

TRANSCRIPT: Interview with Caroline Sapriel of CS&A and Stephen Welch, past chair of the IABC EMENA Region

SW: My name is Stephen Welch, I am past chair of the IABC EMENA Region, and this is the latest in a series of podcasts. Today we welcome Caroline Sapriel, who has recently been nominated as an IABC Fellow.

Good morning Caroline, it's nice to meet you and congratulations on being nominated a fellow of IABC. Perhaps if you can just tell us a little bit about your journey and how you got to become a fellow of the IABC?

CS: First of all, thank you very much, I am delighted to have been selected as a fellow of the class 2021, it is a real honour. My relationship to the IABC goes back a long way, 1987 to be precise. I went to Asia after studying mandarin and sinology and ended up in Taiwan. In Taiwan I got my first job because when I lived in Israel I was the press officer for the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation, so I had a little bit of PR and press officer experience. After a year in Taiwan, I got a job with the Hill & Knowlton affiliate, and it was the first time an international PR firm had representation in Taipei. It was an ad agency and they needed somebody to do the PR, and because I could write and had a little bit of experience, I was hired. We did a lot of the work for the Hill & Knowlton clients in Taiwan, but we also did a bit of our own. I quickly realised there was not much in terms of education or support so one of my colleagues at the Hill & Knowlton office in Hong Kong said you should join the IABC, so I joined and was actually the first member who joined from Taiwan.

SW: Fantastic, I did not know that.

CS: I subsequently moved in 1990 to Hong Kong and have continued to be a member since. It was in Hong Kong I decided to get involved in the chapter boards and the area that was always interesting to me was professional development. We ran a really good series of outfits and events in Hong Kong targeting professional development. Hong Kong at the time was still developing, and I wanted to make sure that people got good education and opportunities to grow, so that is what I did and served 8 years there. I then moved to Europe, where I joined the chapter in Belgium, and continued to work on their chapter's professional development. Then I joined the European board for a while, where I contributed to the first Euro Conferences programme as I had attended quite a few of the world conferences, which I just thought were wow, as an upcoming professional there is so much you can get from them. Then I was also asked to contribute and serve on the global conference programme committee. Finally, I was asked to serve as a founding member of the global ethics committee and supported the Paris chapter with events. So, over the years I have done quite a lot of different things and it has been wonderful.

SW: I think that the world conferences have got to be a highlight for anyone in their communications careers. I think that we have had a couple of really successful virtual ones, but I know a lot of people can't wait till the next one where we all get to meet in person again. You run your own agency, don't you?

CS: Yes, well it's not an agency but a risk crisis and business continuity consultancy. We started 30 years ago this year so are celebrating our 30th anniversary.

SW: Wow congratulations!

CS: After experiencing crisis from the communications angle, working for a couple of big firms, I felt that the communications piece to try and get organisations prepared for crisis was a little limited. So, in 1991 my business partner and I embarked on CS&A, starting in Hong Kong, to try and provide a

more integrated approach to crisis preparedness, emergency crisis response, crisis communication, and business continuity after a crisis. In the mid-90s, we started taking on assignments from clients in Europe and so in 1998 set up a base there, and now we work everywhere. We have key geographic bases, our team is only senior people, we're not really structured like an agency with account executives and all that, and we work mostly to help clients build resilience before or after a crisis. We don't step on the toes of communications or PR agencies that typically hold hands during a crisis.

SW: Ok, great! So, what are some of your other career highlights over the past 30 or so years?

CS: Well, handling my first major crisis was the turning point of why I chose to focus on crisis management and is something that was really, well, it was a bit of a baptism of fire as I was quite young, and it was a dramatic crisis. It was a major air crash with 259 people. I handled media, next of kin, and I learned a lot during the case that actually I've kept with me on many occasions with different clients along my career.

My second milestone was my first project at CS&A which felt like a recognition. It was with Cathy Pacific, who were a client in the agency for us, and they needed a crisis manual as they only had an emergency and accident manual. They said 'you're the only we know that could write it' because I had developed quite a bit in that sphere, so that was a bit of recognition. Another thing that really moved us into a bigger scope of service is when Shell Greater China asked us to develop a large simulation for their explorations business and we were up against the big agencies and we won it. Of course, setting up in Europe and moving to other parts of world doing very large projects was also incremental.

You know, you've [Stephen] been exposed to crisis management, I'm sure you know that the profession has evolved quite a bit. A lot of the large companies have a lot of in-house capabilities these days, so what we wanted to do was to make sure that we continued to add value to these organisations, providing digital solutions or new ways to do things better, faster, more efficiently, or more cost effectively. We developed several digital tools like virtual simulations and many other preparatory tools. As everyone is jumping on the preparatory bandwagon, especially now even more with the pandemic, we provide knowhow to organisations who need to put in place things that the multinationals have bigger resources to do in-house.

SW: Very good. You talked a little bit about how crisis the crisis professional has changed, in your career how have you seen the communications profession evolve?

CS: It's interesting because I still do some work in communications and what I'm finding, and I don't want to sound like a dinosaur when I say this, but I'm finding the internet, the web, and the social network has meant that a lot of people have marketing or branding communications experience but that's about it. So, it feels as if there is a major erosion in the younger people coming into the profession. They don't necessarily know how to write or don't understand how news media works, so there is a whole bunch of the main pillars which I consider to be half the profession which don't seem to be there because Instagram is the mode of the day.

SW: Yea, they can write 280 characters but when they get to 281...

CS: Yes, and when you see people jumping from this level of knowhow and being thrown into managing a big issue or a crisis, they can't do it.

SW: And what role do you think IABC has in supporting that and helping people to be more successful?

CS: I think that there has got to be, and I speak from a professional development point of view, more resources. I think the IABC has a crisis academy, done through webinars, but I don't think the webinars are particularly dynamic. It is just one person speaking, it really is just information transfer, which isn't raising the bar for the younger people coming into the community. I say this because I have quite a few clients at the moment asking me to run master classes in communications because the younger people in their teams around the world just don't have exposure to this, so I think it's about professional development at the lower level. They need exposure to how a news desk works, how to write in such a way that makes it compelling and not just a promotional pitch, how do you develop critical thinking so people ask the right questions, and how to build the right information and data. How do you grow from being a communicator to understanding what business should be, and what difference does it make to a business?

SW: That's when sorts of things like the global standard plays a big role as well. You talked about young people coming into the business, what tips or advice would you give young people coming into the profession this year?

CS: Learn, engage, ask questions, do not just rest on what is comfortable and just use Instagram because everyone uses Instagram. The communications profession is so much more, and I hear very often younger people, or even people mid-career, saying they are struggling to get ahead or a seat at the c-suite table, and part of the reason is because communicators are not very good at building their own credentials. In my field, when a communicator is responsible for crisis management it boggles my mind that most of them have never even seen a risk register, so how do you develop that? You must develop critical thinking; you must ask the questions that perhaps other people are not asking. We have a colleague who is a psychologist and has a great saying, 'the best questions are the mid wives to solutions', and that's a very good point. It's about being inquisitive and having a critical mind. Grow and take on all the learning you can get, which is what I did when I was on my own in Taiwan. The IABC is fantastic but I do think it needs to home in on what it offers the profession and include the traditional skills that are essential for communicators.

SW: There is that but there are all bits around the outside, like your work [crisis communications], how to understand business, how to operate at a senior level, which I think is incredibly important.

CS: Indeed, so it's a combination of skills and understanding what is necessary in communication. You can't be an expert in everything, but I've got a bunch of people from a client right now who do marketing communications, and their company is trying to move them in corporate communications. It's a huge task because they have been too focused on their product and marketing, and I think if IABC can figure out a way to make that bridge and expand that and give these people essential skills that would be great. You can't have a seat at the table if you do not have the credibility, and the way to be credible is to build knowledge.

SW: Yes, and as a lot of people have said you might be invited to sit at the table once, but you might not be invited back and that is the critical thing.

Well, I'm loving this conversation, we could probably talk forever, but I am conscious of time so do you have any final words?

CS: Once all the fellows are announced, I was thinking it would be really nice to get together with and them and think about what we as fellows can do to support the young but also to create more professional development, because I do think the IABC sometimes misses the opportunity to challenge and get feedback from senior leaders, and maybe the fellows should get more involved in that.

SW: Great, well I will make a note of that so watch this space. Thank you very much for you time and I hope to get to meet you in person sometime soon.

CS: Sounds good and thanks very much for the opportunity Stephen.