Hello Hello and welcome back to after school the Simon Fraser University School of Communication alumni spotlight podcast. This is episode two. So if you want to catch up check out our previous interview with creative BC CEO Prem Gill, where we talk about the creative industries here in BC. This week, we’re turning to the professional side of communications speaking with the director of Global internal communications for staff base, formerly banana tag, Adam Brayford. Also currently in Vancouver, BC, Adam has been a professional communicator for over 12 years and has worked with IABC Simon Fraser University and of course, staff based slash banana tag. For those who may not know, staff base is an internal communications platform designed to help unite your company through internal comms, HR and IT services and management. So without further ado, here's Adam Brayford. Thank you for coming on the podcast that I think at the time of this recording, we still don't have a name solidified for it yet. But either way, thank you for coming out. And thank you for chatting with me today.

Thanks for having me.

So you work for banana tag and actually going to be changing to staff base. So I'll try to use one or the other, I may use them interchangeably. But as long as we're on the same page for that, no problem. So what is staff base? And what do you do there?

Yeah, so I'm the Director of Global internal communications for staff base. And we are a tech
company, we're a startup with about 550 employees, operating in five countries with 1000 customers, everyone from Samsung, to Adidas, to you know, Sephora, and even some local brands that you might know here in BC, and we're a one stop shop, internal comms platform. So especially in this day and age with COVID, and everyone going remote for work, you have to reach out and connect with your employees and keep them on the same page in a number of different ways. There's companies with a lot of non desk workers, there's companies where email is the primary channel, but whether you're using an employee app, intranet, email, Slack, Microsoft Teams, or soon text message, staff base is the platform that you use to create, send and measure those communications.

**Speaker 1** 02:38

Oh Cool. So what is your kind of day to day look like there?

**Adam Brayford** 02:41

Yeah, well, okay, so in a startup world where so we've reached, you know, coming together with staff base, and formerly bananas egg, which is where I started bananas, it was the the email tool that then merged with staff base to form like a truly multi channel solution. That's a lot of change, though, you're going from a couple companies about 250 people to 500, suddenly, we have $200 million of investments. And we're ultimately heading to, you know, IPO. So that's a lot of change for employees to go through. So my role as an internal comms professional, is to help people navigate that change, keep honest, transparent and productive communication between leadership and our people, and give people reasons to believe in our vision. And where we're going, you know, the internal comms function is a lot newer than external communication than marketing. It's not something that anyone was talking about when I was a student at SFU. But it is, more and more people are realizing how foundational it is to achieving your goals as a company, because your employees are your biggest resource that your biggest relationship, your biggest stakeholders, and potentially your biggest champions, or your biggest risk, if you're not treating them well, and really staying on top of where they are, it all starts with having a really good solid communication strategy. And part of that is, you know, the different kinds of stories that we tell. So we're preparing leaders to communicate with employees through vlogs, through posts through face to face encounters, you know, events. And then if there's a crisis that crops up or there's a major change or investment that we make, we drop everything and we help, you know, make that happen as well. So it's a it's a quite a variable day to day experience, which I like.

**Speaker 1** 04:40

You kind of mentioned that, you know, there's a lot of kind of focus, especially at SFU. And I'm sure communication programs around the country continent, wherever, where, you know, external communications is the focus. I mean, I have another job as a digital content manager that focuses on external relations. I did a semester With the Co Op program as a part of the external relations team, so internal communications doesn't really seem to be as focused on so kind of on that track. What was your experience getting into this field?
Adam Brayford 05:15
Yeah, you know, it's interesting, I never saw myself getting into internal communication. But that is kind of the story with anything I've gone into. I've surprised myself a number of times by happening upon an opportunity that I just couldn't pass up and saying, yes, and diving into it headfirst. It's all about kind of budget and focus, and how you operate your business. If you were to talk to a communicator, 15 years back, their view of communications would be different, too, because it would be way more focused on traditional methods of reaching an audience, which most often was media, through the media, rather, and setting up interviews like that. Whereas the conversation has shifted a lot more towards strategic communication, how to align an organization around a solid communications strategy to help them achieve their goals. And, you know, organizations are realizing more and more, you know, you look at what happens in different companies, there is the situation in Facebook recently, with the most recent whistleblower, Hootsuite has had their share of situations like that. And there's an element of how you run your business and how much trust you have in your leadership that's out of our hands as communicators, but at the very least, organizations are realizing that they need an expert who really understands what it's going to take to bring, you know, 10s of 1000s of employees around the world to the same direction that you're hoping to take your company. So yeah, I am kind of getting lost and forgetting the questions, but let me know if I'm not touching on them.

Speaker 1 06:49
No, it's all right. You mentioned at the beginning of that answer there that, you know, you kind of surprised yourself, and you didn't really kind of see when you first graduate SFU maybe which I'm sure a lot of students are in that position, myself included. We don't really know where you're gonna go after you graduate. So what was something that kind of got you interested in? Professional Communications career path? Was there anything?

Adam Brayford 07:12
Yeah, so it's funny, I think a lot of people in communication struggle with this issue, and especially communication, the way it's set up at SFU. Because it's very broad. And there's so many opportunities to go into. And that makes it hard. Because, you know, we are not a software engineer who goes to be trained in that, and then does it. There's a lot of different doors that you can take. So what initially turned me on to communication, I started as a science student at SFU, I figured I'd be some sort of CSI person, because, you know, those are the shows I watched in high school. And that was my understanding of what a career was, yeah. Then I get SFU. And realize, you know, I am really interested in this stuff, but I suck at it. So I spent a little bit of time dating the option of being a teacher. So I started taking French courses, because I was doing French and I thought it'd be a French teacher. I ended up keeping going and French the whole time. But finally, when I spoke to an academic advisor, I talked about, you know, hey, I might be interested in journalism. And so they pointed me towards communications and that, you know, the path ebbed and flowed from there, you mentioned Co Op before, Co Op was along with being involved in IBC, the the global communications Association, the biggest game changer for me as a student, that helped me figure out what I didn't want to do and did. So you know, I got to try out the flip side of journalism, which is PR, I got to do a lot of media interviews, which is really fun. And it helped me realize that, you know, that area of communications wasn't for me, but I did like public speaking, I got to try out work in SFU, which, you know, led
to a career at SFU. At one point, I worked for the Forest Service. So, you know, wildfires, everyone's talking about them these days. So when there was a wildfire, I'd interview about it, and I'd fly to fire zones and, you know, keep the media safe and out of the like, danger zone. So, yeah, I think it's just a collection of things. Like, I think there's a tendency to worry when you're getting towards the end of your degree about exactly what you're going to do. And my advice, like, obviously, Co Op, obviously, volunteering with an association like IBC, but not to worry too much about diving into the exact thing you think you want to end up in right away. Like I ended up doing my first job at SFU. I never thought I'd be interested in that. But I learned so much there and it eventually turned into the next opportunity and the next so, you know, you never know how it's gonna happen. But a lot of amazing opportunity in comms, that's for sure.

Speaker 1 09:45
Absolutely. It's funny, you kind of mentioned journalism, I go into every academic advisor saying hey, I want to get into journalism. That kind of happened to me too. It's it's kind of nice to hear that, you know, I feel like my path in this degree hasn't been very linear either. And it's kind of nice to hear that, you know, your path wasn't very linear either. So kind of focusing more on your time at SFU, you mentioned that you started as a science student, you kind of moved into French. And then you mentioned you wanted to go into journalism and open communications gives me a little more, but your time at SFU?

Adam Brayford 10:23
Yeah, totally. So I lived my parents while I went to school, very lucky, depending on how you look at it. And I was, oh, yeah, you know, it's a big, big, big money saver that not everyone gets to do, but commuted from North Delta. And for me, I was always a real kind of practical realist. So when I say that I didn't necessarily go into the exact end job I wanted right away. I was always kind of I had my head grounded in, you know, what do I need to put into this to get out my desired outcome? And how can I get there and baby steps. So I would say, I loved communication. I just it felt natural for me, when I finally found the School of Communication, like, they spoke my language, I everything seemed easier, because I was in the right place. You know, when I started in science, I was forcing it, it was hard. I think I looked up in the middle of a genetics midterm. When I was having the hardest time on the test, I looked up and I was like, I suck at this. What am I doing? What is my career even going to be? And I decided in that moment, I was dropping the class and leaving science. And I got up, I didn't finish the test. I didn't even know if I could drop that class. But I did. I it was, you know, I was just within the deadline, and switched out of it. So yeah, I you know, I love communication, I think the biggest things from me because I am so practical work Co Op, and those work experiences and the courses that are grounded in, you know, real world experiences. So I think, probably, you know, there's a couple of memories that come out for me, my top three classes would have to be Peter Anderson, emergency communication, which was so interesting, having done that Co Op for the Forest Service, Martin Labra, it was practical communication for social issues. I cannot believe I know these names, because these course names, it was like, way over a decade ago. And the final one was Katherine Murray, who I think is now in, in the arts, but she taught a class on political communication. And we took it during Obama's 2008 campaign, and he got elected for his first term during the class. And I'll never forget Katherine Murray, reading the lines of his
speech, the yes, we can speech, that famous speech when he gets elected. And just really dramatically, and, you know, obviously there, lots of praise for him. But she said, you know, the speech is, okay. If one of you wrote it in this class, I give you a b minus. But Obama really sells it. Obama gets the A. Yeah. Good, good, good memories of the student years way back when? Yeah.

Speaker 1 13:12
Oh, it sounds like it. So kind of going into our last few questions here. You know, you've kind of mentioned a few things before, but is there anything you would tell current students or recent grads who are interested in a professional communications career?

Adam Brayford 13:25
Yeah, I think one of the things I learned early on in Co Op is because communication at SFU is such a theoretical discipline, there's a lot of practical skills that you need to teach yourself. And so for the, you know, first year or so of taking communication, I just kind of like waited for someone to teach them to me, like, I'm talking things like graphic design, or, you know, different tools that are out there. I mean, you've worked in digital roles. So you know, that communication plays a big role in the strategy and proper communication that goes into using technology instead of just, you know, investing in tech and not doing good job of it. But the thing is, you kind of just have to download these programs and try them out. So what I did is in my co ops, I always tried to, you know, get my work done, and then try to add a little bit to my scope and say, What if I helped you with this and what helps you with this? And the more you can do that and come to an employer, with that rounded skill set, the better. But I would say in communications, strategy is always distracted. I want to say king, but we shouldn't use that language. Anyway, strategy is queen. So really, get comfortable with what a communication strategy looks like. They I mean, it's a there's a global approach to it. Everyone should be doing it the same way. Take workshops, and that is the skill that will regardless of any technology, because technology will always change. That's the thing that you need to master. So yeah, get out there. Try things volunteer. Learn new skills. And you know, that's how you learn

Speaker 1 15:03
100% Yeah, you mentioned kind of having to teach yourself these things. And I think it took me up until, you know, this past summer semester, I'm in my last year, but I did my last summer semester, I'm like, Well, I'm probably gonna have to start figuring some of these things out on my own. So earlier, that you can kind of get on that, the better. He mentioned, you know, communication strategy is something that you really want a familiar site, familiarize yourself with. Do you know like, what are some of the top skills that professional communicators should master when entering this field of work? On top of strategy, understanding, like the technology out there and whatnot?

Adam Brayford 15:46
Yeah, that's a good question. One of them is storytelling. And when I say storytelling, you know, it's just the the undying skill. whatever medium you're using, whether you're, you know, writing
It's just the underlying skill; whatever medium you're using, whether you're, you know, writing a speech for an executive, or it's a, you know, press release, or an email, or whatever it might be, you're, you're trying to capture the minds of your audience, by connecting with them on an emotional level. And we do that through stories. So it's an interesting practice of graduating from university, and then unlearning everything you learned about academic writing for the business world, and that'll look very different, depending on the business you're going into. And it won't apply to everyone. And some of the people listening will go into academic careers, which is amazing. But you know, in my world, in the tech world, an internal communication, less is more, so the fewest words possible, most clear, more casual, in tone. So definitely storytelling. And then beyond that, like junior roles will look different than senior roles, you'll get a little bit less hands on in the implementation of stuff as you go on in your career, but at least for that first half decade, you know, when you're in a generalist communication role, if you are, you know, you might need a little bit of graphic design, you might need a little bit of video editing, you might need to write a press release. So you might need to edit a website, all that stuff definitely helps you and then even as you progress in your career, and you're just operating at the strategy level and not having to implement that. I've always found that having a good hands on understanding of tech and tools and design and all that stuff helps inform my strategies better because I know how they're going to be brought to life.

Speaker 1 17:49
Absolutely. You mentioned you know, video editing, okay, I've done that draft site. Okay, done that. So, you know, kind of being able to do a little bit of everything seems to be, you know, a good way to kind of approach it. But that's all the questions I have for you today. Thank you again, for coming on and talking to me today.

Adam Brayford 18:11
My pleasure. Thanks. This is fun.

Speaker 1 18:13
Um, if anyone wants to reach out to you, where can we find you?

Adam Brayford 18:16
Oh, yeah, totally. Well, I'm on Twitter at Adam Brayford ad am br Ay fo rd. And yeah, feel free to reach out there and give me a shout

Speaker 1 18:28
Alright, awesome. I'm gonna go and follow you on Twitter in.

Adam Brayford 18:32
Amazing. I'll follow you back. There's a great interview. Good questions. Thanks, buddy. Yeah,

Speaker 1 18:36
no problem. Thank you again for coming on. And I'm looking forward to hearing from you again someday soon in the future.

Adam Brayford 18:44
Fantastic. Talk soon.

Speaker 1 18:46
Awesome. Well, thank you, Adam.

Adam Brayford 18:47
Bye now.