

Communicators Conference Recap: Shonali Burke

May the Force be With You

By Michael Farr

“PR has bad PR,” said [Shonali Burke](#), president and chief executive officer of [Shonali Burke Consulting, Inc.](#) And the solution is to get back to the basics, embrace new technology and leverage the strength of online communities.

Burke shared her mother’s story of starting a new teaching career later in life through an early, mail-in distance-learning program as an example to follow.

“My mother did what PR is really all about. She used the technology of her time to be a bridge between her and her goals,” Burke said. “Especially with the way with which we’re being overwhelmed by technology, we have forgotten what PR is all about. It’s about being that bridge between organizations and their customers.”

Savvy communicators have great potential to unite people for worthy causes, Burke emphasized. To illustrate, she described how her friend, whose mother was diagnosed with lung cancer, was able to launch a successful national awareness campaign through fostering and grooming online communities.

The campaign began with the [“Where’s the Funding for Lung Cancer”](#) website, which published educational content and a provided forum for others to share their own stories. Later, after consulting with a small group of core supporters in a Facebook group, Burke’s friend launched [Sock Monkeys Against Cancer \(S.M.A.C.\)](#), which aims to provide comfort to cancer victims through the sale of sock monkeys.

The long, patient work of building up online community support for the sock monkey campaign resulted in a near-doubling of the funding goal once it actually launched.

“People say content is king. I say community is king,” Burke said. “If we don’t have community, who is going to get our funding?”

Recruiting influential personalities to your side is crucial for mainstream success, Burke said. That was her strategy when she began work on USA for UNHCR’s [Blue Key](#) campaign, which raised funds for the United Nations Refugee Agency.

“When you have a cause that deals with people who are essentially voiceless, how do you get people talking about it?” Burke asked. “Well, you bring in people who do have a

voice, who do have a platform and who are willing you use that platform and their voices to give your cause a voice.”

Burke acted as a kind of community manager before the campaign, introducing influencers to one another online, encouraging networking and drumming up support for the cause. She said she was very clear about what was minimally expected of the members, but as excitement built, they started asking, “What more can we do?” She knew she had them.

The campaign launched and quickly took on a life of its own. People latched onto the cause, creating their own online content and asking how they could organize local support groups. Companies jumped onboard as they saw their customers’ enthusiasm.

“This campaign started becoming bigger than anything we could have ever imagined,” Burke said. “And it grew out of the fact that this initial media community was so energetic.”

Burke ended her talk at the conference with an exhortation and charge, both daunting and inspiring.

“It is really a brave new world. The possibilities are absolutely endless. And all of you have a choice. You can either get on the bandwagon and ride off into that horizon or stand on the sidelines and watch the world go by.

Follow Burke on Twitter at [@shonali](https://twitter.com/shonali).

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