



Climate Change

As Oliver Rust bows out as co-chair of the MarComms committee, he and Anita Davis, who continues in the role, share their insights to help members navigate today's accountability economy



'Informed, executive leadership plays an essential role in crisis response'

— Anita Davis

What do Washington politics and United Airlines have in common? Aside from making global news headlines in 2017, both have amplified the importance of reputation in today's accountability era. The idea that "perception is reality" rings true — it doesn't just apply to philosophy.

What a public figure or body says and does matters more today than ever before, and no one — PR manager or President — is immune to the devastating

consequences of a poorly handled publicity crisis.

Committee chair Anita Davis and Oliver Rust, who recently stepped down as co-chair, look back over the past year's biggest moments in MarComms and emerge with valuable lessons for businesses in the coming 12 months.

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Lessons in accountability

Davis is Vice President, Public Affairs at investment firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, where, inevitably, a lot of the discussions are centered on current events.

Last year was a particularly transformative one in global politics and business, she told AmCham. Communications best practices were strongly influenced by the rhetoric and activities out of Washington, not forgetting the impact of “fake news” on the industry’s reputation.

“The year was a case study — and an ongoing one at that — on the emergence of direct communications via social media channels, juxtaposed with a growing distrust of partisan media. We were constantly reminded of the critical importance consumer trust plays for brands,” she says.

Emphasis on reputation maintenance also continued to intensify, says Davis, referring to United Airlines’ social media crisis following the forceful removal of a passenger back in April 2017, and Bell Pottinger’s collapse into administration in September 2017 following the PR firm’s entanglement in South African politics and the corruption mire that finally engulfed former president Jacob Zuma.

“Public accountability is critical to commercial success. Informed, executive leadership plays an essential role in crisis response,” she says.

Gratification generation

Rust is Managing Director, Asia Pacific, at business intelligence firm ORC International. At work, he regularly monitors the latest communications trends and their impact on his clients’ businesses.

Rust predicts that technology and service-sharing apps like Uber and Airbnb will continue to disrupt traditional industries in the next five to 10 years, and

adds that businesses should anticipate the impact of increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence on their marketing strategies.

One thing is certain: whatever the scenario, it will involve mobile. He says the average user spends five hours each day on their smartphone, and that we can expect two billion new users by 2020.

“In today’s age of instant gratification, consumers expect to be connected 24/7 with everyone and everything that they care about. Mobile marketing has to be a key component of any marketing strategy in a multi-touch multi-channel world.”

Power of the people

Davis and Rust advise businesses to stay on top of the shifting global tone around individual voice and empowerment. They say social movements related to equality and individuality will be a key theme for marketers in 2018.

“The way consumers think and express themselves will impact the way brands think about communications and marketing,” Rust says.

Davis says she will continue the work she and Rust have been doing to promote open and interactive dialogue among members by hosting thought-provoking speaker events of interest to MarComms professionals and the broader AmCham community.

Both urge members to treat the marketing & communications committee as a forum for knowledge-sharing about these two industry segments. “We provide a space to discuss the issues shaping the MarComms world of the moment,” says Davis.

