

TALES FROM THE MEDIA FRONTIER

**GE and ANZ Bank
take their stories
directly to readers.
Report by Brunswick's
DARREN MCDERMOTT
and LOUISE WARD**

IN 2005, VETERAN TECH JOURNALIST Tom Foremski heralded a massive change in media and corporate communications with the declaration “every company is a media company.”

Businesses publishing their own stories isn't new.

John Deere launched a magazine for farmers in 1895. GE hired Kurt Vonnegut in 1947 and tasked him to “hunt for stories” and “keep a steady drumbeat of good news issuing from the plant.” But those efforts reached relatively few people, mostly employees and customers. Companies now have access to the same distribution channels as mainstream media, from Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to Reddit and Snapchat.

Anyone with a story to tell has the means to tell it – and to have it heard. That change has “profound implications for the way businesses communicate with the public,” according to a recent *Financial Times* article that highlights the blurred line between corporate and traditional journalism.

Brunswick spoke with two corporate journalism pioneers:

TOMAS KELLNER, Managing Editor of *GE REPORTS*, a seven-year-old site dedicated to news about the venerable industrial giant, and **PAUL EDWARDS**, Communications Head at Australia's ANZ Bank, which recently launched *BLUENOTES*, a forum for insights about the economy, banking and society. Both see the enormous potential for companies to contribute to the narrative around their business.

Following are excerpts of interviews that were conducted separately.

Why did you start publishing?

TOMAS KELLNER of *GE Reports*: We started as a reactive tool in 2008 during the financial crisis. The company wanted to contribute the GE Capital perspective to the conversation – but there weren't enough writers around to be picking up stories from every company that wanted to be heard. So we originally built this platform to tell our side of the story, reactively. But now it's really a proactive tool – where we tell all the stories we think are worth telling.

PAUL EDWARDS of ANZ's *BlueNotes*: Our CEO took a trip with our board to visit Silicon Valley companies in 2013 and had a “light bulb” moment. He came back and challenged me to redefine how the bank communicates – internally and externally. Early on, we identified the need for content – really good content – that we

could use to engage on these new channels. From there, *BlueNotes* was born.

What's your goal?

TK: To tell stories that connect with our readers and get them excited about GE. We want to show our readers that we make really amazing things and that we can solve really difficult problems – from a jet engine to an MRI scanner or new ways to generate power or solve the fresh water crisis in Africa. These are big discussions outside GE, but to which we have something to contribute. You can't share those stories via a bunch of jargon in a press release. You have to have a good narrator – a protagonist.

PE: We want to be a part of the conversations happening outside our bank. To do that, we have to bring something to the table. With *BlueNotes*, we use our expertise and relationships for the benefit and interest of our readers – for example, using proprietary data



to do a story on the trajectory of the New Zealand craft beer industry.

Do you focus on your own organization, or the world around you?

TK: We focus on the things about our company – what we make, what we do – that impact a bigger discussion about the world around us. We think we have many stories that are worth telling but there are just not enough journalists to report on them.

When we do use *GE Reports* for more “hard news” about ourselves, we always



gereports.com draws in readers with arresting visuals, as with this recent article on indoor farming using GE's LED technology

maintain our storytelling angle. For example, in summer 2014 when we were seeking to acquire Alstom, we wrote a story to explain the mutual history of the companies dating back to 1892 and how they fit together.

PE: There is a limited audience out there for a daily diet of ANZ-focused material. Right now, about 80 percent of our content is about the world outside our walls and 20 percent about ourselves. All our content is formed around large-topic pillars: the “Asian century,” the economy, management and leadership, diversity, sustainability –

they're all relevant conversations for us to participate in. And the reason that we preserve the opportunity to use *BlueNotes* for our own stuff is that traditional media is shrinking, particularly here in Australia. There simply aren't enough journalists to cover all the topics we want to cover from our business point of view.

Companies have been involved in telling their own stories for years.

The Hershey Press launched in 1909. What's different now?

TK: Everyone has access to the same distribution channels as the legacy media. Back when Kurt Vonnegut was writing for GE's publications, they weren't available on newsstands. You could only get hold of them if you worked for GE or had a friend or family member who worked there. The material was out of sight for most people. Now any company can come into your living room and tell you a story.

PE: The opportunity is supercharged since

technology has made it so easy to produce and distribute content, but the need is also supercharged. Traditional media is fragmented. Attempts to grow readership are fumbling. The number of people writing about ANZ is shrinking and the resources they have to do research on our industry are shrinking. At the same time, people are glued to their various digital screens 24/7, and expect to hear from us.

Did you have to present a business case for your publications, or show return on investment?

TK: ROI all depends on your goal. Do you want to sell products? Do you want to inspire? To change the perception of your company? Our goal is to show the world what we do – to build awareness of the value we provide to society. Obviously, we look at the usual performance metrics such as page views, the “bounce” rate (when readers leave the site), and the number of unique visitors. But we also measure the →

pickup of our stories by other media, total time spent reading, and the number of new email subscribers – a bellwether metric since it indicates that people like what we do and want more of it coming straight into their inbox.

PE: We took a leap into the unknown with *BlueNotes*. We couldn't say, "This is exactly how it's going to work and what our metrics of success will be." Now that we've launched, we have monthly reports on things such as page views and the quality of our subscriber base. But the biggest benefit that our executives are paying attention to is the flexibility we now have to communicate, for example at results time, or on issues we want to engage around, such as the new capital requirements for banks in Australia. We can occupy that space.

Does your company's culture allow you editorial freedom?

TK: It has always been in GE's DNA to explore new things – to take things for a spin and see how they work. You could say it goes all the way back to Edison. It's one of the reasons I took this job – they let me in and they let me loose. I can run around the company as an in-house reporter and most of the doors I knock on open.

PE: There's an understanding here that we have to take some risks as we rebuild our communications function for the social media age. We need to be able to experiment. Having our CEO understand that and give us his blessing to test things out has been critical.

How do you make sure that your stories find an audience?

TK: We are under the same pressure as any traditional journalist. You don't want to sit in your cubicle and publish stories that nobody but yourself reads. The storytelling business is really a transaction, where the reader pays you with their time and

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Paul Edwards
Communications Head, ANZ



"The Asian Century," with stories focusing on the growth and impact of China and Asia, is a topic area on bluenotes.anz.com

you pay them back with information. You need to tell them something interesting that they don't know, or something that will make them smarter, or they'll feel cheated and they'll never come back.

PE: We know that *BlueNotes* will only be successful if we loosen the boundaries that previously existed for corporate communications. One of our most powerful assets is our Managing Editor, Andrew Cornell, who we hired from the

Australian Financial Review. As well as overseeing all our content he writes his own column in the same style that won him awards at the *AFR*.

What is your distribution strategy?

TK: Our distribution channels range from email – 17,000 subscribers get an email from us every day – to Twitter to Gizmodo. Our strategy is to write stories that are so

compelling that people want to share and comment on social media, and media outlets want to run with them because they know they will interest their readership. As far as our strategy for fueling that social pickup, we do spend a lot of time constructing enticing gateways to the story – the headline, the opening paragraph, an infographic or the GIF – a short animated film. We'll take a 10-minute video that someone shot for GE years ago and find a five-second segment that's really GIF-able and put that out on our channels with a link to the full text.

PE: A lot of it has to do with the social networks of our contributors themselves.

We work with them to make sure that once their story is published, they have a social profile in place to participate in the resulting conversation. Person-to-person social media conversations will always be

more robust than corporate-to-person. We want to activate that. One of the ways we help our contributors to do that is through training programs, including one for executives that's designed to make them more comfortable writing for *BlueNotes* and participating in the conversation on social media.

Do you pay to promote your content?

TK: We don't usually use paid promotion but occasionally, if a story is doing really well on *GE Reports* and is already getting a ton of traffic, then we might put some paid



promotion behind it to push it a little further. But we really just bet on winners – stories where we have proof that the social web is interested. *GE Reports* itself is not involved in any sponsored content mechanisms, but our marketing team does take some of our material for a partnership with *The Economist* called *GE Look Ahead*, which is great because there’s an obvious overlap between the audiences. *GE Reports* gets a lot of traffic through that partnership.

PE: So far, we are working on building an organic audience for *BlueNotes*. In fact, a lot of our promotional tactics have been quite old-fashioned – such as leaving leaflets at conferences, believe it or not. My hope is to have *BlueNotes* host its own roundtable debate events three or four times a year. We’ve had a lot of success with translating relationships that we build offline into online advocacy.

What’s your take on the debate over whether corporations publishing content is “journalism?”

TK: I really don’t like the splitting of hairs with this debate. What we are doing is a form of journalism. My friend Shane Snow at Contently (which matches freelance writers with corporate clients to create content) makes the distinction between “Journalism with a capital J and journalism with a lower-case j.” “Journalism” is comprised of deep, investigative pieces and “journalism” is simply the sharing

of information. We do the latter. We are sharing information that’s not being offered elsewhere.

PE: I think the debate about that has disappeared a bit. When we first launched *BlueNotes*, a number of people from the traditional media had very strong views about it, but now there is a recognition that there will be many forms of journalism. There is an appetite online for a smorgasbord of content – people aren’t subscribing and dedicating themselves to only one outlet. Even if they tried, they would still be inundated with links on their social networks and in their inboxes. The online user has become source agnostic.

What has surprised you most?

TK: Probably the power of organic sharing. You can have a story that gets hundreds of thousands of views and positive comments based on the quality of the story alone – no paid promotion. We had a story about

a Japanese farmer who built an indoor vegetable farm (see photograph on Page 71). The story was about him, really, with GE supplying custom-built LED lights for him to use. That post got on to the top spot on *reddit.com*, the “front page of the internet.” It really showed me the power of this tool – if you do it right, people will respond to it. They’ll share it with their friends. They’ll talk about it.

PE: For us, one consequence of *BlueNotes* is that it allows us to think more clearly about the role of our employees in social media. After watching how they interact with content on the site, we’ve built a really useful model that organizes them into “listeners,” “sharers” and “experts,” and we’ve been able to use that model in our other social media programs.

Are there emerging platforms that you’re exploring?

TK: One of the beauties of this space is that things come out of the woodwork, pretty →



A *GE Reports* story features astronaut Buzz Aldrin, wearing limited-edition *GE* sneakers, inspired by the boots he wore on his 1969 moonwalk, also made by the company

“We are under the same pressure as any traditional journalist. You don’t want to sit in your cubicle and publish stories that nobody but yourself reads”

Tomas Kellner, Managing Editor, *GE Reports*



much every year, maybe every six months, and so we are looking at different platforms all the time. The marketing team is looking at Snapchat. We are on Vine. We try to do microcontent with Yo, the “pinging” app. We are open to new things. If something allows us to tell a better story, we might go there. That’s basically the motto.

PE: You know, my 13-year-old is almost exclusively engaged on Instagram. No interest in Facebook. But Twitter is still quite live. We’ve got to keep watching the platforms that people are engaged in and work out how we participate in those and the platforms of tomorrow, because I don’t think they’ll be the same group as they are today, and each is quite different.

What’s next?

TK: Right now, we have 15 *GE Reports* sister sites around the world, and we are looking to grow that number. We want to be able to tell the same story to readers around the world on the same day, at the same time. If you think about it, that’s an immensely powerful tool for any company to be able to scale communications in that way. That was not possible 15 years ago.

PE: We really want to focus on investing in our existing people throughout the bank – empowering our people as social media storytellers. We also want to push the boundaries on formats, and produce consistent visual storytelling, including video, photography and graphics.

Any advice for those wrestling with the relevance of this for their organization?

TK: You have to grab the initiative and show the various gatekeepers – and there are many inside GE – that this is a good approach, that it works. That you will do no harm, and that this is actually a benefit.

PE: The world of corporate communications is changing faster now than at any time in the past 25 or 30 years that I’ve worked in the business. In the past two years, the number of people accessing the web via mobiles increased by 60 percent. That trend is just going to continue and corporate communications is going to have to adapt to keep up.



TOMAS KELLNER

Managing Editor of *GE Reports* since 2011, Tomas Kellner is a former *Forbes* staff writer in business and technology. He was also a Senior Director of Global Business Intelligence at corporate investigations consultant Kroll. A Fulbright scholar, Kellner holds a graduate degree from Columbia School of Journalism as well as a degree in engineering and materials science.
gereports.com

GE

GE is the world’s largest infrastructure company with a specialty finance business. Its industrial operations span water, energy, aviation, transport, lighting and software.



PAUL EDWARDS

A senior communications adviser at ANZ since 1996, Paul Edwards is currently Group General Manager of Corporate Communications. He holds an economics degree and previously worked in corporate and consulting roles in Australia and the UK.
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ANZ

Australia and New Zealand Banking Group, or ANZ, is the third-largest bank in Australia by market capitalization and among the top 50 banks in the world.

DARREN McDERMOTT, a former journalist at *The Wall Street Journal*, is a Director in Brunswick’s New York office, where he works on digital content and media relations.

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EVERY COMPANY IS A MEDIA COMPANY

Your business can tell its own story better, following these steps

- Build your publishing game plan to support your communications goals. If you don’t have a communications plan clearly outlining your goals, start there.
- Develop an authentic editorial voice. People engage with stories and with good narrators. Not with press releases.
- Align the enterprise around the new strategy. Make sure your various business units and regions understand the vision and their role in contributing content.
- Don’t forget distribution. Whether it’s additional owned channels, traditional media or paid media, if you aren’t thinking about distribution strategy, you’re not giving your content a fair chance to rise above the clutter and chatter.
- Make sure you’re tracking how and where your content is consumed. But don’t stress about fancy metrics reports.
- Experimentation is key. Don’t be afraid to try out a new channel, test engagement with your content – but then close it if it’s not working.
- Map existing editorial talent throughout the organization before making new hires. You might already have a video producer on your team and not know it.
- It’s fine to start small.
- Your success is ultimately tied to the quality of your content – there’s no way around it.