BIOGRAPHY

LESLEY BRADSHAW
CO-FOUNDER, SMALL DATA ENTERPRISES

Leslie Bradshaw is a passionate entrepreneur known for her ability to lead teams, interpret and visualize data, accelerate growth, and have fun in the process.

The combination of her operational leadership, creative thinking, passion for data-driven storytelling, and ability to successfully engage across disciplines has aided vanguard brands with some of their most innovative executions. These include helping architect the de facto social strategy for Nike’s custom shoe division (NIKEiD) still used today; the collaboration between NASA and foursquare to bring about the first check-in from space; the concepting and development of Intel’s brand storytelling platform “iQ”; Google’s data visualization efforts around the 2012 election; and C-SPAN’s 2008 and 2012 election efforts and its Peabody-winning Archives redesign in 2009.

Bradshaw spent the early part of her career building one of the world’s top data visualization firms to become AdAge’s Small Agency of the Year—Southeast in 2012 and make the Inc. 500 list twice for revenue growth experienced during her tenure (2006–2012).

An advisor to multiple startups and co-founder of her own “small data” firm (focused on examining the smaller data sets that affect critical components of our lives, such as relationships), Bradshaw has been recognized by Fast Company as one of “The Most Creative People in Business” and by Inc. Magazine as a “Top 30 Entrepreneur Under 30.” She also spent 2013 and part of 2014 helping build a Knight Foundation-backed technology company that turned text into video using natural language processing and data visualization techniques.

Bradshaw, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Chicago, is a regular contributor at Forbes on the topic of female entrepreneurship and serves as a fellow for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, where she researches and writes on the topics of Millennials, data-driven innovation, and entrepreneurship.
INTRODUCTION

HOW TO THRIVE IN THIS NEW ERA

On a recent episode of the NBC program Parks and Recreation, City Councilwoman Leslie Knope had trouble finding support for her initiative to add fluoride to her town’s drinking water. Enter Tom Haverford, her culture-obsessed, hyper-Millennial staffer, with the solution: Rebrand fluoride as “TDazzle.” Paired with a video, hashtag, and giveaway, Knope soon had her community on board with the “aquatic-based social media oral experience.”

While TDazzle needn’t be used as a case study, thriving in the new era of public engagement requires a little dazzle—though it may be more doable than you realize.

The Internet has demanded that we change the old practices of public engagement. We must now show and tell more compelling stories; we must be more authentic and less self-serving in our conversations. In return, we no longer have to rely on costly one-way messaging or direct communication with limited audiences. We now have wide-reaching, 24/7 access to the public.

I have spent the better part of the last decade on the front lines of engaging with the public using many of the techniques I lay out in this report. Whether through innovative uses of social media data for organizations like NASA and C-SPAN or graphics that help end users learn more about a complex topic for brands like Intel and Google, these are not just theoretical recommendations but tried-and-true lessons.

Outlined here is a tactical guide to tapping into the new communications landscape to get your message heard, understood, and acted on.
A Happy Medium
A HAPPY MEDIUM

Embrace what content marketers already understand—the way a story is told is as important as the story itself.

While we can agree that knowing your message and clearly communicating it through traditional methods is no longer enough, this still leaves many of us asking, Where do I go from here? The answer is right in front of us, staring back through the numerous branded messages we receive every day. In short, the future of public engagement looks a whole lot like the future of consumer marketing.

The playing field has been leveled. We are all now content marketers with similar tools and distribution methods, though our content and resources may differ. Taking a cue from successful consumer brands, here are some considerations for telling your story.

MULTIMEDIA TYPES

STATIC
The static category of content, the most basic type of multimedia storytelling, includes everything from photographs to infographics to fully designed presentations. While you can scale it up or down depending on budget, creating a high-impact visual piece can carry your message far. Evergreen content (meaning the information doesn’t change) is a particularly good investment for this form as it can be reused ad infinitum.

MOTION
From the looping 6-second posts on Vine to the 3-minute HD video, motion projects are also malleable to budgets and abilities. But it’s critical to have an awareness of those limitations. An iPhone in steady hands can capture on-the-fly moments that make excellent content, but an unprofessional long-form video can be damaging. Don’t cut corners with this medium.

INTERACTIVE
Apps, responsive websites, and interactive visualizations are good solutions for dealing with complex data, handling long-term projects with frequent updates, or gathering input. They are a bigger investment of time and money and require the most upkeep, but as they can change over time, they can stay relevant.

DISTRIBUTION
A few years ago, matching content to platform was easy. Commercials ran on TV, and print ads ran in newspapers or magazines. Today, videos and print pieces alike can—and should—be published everywhere. Rather than putting your eggs in one basket, let those baby content chicks fly. Before posting a video on YouTube, tease it with a Vine or a screenshot on Facebook. Follow up the video’s release with a blog post or a Twitter Q&A. Extend the life of your stories by repurposing them and making use of the strengths of various platforms.

Also consider which devices audience members may use to view your content. On average, each U.S. household has 5.7 Internet-connected devices, including smartphones, tablets, desktops, and even smart TVs. In other words, there are a range of screen sizes and capabilities. Different devices are used depending on convenience and effectiveness. Your content should be optimized for all of them.

TIMING
Determining the right moment to tell a story is as crucial as any other part of content creation. If you need evidence: Movies released in December are more likely to receive Oscar nominations, which are announced in January. To impact decision making, the decision makers must have you on their minds. Strategize the general timing, but always gauge the public conversation to find a good opening—either to change the subject or to add to it.

ADDING VALUE
If there is one lesson successful marketers have learned, it’s that good content adds value to people’s lives. As an example: “ElfYourself” is the Christmastime campaign Office Max has been running for eight years due to its popularity. The campaign is centered around a website (and now an app) on which users can upload photos of themselves and others to serve as the faces of dancing elves in a shareable holiday video card. What does that have to do with Office supplies? Not much, but it has made OfficeMax the center of an Internet phenomenon.

Of course, your efforts do not need to reach those heights. They just need to result in content that people want to use. Think of content as a free service you offer. Whether it’s providing a laugh, contributing useful information, or advancing shared values, focusing on the interests and needs of the community positions you in the center of the conversation. From there, you have the ability to control the sentiment and impact decision making.
Thinking Visually
THINKING VISUALLY

Forget press releases and text-heavy articles. Visually rich content is replacing copy-heavy messages with exceptional results.

In 2011, a team of researchers at the University of Southern California determined that each person receives 174 newspaper’s worth of information every day—over three times as much information as we received in 1986. This number is probably even larger today, meaning that messages have more competition for attention than ever before.

So what’s the secret to breaking through the noise? It’s simple—use visuals. Whether it’s a photograph or a 5-minute video, visual storytelling works. Facebook posts that include pictures garner 120% more engagement, and publishers that use infographics see 12% more traffic. If you have the ability to add motion to the mix, you should know that people are a whopping 85% more likely to purchase a product after having watched a video about it.

Why does visual work so well? To start, our brains process visual information 60,000 times faster than text. Visual messaging is efficient. Not only are images attention grabbing, we don’t have to give them all that much attention to get their meaning. You can “say” more in less space with pictures—and speak in a universal language that nonnative speakers (or even less educated people) can understand.

For those working to engage the public on an issue, visual communication simply makes sense. However, many people don’t feel comfortable creating visual content—and who can blame them? The majority of us have been trained to create reports and press releases—to communicate with words. Here are some suggestions and thoughts to get your synapses firing in a new, visual way.

SHOW DON’T TELL

Trim your core message down to a single simple sentence. From there, brainstorm a handful of ways you can communicate it without words. Try sketching or taking a photo that illustrates your point. Think of concrete images that can serve as visual examples. For more abstract ideas, turn to metaphors. Remember the 1980s ad of the fried egg that represented your brain on drugs? Figure out your message’s egg.

Infographics and data visualizations create visual metaphors that make your information easier to digest.

Provide through tangible comparison

An important way to ensure a successful visual is by adding value. As mentioned, we get 174 newspaper’s worth of information in a day. Yet what if you had been given a different measure, such as 2.7 gigabytes? That number would not have had nearly the same impact because it is not as tangible or approachable to most people. Infographics and data visualizations create visual metaphors that make your information easier to digest. They are about taking something that, at face value, is opaque for the average person and putting it in visualizable terms that he or she is familiar with.

Consider what you know

Data visualization, as a term, may be new to you, but what it encompasses is not. For example, the map is a relevant way to present location data to your audience. Bar graphs, pie charts, and even doodles that show relationships between data are all valuable visual tools.

Be consistent

Even if you do not have the budget or resources for a full-time design team, determining a fixed visual style—colors, imagery, even typesetting—can give your campaign a cohesive and professional feel. Also, there are myriad apps and tools that can help even novices churn out slick-looking visual content.
Finding Your People
FINDING YOUR PEOPLE

From audience to advocacy, tapping into niche communities can have multiple benefits.

One of the ultimate goals of public engagement is to eventually have the public do the work for you by spreading your message. While you may apply the term “word of mouth” to this effect, this is not a guide on “going viral.” That level of frenzied buzz often requires good luck as much as good content—and usually fizzes as fast as it comes. However, slowly developing relationships with people who will champion your cause takes just a bit of footwork and will result in development and amplification of your message in a sustaining way. Here are some tips for finding “your people”:

• Figure out what you care about. Although the obvious answers such as raising money, obtaining input, or building awareness exist, also think about values and interests that are secondary to those goals. Next, determine what your potential audience cares about—not what they should care about or what they may care about once they are aware of the issue important to you, but what they actually care about. Then, focus on where those interests overlap.

• Research platforms where relevant communities are already engaging with each other. Forget the idea of “if you build it, they will come,” and replace it with “it’s been built, so go there.” This may include mainstream platforms and forums, but the Internet is also full of active, niche communities.

• Jump into the conversation where it makes sense, but don’t start talking blindly. Tailor your messages to fit within the rules, etiquette, and values of the platform. These may be subtle, so it helps to listen, pay attention, and start slow.

• Once you have a feel for the community, be active and have a consistent presence there. Remember to focus on shared values or any area where you can lend expert insight—the conversation shouldn’t be self-serving. It’s important to give back to the community in a significant way before asking it to do something for you.

• Credibility and trust are earned through authentic engagement. Over time, community members who see you as reliable will develop into advocates. Pay attention to those who have influence over your target audience or understand how to reach them. These members have the potential to become partners in amplifying your message.

• Provide opportunities for community members to be part of your cause in ways that are meaningful to them. Ask for input or single out influencers for mutually beneficial contributions, for instance, asking to feature their stories in campaign materials.
Breaking and Amplifying Your News
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You’ve created your story. Now find media to broadcast it.

OWNED MEDIA
This is the media that belongs to your organization, such as your Facebook page or official website. Owned media is most likely the main forum in which to tell your story.

What it includes: Social accounts and websites.

What to consider: This is where organizations have the most control, but with great power comes great responsibility.

How to make it work for you: Create a hook. Find a kernel in your story that is exciting or connect it to an issue that is relevant and timely. Draft headlines that don’t give away the entire story, but instead entice the audience to want more information.

PAID MEDIA
This refers to media placement in independent forums that your organization purchases, like advertising. Paid media can get your story in front of an even larger, handpicked audience.

What it includes: Social media advertising and media buys.

What to consider: Too much paid placement looks inauthentic and can annoy those who encounter it too often.

How to make it work for you: Use paid media as an opportunity to jump-start a significant initiative or to boost content that is already performing well. Make use of advanced targeting tools to get the most mileage out of your dollars.

EARNED MEDIA
This refers to any mention of your story in a forum independent of your organization, like a newspaper article or a social media post from someone outside of your organization. Earned media indicates that your story is working because others want to talk about it.

What it includes: News outlets and the social universe at large.

What to consider: When others tell your story, they can tell it in their own way.

How to make it work for you: Create content that works in a wider context and then find publications or connected individuals in that subject area. While you can’t pay for earned media, you can ask for it. Create pitches that explain how your story relates to their interests, serves their needs, or adds to a larger conversation. If they find it worthwhile, they may amplify your message to a larger audience.
The Right Metrics
THE RIGHT METRICS

Metrics give us important feedback that helps shape content and conversations. Metrics also help us justify to key stakeholders the importance of continuing or ending a particular program, strategy, or tactic. In an era where there is a digital record of every interaction, modern communications metrics are highly specific and assess value in multiple ways. With all this new instant information, you are what you measure.

Listening and observing are perhaps the most powerful approaches for public engagement. Public reaction can be used to craft new messages and determine strategy. Today, our socially driven era provides a plethora of listening tools that track large-scale engagement efforts quickly and in a variety of ways. However, with access to such large amounts of detailed and personalized data, a new question arises: What do we measure? Figuring out the right metrics will drive success, rather than just distract you from it.

BECOME A RECORD COLLECTOR

Think about how many songs are in your music collection—it’s way more than you could ever listen to in a reasonable amount of time, but you still like having access to all of it. It’s the same way with data. “Listening” to everything at once would be overwhelming, but go ahead and collect all the data that interest you. Stick to playing your greatest hits—the measurements that you know matter now—and keep those more obscure songs in your collection if you need them. You never know what information may be meaningful down the line.

TRACK TO INFORM ACTIONS

The metrics that directly show progress toward your objective hold the most weight. As an example, news organizations tweet links to their stories with the ultimate goal of driving traffic to their sites to increase advertising revenue. Therefore, retweets, while valuable for spreading awareness, are not as important as clicks, and tweet impressions don’t mean much at all. After learning tweets that tell a complete story (e.g., “Argo wins Best Picture”) increase retweets, but decrease link clicks, many news outlets have adjusted their strategy to promote link clicks by sending tweets that only tease the story (e.g., “Best Picture winner announced”).

Along with quantitative (numbers) data, qualitative data show not just what happened but how or why it is happening.

DON’T FORGET QUALITATIVE DATA

People often focus only on numbers when collecting data, such as how many people attended an event, clicked on a link, or commented on a post. However, the sociologist William Bruce Cameron wrote that “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Along with quantitative (numbers) data, qualitative data show not just what happened but how or why it is happening.

Sentiment can be an incredibly important measurement of how a message is coming across to an audience and lead to insights about how to heighten engagement, potentially changing the hard numerable data. Of course, not everything that is said will be valuable. Anything that is clearly a reaction from a personal agenda and is not constructive can be ignored. Particularly thoughtful or honest feedback, positive or negative, as well as the general consensus should be taken into consideration though. It’s the difference between counting the number of tweets and reading what they say.
The Future Is Now
THE FUTURE IS NOW
Organizations of all types are embracing the future of public engagement and blazing the trail for others.

No part of our life is immune from the unfolding changes to communications. Our politics, health, education, and daily lives are being presented in engaging ways that not only communicate key messages but better connect people with what is happening in the world around them. Here’s a sampling of how some of these entities are practicing visual storytelling, engaging niche communities, leveraging brand marketing techniques, and utilizing data with tremendous results.

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S REELECTION CAMPAIGN
An old-fashioned email campaign raised more than $690 million for President Obama’s reelection in 2012. While email is not a new platform for raising money, some of the techniques used to enhance the campaign’s success, including listening via an instant feedback loop, are novel.

The campaign’s digital team experimented with email messaging, split testing formatting, imagery, and landing pages. Eighteen dedicated email writers drafted and tested numerous subject line options daily, continually revising their strategy for optimal engagement. Being personal and keeping the message short worked best. Clickable subject lines ranged from “Hell yeah, I like Obamacare,” to “I will be outspent” to simple “Dinner?,” but the most successful was an email titled “Hey.” That one word raised millions of dollars.

In this new era, one-way messaging that only focuses on what you want to say (not taking into account what an audience wants to hear) does not work. Using focused measurements to gauge impact counts more than experience or intuition—the Obama team was surprised to learn that despite having incredible design and technology resources, emails featuring plain text links and gaudy formatting (think giant fonts and highlighted text) performed best.

COOK COUNTY’S BUDGET
Government websites don’t have the best reputation when it comes to ease of use or interface, but Cook County, Illinois (Chicago falls within its borders) went beyond creating a well-designed, intuitive site to house its budget and expenses by making Look at Cook, an interactive data visualization.

The Cook County budgets were already accessible online and presented clearly—as long as you were already fairly familiar with reading county budgets. But Commissioner John Fritchey believed that in order for the public to engage with the city’s finances, and ultimately be informed by them, they needed to be easier to understand.

Fritchey enlisted a duo of private sector designers with experience creating visualizations based on open government data. The end result was a series of clickable line graphs showing budget information year over year. Choosing a year enables users to view the breakdown of the various funds. In just a few clicks, the public can check how much was spent on, say, animal control in 1999.

The visual component gives users a sense of proportion and meaning to the numbers, while the interactive nature of the project enables multiple stories to be told and the public to immediately feel involved while exploring them.

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NASA’S SOCIAL MEDIA

NASA has done a great many things. It’s put men on the moon, rovers on Mars, and even conquered a new frontier: social media.

The agency has more than 5 million Twitter followers, 2 million Facebook fans, and more than 164 million YouTube views. But it’s not just about the numbers; it’s about how NASA engages its audience.

From checking in on Foursquare from space to hosting events for its communities on the ground (called “Socials”), the agency takes advantage of multiple, relevant platforms and ensures that every mission and astronaut has a consistent presence (nearly 500 accounts in total). NASA even has a comprehensive directory of the agency’s numerous related social media accounts on its website.

While NASA’s work tends to be more interesting to the general public than that of other government agencies, the space program hasn’t been well publicized since the 1990s. Unable to grab headlines or TV air time, many of NASA’s advances—and the fantastic content it produces—went unnoticed by the mainstream, that is, until NASA went directly to the people.

Engaging communities on social media, a place where its target audience was already hanging out, paid off. The landing of Mars Curiosity, for instance, had 70,000 retweets. NASA now even televises launches and other cosmic events via its own Ustream channel. The self-produced music video of Canadian astronaut Col. Chris Hadfeld singing David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” onboard the International Space Station probably did more to connect people to the space program than any mission NASA has had in years (and he did it on his own!). As a result, more people engage and understand NASA’s multiple missions in space and here on Earth than ever before.

Providing value (gorgeous images, a feed that alerts of asteroids passing Earth, updates, and education) goes a long way, and now the buzz around NASA is self-maintaining. During the recent government shutdown, for example, the Twitter community rallied around the hashtag #ThingsNASAMightTweet, filling in the gaps during the agency’s imposed radio silence.

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL’S (CDC’S) “TIPS FROM SMOKERS” CAMPAIGN

Public health officials’ main concern when delivering a message is whether it is accurate and clear, but, as the CDC learned, it doesn’t hurt to market it a little too.

The organization did two things to make its recent “Tips From Smokers” campaign a success. First, it enlisted the help of experts, namely ex-smokers, who know how to speak to other smokers. Second, the organization relied on real, and sometimes graphic, stories to powerfully illustrate common statistics about the dangers of smoking, creating a series of TV ads and short videos that it posted online. The CDC didn’t stop with its big content piece, however. It extended the life of the campaign by repurposing pieces, designing shareable images, and hosting a Q&A with one of the video’s participants on Facebook.

The best part? Real results. The campaign garnered plenty of Likes, shares, and views in various outlets, but the most telling metric is that the CDC estimated in a report that 100,000 people quit smoking permanently because of the campaign’s efforts.
There are two options when engaging with members of the public: talk at them until they give us what we need, or talk with them until we can deliver what they need. The former strategy has never been good practice, but it has occasionally worked. In this new world and new economy, though, I will boldly assert: This will no longer be the case. The public is not stuck listening to one story. There is now a range of narratives and conventions with which it can engage.

Good communication hasn’t changed significantly. While packaging and delivery have evolved, the heart of all engaging messages remains the same: thoughtful, authentic, and personal.

This guide was designed to give you the tools to create stories and conversations that will resonate with audiences and aid in decision making. It has touched on classic strategies and devices and paired them with the capabilities of brand new technologies. These modern tools of engagement are meant to help us tell our stories in richer and more nuanced forms and to better reach the people that need to hear them.

As for what comes beyond this guide, communications ebb and flow. When the landscape becomes too saturated with one type of media or storytelling strategy, another form will reemerge. How do you stand out in a noisy room? You can try shouting, or you can try sounding different. Recently, I’ve seen a return to longer form video and written pieces. It doesn’t work when telling every story, but if it has substance, people still have the ability to pay attention, despite reports to the contrary.

The future of public engagement isn’t just one thing. It’s intermediality. Through the connections between storytelling forms in the digital space, we are finding closer connections to our intended audiences.