

# Brendan Cooper talks internal communications

 By Jessica Tennant

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Ex-*Sports Illustrated* editor and *Heat* magazine editorial director, Brendan Cooper now heads up New Media's internal communications division.

Speaking of the transition, Cooper says internal communications offers a more diverse audience and therefore a broader range of topics. "We focus on everything from health and wellness content to thought leadership and innovation pieces... and on any given day I'm touching the financial, motoring, entertainment and FMCG sectors."

But of real value, is its focus on content that resonates with the employees they produce it for.

Here, Cooper explains why he decided to move to the internal communications space and that South African businesses are actually ahead of the curve in their understanding of the importance of it...

## ■ Why New Media?

New Media is a company that I really wanted to work for, for a long time and it eventually worked out. It's a company that has always been very creatively lead, and has a happy, inspiring and transparent culture, which is the kind of environment in which I thrive.



Brendan Cooper

## ■ What key learnings are you going to adopt in your new role?

- Happy people make great work.
- Make to-don't lists so that you aren't focusing on the wrong things.
- If you really care about what you're doing, everything else will fall into place around that.

## ■ So what's on or at the top of your 'to-don't' list?

I write out my list of 'to dos' then ask myself are you the best person to actually do this bit? If not, I ask for help. There's a lot of value in knowing your weaknesses. In my case, anything that requires using Excel.

## ■ Internal communications are very much aligned with HR. Where does HR come in, exactly?

The role HR plays in staff engagement is evolving in line with cultural and societal changes. Traditional HR practices with a focus on outputs rather than inputs and things like annual performance appraisals are falling away. HR needs to work closely with the internal communications team to make sure that employees are heard rather than spoken to, and understand the purpose of the company they work for, rather than the financial targets or company policies. HR needs to help guide the stories that the company wants to communicate to staff, which makes it far more of a communications role than an operational role.

## ■ Do South Africans understand the importance of internal communications?

South African companies are really ahead of the curve in their understanding of the importance of employee engagement and the need for effective internal communications. The work we are doing for clients in this space is winning international awards. We won two Pearl Awards in New York for *Siyasiza* magazine, which we produce on behalf of FNB. We're winning these awards because our clients allow us to do innovative, quality work because they not only trust us but because they want the messaging they are sending into the business to be meaningful to their people; for it to add value to their lives. I really think some South African companies have a lot to teach the rest of the world about how to communicate to staff.



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### ■ ***Is South Africa on par with the rest of the world when it comes to understanding the communication channels that are necessary for effective internal communications?***

South Africans are early tech adopters, and in general, our clients are switched on to new platforms and new ways of using these platforms effectively. Our role as their agency is to help guide that conversation, and that's where the magic happens. We have helped clients launch custom built, cutting-edge platforms into their businesses that are on par with what the world's most progressive companies are doing, if not better.

### ■ ***Tell us a bit about your team and their combined skill sets?***

We have 22 expert editors, writers, designers, audio-visual content producers, content strategists, user experience experts and client service specialists. Ultimately, the skill sets need to combine to make us great storytellers. Stories convince where facts don't and our mission is to get messaging across in a way that resonates with the people we're talking to. We put the right people together to find the right ways and right platforms to tell these stories.

We have excellent content crafters at New Media and continue to attract the best people in the industry, so it's not difficult to have the right skills in place. It's more about making sure we're understanding what our audiences want and need, and what our clients are trying to achieve, then using these skills to make that happen.

### ■ ***If you had to pick one character trait that makes you good at what you do, what would that be?***

Hmm, that's tricky. I would like to think that I listen with empathy and that that helps create a happy, inspired workplace.

## ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. [marketingnews@bizcommunity.com](mailto:marketingnews@bizcommunity.com)

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