



CharityComms podcast – Episode 6 transcript

Robyn: Hi there and welcome to this episode of the CharityComms podcast. If you're a return listener it's great to have you back. If you're a new listener, I'm Robyn, the events officer here at CharityComms.

Sushi: And I'm Sushi from the Digital Engagement Strategy Team at Scope. For this episode we decided to focus down on the charities achieving great things with smaller teams and smaller budgets.

Robyn: Yes, as a small charity ourselves with a team of just 11, I must admit we've got a soft spot for our small charity members. First up we geeked-out with Scott Roberts from Haven House Children's Hospice who created his own podcast which went behind the scenes to chat to the amazing people running a hospital day-to-day.

Sushi: We also spoke to Sarah Rughoonundon and Gemma Collins-Ellis, a previous inspiring communicator award winner from Bliss, the charity for babies born premature or sick. They let us pick their brains on how they put digital at the heart of their organisational strategy with an aim of increasing their ability to reach every baby born premature – a pretty admirable aim!

Robyn: Absolutely! Without further ado, here's our interview with Scott. Enjoy!

Robyn: Hi Scott. It's so great to have you here with us today. How are you doing?

Scott: Very well, thank you.

Robyn: Awesome.

Sushi: I'm here too!

Robyn: And Sushi is here too! I always forget to mention that. I think it's because I assume that in everyone's heads you're just there! You are there. The woman who needs no introduction. Sushi is in the room. So, Scott, you started out in journalism and radio before moving into PR in the third sector, but how did you find that transition? What made you want to move into working for charities?

Scott: Well it was quite a gradual transition really because I worked in journalism for six years, so a qualified journalist, and I worked mostly in local and regional news in radio but sometimes online for the BBC and commercial



stations across the South of England. And then I moved into the LGBT sector, specialising in LGBT journalism which was quite interesting because it's not something I thought I would do. But I worked at an LGBT publication called PinkNews.

Sushi: Ah yes, know it well.

Robyn: Yeah, I know PinkNews.

Scott: So it was a good market leader for the sector. I was there for about two and a half years as Editor and then Political Editor, and I built up a bit of knowledge about certain issues to do with equalities and sexual health for the LGBT community, because obviously it's something that disproportionately affects those communities, and I was working quite a lot with the Terence Higgins Trust in terms of they would send me some really good press releases and I would follow them up.

Robyn: Ah, yeah!

Scott: And eventually a job came up in their press office for PR and Social Media Lead and that's how I kind of went into the charity sector. I did journalism in charity work for about a year or so and then I moved full-time into the charity sector. So it was a gradual transition.

Robyn: Sounds very smooth.

Sushi: So, you moved to the Terence Higgins Trust and you've also worked for small charities?

Scott: Yes.

Sushi: What would you say are the best bits about working for small charities and what are the more challenging parts?

Scott: I think the best bit about working at a small charity is that you quickly – it is like a community, it's like a family. So small charities, where I am at the moment, Haven House, we probably have around 80 staff, you pretty much recognise all the faces in the organisation and you build up really nice working relations because there is a degree of familiarity, which I think is nice. One of the best things about small charities is that you can show a lot more impact direct because you might not have a big team, though you actually have a lot of direct responsibility, and it's more noticeable. For instance, if you're not there, or your colleagues aren't there, because there isn't someone to just pick up the role and it all continues, so –

Robyn: Yeah. There's nowhere to hide.



Scott: Exactly! Sometimes it's a good thing and sometimes it can be challenging. But I think you can demonstrate more of a direct impact and I think you can probably have a bit more freedom because it might just be you in a really small set-up.

Robyn: So moving on to the Haven House podcast, we really loved how, in your talk, you said that you decided to go for podcasting because you thought it would be fun and accessible and different, and we also obviously had a lot of drive to create a podcast so I think we were very much on the same page with that, and you obviously love podcasting but how important do you think it is to have that passion for it before jumping into the project?

Scott: Well if you're going to take on something to do additionally, along with all of your other responsibilities, you should do something that's fun!

[Laughter]

Scott: I wasn't going to say, "Right, can I do something that actually I don't really want to do in my spare time, which is actually just more work." You know, because at any time you might be asked to do something more in your spare time which you don't really want to have to do. But, you know, there's no point doing something if you really won't find it fun and it's your own idea. So I wanted to do this naturally and I think over the years I've learnt you might want to do something additional at work but, first of all, if it's a good idea and it's your own idea, make sure you'll enjoy doing it because you're not going to have a good time if you do that in your spare time and it's not fun.

Sushi: So, you started your podcast but was everyone on board?

Scott: Everyone was on board in terms of they knew that it was something that I wanted to do and they knew that I could probably do something quite decent from it.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: But obviously not everyone is familiar with having to do an interview so I had to persuade a few people initially. I always ensure that a podcast, the person that is recorded sounds the best.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: And that's something which I think a lot of radio journalists do across the board.

Sushi: Yeah.



Scott: I think it's ethically quite a good – that's one of the reasons I love radio for journalism because it's quite an ethically good thing to do, but if you want to – you're not changing what was said but, for instance, you're ensuring that it will sound as good as they would want to sound. It actually helps with the process and I think a lot of people, when they realise that an interview is just a conversation, because reservations about, for instance, doing a podcast, and the same about people that might be reluctant to ever have to do any type of media interview across the board –

Robyn: Yeah, it can be daunting.

Scott: And a podcast is probably the softest entry point to do anything that is broadcast because you're doing it in-house and, at the end of the day, it's not going to go direct onto a broadcaster platform.

Sushi: For sure.

Scott: So generally it's quite manageable. And then the other thing is that you – I think every person that I've found, even when they've said the cliché thing of, "I hate the sound of my own voice" or, "Can we do that again?", whenever people have listened back to the podcast it's always been a really lovely experience for me because they can't actually imagine, they can't comprehend that that's them.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: They're hearing them sound completely different for the first time and I say to them, "Well this is what you are like all the time when I speak to you", and they can't get over the fact that they sound so, you know, polished and slick and they think it's someone else. It's like, "No, that's you!"

[Laughter]

Scott: And it's amazing.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: And that's why it's really useful for any media training as well, because it's actually building confidence.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: And I think every podcast I've done with someone they've always felt more comfortable about doing other stuff after that. So it's actually helped with them when they're doing presentations, when they're going out to do meetings, or when they're doing media interviews as well.



Robyn: Well that's really interesting because, yeah, we were thinking about, compared to video, do you think people are far more comfortable then with a mike rather than being sat in front of a camera? It feels a little bit more informal, a little bit more relaxed and there is a bit less pressure on – because if you're just speaking then you're just sort of thinking about how your voice is coming across and maybe what you're saying but, if you're in front of a camera, you're thinking about what you look like, how you're sitting, your body language. Do you feel like – have you worked with video? If so, did you see a difference in terms of interviewing people?

Scott: Yeah, and that is – I mean, to be honest, that is the reason why I went into radio in the first place.

[Laughter]

Scott: It's true though! You know, when I was at university and some of us – we were all doing broadcast journalism and some of us clearly wanted to go straight into telly.

Robyn: Yeah.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: I never really had much time for wanting to be a video journalist because, first of all, logistically it's a lot more challenging. If you're going out to report a story, for radio you just take your recorder and maybe some headphones and that's that.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: For telly, you've got to take the camera, you've got to take the tripod, you might have to take a boom, a sound protector.

Sushi: A cameraman.

Scott: Well, if you're a video journalist, you kind of have to do it all yourself.

Sushi: Right, oh right.

Scott: And I'd rather just take a little recorder and go in a car.

Robyn: Yes.

Scott: Rather than having to spend time getting a tripod out and then, you know, working on the location in terms of what it looks like, white balance, ugh! It's so! And then editing take so much longer.



Robyn: Yeah, I can imagine.

Scott: I mean with – because it's video so the file is going to be humungous.

[Laughter]

Scott: So, nothing gets wasted in radio. So it's a far more flexible platform because it's just audio and you can do brilliant things with audio. You can manipulate it. It's theatre of the mind at the end of day.

Sushi: Okay. So how do you identify your audience and refine the scope of your podcast? So what did you aim for? Who were you trying to talk to? Did you have a plan in your head or are you like, "I'm going to test something", give it a go? What was your approach?

Scott: I think for audiences is that – I mean the audience for the podcast is the same audience that we probably interact with for all of our PR and comms at Haven House. So you always have a sense of who they are. I think that's also one of the benefits of working at a smaller charity, is that often you see your audience on a day-to-day basis. So working at a hospice you see the families that we support day-in-day-out. I wasn't aiming for a particular new audience. It was simply a new way to interact with them and to show them something new and to see if they liked it really. So I really wanted to do podcasts so it was an opportunity to try and just raise awareness a bit more of the services side and provide a platform for the services teams to be able to kind of talk about their work, and also give a bit of confidence for them. Because I think fundraising – I think the average fundraiser is never going to be quite short on confidence. They have to go out and about and meet people to try and persuade them to support the charity, but it's different on the services side. You might not ever have to do any type of media work or any type of wider presentations externally, so it's important to try and encourage people to do those types of activities as well.

Robyn: So, when you released the first episode, was it pretty much exactly what you wanted to release or was it more like, "We'll just release it as a minimum viable product, and then we'll keep rolling with the punches and we'll see what works and what doesn't."? What was that process like?

Scott: Well the first podcast was with our Director of Care and she listened to it, she liked it and then we published it on our website, we uploaded it and then we promoted it on our social media channels, and then we played it at our organisational learning day, so an away day, and then everyone really enjoyed it and were quite impressed, really. So from then on it was just working with different staff and also volunteers. I did one with a – one of our young volunteers has done a lot of fundraising and she's part of a bereaved family because she lost her sister to an inoperable brain tumour several years ago, and so for that podcast it was interesting because we had previously



done PR and marketing stuff with her over the years and it had really been based on this incredible fundraising that she and her family had done, but we hadn't often gone into greater detail about how she and her family became involved in Haven House. So the podcast really explored that in greater detail and it was the first time, I think, that we had done something like that, because it's not easy to do any kind of PR and marketing around bereavement, not least with someone who's experienced bereavement at such a young age. So I found that very powerful and also I learnt a lot from it in terms of some of the wider issues in terms of what young people face through the bereavement process. I think we wouldn't have been able to have done something like that if it had just been getting, for instance, her just to write a blog, because I think she probably would have simply focused on the fundraising, but she actually went into a bit more detail so that was really useful for us.

Robyn: I think that's really nice. I think that was something that we picked up on that was really great in your talk, was just the way that you were like it allows you to go that much deeper and it allows you to – well it allows the person you're speaking to to roam into how they felt about something rather than, "Here's what I did and here's what happened afterwards."

Scott: Yeah.

Robyn: And that kind of human aspect of it is so important when you're doing a podcast for a charity.

Scott: I think the thing is that I like podcasting because it kind of – I think sometimes in PR and comms we can all start getting on that treadmill of, you know, we've done this type of release before, we've done that before, and you slightly lose touch with some of the more human aspects of what you do, and I think the podcast provides that spaces where you can reconnect a bit more with what the charity is about. Because I think being able to do that, or have those connections, it doesn't have to be with a podcast but just being able to meet service users regularly and just being able to share their stories is important, because it overall will make your PR and your comms a bit more authentic.

Sushi: Yes.

Scott: So yeah, a podcast is important for that.

Robyn: So true, hmm.

Sushi: So we thought we'd talk a bit about tech.

Scott: Okay.



[Laughter]

Scott: This is where I'll go very quiet because I'm not a tech person at all.

Sushi: Well, during the conference, you spoke about your very lightweight kit which obviously is useful for, I guess, taking around the place?

Scott: Yeah.

Sushi: And that's great. I found the opposite. I have so much stuff, it's ridiculous, and I feel like I'm just buying more and more stuff. How are you – do you feel like you've got a lightweight kit, you're very happy with it and that's good for you? Or are you building on it? What do you feel about your kit?

Scott: So with podcasting I never had to buy anything additional which I didn't already have. So I've had an audio recorder for many years because obviously I used to be a radio journalist.

Sushi: What's it called?

Scott: It's a Zoom H2. I think it costs around, new, £150 but you can get them second-hand on Amazon for probably £100 or maybe less. These days, I mean you don't have to spend that much money on an audio recorder. This was probably about eight years ago.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: And yeah, I mean if you take good care of it, it'll last. So it records in wav but I think we broadcast most of our podcasts in mp3 just because it's smaller for people to download in terms of file size. And I've got Audacity which is a free editing software. It's very basic and it's quite simple to use. I don't feel that I have needed anything additional in terms of kit.

Robyn: Well also we were interested in editing. I know each episode is down to five minutes but, as you were saying, you record a load more and then you trim it down to that amount. So do you do the editing yourself or is there someone else on your team that does it?

Scott: I don't think we would be doing podcasts if I got someone else to do it!

[Laughter]

Scott: It's something that –

Sushi: You basically do the entire thing, right?



Scott: Yeah.

Sushi: It's very impressive.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: I mean I had all the equipment, I knew I had to do it, I knew when I could do it.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: Editing is the bit that I think is – if you know what you want to include, it doesn't take that long to do it.

Sushi: Hmmmm.

Robyn: Yeah. Because I feel like something that me and Sushi have – which obviously you must have done because you were in radio yourself and I imagine you do enjoy it so you listen to a lot of it – is that we listen to, we still do, we love podcasts, we listen to a lot of it, and I think part of what we found helped a lot in the process of creating a podcast was just listening to loads of them, and just like maybe picking up on things that maybe helped shape the narrative or were compelling, and just paying attention to how they round it off, how they start it, going into it what sounds natural and what transitioning out of it sounds natural, and all those little bits. There is so much out there already, you could use that techniques. I imagine you already have them to hand because you've done so much on it already.

Scott: Well I feel that like – and also I feel like listening to Radio 4 is a good starting point as well.

Sushi: Oh yeah, definitely, definitely.

Robyn: Hmmmm hmm.

Scott: Because the thing is, with Radio 4, is they really like spacing.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: When you have a bit of silence or a pause that can be so powerful.

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: And so, yeah, I think that if you listen to radio in general and podcasts across the board, I think you're at a good starting point really.

Robyn: Yeah, picking out what makes you enjoy something.



Scott: Yeah.

Robyn: What storytelling parts you really gel with. Yeah, absolutely.

Sushi: Yeah. So you also mentioned some of the way that podcasting has helped some of the people you work with. So they feel more confident doing media, the presentations, they're more confident in meetings, but you also mentioned in your talk that it was good for internal comms, so I was wondering if you could talk to us about how it's helped potentially break down some silos?

Scott: I think that Haven House is a small charity so internal comms is something where, small charities, they should be better at doing it, and I think we are because we're on a very small site and you can physically see a lot of your colleagues.

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: So we're not on different sites across a large region. It's very simple to kind of ensure that our internal comms are quite agile and impactful. I feel it's helped with internal comms for podcasting because people are hearing their colleagues in different teams talk about areas of their work which they might not have had the opportunity to, and also our internal comms are really simple. We have, you know, we might have an all-staff email, and we don't send that many out, and we've got something called a team brief which is like a retrospective every other month kind of report of what everyone else has been up to and sharing their news. And that is it. And we try, as with all of our comms, to point everything onto our external channels because actually if there is news, if we're doing something or we've got a nice story, or we've got, you know, something that we want to shout about, we really want you to listen to it, or hear it, or read it, or watch it on our website or on our social media channels, it's just nice for other teams to hear their colleagues talk about their areas of their work, and it might be the first time you've heard someone from a different team speak.

Robyn: I think that's really cool. I suppose that must be true of any sized charity then as well, which is very cool, because I imagine the larger charity you're in the more likely it is that there is a load of people that you've never spoken to.

Sushi: Hmm.

Robyn: But, because you're in the third sector, a lot of the time you're in an organisation because you are passionate about the cause and you're passionate about the work that you're doing, so it's even more likely that you'll want to hear about the realities of their day and their work, especially



when it's people like people working a nightshift or nurse teams or something like that, because it's just so inspirational listening to the stuff that they do anyway.

Scott: Yeah. Because I think, as I was saying earlier, it's really easy sometimes to get a bit siloed and to maybe produce PR and comms for the people that ask for it direct.

Sushi: Yeah.

Robyn: Yes.

Scott: And so podcasts can help balance that across the board and to allow people that sometimes don't get the opportunity, or don't sometimes feel that what they're doing is kind of, you know, you always hear people saying, "No one would be interested in that" or, "I just do this." You put it together in a podcast and people are like, "I had no idea XYZ was doing that" or, "Wow, that's amazing!"

Sushi: Yeah.

Scott: So I feel, yeah, it helps with internal comms across the board really.

Robyn: I think that's what's really inspiring about it as well, because within the organisation, or outside of the organisation, it gives you the opportunity and the space to platform voices that might not otherwise be heard. And I think that's true of what we hope to do with the podcast. I think that's true with what a lot of people are doing with podcasts.

Sushi: Hmmm.

Robyn: It just creates an extra space essentially in a place where PR Comms, like, it might feel quite crowded because you've got the website, and you've got Twitter, and you've got Facebook, and you've got videos that you're putting out, and it can feel like a little bit – oh, you've got blogs – you've got loads going on, but then, because of what lends itself to what kind of platform, sometimes creating this extra format-podcasting-can create extra space for a story that might not otherwise be told but it's really inspiring to hear. So do you have any advice for charities who might be considering trying out a podcast but are a bit nervous or apprehensive to take the first step?

Scott: Yeah. So I would, first of all, you want to keep your podcast quite short to begin with and then, if you want to lengthen them, you'll probably be in a better position to do so. Because, with the shorter podcasts, first of all it doesn't seem so daunting and also your audience might feel easier to listen



to something short to begin with and then to listen to longer things once they've built up a bit of rapport with the platform.

Robyn: Right.

Scott: So I would say, to begin with, keep a podcast to five minutes and go for an interview one-on-one format. So don't try and interview more than one person to begin with, concentrate on what they're saying and edit it so that it's really a conversation around them and you, and to keep it simple as well. So whenever you listen to Radio Four, it's quite simplistic in terms of the production. Sometimes you might listen to a programme where there is no sound effects or music; it's simply a narration and the interviewee. So go for that to begin with and then you can see about incorporating music or other aspects, because it just means it will be simpler for you to do.

Sushi: Hmmm hmm.

Scott: And then, finally, just, always bearing in mind that it's not a live thing, so you can go back to it, if your interviewee wants to start again, that's fine, and you can record your intros and outros separately. And just have fun with it.

Robyn: Yeah, that's great. I completely agree as well because I think the keeping it short thing, one of the things we've already really loved about podcasts is that it's so flexible. You don't have to have like a half an hour long programme, you know? You can have a five-minute one or you can do an hour long one. Ours tend to come to an hour-ish and I've always fretted about whether it's too long, whether it's too short, and Sushi is always like, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter. If someone wants to listen, they'll listen."

Scott: The length of podcasts can change quite substantially sometimes. Because I've seen podcasts when normally they're around 30 minutes and then sometimes they're 40 minutes and then sometimes they're 20 minutes. It all depends, at the end of the day, if you've got the content. So if you've got a really great guest you go on a bit longer and a bit longer.

Robyn: Yeah!

[Laughter]

Scott: Even radio does that. You know, TV is timed to the second, radio is timed to how long you've got in an hour. So you can think, "Okay, alright, we'll go a bit longer with this interview and we'll drop the travel".

[Laughter]

Scott: People do that all the time.



Sushi: Really?!

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: I mean when I used to work as a newsreader people would always, sometimes on certain programmes they would come to the news about three to four minutes late because, "Oh you know, we had so and so on and we just had to go on a bit longer." I was like, "People want to hear what the news is." Yeah, don't get too worried about how long you do something for. If it sounds good and it's going well you can lengthen it, but don't feel that you need to go to any particular amount of time to begin with.

Sushi: Right.

Robyn: I agree. That's a good tip.

Sushi: Hmm.

Robyn: Cool. Is there anything else you want to touch on? Is there anything else you wanted to chat about podcast wise? Anything you think we missed that you were like, "This is a useful thing to talk about"?

Scott: No. I feel that it's very comprehensive.

Robyn: I know!

Scott: I'm just delighted that you had me at your conference because it was really lovely to hear so many other people talking about the different innovative work they're doing, but also people saying, "I'm really encouraged to go into doing podcasts now."

Robyn: Yeah.

Scott: I think that's clearly a good sign that podcasts are on the up for charities, which you obviously know already, and I think it's great that, you know, more and more charities are trying them out and podcasting.

Sushi: Definitely. You're one of the founding fathers of the podcast movement in the charity sector.

Scott: I wouldn't go that far!

Sushi: You're going to be up there.

Scott: I think other people were doing it before me!

Sushi: Not that well though.



[Laughter]

Robyn: Well thanks so much for coming in and chatting to us. It's been really interesting.

Scott: Thank you for having me.

Robyn: Well I think it's clear that we had a love of podcasting in common with Scott. It was really, really interesting to hear another person who is sort of a podcaster within a charity and we just made such a compelling podcast on a real shoestring.

Sushi: Yeah, definitely. I mean obviously we love podcasts, we have created one and we share his love of them. Also we know that it doesn't take all the tech in the world and all the resource in the world and, you know, really you can just kind of work it out as you go along.

Robyn: Definitely. And I think that it's so inspiring to hear someone just be like, "There are such great stories here, let's find a way to share them with people and in a way that really feeds our service users and the people who would be looking for this information." And I think that he really nailed getting that concept down.

Sushi: Yeah, definitely. Also innovating with the fact that you might have low budgets and clearly letting his passion drive his ambition to create it.

Robyn: Absolutely. Well, yeah, he did a really impressive job innovating on a small budget and our next guests are a great example of this too. How do you go about an organisational strategy overhaul to put digital at the heart of everything you do? Bliss recently underwent this process and Gemma and Sarah from the charity gave us the lowdown. Here it is.

Robyn: Sarah and Gemma, it's so lovely to have you in today. Thanks for coming in to chat to us.

Sarah/Gemma: Thanks for having us.

Sarah/Gemma: Thank you.



Robyn: We've got Sushi in the room as well.

Sushi: Hello. I'd just like to say I'm very sick.

Robyn: Yeah.

Sushi: So, I want to apologise for all the sick sounds that you're going to hear; the rustling of the tissues. We're also in quite a noisy office today so you will hear some background noise but Robyn is going to do her best to take it out.

Robyn: I will try my very best; I apologise in advance. We thought we would kick-off the interview with just a couple of questions about just your intro into the third sector, stuff like that. So how long have you both been in the sector? Did you come in from a different profession? Did you come from a corporate sector? How did that happen for you?

Sarah: So, I have always worked in the third sector so I've never been outside the world of third sector. I started off in a charity, the National Literacy Trust, and then worked for the Met Police and started doing a lot more digital work with them. So that was a really interesting place to be, a huge organisation, very pressured environment; really interesting place to go to work. And then I worked at the National Housing Federation, I became Digital Manager there, and then I ended up at Bliss as a Digital Lead. So, yes, that's my working life.

Gemma: Yeah, and I've been at Bliss four years. Absolutely love it. But, before that, I was also in a small charity called the Lullaby Trust, so a similar sector. I'd heard of Bliss before and so it was kind of a natural next step. But, before then, I worked in regional newspapers so I cut my teeth in journalism; I did that for a few years. So a bit of a mix but all comms stuff.

Robyn: Yeah. A lot of people we have on come from journalism so I think that journalists are propping up the third sector.

Gemma: Yeah, I think that's true!

Sushi: How did you find that change from journalism into the third sector?

Gemma: It was quite a bit change. I think the pacing is very different. Journalism is fast paced. Even when you're in local and regional news things happen quickly and you're working to a deadline. So it was quite an adjustment to plan things over several months and really have time to kind of get into the detail of a project, and that was really nice, I liked that, and being able to be much more creative and to write differently and to write for different audiences instead of the same audience and in the same style was really nice. So, yeah, I found I had a lot of transferrable skills but I just really



loved being in the third sector and enjoyed going to work every day, so I can't imagine leaving now.

Robyn: Like a lot of small charities, as we hear more and more, Bliss has been on a journey to embrace digital and it's sort of really transformed how you work. So how does the organisation look today compared to what it used to be on the other side of that transformation?

Gemma: Yeah. So four years ago, when I first started at Bliss, like a lot of charities, there was a lot of print. So we provide a lot of information for families and everything was print first, so we would always be making a booklet or a leaflet and maybe printing loads of stuff out in the office, and that was just the way that we communicated to parents on the neonatal unit. And, to a certain extent, we still retain some of that because our supporters are physically in one place. They're in a neonatal for a couple of days or a few months so they do still need some of that physical support. But just the way that they interact with us is completely different. They're also, you know, demanding content in different formats which is right and we should adapt to that. So today we do do that. We create podcasts and our social channels have grown enormously. Our website is so much more accessible and usable for them. So instead of thinking what leaflet do we need for them? We are thinking actually what do they need first and then what format do they need it in, and what are the limits to that and how can we be creative and create something in digital first, if possible, but also multichannel where they need it? So, yeah, we're really thinking much more about what they actually need, instead of thinking in that kind of old kind of print way.

Robyn: Yeah, just centring your audience in all those decisions.

Gemma: Yeah, exactly.

Robyn: Yeah, it's really interesting.

Sarah: Yeah, for me as well, because I came in when Bliss was already very much at the beginning and almost sort of part way into the digital journey. So coming in as Digital Lead, it was like gold. It was like coming and I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is incredible."

Robyn: A digital person's playground.

Sarah: Yeah, and everyone was coming up to me when I started and they were like, "Oh, we want to do this, we want to do this." And I went, "Woah, there's only one me!" But it was the most wonderful place to be and SMT were really on board and everything.



Sushi: Well you started to touch on the success you've had with your digital strategy, and we all know it's been very successful, and I'd like you to show off now and tell us about some of those successes?

Gemma: Yeah.

Sarah: Shall I go?

Gemma: Yeah, go for it.

Sarah: So, one of the big things when I came in was the website that we used to have was just absolutely not working for us and we needed to move on to a new platform. The speed at which we managed to do that, and the smoothness of that project as well, for me, was a real sign of success of the digital culture, because people were so on board and so up for getting involved and supporting it. We had like the entire organisation making that project happen and making it their priority as well. So, whereas in previous lives I've had, you know, where you go and ask someone to help you with some web copy you need them to write, or edit some pages, and they're like, for them it was very much low down their list. But everyone on this project they would do it and so everyone did the content migration, everyone learnt the new CMS, and it as a really fast-working, fast-paced project, and, as I say, really smooth. So that is literally just a few. I mean there are so many more.

Gemma: Yeah. We have the social media strategy as well. We kind of evaluated all the content that we put out on social, and then created some kind of strategy statements that helped us develop new content and think about what people actually come to those platforms for, and really focus more on the community aspect than kind of it being a promoting platform. So that was really successful. We put a lot of investment this year into paid social media as well which is yielding results, which is brilliant, but understanding again who we're targeting and trying to like really drill down into that and make that more effective. So that's been great.

Sarah: Our Facebook Chatbot.

Gemma: Oh, our Chatbot, yeah. Yeah, we're the first charity in the UK to have a Facebook Chatbot. So when you set up your Facebook Donate page it takes you, yeah, it's just a bot that takes you on a journey and hopefully encourages you to sign up to our mailing list, as well as like giving you tips on how to fundraise and raise more money from your audiences. Like it gives them impact statements and graphics that they can use and share on social. So that's really effective. The donations that are coming in from that continue to increase. And we've had – I can't remember the number but quite a lot of sign-ups through that as well to the mailing list, which means obviously, you know, converting those hopefully into more



regular supporters, or at least people that we can communicate with on a regular basis.

Sarah: I think one of the other things that has been really important actually and a real success is that we focused on internal ways of working digitally as well. So this isn't about digital tools that can help us reach our external audiences but how can we use digital to be more effective internally. And that, for me, has been one of the key successes that has made a difference, because it's made staff realise that digital just impacts everything that you can do and it can make certain things work so much better. And then from things just as simple as like, as Jemma mentioned earlier, like reducing our printing and actually thinking, you know, taking laptops round and just being more effective, as well as looking at more, much more bigger projects around introducing KPIs for our data and getting data into our database and things like that which, you know, is something we're working on for a long-term project. But the focus is there and the understanding is very much there, and the drive. So all these things are happening, as well as we had managers focusing in driving that internal ways of working as well digitally. It was manager led. That was so important as well because it made staff realise this is important, you know, this is a real focus.

Sushi: Gosh, wow.

Robyn: Well there's a lot to unpack there so I might just rewind to the very beginning because – and this was something you also mentioned in your talk at the conference, which was that the digital-first strategy was borne out of your new organisational strategy, and as an organisation you decided to just put digital at the heart of it. Can you tell us a bit more about – I know that, Sarah, you came on board was it part-way through that process?

Sarah: Yeah, so it had already been –

Gemma: So obviously you do quite a lot of research when you embark on a new organisational strategy and part of that was speaking to our supporters and parents.

Sarah: Yeah.

Gemma: And so we did a massive piece of work on that and had thousands of parents respond to us. There were a few things that kind of told us we needed to focus on digital. One of those was like our digital audience is growing and people saying that they wanted to interact with us and engage with us in that way. But we did have to ask ourselves quite hard questions about what we can afford to do and so that was part of that conversation as well. And so these things all came together and we decided that we're going to put digital at the heart of the strategy so we want to become a digital-first organisation, even though at that time we hadn't really planned



out exactly what that meant or how we would do it; we just said that this was our ambition. So, yeah, the SMT and board led that. They decided that's the way that we're going to go and then they left it to the comms team to decide how that would be done, and that's kind of when we brought Sarah in and how we did that.

Sarah: Yeah, and coming into that as well, what was very obvious as soon as I started was, one, was that we were really trusted to get on with it, so there wasn't any kind of need to constantly update or include senior managers or colleagues in terms of decision-making and things like that. And it's so necessary when you want to move at a faster pace that you can just make those decisions and know that you're going to have support. I think the other thing about the culture at Bliss, which has made such a difference, is that there is very much a can-do attitude and just get on and try things, and it doesn't feel ever like if we make mistakes, it feels like that that's a good thing because we learn from them. So there isn't that kind of fear that sometimes happens and can really hamper people progressing in digital because of worrying that something might go wrong. It's more like, "Oh if something goes wrong well how can we learn from it and what can we take from it?" And things do go wrong, you know, or things aren't perfect. And certainly in terms of allowing the organisation to take on digital projects, of course there are bits of it where I'm looking at it, going, "Oooh, that's not how I would do it" and all that sort of thing. But you have to embrace that. It's the same as when social media first came in and people started using it, and they tried to control it too much and they couldn't actually make the most of it. It's exactly the same approach. You know, you've just got to let those mistakes happen and let people learn, and then they build their own digital skills as a result because they're doing it. It's the best way.

Gemma: And I think then seeing those benefits as well is one of the key ways that you can get buy-in.

Sarah: Yeah.

Gemma: So as soon as we started to –

Sarah: Definitely.

Gemma: To prioritise digital and, you know, for example, doing some of our digital marketing, people said, "Oh my God, yeah, that's actually really getting results. I want some of that kind of thing for my projects and my teams."

Sarah: Yeah.



Gemma: And we had this really old outdated website which really worked in our favour as a Comms team because people hated it, so they were just dying for something new and so that was –

Robyn: A reason to innovate.

Gemma: Exactly, yeah.

Robyn: Yeah.

Gemma: So they were really on-board with that and, because it was led by SMT and managers – we did ask ourselves some questions at the beginning of the planning process which, I can't remember the exact wording, but they were around how we used kind of digital tools and technologies to be more efficient and how we do the same to meet users' needs, and so asking ourselves those three questions, but I can't remember the third one, at the beginning of the planning cycle, and having that in the templates and in the planning, meant that every team was asking themselves those questions just as part of their process, and so that really helped to get buy-in as well because they had already started to think about it.

Sushi: I'm just really fascinated by this culture thing.

Robyn: Mmmm.

Sushi: It's come up a couple of times.

Gemma: Yeah, so am I!

Sushi: Because, you know, that thing cuts across all size of charities. You can't have good digital culture without good digital culture. It's not going to work. You know? If you don't have those things you've talked about, being trusted, that can-do attitude, where does that come from? Is that something that the organisation, because it has decided they're going to go for digital first, they've gone, "Right, we need to be more open, we need to embrace people, we need to get on-board, we need to move faster", or was that already Bliss' culture?

Sarah: Well I don't know if that was already Bliss' culture. It's what I came into. So it was already there when I came in. I don't know if that had been there for years before. But I think a lot of it does come from SMT and it comes from SMT letting go but prioritising. So, you know, there is a very loud message about how we're going to do things and it is through digital, but it's letting stuff just get on and do it. You know, what's made the difference, because I've worked in places where, you know, we just haven't – we've been trying really hard to achieve that sort of culture and doing all the right things you think and just not quite getting there, so I equally am fascinated as



to what is it about Bliss that is working so well? I think some of it is size, so the fact that, again, you know, we've mentioned it before but when I work on projects, for instance the website project which we did when we relaunched it, huge parts of my time were invested in going and having conversations with people around it and about it and keeping everyone up to speed, and still that, for me, that individual relationships is one of the most important things about building digital culture. Because if people feel involved and empowered, and they feel that if they are getting stuck on something they can come and access a bit more support, that's been definitely a part of it.

Robyn: It sounds like there is sort of two elements to it, which is creating and cultivating that culture in the first place and then realising the value of it and maintaining it so that it's not taken for granted.

Sarah: Yeah.

Robyn: I think when people are –

Sarah: Absolutely.

Robyn: When you've got a team that really is giving their all into something and seeing the value in what they're doing, I think that can easily slip into taking that for granted, especially obviously with the senior leadership team.

Gemma: Yeah.

Sarah: Or sometimes you can get a lot of excitement generated around digital, you can start things off and then people lose momentum, then lose interest. I think some of that stems back to that fact that it's rooted in our strategy because people, when they were planning from that strategy and they were asking those three questions, it made it really focused and it kept the momentum going.

Sushi: Yeah, that's a really good point, and kind of leads on to the idea that you don't have a digital strategy; you've got an organisational strategy that is digital-first. Why?

Sarah: I mean, for me, that is absolutely crucial if you're going to be successful in digital because digital is just a tool that you can use to help you achieve what you need to achieve. It's just one of the tools. So it shouldn't be seen as a separate strategy. That's when it becomes something that is owned by the digital team I think too much, rather than owned by the entire organisation. So, yeah, it's just been an absolutely fundamental building block for Bliss' success I think, and making sure that we keep focused on it as a means to an end rather than this kind of –
I think it makes it more mystical almost when you start talking about digital strategy. It makes it less – I think for anyone who doesn't have digital in their



job title or doesn't have that as their kind of core expertise, they then immediately go, "Oh, that's not for me. That's for the digital team's expertise." So you can strip that away and it all of a sudden becomes something very different that everyone needs to get involved in. For me that, you know, we've talked a lot about culture and, for me, getting that culture is more important than getting the skillset. Because once you've got that culture you can build the skills.

Robyn: Well, I think that also leads neatly on to something else I was going to ask you about, which was touched on briefly earlier, which is those questions that you came up with, which are sort of at the heart of the decisions each team will make. I do have them written down so I'll just run through them, which are:

- How can better digital working help improve the support you offer?
- How can improved digital comms help you extend your reach?
- And how can digital techniques and tools help to save money and improve efficiency?

I was just curious to know how you came up with the questions. Was it the comms team sort of created those and then just handed them to the teams and were like, "Ask yourself these before – well, have them in mind whilst making any decisions you have on operational plans"?

Gemma: That, again, came from SMT and I believe they worked with the comms team but this was like 2015.

Sushi: Yeah.

Gemma: So, it's quite hard to remember. But yeah, again, from senior management and then we had obviously templates that we complete at the start of the year as part of our planning so it was just in that.

Robyn: Great.

Gemma: So, everyone kind of approached it in their own ways and then we share those plans and work together. We are about to launch a new strategy in January and we probably will do that differently. We are in a different place now, we are more advanced, so what that will look like going forward I don't know, but at the time that was a useful tool to get people starting to think about how it, you know, it affected their area of work and how it's relevant to them.

Robyn: Yeah. I felt like they really summed up a lot of really key cornerstones of how to create a digital-first environment before they –

Sarah: The other way you create a digital-first environment as well is have tools that block you so much that everyone is so frustrated –



[Laughter]

Sarah: Driven so much by it, that the idea of anything that works is like gold and they're like, "Let's do it!"

[Laughter]

Sarah: I mean I'm not even joking.

Gemma: Yeah, I know!

Sarah: That's part of what I came into and they were like, "Make this work!" So, yeah, build up people's frustrations.

Gemma: Yeah.

Sarah: And then –

Robyn: Find a solution!

Sarah: Yeah, exactly.

Sushi: Feels a bit like Brexit to be honest!

[Laughter]

Sushi: Well, that sort of goes on to your website a little bit. You said it, not me! So your site, you said, was a great example of – well, is a great example of the successful strategy really and the kind of revamping of it. Could you tell us a little bit about the process of doing that?

Sarah: Yeah. So, yeah, I started and it was immediately obvious the platform we were on just wasn't providing what we needed. So it was immediate that we just need to move onto a new CMS. But one of the things we did to start with is we didn't just launch into, "Right, let's go out and find a new provider." We did a ton of research first and we took our time to work out what we needed sort of functionally from a new CMS. But we took a ton of time to understand our users and their requirements, and we did a lot of internal work as well. So working with staff to understand their frustrations with it and their needs and how they, you know, what the biggest barriers were for them.

Sushi: And you did this before you went to an agency?

Sarah: Yeah.

Sushi: Right, okay.



Sarah: And I really spent a lot of time on this because, for me, I've had a lot of experience of working with agencies and one of the worst things you can do is go to an agency with a vague idea.

[Laughter]

Robyn: Yeah!

Sarah: Because you will get vague ideas back and you'll get vague budgets.

Sushi: Yeah.

Sarah: And you'll just end up being so frustrated. And then you might embark on something and nobody really knows where it's going and then the budget – you know, everything just goes wrong very quickly.

Sushi: Yeah.

Sarah: So, for me, being really crystal-clear and writing a really, really clear brief that then we went out with that had a lot of information and understanding. And also what was really good is internally – I think actually one thing we haven't mentioned yet is internally what we also have is very realistic expectations. So digital can be something that people think, "Oh, you can deliver something really quickly, you can deliver all these things like, you know, in no time at all" and it's not the case. You need to focus still. So for the website launch we very much phased it. We knew that we could get it onto a new site and we prioritised a couple of areas and then we would look at making some more bigger improvements further down the line. So that minimal viable product attitude was very much at the core of it. So we focused on – from our research we knew the two biggest issues on our website. One was the donate process because it was hideous on the old site. You had to actually kind of log-in to make a donation which was just crazy. And there was very, very – the structure on the old site was just terrible and, as a charity that provides information, obviously that was a really big –. And that had come through from the strategy research, you know, about how important that information is for parents when they're first in that situation, when they have babies premature or sick. So those were the two key areas which we focused on for launch and we said everything else, which there were so many other things that we wanted to achieve on the website, has to wait. And so that was really helpful. And then, because we did, you know, once we went out to brief and we knew we had such clear ideas of what we needed to achieve from this, it just made it so much more effective in choosing an agency to work with. They need to totally get you and they need to be providing the ongoing support that you know that will work and at a cost that you know will work for the organisation.



Robyn: You sort of mentioned how, when you first transitioned from the old website to the new website, that you had to kind of just grit your teeth and just bear the fact that some of the less tidy, less polished stuff, was going up out there.

Sarah: Yeah.

Robyn: And then, since then has it been a sort of really iterative process? You have sort of been putting things out and then, as you've gone along, have you been retesting things down the line? Is that continued in that stream?

Gemma: Yes.

Sarah: Yeah, very much so.

[Laughter]

Sarah: So in terms of the content, like when we migrated it all across we said, "Okay, we have to just migrate as is because we've got this brilliant new structure now so people can find it, which is great but maybe, when they find it, it won't be as we wanted it." But we are just taking it step-by-step and going through the content to improve it as we can that is realistic within the resources. And actually, do you know what, when we did migrate that content and we said, "We'd really like to rewrite a lot of this and make it so much better", just putting it on the new platform made it so much better. I'm so glad we did that and didn't hold ourselves back by trying to get it all perfect first. Because as soon as it was in the new platform and we had much better ability to make those pages just – the design and the look and feel and what we can include and how we can crosslink and everything like that was so much better. That page already was just drastically improved.

Sushi: Yeah.

Sarah: So it is a step-by-step process and our Information Support Team, you know, they have different areas which they're looking to develop and, you know, as Gemma mentioned, we've launched mental health information. So, you know, bit-by-bit, all of that content is improving and we know it's going to keep on doing so.

Sushi: So we've talked about the idea that Bliss' size is its strength.

Sarah: Hmm.

Sushi: So what do you think are the biggest advantages for working in a smaller organisation?

Sarah: So many!



[Laughter]

Sarah: There are so many.

Robyn: That is the right answer!

[Laughter]

Sarah: There really are though! I mean, okay, so one of the biggest advantages is that you can pretty much go to everybody and have a conversation individually, and support them on a very individual tailored basis, and that makes them – you know, I guess it works on a number of levels. One, it feels like they're getting digital support and, two, it feels like they're being listened to, so you're taking what they need into account. So a lot of it is about internal comms, like I mentioned before, in a small charity and you can just do that in such a personable level. I guess another is that one of the things we are focusing on a lot, as Gemma just mentioned around, is the training. So upskilling, once you've got that culture, then you can focus on the skills. So that is where we are at now and we've got an ongoing training programme. And, again, because you're small, you can go and train every single team quite realistically. Again, give yourself realistic amounts of time to do it. It still takes time and effort and energy, but you can do that, and you can do it for each team on a really tailored basis and invest it. Because it's so worth it in the long while because, once you've got them up-to-speed, or even if you've got one or two team members in that team, if they get really good then they become the experts in their team and all of a sudden their team members are going to them instead of coming to you, which is amazing. It's fantastic and you have that extra support. I think being small as well is that we, again, are decision-making. So if you're small and you're constantly having to go up and get loads of decisions made by other people then, you know, I'd say you've really got to question how you're organising your organisation. That's just so stifling. And just being able to make decisions quickly. But it only works if you communicate properly with people, because you can still do decision-making in complete silo. So just, you know, you can do that on a small level.

Gemma: I think that being a small charity and digital fit perfectly together because, as a small organisation, you have limited resources not only in people but obviously the money. Digital can provide solutions to some of those problems. So, if you are thinking in that way, you can probably find a free tool. You can probably find like a Canva, or a Trello, or you can probably find something that makes video online. You know, not just in terms of creating but there is digital processes you can put in place that make things more efficient internally.

Sushi: Yes.



Gemma: So, I actually think that, as a small charity, digital has so many opportunities for you.

Sushi: Yeah.

Gemma: And so to embrace that fully means that you can do more with what you have. I mean I love being small. I think that the culture at Bliss is a really good example of how these things can work together.

Sushi: Yeah.

Gemma: So yeah, that is, I think, the crux of it. But also the communication, like you said, you know, of being able to have the comms over site but devolve as much as possible and all feel like you really have ownership of things, and communications can just communicate a decision or a way of working and everybody knows and is on-board with that.

Sarah: Yeah. For me at Bliss as well, the biggest thing is not budget. You know, when you work at a small organisation the challenge often is you have smaller budgets to work with, but that isn't the challenge for us now; it's time. Because, as Gemma said, there are so many free tools out there. We have the can do, just do it, attitude where we'll try things, and so you can find a lot of ways of making digital tools work for you but, you know, then it becomes just a time investment which then gets diluted if you upskill your entire organisation, because then you have the time of 50 people instead of sort of three people in a digital team. You know, that is hugely different.

Robyn: Wow, my God, I could write a book on all of that!

[Laughter]

Robyn: So thorough. Brilliant.

Gemma: That's why you should come and work with us!

[Laughter]

Robyn: It's an advert for Bliss!

[Laughter]

Sushi: I think what you said about the idea that digital matches so well with small charities, I've always believed that. Because at CharityComms – CharityComms is a young organisation, it's only 10 years old and, you know, we've never had to say, "We need to do a digital transformation project" because there is no reason to do that because it's so young, it was born in



digital and it understands digital, it totally embraces it. You know, everyone is an editor at CharityComms because that is the way you work. You recruit people through the website. I think that, for me, has always been so critically important and it's exciting. It's just exciting. And, as you say, all those tools out there. There are so many developers creating fantastic tools, let's get on board with them. Exactly that – the culture that brings people together to say, "Let's try a thing, let's do a thing, let's give it a go." That is all – that stuff, the magic of small charities.

Robyn: Yeah, absolutely. Well, the last thing we wanted to ask was just if a small charity wanted to start on the road to creating their own digital-first strategy and really weaving it into the organisational strategy the way that you guys have managed to, what would your advice be to them?

Gemma: Start with what your users need. So get that research.

Sushi: Yes.

Gemma: Go out and ask those people and find out what they need and how they need it, and take that to your senior managers and maybe get them involved in that process, so that they're hearing from their users that that is the way forward. And if you can get that buy in and them on board then you can listen to the rest of the podcast and take the advice on the next steps. But, yeah, start with what those people need.

Sarah: Yeah, and I would say focus on the culture. Get that culture going first. And if you have barriers to getting that culture established, look to identify people in your organisation who are really on board with digital and get it, even if they don't use those skillsets themselves. Get them to help you make those arguments and evidence, you know, the user research you've done. And also look to peer pressure because peer pressure is a wonderful, wonderful thing for changing people's attitudes. So, you know, you might not be able to change some senior managers' ways of working yourself by talking to them, because it just might not cut through for them for whatever reason, but if they see other senior managers and other chief execs working in a certain way or understanding it in a different way that can really, really help to making that sort of first step.

Sushi: I remember one tip that Zoe Amar said in her talk at CharityComms was – one of my favourite tips was the idea that if you plant seeds but also don't take credit for those seeds.

Sarah: A hundred percent.

Sushi: Let people just believe that those ideas are theirs.

Sarah: Yeah.



Sushi: And you really have to check your own ego on that because that's hard for me. I'm thinking I want to take credit for that idea and you can't. If you don't, it will happen. It will be like, "Well I got the end result! Get over it!" Yeah, no, I agree with you.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah, I've had that from getting senior – trying to get senior managers onto social is a real example of that. You suggest it to them and they're like, "No." Or they go on it and they create a profile and then they never do anything with it. You know, let them come round to the idea. Let them want to do it. As soon as they want to do it then it flies. If you're trying to put someone on a platform that they don't want to, of course it's not going to work. So even though it's a great idea, you have to find ways to let them come to it themselves and think it's good. So yeah, it's a different way to do some things.

Robyn: Brilliant. I feel like that was a really coherent – not coherent – thorough first few steps to take.

[Laughter]

Robyn: So applicable across the board. So yeah, that's all we've got for you today so thanks so much for coming in. It's been really, really interesting to hear about –

Sarah: Thank you for having us.

Robyn: And I hope it continues going so well for you.

Sarah: Thank you!

Gemma: Thanks!

[Laughter]

Sushi: It's always so inspiring to hear from small charities who see their size as a superpower; just like CharityComms.

Robyn: Absolutely. And I think their passion really shone through in everything they were saying. And it really goes through into just how thorough they are about everything. It's completely driven by the fact that they just have a love for what they do and making everything that Bliss puts out the best that



it can be. And understanding that digital is a tool to enable you to put out the best as well.

Sushi: Definitely. The fact that digital is so right for small charities, that was very, very inspiring.

Robyn: Yeah, absolutely. And they gave so many useful tips as well. We basically really picked their brains across that whole entire interview but, by the end, it was still like, "Great! Here's a load of things we would recommend you do as a small charity if you want to do everything digital over the whole of your organisation."

Sushi: Definitely.

Robyn: And although they obviously had a lot of people who were already on-board so they didn't have to do too much cajoling of their team, they really harnessed that in an impressive way. Well that's it for this episode. We hope you enjoyed our journey into the small charity world and picked up a few useful tips along the way.

Sushi: If you're a listener from a small charity make sure you keep an eye out for when booking opens for the CharityComms annual Small charities communication conference taking place in July. And, as always, if there is anything you would like to hear more about, or if you've got any questions for us, you can catch us on Twitter. I'm on @sushi_juggapah.

Robyn: And I'm @robynlewes. Alternatively you can reach me at my CharityComms email which is in the episode description. Make sure you subscribe if you would like to be notified when we upload. And, if you enjoyed the episode, we would really appreciate your review or rating. We'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now!

Sushi: Bye.