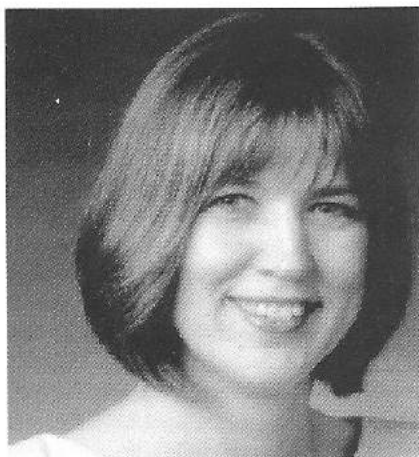


Profile



Angela D Sinickas, ABC

Angela Sinickas is a senior communication consultant at William M Mercer Inc, based in Orange, California. She has been involved in internal communications for 25 years and now specializes in communication measurement and strategy. She is author of the manual How to Measure Your Communication Programs. You can visit her website at www.sinicom.com

How did you first become involved in internal communication?

I was a senior in college when my news editing professor recommended me for a part-time job doing communication at the medical school. I did a little bit of everything — edited a newsletter, planned parties and picnics, dedicated a building, and even gave tours of the anatomy labs. When I graduated, they offered me a full-time job.

How has the profession changed since you first joined it?

Internal communication used to be a poor step-child to public relations. Internal communication managers were paid less than PR managers and often weren't eligible for bonuses. These days, I think more executives understand the impact effective communication can have on how well their companies work, so there's greater parity in pay and status.

I've seen a number of CEOs looking for VPs of communication who have a

strong internal communication background because they believe that any weakness in PR experience can be backfilled easily by a good PR agency. Ongoing internal communication is harder to deliver strategically through outsourcing.

Also, technology has changed how we do what we do. Most of those changes are exciting, but there has also been a down-side. Now communicators are doing more of the production work than we used to because of inexpensive, readily available software. We're designing, typesetting, sizing photos and doing the layout of our publications, whether they're printed or on-line. I find this ironic. When I started in this business, my part of a publication was writing, taking photos and doing a rough, pencil thumbnail layout. If something mechanical needed to be changed, I marked up the dummy and other people had to fuss with the time-consuming detail of making everything look and fit right.

We wanted to become more strategic over time, yet the technological changes have forced us to do more mechanical work than we used to. The second negative impact of more technology is speed. When I started in this business (1974), we didn't even have fax machines. We had more time to think about what we were doing and do it right, rather than just constantly react to new demands off the top of our heads.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

A couple of different things, but most of them related to communication. For a while I wanted to be a teacher. I remember being about eight years old and in the hospital. My mother brought me get well notes written by my classmates as a school assignment. I'm almost embarrassed to tell you that by the time she came back the next day, I had corrected all the misspellings and punctuation errors. A few years later I decided I wanted to be in the business world, but thought that the highest level I could aspire to would be the executive assistant to a company president. Of course, this was in the mid 1960s.

By high school, I wanted to be a UN translator or a diplomat: I love learning about different cultures, and languages come easily to me.

But what I still want to do — when I grow up — is write novels.

What professional qualifications do you have?

I have a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I earned the Accredited Business Communicator certification through IABC.

In university, I wanted to major in either theatre or languages, but my parents wouldn't hear of it. So, since I liked science, I started majoring in Foods and Nutrition (my mother said that no

matter what happens in the world, people will still need to eat!). After a year and a half, the only writing I did in class was filling in lab reports. I started freelancing for the school paper, writing articles about theatre, food and my appearance on 'The \$25,000 Pyramid' (a television game show). At this point, I thought I'd become a food writer.

My best friend's fiancé was studying journalism and that sounded like something I would enjoy. So, when I switched my major to journalism, all the chemistry, physiology, microbiology and food science courses I had taken became electives.

There were two courses I took that did directly relate to the measurement side of communication I eventually fell into. In one of my food science courses we taste tested various brands of chocolate pudding, ice cream and other foods and rated them on things like flavor and texture. Then we had to do statistical tests to see if the differences we noticed were truly different or just random error.

Then, as part of my journalism curriculum, I took a public relations course, but the PR professor was on sabbatical. The course was taught by the market research professor, so he taught market research. At the time, I was pretty upset, but I've since seen that as a good thing.

Once I realized I needed to measure the effectiveness of the employee communications I was managing at the *Chicago Tribune*, I read everything I could get my hands on about measurement and went to all the sessions at conferences and local professional associations about measurement. I don't see myself as a statistical expert, but I always work with colleagues at Mercer who are. I see myself as a bridge between communicators who don't know how to measure and measurement experts who don't know what's important to measure about communication.

Which professional associations do you belong to?

I've been a member of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) since 1979 and have been active at the local level at four chapters and then at the international committee and task force levels. Before that I was pretty active with Women in Communications, Inc (now known as AWIC), but their

focus seemed to be more on the mass media rather than corporate communication. That's why I switched to IABC.

IABC gave me a lot of volunteer opportunities to develop leadership skills and other types of knowledge I didn't have a chance to learn in my jobs. I think that's how you get the most out of whatever organization you belong to. It's not the publications or the workshops. It's what you choose to volunteer doing and the people you get to know well. For example, one of my best friends is a New Zealand communicator I met through IABC. And I've met a lot of wonderful people in South America and Spain because I find every opportunity I can to practice my Spanish at IABC conferences. I even did a speech in Madrid a few years ago while on a combined business and vacation trip.

This year I joined the Council on Communication Management and look forward to my first conference with them this September in San Diego.

What do you consider to be your greatest achievement in your career as a communicator?

I guess the watershed event for me was putting down on paper my thoughts about communication research and having it published. That was about 1994. Since then, I love hearing people tell me what kinds of measurement they've done in their jobs because of what they learned in my manual, and what a difference it's made in their careers.

Which organizations' internal communication efforts do you particularly admire?

That's a tough one. I really admire a lot of the things my clients are doing. Seeing their companies from the inside, I also see the challenges the communicators face and how they overcome company politics, benighted management, lack of resources and a lot of other challenges to try to do what's right to make communications help their organizations succeed. Not to take anything away from well known companies with years of a strong communication culture behind them, I most respect the communicators who win battles against incredible odds in companies where employee communication has often consisted of supervisors yelling at employees.

Which internal communication professionals do you most respect?

Number one is Roger D'Aprix. I went to every session Roger taught at conferences, and I've read two of his books. He taught me that employee communication wasn't just some journalistic, creative exercise, but something that could make a difference — if done right. One of the highlights of my career was working with Roger at Mercer before he officially retired and began consulting on his own. Roger is not just a seminal thinker; he is such a down-to-earth, friendly, helpful, caring human being. He is an international treasure.

Shel Holtz is another communicator I respect enormously, and for a completely different aspect of communication. Years ago he saw the future and understood the importance of communicators' becoming web-literate. And he made it his life's work to bring the rest of us quickly and joyfully into the fold.

What are the greatest challenges being faced by today's internal communicators?

My first reaction is the lack of resources: budgets and staff. But the more insidious challenge is one we create for ourselves — a sort of defeatist attitude I often hear. I've been guilty of this myself. We complain that we don't get invited to planning sessions. We complain that management doesn't understand how important our role is. We complain that things will never change.

Yet I've seen remarkable turnarounds at clients when the communicators don't create boundaries about what they can and can't accomplish and just go do it. They build buy-in for what they do by understanding first what's important to the various executives in their companies and then finding ways to support them in reaching their own goals. This may take some time.

The really good communicators also realize that they shouldn't waste their time with the executives who will never 'get it' and focus instead on those who know how to make the best use of communication. It's more satisfying for everyone all round, and the executives who aren't believers in communication sometimes eventually come around when they see the improved business results their colleagues are getting.

How do you anticipate our profession changing in the next 10 years?

I disagree with the picture of the future often painted by other communicators that we will be out of a job soon because communication technology will make it easier for everyone to communicate with each other without the need for a communication management function. Just because people in a company now find it easier to communicate directly with each other doesn't mean that they actually do it, or do it well. Supervisors still are not choosing to communicate with their staff unless systems are in place to make it easier for them to do so — and they have a reward structure in place that encourages them. People are overwhelmed with the volume of emails and voicemails they receive every day. We have internal web sites proliferating, or electronic bulletin board postings, but no one can find what they need, or even know that it's available.

I think we'll see a growing chasm between two different types of communicators, those who are the strategists and project managers working side by side with operational management, and those who are the communication craftspeople who love being creative in a narrow niche of communication expertise.

The strategists will blend our traditional communication expertise with principles of organizational development, knowledge management and business. They will manage a network of communication specialists who are mostly freelancers. The communicators who love being creative within some communication skill area, whether that's speechwriting or web development, will find happiness and success doing more of what they love to do for a variety of clients. They won't feel that they have to become strategists to move ahead in their careers. They will create their own careers.

If you had the opportunity to change any one event in your career, what would it be?

Not to have stayed in one particular job I had for quite as long as I did. In my first full-time communication job, I was doing a lot of different types of communication. I thought I was under-using my journalism degree and decided my next move should be to become a

pure editor of a publication with a larger circulation. Unfortunately, I found that what I thought I wanted was absolutely wrong for me. I became bored by about the third issue of the publication. I missed the variety of different aspects of communication. But I stayed in that job for another three years — about 30 more issues! The only good thing was that, because the job was so easy and had such predictable, regular hours, I finally began freelance editing on the side, and met my husband, who was an independent art director.

What ambitions do you have as a communicator?

I'd like to work abroad more often, and perhaps live in another country for a time. It probably goes back to wanting to work at the UN or State Department. I find the cultural differences about communication so interesting, sometimes obvious but often very subtle.

Right now I train a lot of communicators on how to be more strategic and measure their effectiveness. Next I'd like to reach company executives with the message of how they can make better use of their communicators in strategic and measurable ways that can make their companies more successful.

I have ideas and some initial chapters on two other books on communication not related to measurement, if I could only find more time to work on them.

How do you relax?

Believe it or not, with all the travel I do for clients throughout North America, I love to travel for fun. I like tennis, scuba diving, skiing and cruise ships. I hate hiking and camping. Reading murder mysteries is pure, instant relaxation, especially with my cat purring nearby.

What advice would you give to somebody wanting to be the next Angela Sinickas?

There are several things about career planning I think are terribly important. First, have some idea of a general direction you want to move toward so that when the right opportunities come up, you'll be able to recognize them. For example, I thought I might like to try consulting several years before I actually became a consultant. During the interim, I talked with people I met who were

consultants to learn what they did, how they became consultants, what they thought made them successful. I also volunteered to be a liaison between a variety of consultants doing projects at my company so I could see first-hand how they did what they did. By the time I did go into consulting, I knew what area of consulting I wanted to pursue and had quite a few contacts that led to a job offer.

The second piece of career planning advice is to become aware of what it is that you've loved about every job you've had in the past and what you've disliked. Think about how different jobs fulfill or work against those criteria and your personal values. Too many people blindly try to move up a job title career ladder — specialist, editor, manager, director, vice president — and find that their new job is deeply unsatisfying.

Third, before you leave a particular job or company, wring out every ounce of potential from it. You often have a better chance of redesigning your current job to include new responsibilities with people you've already proven yourself with than finding that ideal job somewhere else. For example, at that editing job I stayed at too long, before I left I built a working relationship with the Public Information Office down the hall. I learned how to do news releases and press conferences while still officially an editor. At the *Chicago Tribune*, doing a communication audit gave me the data to change my job from being an editor to a communication manager.

Finally, everyone has a unique communication background. The industry you work in, the aspect of communication you've done a lot with, the specific types of experiences you've had. It could be getting management buy-in, managing a staff of creative people, understanding how to communicate financial information. Whatever 'it' is, you need to first identify what your own specialties are and then decide if you feel passionate enough about any of them. If you find one, then learn all you can about it and start sharing that information with others, through articles and speeches for example. Then write a book! That sharing is terribly important. Without sharing what you know, you limit what you learn in return ■