AN INCLUSIONARY WAKEUP CALL FOR PUBLIC INTEREST COPYWRITERS

MARIA BRYAN

Practitioner Q & A

An Inclusionary Wakeup Call for Public Interest Copywriters

Interview with Maria Bryan

Nonprofit Marketing and Communications Expert with Maria Bryan Creative

Biography

Maria Bryan is a nonprofit messaging strategist and trainer. She helps nonprofit leaders tell powerful and impactful stories that minimize harm. Maria has over fifteen years in marketing communications in the public sector. She has a master's degree in public administration, a bachelor's degree in journalism, and is professionally certified in trauma and resilience. Maria is a firm believer that storytellers make the world a healthier, safer, cleaner, and happier place.

Question: Can you tell us about your background and how you became interested in the intersection of language and communication?

Answer: I'd really fallen in love with public service, and I'd found a home in nonprofit communications, so I started out working at a community health center in Chinatown in New York City. This is a good foundation because I'll probably be talking a lot about this when you ask me about language. I worked in an organization that served mostly Chinese immigrants by providing cultural and language-appropriate health care. I then worked at the largest public health organization serving New Yorkers for a few years and then I had my baby and was ready to get out of the hustle. So, I started my consultancy, Maria Bryan Creative, at the very end of 2018, where I first focused on nonprofit marketing strategy and campaigns and have for the past few years really focused on messaging—nonprofit

messaging—through one-on-one support and training.

So, much of what I do is training nonprofits in their messaging. I focus on trauma-informed nonprofit marketing and messaging, i.e., how can nonprofit leaders, and especially marketers and communicators, be equipped to integrate trauma-informed best practices while they are gathering and telling stories.

Question: I'd love to hear a little bit more about what got you into this rabbit hole of curiosity.

Answer: When I was a health educator in Ghana, I worked very closely on women's issues through training men. There were really innovative programs at the time about training men. I realized that, at least for the tribal language in the community I lived in, there wasn't a word for rape. It was the first time that I realized the power of language in words. How do you fully talk to a community about something like rape and the nuances of, for example, can you rape your wife? Can you rape your girlfriend? What does rape look like when rape isn't even part of their vocabulary and language? The weight of language very early on in my career was important, especially for the most vulnerable of us.

As a white woman working in immigrant communities, I quickly realized the importance of understanding the language and cultural context of the communities I was serving. In transitioning to work at an immigrant community health center that prioritized culturally and linguistically

appropriate care, I gained an even more empathetic view of the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Specifically, I recognized the ways in which my own privilege and experiences as a white woman could lead me to make assumptions and take the lead on communications, only to find out that my messaging was not effective or even harmful. Through these experiences, I learned the importance of centering the voices and perspectives of the communities I was serving in my communications work.

For example, I'd be writing a blog post or an email about how to get better sleep at night—I would write things such as, "only sleep in your bedroom, don't work in your bedroom." We had a system in place where people would review my work and they'd say, "Maria, a lot of these families live in one room, they don't have the luxury to only sleep in a separate bedroom." There were so many lessons like this in the first seven years of my career, more in the cross-cultural context of how important language is. I'll stop there as far as where this curiosity is from, and the power of language, it started as both a health educator in Ghana and working in immigrant communities in New York.

Question: Are there any particular strategies that you use from that cross-cultural perspective? For instance, how do you take a strategy that may have worked in Ghana and transfer it to something that would work for the Chinese immigrant population in New York City?

Answer: I love that question. In this field, I'm learning that you can't have a checklist

sometimes, and you really have to rely on intuition. You really have to give yourself grace and empathy as you're working toward it.

I just want to start off with that, there is no checklist. I lived in Ghana for two years and was really immersed in the community. It helped to know that humor was helpful for language and health education. In the Chinese community, especially in New York City, there was so much fear, and this is growing post-pandemic. The Asian American community is in fear of a poor health diagnosis, in fear of the government, and in fear of violence. Even having that kind of context is helpful, and I was immersed in it. For five years, I worked in Chinatown and was one of maybe three white people that worked in this very large organization that spanned across two boroughs.

Part of it was time, but in both cases I relied very heavily on the people who lived that experience. Fortunately, I had partners in Ghana who would put me in my place when needed. Something that was really beautiful about Charles B. Wang Community Health Center that really set the tone for the work I do today was this very lengthy review process. It might feel very long and bureaucratic, but now I've come to really appreciate it, because I might write the first draft of something, but they're going to have community members review it first. They're going to have doctors, actual health educators, who have been in the field working with these patients to review it. I was the health literacy editor in line for other people; I studied journalism and

English, and with that background, I came in to make sure that health literacy was at a third or fourth grade reading level. That's not to say that we didn't have very smart patients, but things are just easier to read when they're at a lower literacy level.

That's what it takes—not relying on yourself, having humility about your life experience and your privilege.[1] Again, very early on in my career, I knew that I was this white person that stuck out and was filled with privilege and I had to constantly check that, because I wasn't doing fundraising communications. I was directly creating communications for the people that we served.

Question: How have you evolved your approach to copywriting over time?

Answer: I really transitioned last year into helping nonprofits have a strong messaging strategy to lead all their communications, whether that's directly for their beneficiaries and clients or fundraising, or advocacy. There is a storytelling framework that I teach, and I teach content development. Last year, I was teaching this framework, and one of my students who worked with LGBTQ+ homeless youth asked, "Where does trauma-informed messaging fit into your framework?" And it kicked me in the stomach. I intuitively tried the best I could to respond. I thought, of course, so many people in this room are working with clients and beneficiaries who have experienced great trauma, and we cannot talk about messaging without talking about trauma. We are asking people to tell what is likely their most painful lived experiences in order to

fundraise, in order to fill our programs. This was a huge change and trajectory for me, where I realized that if I'm going to really focus on messaging, I need to integrate both trauma-informed and ethical storytelling practices.

This is where language is so crucially important because how we talk about our clients informs whether we're dignifying and respecting them. In the 90s, we saw a lot of Sandy Struthers and these cringeworthy fundraising campaigns where these children literally have no voice, their parents are not in the screen. There are flies all over them, and then a white woman is like, "Come on, folks! Let's save their lives." And the thing is—it worked. It raised so much money, but we can do things differently. We can still have a really big impact and we can give the people we serve great agency, and we can bring people in—supporters, people with money—we can bring them into the community in a way that doesn't position them as saviors and so that's what trauma-informed and ethical storytelling[2] is all about. It's these shifts in mindsets as a start.

In any role, workflows and processes are crucial for ensuring tasks are completed efficiently and effectively. When it comes to storytelling, these workflows may involve a range of elements, such as obtaining the correct media consent form, using appropriate language when referring to clients, and a word bank which outlines the nuances of different terms and phrases. For example, there may be important differences between the terms "homeless" and "unhoused" that must be understood and respected when working with people who are experiencing housing insecurity. Similarly, the language around issues such as substance abuse can be complex and nuanced, and may require careful consideration in order to ensure respectful and appropriate communications with clients. Ultimately, having a clear and effective workflow is essential for providing high-quality care and support to those we serve.

I had one client who works in indigenous communities and she said, "we don't use the phrase 'mission statement.'" I was like, "Of course you don't use the word mission statement"! That blew my mind—the word "mission" is a reminder of the colonial missions that were catastrophic for indigenous communities throughout history. We used "purpose statement" instead. When it comes to ethical and trauma-informed storytelling, language is everything. Making sure that we protect what I call our story owners, dignify our story owners, it really is the role of nonprofit communicators and marketers to uphold that and to take that seriously.

Question: Within public interest communications we work on storytelling as well as the role of ethics. Research suggests that trauma-informed stories, like suicide narratives, have the potential to lead to pattern behavior. How do you make sure that the stories you're telling, especially as they relate to trauma, are not causing harm?

Answer: Here's what is so important about the question that you're asking. It's not just about protecting the story owner, the person who is telling their story. Your audience is

just as vulnerable to reliving their own trauma, or experiencing secondary trauma. Especially in the nonprofit space, people who are reading your content are drawn to your mission for a reason. It may be because of similar things that they've experienced. For example, if you've survived sexual violence, you might want to donate your money and time just to organizations that support sexual violence.

This is so huge. It's not just about the interview process; it's about writing these stories in a way that protects your audience who reads your content. I feel you can't skirt around the pain and the problem—we can't pretend it doesn't exist, but we don't need to overtalk about the pain and the gore. We have choices on writing just enough so that we know the problem exists. We set the tone—this is the problem; this is the pain. Then we can go into the transformation, and if the goal is to not shock people, but to inspire hope and empathy, then we're closer to doing justice for audiences to make sure we're not retraumatizing them.

Again, I want to underscore that we have choices in how much of the pain of the story we share. You don't have to go into detail. One story that I often share when I'm training people is that I have a client who is spearheading bereavement advocacy. She is ensuring that there is more holistic legislation in support of people who have lost loved ones and she has her own story of losing her five-month-old daughter. When I talked to her about her story, she said, "before I go any further, I'm not going to tell you anything about my daughter. I'm not going to tell you what her diagnosis was.

I'm not going to tell you about the moment she died." She clearly set those boundaries. She said, "I will tell you as much as you want about my story, but you don't need to know about my daughter." She said it was such ferocity that I know that she has had so many journalists asking about the gory details of her daughter's diagnosis and how her daughter died. She could tell her story very impactfully and really portrayed her own pain and experience in a way to get your attention without going into the gory details.[3] I think of that story often, how we can set boundaries on what we need to share in the story and what is not relevant.

Question: With this example, she was very clear with her boundaries, but sometimes folks don't know how to communicate boundaries so clearly. What are signs you look for to make sure your audiences are comfortable with what and how you are communicating?

Answer: In an interview process, the most trauma-informed best practice is, before every question, continue to give them that permission, control, and autonomy. For example, "You don't have to answer this question. You can answer as much or as little as you're comfortable sharing."

Because you're right—she set those boundaries. I didn't. Now, during that interview, I did make sure that we were pausing for breaks because she was telling a very painful story. That is on us, the interviewers, to constantly be reminding the story owners that they have a choice in how much they're sharing. They also might feel very cozy and comfortable in the interview

process if you're doing it right. So, they also need to know that they can retract that story at any time. They might see it in the wild and realize, actually, I don't really want that much of my story out there.

So again, it's not so much a checklist. I think it's good to have principles and guidelines on putting the story owner first or prioritizing transformation, hope, and inspiration instead of the shock factor.[4] Again, you're going to have to rely on practice and intuition—and you're just going to fail a couple of times. And then you'll keep going, because it's important to you.

Question: One of the things that I've learned by following your work is the importance of listening and taking inventory of our audiences' preferred language. You mentioned word banks earlier, but are there any other tools that you use to adjust for your audiences' linguistic preferences?

Answer: When you're just starting out, look at testimonials or interviews. As a marketer or communicator, you want things to be as academic and eloquent as possible, but if you really look at what your key audience is saying, they're saying it without editing themselves. The best way to use language that resonates with people is to use language they're also using. I know for my own marketing, whenever I am launching a project, I'll do a pilot where I do it for free or very low cost, and I'll say, I'd appreciate if you could review this and give a testimonial. Then I'll take that testimony directly as the copy that I use for the sales page.

This also works in fundraising because it's easy for us to assume why people give. In the nonprofit context, it's easy to assume why people show up at our doors and use our services. Again, from a general marketing perspective, we assume why people want our services, but if we actually ask them, we can learn so much more. Early on in my consultancy, I taught about audience personas, and if you're just sitting there coming up with what you think the audience persona is, you're actually vulnerable to your own biases—but if you do take the time and space to actually have conversations with your most ideal audience, you'll be able not only to have a much deeper understanding of their wants and challenges and needs, but also to hear the language they use.

Early on in my career, I had the opportunity to work in a community that spoke a tribal language that was very different from English. This experience taught me the importance of humility in communications and the need to understand the language and cultural context of the communities I was serving. Later, working in a Chinese community in New York City further emphasized this lesson. I realized that I couldn't assume that people would automatically understand what I was saying, whether it was due to cultural differences, language barriers, or any other factors. This is a lesson that I carry with me today, even when working with clients who may share some of my own experiences and backgrounds. I believe that centering the perspectives and voices of those we are communicating with is essential to effective and inclusive communications.

Question: Based on your experiences over the past fifteen years, do you have any advice for communicators who are starting this journey themselves, or who may be struggling to connect with their audiences through language?

Answer: It has been a range of different experiences. It is funny how cyclical things get when I talk about going back to lessons I learned early on in my career, they've been popping back up.

My biggest advice is slow down your process. You don't need to be banging out social media every day, email every day. You don't need to be gathering 20-50 stories a year. It isn't even that consistency is key—what's truly key is resonating with your audience, or being known for something you're positioning—no matter who you're marketing for, whether you're a nonprofit, for-profit, a consultant.

If you slow down the process and you have a deep understanding of your audience, if you're telling a good story that's ethical and trauma-informed, it means you might only have two to three stories to tell for that year. At the end of the day, you have a website that will resonate with your audience. You have email and social media to which people will be nodding their heads. You're building that trust in a very deep way. My hope for marketers is that they have leadership that gives them that space and that they give themselves that space. They don't need to bang out as much content as possible to reach their goals. They just need to do it well.

When I was working in the nonprofit space, I put pressure on myself to be on top of everything, to create two nonprofit stories and feature two clients every month. There was no room for anything! Less is more—do it slower, give yourself space, and you'll start to see movement in your goals and initiatives.

Question: What barriers have you faced regarding the use of language that is more prone to getting lost in translation? For example, in the Chinese context, there's the notion of guanxi,[5] which is difficult to translate in a Western context.

Answer: This is another example where slowing down comes in. Sometimes it just takes a bit more effort and a few more conversations. In terms of the cultural context, make sure that you're getting input from people—does this sound right to you? Is this resonating? Is this what I'm trying to say? Leave room to rewrite things—and I'm coming from a public health context, so it's important that we're getting the right message across because we want our audience to be the healthiest version of themselves. I want to take it a step further and say that a big part of this conversation is that language changes so much. What was acceptable yesterday may not be acceptable today. We might be able to reclaim that word, that language too, which is beautiful. I love when that happens.

So, how do we ride that wave as marketers and as communicators? What I particularly find to be tricky—and maybe even harmful—is when people become frustrated with language and want to completely

change it to something that others aren't going to even understand. For example, "DEI" has been so watered down,[6] so when do we say, we're not going to say DEI anymore, instead we're going to come up with something else that has more weight to it, I'm all for that.

"Ally," the word "ally"—I've heard people feel very strongly that they don't want to use the word "ally" anymore because it's lost its meaning. For a word like "ally" that is so well known, it is going to take a huge movement to get people to start using a different word in its place. I think that there's going to have to be patience when you get frustrated with language, and it starts to feel watered down, and it doesn't resonate anymore.

Another great example in my industry is "thought leadership," which can make people gag. People hate talking about "thought leadership," but what can you do? We all know what it means. We can come up with all these cute ways to say it in a way that might be more meaningful, but sometimes you have to use the language that people know and understand. You can also leave space to say, "Hey, this is what we have, but this is imperfect."

As part of my services, I often help people craft their organizational purpose statement. However, I've come to realize that the term "mission statement" can be problematic and even offensive in certain indigenous communities. Therefore, I strive to honor and respect the language and traditions of the communities I work with by using terminology that is more appropriate and

respectful. At the same time, I recognize that clear and effective communication often requires using language that is familiar and understandable to those we are communicating with. It's important to strike a balance between honoring cultural and linguistic differences and ensuring that our messages are accessible and meaningful to our audiences.

Question: *How do you stay informed and up-to-date with these trends in language and preferences?*

Answer: My clients—they know their industry so well. I find time and time again that I'll have a client and I'll be working on their messaging. I can try to do a bit of research, but the second I'm in the room with them, they know. They know the newest and most nuanced, appropriate way to talk about their clients and their industry. After every client meeting, my vocabulary grows. Thinking back to my client who lost her daughter, I thought, do we talk about "bereavement," or do we talk about "grief," because everyone knows the word grief. She made sure I understood that grief is part of the bereavement process, but it doesn't capture the financial burdens, for example. I have learned to put my assumptions at the door when I'm with my clients because they know best—and then I'm just getting them in the room so we can get it on paper to agree on these things. There are resources and they do change, but people know in their industry what the language is and what the complexities and the nuances are.

Question: When you bring your clients in to talk, how do you facilitate that conversation with them? Do you have specific questions to ask when you're uncertain how to phrase something?

Answer: When I bring clients in to talk about messaging, I try to create a diverse group of people in the room, including founders, new employees, community members, and others. This mix of voices and experiences helps us answer questions in different ways and ensures that everyone has a stake in the conversation.

Before we even get to messaging, we spend a lot of time discussing questions like:

1. What is the problem that we're solving?
2. What are the systemic issues at play?
3. What are the nuances and interrelated factors involved?

Then, we dig deep into the client's unique solution. For example, I ask a lot of questions about the client's story arc, the beneficiary's story arc, and their positioning in the industry. We discuss questions like:

1. Why do you see your solution as different from other organizations, and why is it important to do things differently?
2. What is your role in making the industry better?

We also explore the more daring goals they may have, which helps us clarify the vision for both their organization and their greater industry. Finally, we talk about empathy and what makes the client's lived experiences credible to support the people they serve. These are the kinds of questions we ruminate on and discuss at length, and through these conversations, we develop word banks and messaging strategies that accurately and effectively convey the client's mission and values. As the facilitator, my role is to guide the conversation and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute their thoughts and ideas.

Question: Looking ahead, what are the biggest challenges that you think copywriters are going to face in the next few years? How do you plan to address them?

Answer: I hate to give the same answer, but I think it's this pressure to create as much content as possible, to be in this hamster wheel of content creation. There's burnout that comes with that—the creative burnout, the emotional burnout, mental, physical—of all the burnout that comes with creating as much content as possible. We must give ourselves permission to slow down and to trust that our audience is still going to act even if we might not be producing as much content as we think we need to be producing. I combat it through practice and modeling. I've transitioned how I create content and how much content I create and I have data to show that people are acting more on relevant content than on just constant content. Trauma-informed content is not new—and it's actually going to become the norm, which I think is going to be scary for copywriters because it's one more thing that they have to do—to make sure that their content is trauma-informed. This is the direction that we're going. Embrace it. It's possible, and as it becomes a

practice It'll become easier to do things with a trauma-informed, ethical lens.

Question: PIC is about adapting and sustaining messaging strategies. You've talked a lot about adaptability and how the field has approached these new trends. How do you adapt your messages and campaigns to account for this goal of long-term impact? Especially with the goal of slowing down, how can we ensure that these messages sustain themselves?

Answer: We can rely on automation and tools. We can see what's working and get them on repeat. We can repurpose content that works well instead of reinventing the wheel—take powerful messaging and repurpose it. Your audience today and your audience three years ago are likely different—they've likely moved on. Whatever you wrote three years ago that was working, you can reuse that. I give you permission to use that content again.

From an ethical and trauma standpoint, I'm rewriting my content all the time. There are a few trends and tactics that I do and that we could all do. For example, don't overpromise transformations. In copywriting, we talk about the necessity of transformation. Instead of saying, 'take my course and this is how your life is going to be different,' I could say, 'students that have taken my course have often had these kinds of results.' We can be clear on what to expect in terms of transformation.

Urgency—don't create false urgency in your writing or whatever you're offering to your audience. If there is real urgency and doors are going to close, then let that be real. If not, people will become frustrated if you create urgency and then they see the same offer again a week later. It is important to build ethical trust by avoiding fake urgency. I took advantage of all the best practices in copywriting, and now that I'm getting trained in ethical and trauma-informed messaging, I frequently go back to my sales pages and make these tactical tweaks.

Question: Our last question for you—where can our audience go to learn more about you and your work and stay up to date on your latest projects?

Answer: MariaBryan.com is where you can learn more about my work. I would love to connect on LinkedIn, so you can find me— Maria Bryan.

References

Black, L. L., & Stone, D. (2005). Expanding the Definition of Privilege: The Concept of Social Privilege. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*(4), 243-255. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2005.tb00020.x

Chen, X. P., & Chen, C. C. (2004). On the intricacies of the Chinese guanxi: A process model of guanxi development. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *21*, 305-324. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:APJM.0000036465.19102.d5

Hastings, G., Stead, M., & Webb, J. (2004). Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern. *Psychology & Marketing, 21*(11), 961-986. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20043

Jackson, P. B., Thoits, P. A., & Taylor, H. F. (1995). Composition of the workplace and psychological well-being: The effects of tokenism on America's Black elite. *Social Forces, 74*(2), 543-557. https://doi.org/10.2307/2580491

McKellar, E. (2021). Shopping for a cause: Social influencers, performative allyship, and the commodification of activism. *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*, 1377. https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1377

Meretoja, H. (2018) *The Ethics of storytelling: Narrative hermeneutics, history, and the possible*. Oxford University Press.

Oh, E-J. (2021). Diversity for tokenism? Moderating effect of fairness on token-gender and workplace discrimination. *Academy of Management, 1.* *https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2021.11882abstract*

Rudd, M., Vohs, K. D., & Aaker, J. (2012). Awe expands people's perception of time, alters decision making, and enhances well-being. *Psychological Science, 23*(10), 1130-1136. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612438731

---

[1] The concept of social privilege is based on the contextual power inherent to one's identity or demographics including, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, economic status, age, education, and degree of ability (e.g., Black & Stone, 2005).

[2] Ethical storytelling involves a set of practices enabling communicators to more effectively, respectfully, and responsibly convey others' stories (e.g., Meretoja, 2018).

[3] Shocking audiences with too much detail is a form of fear appeal, a tactic shown to have weaker and even adverse impacts in social marketing campaigns (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004).

[4] Certain emotions move audiences to action in unique ways, and eliciting positive emotion tends to lead to more positive outcomes. For instance, Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker (2012) found that people who experienced awe were more likely to spend time volunteering and to feel more satisfied with their lives.

[5] The concept of guanxi is important within Chinese culture, denoting a strong interpersonal relationship including trust and moral obligation. For more on guanxi, see Chen and Chen (2004).

[6] Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become buzzwords across academic and corporate spaces alike, but discussion around these topics does not always lead to action. Lauding diversity and equity without substantiating these concepts with inclusive practice can lead to performative allyship (e.g., McKellar, 2021) and tokenism (e.g., Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Oh, 2021).