





changing lanes

Kate Reynolds is director of corporate affairs and communications at National Express. She talks to **Rebecca Pardon** about her journey from the newsroom to steering sustainability at one of the UK's most recognisable brands

As our train system creaks under the strain of strikes, overcrowding, frequent delays and lofty ticket prices, to some, coach travel may seem comparably luxurious in its simplicity. A glimpse of a National Express coach evokes fond memories of journeys that may, admittedly, have begun to feel slightly wearying by the fourth hour onboard, but were dependable, nevertheless. Much of what makes these journeys distinctive is the drivers, whose personalities can transform the atmosphere of a lengthy trip.

For a brand whose routes are intimately threaded across the breadth of the UK, in a snaking network connecting the nation, National Express' petrol guzzling fleet is increasingly at odds with an environmentally conscious world. This year, the brand hopes to pave a new route towards sustainability with the launch of its new, fully electric bus service in Coventry. "We have set ourselves the target of making our coach fleet zero-emission by 2035," says Kate Reynolds, the company's director of corporate affairs and communications, and executive ▶

sponsor of environment and sustainability.

Reynolds speaks optimistically about the company's ambitious goals but, with a lengthy career in corporate affairs, she has a proven knack for knowing when and how an organisation needs to adapt. As a child, Reynolds developed a keen determination to break into the world of news.

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“I think probably my ideas about journalism were really shaped by what I’d seen on TV, such as Lois Lane,” she muses.

It wasn't long before Reynolds was living her childhood dream. Having studied French and business at the University of Brighton, she felt her appetite for learning had only grown. After completing a course in print journalism, she was offered a role at a local newspaper, covering a rich variety of human-interest topics. Days when she was not frantically typing ahead of deadlines were spent researching for a “random” assortment of stories, such as by visiting football clubs to interview the managers and players. Soon, however, Reynolds was struggling with the heavier nature of some of the grittier news stories.

“I was in journalism for about four years, but I started to feel that, although it had been my childhood dream, it hadn't really clicked for me,” she says. “I was working on a lot of heavier things, like long, sometimes quite bleak, court cases. I'd be the person who went and sat in a coroner's court for the day. I felt like it wasn't really suited to my personality.”

After meeting Reynolds, this is not very surprising. Warm, engaging and talkative, she describes her affinity for livelier environments where she can engage with others – something coroners' courts are not particularly known for. Trusting her gut instinct, Reynolds chose to give up on her childhood dream in order to pursue a new one.

When she was given the chance to swap echoing court rooms for bustling client meetings at QuickSilver PR, Reynolds leapt at the opportunity and started managing the accounts for housing associations. “I just immediately felt a click in week one,” she says. “I knew this was what I wanted. It gave me the mental and intellectual stimulation of journalism, but also the great client relationships and the creativity.”

It was here that Reynolds also noticed how some areas of the communications industry were

slipping behind. “It was 2007 and social media was just emerging – Twitter was kind of on the cusp of becoming a big thing,” she recalls. “I was really keen to try to get housing associations to use social media more to connect with customers but, working at an agency, it felt like I was one step removed from being able to do that.”

Reynolds had spotted a gap in how housing associations were engaging with customers. Soon, she was being snapped-up by organisations looking to dip their toes into the world of social media. When headhunted by housing provider Sanctuary Group, her role turned into a healthy stint of nine years. Reynolds remembers this time with pride, but also as “very emotional” as, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the organisation worked hard to support the residents of its 100 care homes. Having been settled and happy in her role at Sanctuary for so long, Reynolds noticed the familiar feeling of restlessness; she realised she wanted her career to encompass a greater variety of experience.

Her new role as director of corporate affairs and communications at National Express seemed to emerge from the blue as the perfect opportunity in an entirely fresh sector which brought a new set of challenges. What would be a daunting and nerve-racking experience for many was embraced by Reynolds who, despite relishing her time at Sanctuary, was hungry for the intellectual stimulation that can sometimes only come from immersing yourself in the unknown. “It was really rejuvenating, actually,” she recalls. “I had to build entirely new relationships across the transport sector. It's like getting to know a new world, and I've really enjoyed that. There were definitely nerves, but I never doubted my decision.”

At National Express today, Reynolds is also executive sponsor for environment and sustainability. “The businesses that will thrive in the next 10 to 15 years will be those that really embrace their sustainability journey. I was attracted to this business because they were already really on the path with that. Coventry is now an all-electric bus city.”

The journey to sustainability, however, is by no means smooth or straight-forward. “It's really interesting to see how this transition happens up-close,” Reynolds observes. “From a distance, you think it is a really neat, elegant transition. In reality, it's full of bumpy and thorny problems that you're picking up along the way.”

National Express has already placed its net-zero targets, aspiring towards a zero-emission bus fleet by 2030 which, Reynolds says, the company is halfway to meeting. Its coach fleet is hoped to also be zero-emission by 2035, although this is proving trickier to get into motion and maintaining the same quality of service and routes, while enabling coaches to refuel when necessary. “In corporate affairs, you need to be really responsive to [public sentiment], especially in



November 2023 – present Director of corporate affairs and communications UK, Germany and Ireland, National Express

September 2022 – November 2023 Director of corporate affairs and communications, National Express

July 2020 – August 2020 Director of communications, Sanctuary Group

January 2019 – July 2020 Group head of external affairs, Sanctuary Group

July 2013 – December 2018 Group head of PR and communications, Sanctuary Group

February 2013 – June 2013 Head of external communications and PR, Birmingham Metropolitan Police

January 2010 – February 2013 Head of communications, Wolverhampton Homes

April 2009 – January 2010 Marketing and communications manager, Orbit Group

commercial business. I think, in a communications role, you are really privileged because you have this bird's eye perspective of the whole business."

Although having hopped between various communications roles across a diverse landscape over the course of her career, Reynolds believes there was always an underlying sense of direction and purpose. "I think the theme in all of the roles I've done is that they all have some element of public service, but there has been this commercial edge to them," she says, before adding: "Coming into a new industry is something I would recommend for anyone in their careers. Don't stay in your lane, make sure that you go outside of it and try those other experiences."

For many across the communications industry, getting a seat at the table is a typical struggle that can lead to practitioners feeling unheard or undervalued. At National Express, Reynolds feels fortunate that this is not the case under CEO Alex Jensen, previously CEO at bp, who joined the company last year. "Although I am very lucky in my role, I know that, generally in the industry, there's still a question about where communications sits and the value we bring."

Reynolds takes this topic as an opportunity to share some of the advice she bestows on her graduate mentees at National Express. "If you really want to make an impact, you need to think about where there

is a problem in the business," she says. "And, if you can see that problem and you can truly understand it, you may be able to come up with a solution. I think it is very similar at a senior level as well: it's about bringing that quality of conversation."

Reflecting on the changes she has noticed throughout her time in the industry, Reynolds refers solemnly to how the media industry has rapidly transformed. "I think social media has had a huge wave of influence, hugely impacting traditional media," she says. "I have noticed the change in how newspapers, TV and radio will report on things, based on what they believe will be popular on social platforms or what will generate the most engagement. Sometimes, this threatens heading into clickbait territory and it feels degrading to the overall media landscape."

When asked how the relationship between communications professionals and journalists has been impacted as a result, Reynolds responds passionately: "I think we still need to work respectfully with journalists and understand what they need from that, as well as what the business is trying to achieve. There is a perennial value in managing that balance, and maintaining this is really important."

It is when discussing her future ambitions in her role that Reynolds truly brightens with enthusiasm. "I have a theory that a job really enriches you after you've been there two years; you've seen a couple of business cycles by that point, so you've worked out the key moments and you're able to predict how things might land," she explains. "You've established your relationship with people, and you have learned how to navigate the business by this point, which is often the sweet spot. Although, I think there's also a point about staying somewhere for too long."

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Reynolds has just reached this sweet spot herself, celebrating her two-year anniversary at National Express in September, and elaborates on whether she indeed feels any difference. "I'm really excited; I've just recently taken on responsibility for Germany and their communications team. It's a new country for me, but it's also a new mode of travel, because it's rail.

"Additionally, sustainability is another thing that really attracted me to this role," she continues. "Just yesterday we launched a hydrogenated vegetable oil-ran route in Dublin, which was really exciting. These kinds of sustainable moves and decisions, that's where I see my focus going for the next few years. It's hugely motivational." ■