eating our audience for breakfast:

- \$20 for a copy of Harvard Business Review? Why pay, you can read five articles a month for free...
- \$50 bucks for an event? Curate your own crowd using Meetup.com – there are thousands of if not hundreds of thousands of groups out there.

Competition is fierce.

How many of you have used Uber or AirBnB? We're not the only ones being disrupted.

I know times have been hard. It hasn't been a bed of roses. This I know. But you are nothing if not resilient.

Now, it is not surprising that the field is busier than ever – Google tells me that there are:

- 2,500,000 searches for a communications strategy every month
- 140,000 of those are looking for comms skills
- 120,000 are looking for a coms conference...

...and if our membership grew at the rate of our LinkedIn group – now well past the 40,000 mark, we'd have fourfold the resources we have now. But wishful thinking does not make it so.

We have an advantage though – a global standard – a global standard that underpins our ability to be a force for good. I'll talk more about that later.

In the start-up community – we are in San Francisco after all – people often ask not what your advantage is, but what your unfair advantage is:

People.

Specialist experience – and an enduring energy – in the shape of our tireless leaders.

For those who do latin: *semper ardens*.

This propels us forward. Something commercial vendors can never compete with. Their staff do not scale. Not 2x, not 5x.

When the commercial outfits get to the end of the week, they down tools – as is quite right. We all need a break.

That said: we're different. We're a non-profit. It is a different ethos.

An IABC leader scales.

Often 2x, often 5x, potentially infinitely.

How do I know this? All it takes is a couple of calls to ask for help and before you know it you have a whole comms cavalry on hand to help out.

There are a thousand leaders in IABC.

Before we look ahead, let's look back a bit. It'll help set the context. Right back to 1970 when this organisation was formed. Our founders are long gone, but a strong legacy remains. A global organisation that delivers for the communication profession – and the professionals within it.

Why look back? Because we know from research that those who consciously stack up the work they've done to prepare for a challenge consistently outperform those who simply tell themselves they're going to do great.

Remember that next time you look in the mirror for a boost before a big presentation.

Whether you're a student, an experienced communicator, or accredited – or soon to be certified professional, our diverse programming has had something for you: it certainly has inspired me – Cape Town, Chicago, Johannesburg, Lugano, New York, New Orleans, San Diego, Torino and Toronto to mention a few of the superb conferences I've been to over the last few years.

In Lugano in 2009 I learnt about the intricate triggers of information overload – and how to do your best to avoid creating it. I'm still recovering as you can tell.

In Cape Town last year I learnt that South Africa's leading cancer charity makes a point of saying thank you to their leaders...

- Not once
- Not thrice
- Seven. Seven times.

These events wouldn't happen without our leaders. Thank you.

As communicators we share a lot, so it's easy to build valuable connections – even friendships. I have experienced this in London, Paris, Amsterdam, Abu Dhabi, Brussels, Cincinnati, Dubai, Frankfurt, London, Minneapolis, Moscow, Phoenix, Sao Paulo, Toronto (yep, that city again) – and who knows maybe one day somewhere as far along the alphabet as Ulan Bator... but one thing at a time before I get to Zagreb.

These connections wouldn't happen without you. Thank you.

Members have access to diverse leadership opportunities to build their skills, give back to their community, and contribute to a great member experience – and I am for one a beneficiary of that. Thank you.

At the core of that brand is a call to focus on insights and results. To make that measurably, let's break down the shortest articulation of IABC's three-year strategy:

“Financial recovery and sustainability is primary, as is the loyalty and development of our members and leaders and consolidating gains from the 2011-14 strategy. Increased reputation in the profession; better brand positioning; and greater interaction with business as a revenue generator are then the big opportunity to be grasped”.

FINANCES

This is the monster. The elephant in the room. This is what we're doing about it:

Membership: first of all, we've got to fix the leaking bucket. I will strike a Membership Task Force. Claudia Vaccarone will lead this group in partnership with our new Director of Membership on staff, Stephanie Doute. Please give Stephanie a warm welcome. This group will also look at how we translate the new brand framework into a real recruitment opportunity – and they will work

with our Finance Committee, led by incoming Treasurer Ginger Homan in partnership with Carlos Ruiz, our Finance Director on staff, to review our pricing model.

Data & Insights: In order for that to be well informed work – for we really do want to focus on insight and results – we need better data. The board has just agreed to bringing IABC’s survey efforts into the 21st century, using good industry practice and you can hold me accountable for the actions that will roll out of that.

Portfolio: I have commissioned a comprehensive review of our complete portfolio of programmes, products and services to ensure that each and every one of them makes a return, whether in the form of impact in line with our mission, or financially, to fund impact elsewhere.

Half the time we’re competing with ourselves. Let’s work smarter, not harder. This will lead to some difficult conversations down the line but together we can get through them if we focus on change we want to see.

Risk: Last but not least, we need to make sure we don’t end up with out-of-date hardware, software – not to mention make sure we can withstand an earthquake in both the virtual and literal sense. The board has agreed to my request to extend the role of our Audit Committee into a full-fledged Audit & Risk Committee which will meet four times a year and work in partnership with Carlos Fulcher to make sure issues identified are prioritised and addressed.

One more thing on this front – none of the above will happen without world class leaders. In addition to our continued significant investment in the International Leadership Institute, I am glad to say that the board has agreed to my request to make the open call process piloted under Russell’s leadership into permanent policy. Russell will have a busy year ahead as we seek nominations for many of the committees mentioned above.

INCREASED REPUTATION & BETTER BRAND POSITION

The Communications Committee which Russell chartered last year will continue to focus on our external standing of the association and within that contribute to the wider brand rollout. I’m pleased to report that we have a strong Chair in place in the form of Katie Macaulay – author of *From Cascade to Conversation* – and Ron Fuchs, incoming Director-at-Large will work closely with her.

Closer to home we need world leading content and I am glad to report that the board has provisionally agreed to a proposal to reinvigorate our approach here, making it a shared approach across all of IABC. I hereby make an Open Call for a refreshed Editorial Advisory Committee to come in and help shape the conversation that advances the profession.

GREATER INTERACTION

If the financial crisis didn't teach us anything else, then it hopefully taught us that it is not just commercial firms that need to operate professionally and with a solid business model. Non-profits need to do that too, and increasingly we see expectations like this put on government departments as well.

What is common across all of these? These organisations need solid professional communicators to support them. Don't take my word for it. Take SAP's CEO – our keynote speaker earlier – take his word for it.

The Global Communication Certification Council will, under the leadership of Sue Heuman, ABC, deliver the next level exam. Meanwhile the Academy will step up under the leadership of Theomary Karamanis to meet the need for new skills in fast changing landscape.

What can you expect from me? I will follow the path Russell has forged for visible leadership at IABC. At the time Russell took over we needed a strong central figure to continue to hold things together. Looking at this room, and reflecting on the progress we have made – as challenging as it has been – I would like to venture to say that we now need a thousand leaders to stand up and be counted.

We have a thousand leaders in this association.

You're a highly engaged bunch. You're kind. You're hard working. And you're demanding.

So what will I do to help you? I will do my utmost to live what we want the tone around here to be:

Accessible Open Lighter Contemporary Professional

To that end, and accompanying the now once-again regular quarterly reports I am instituting a quarterly progress call – the corporates amongst you will know it as an earnings call – but we of course have no shareholders. We do however have stakeholders and we need to continue to have regular exchanges, as piloted this year as 'open mics'. Look out for an invite to a Google Hangout where you can hold me, and the board, to account, ask questions and get straight answers.

I will also kick off a new conversation once a month – aligned with the IABC editorial calendar – and I encourage you to participate, or indeed, kick off your own.

You've got the connections.

You can create the experience.

The experience that make a difference.

An experience that engages.

An experience that inspires.

An experience that will take this profession to the next level.

Now close your eyes for a moment. Imagine if we all put a shoulder to the wheel at the same time.

Let's face the direction of travel – a direction that society and our profession is going in. A place that is more Dignan, less Ford. More responsive, less hierarchical.

Let's step up and help shape the future. We won't leave anybody behind who wants to join this journey. If it isn't right for you though, then I understand: we have to face the direction of travel. It is a direction set by wider shifts in the world – and a future, if we rise up to meet it, we can help shape.

What do I hope to review with you when I stand here next year?

All of us truly living the brand – and I am not talking about the logo here. I'm talking about the depth and breadth beyond it. And I want to take this moment to thank Priya Bates and her ace team for all their work on this.

What else?

- An Academy delivering the comms skills we need to meet a new reality and a Certification programme to test and verify them. We need this if we are to remain a current global profession.
- A vibrant global conversation taking place amongst members – and the wider world – centred around a focal point: an editorial calendar that advances the exchanges across our diverse community.
- With that a rejuvenated network of people using their skills and connections to create real impact – measurable impact based on insights and results – to deliver on our vision that communication truly can be a force for good. As a practical example within that: a revitalised Foundation that takes the Gift of Communication and our mentoring programmes around the world to the next level – and with that reactivated fundraising to support it.

Most of all I want to see our members, chapters, regions and international task forces, committees and indeed the board and staff work together like never before. Let's remove friction points that are holding us back, let's truly bring new and fresh approaches where needed, and let's refine the things we do best, even better.

I align organisations for a living. It is what I do. That can only be achieved through a facilitative, inclusive approach. The approach we took in developing the #IABC1417 strategy and an approach we redouble.

We should take heed from Aaron Dignan who spoke Monday. We should focus on enabling our leaders – with that we can build a both responsive and resilient organisation that can deliver on our true purpose: establish a respected global profession, built on insights and results, focused on creating connections across a diverse community.

Let's leave behind the silos.

Let's leverage our network.

Let's create new connections that will take us places.

We're 45 this year. Congratulations. Both to those who have been here from the beginning – stepped up along the way – and to those who have only just joined. I couldn't think of a better time or more exciting time to join up, or indeed re-engage, and put a shoulder to the wheel than right now, right here – and thanks to the virtual – everywhere.

As SAP CEO Bill McDermott said this morning: 'One idea carefully placed can change the world.' This is not my idea. It is yours – it is the experience you create based on the connections you maintain, the connections to build.

And for the record, there's a u in endeavour.

Indeed, to take a leaf out of Peter Penny's comments earlier: if not now, when? – and to complete the sentence with a call to action I learnt from one of my mentees:

If not us then who?

I hope to connect with you at many of our conferences and events around the world in the year ahead, and of course especially at the next Communication World Conference – in New Orleans 5-8 June 2016.

Now go do. Do it well.

Pick your passion. Find the sweet spot of action.

And don't forget to inspire others.

Share your story:

#globalprofession
#createconnection
#diversecommunity
#insightsandresults