

Agency for Change Podcast: Monique Farmer, President, Avant Solutions

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Monique Farmer

External validation is artificial validation.

Announcer

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is my friend, Monique Farmer. She's the president of Avant Solutions, a public relations firm designing customized communication strategies that work. We're exploring the fascinating journey behind her new book and we're going to dive into the innovative approaches Avant Solutions employs to craft tailored communication strategies for clients across various industries. Monique, I am eager to talk with you today. Welcome to the podcast.

Monique Farmer

Thank you, Lyn. I'm excited about this discussion this afternoon, and I appreciate you extending the invitation. I know you've got a good following of listeners for Agency for Change, so I'm looking forward to our chat today.

Lyn Wineman

Monique, it is great to have you. It's always fantastic to get to talk with you, and I know our listeners will love what you have to share. Let's even just start with you telling us more about Avant Solutions.

Monique Farmer

For sure. So Avant Solutions is a PR communication and marketing firm that was born in August of 2019, materially, but it was really born in my imagination probably about a decade before then. I like to tell people that it was probably around 2010. I was in the process of interviewing for a potential new role as the head of a firm, someone else's firm and at the time, as part of that interview process, I heard myself

say I'd like to own my own firm someday. I'm a huge believer of our thoughts become reality and the words we speak can become reality. So 10 years later, it ended up becoming reality.

Our places where we like to tell people we play to Lyn are in internal, external communication strategy. So we sit down with organizations as part of an initial consultation or even discovery once we've agreed to work together to really listen to what they've tried before, what their pain points are, and to make a recommendation about a comprehensive communication strategy or approach for them, whether that's for internal, we have some clients who come to us who are just trying to build their culture and get a good cadence of communication for doing that well and really resonating with their workforce. We have other clients, some of them corporate, some of them like local government, state government. We've even done a couple of federal government projects, but they sometimes need all of it right, like the console the internal and then like what they need to do externally, depending on what it is that they're trying to achieve.

The next space is media relations. Got lots of relationships past and present. Some of our people have moved on to other markets, which we always lament when that happens, but we do like to make sure that our clients' stories are being told by reach. So we work there. We media train too. So we've trained corporate leadership teams, some local CEOs. We've also trained some nonprofit their entire board or their president or their executive directors or CEOs to be ready for when it's their time to go on camera. We also teach them some strategies that work in other spaces, like at the board table communication when they're doing like a town hall meeting, and then we do executive communication. That crosses over into that space of some ghost writing for leaders, some thought leadership, platform building, all of those things.

Lyn Wineman

Monique, I know that you and your team are absolute pros. I should let everyone know we get the chance to partner sometimes Avant Solutions and KidGlov like to go in together because we each have our areas of specialty. I love that you mentioned that you focus on internal communications, because I think sometimes we forget that our internal teams have such power in spreading the messages that we want to get out.

Monique Farmer

Yep, Sometimes they get left out. If you work at a place, you don't necessarily like to read about what's happening at your place.

Lyn Wineman

Oh it's the worst. Nothing makes you feel less connected than to read something about your employer in the newspaper or hear it on the radio, or even hear it through social media. I do think that's great. You touched a little bit on this about how you spoke your vision of entrepreneurship into reality, which I love that story, but what inspired you to start this journey, to start your own company? And then two-part question here, have there been any surprises along the way in your entrepreneurial journey?

Monique Farmer

That's a great question. What inspired me to start. I think it probably depends on the day how I answer that question. Really at the deep root of it, I believe that I had to make a choice. At the time I was teaching. I love teaching, by the way, I was teaching full time at University of Nebraska-Lincoln and full, full course schedule, professor of practice, 80% teaching, which really is mostly 100% teaching, and then, if you can fit some other stuff in, good for you. Four classes, one semester, three the next semester, trying to also concurrently build this business.

And I started initially with some team members. I had a lady who had retired from the school district with me, who was free, and she was like I'll help, and I was so gracious to have her support on my team because she knew me and she knew, like, my formulas and how I like stuff put together. So that's always good when you don't have to train from scratch, somebody who is there to support you. I did have some help at the very beginning, which made it more feasible for me to be in the classroom because I was teaching in person to us, driving to Lincoln about three or four times a week teaching in person, and then also I rode the shuttle so I'd be doing work on the shuttle. It was too much and so I needed to make the choice and so I did lament it at the time, but it has been good.

I made the decision to go all in, go full time working on the firm. So I kind of had a soft launch of it and then and went full time in June of 2022. But I still I need my teaching fix. I'm lucky to get to have it and I did find an opportunity to do that, so I teach just one class now. I teach one class for the University of Texas at Austin, all online. But I mean there, there is not a day that goes by that a student doesn't need something. They email, they set time on my calendar. I love being able to pour into the next generation of PR communication professionals. I know you get that itch too, because you all were there at UNL to some professional support.

Lyn Wineman

I love to support. I love to support people that are coming into the communications industry or the creative industry. I ometimes parents don't believe this is a legitimate career, and you and I both know we've. We have benefited ourselves. We've seen other people rise up through the ranks, so it is a great career, but people need to connect and know that. I think your students also must really benefit from your real world. You're in it every day experience, because the thing that is happening right now is that the world of communications and the tools that we have access to and the mediums that our audiences are interacting with are just changing so rapidly. Even if you stopped with the knowledge you had at this time last year, you would be behind where you need to be relevant now.

Monique Farmer

Yeah, it's so true. I mean, yesterday I was in a meeting and we were talking about just using all the, all these different tools. Right, what do you use? Chad, gpt? I think Bard has changed his name already Watson, and there was this. There's, I guess, some kind of plug in that you can put in the chat where you can just speak and dictate to it. I'm like, huh what?

Lyn Wineman

Where is that? Yes, I know Right.

Monique Farmer

He's supposed to be sending it something called Whisper. I'm sure some of your listeners will know, but I fell a little behind because he wasn't a comms person. I'm like what are you talking about. I need that.

Lyn Wineman

Alright, if somebody knows about Whisper, reach out to us, but you know, Monique, I'm going to go Google that as soon as we're done. Actually, staying on top of trends leads into the next question. I want to ask you because, as I was getting ready for our conversation today, I was on your website, which is a fantastic website, and I found this blog highlighting the 2024 public relations trends to watch. I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you to share a few of the top trends.

Monique Farmer

For sure, and I just spoke about this too recently, I had the privilege of being on a panel for HyVee. They were doing a diversity summit for business owners across the city, I believe across the state, and so we did have this question. But shoutout to Jona Ohm on our team, who wrote the piece that I believe you're referencing. But one of the first ones that we talked about on that panel a couple weeks back was authenticity, right, like authentic voice building genuine relationships. I think that can get lost with the tools that we have at our fingertips nowadays, and you know as well as I do, Lyn, anyone who has played with or use ChatGPT in their work. I think ChatGPT is a great brainstorming partner, right Like it can save tons of time.

There are so many ways to generate prompts where it's kind of like another person helping to brainstorm with you. I do not believe ChatGPT is the tool that you want to use if you're a writer who's trying to come across in an authentic way. So much of what it exports is very generic and vanilla, and after a while, I think we run the risk of many brands coming across in such a generic fashion that they're not, they don't feel like they're speaking to the audience in the way that we, as professionals, are trained to do so that those messages resonate. And so I think authenticity is a big one that we all have to be very cognizant of and keep top of mind, and it starts with aligning your actions and your communication with those core values, and you want to create that solid foundation for meaningful connections, and so that would be the first one. I'm big on, and you and I had this discussion before we started recording and going live. But how do we use the information that we have to inform our communication plans? How do we make sure that we drill down enough to understand that client, to understand that topic or issue, to understand that audience, so that we are using the right channels to connect with them. We are where they are on a day to day basis yes, we're already navigating day to day and that we can cut above the clutter. So using our data to inform our planning and then also using what we learn as part of that research on the measurement side to understand whether what we are saying we're after, what we've agreed with the client on, that we're after we can achieve.

The third one is obvious. We've talked about it a little bit, but just artificial intelligence, persistent presence in everything. Like if you weren't already starting to figure out how these tools worked when they really hit the world by storm, we're about like November 2022, I think, because when I first started playing, you're behind. And not only that, but everything is being dotted with artificial intelligence. Every day there's something new that it can do. It gets smarter every time. All of us are using it. Just our day to day platforms that we're using, those are being injected with artificial intelligence. I noticed, I think about a while ago, that Zoom now has some capability to boil down our meetings from a transcript standpoint, not just raw transcript, but like here's the wheeldown of what you need.

Lyn Wineman

Yes, absolutely.

Monique Farmer

Do you know how much time I spend doing that, like after meetings? It saves us so much time. But then what does that mean to now that we have some additional time, are we going to be working more longer? Are we going to take advantage of the fact that we don't have to spend four hours on something that now takes 20 minutes? I'm not sure. I think we're all asking some of those questions. But definitely the industry has changed, is changing, but our industries are ways in this constant evolutionary dynamic deal.

like to tell the students the story of press releases when I used to put them out in 01 02, when I did that, I stood at the fax machine, number one by one to the outlet. The first time we did layout for like internal newsletters, exacto knife and could you imagine, like sticky glue, it just leaps and bounds since then. So it has changed, it is changing, it will continue to change. I'm excited to see what the next decade brings. I think we, as an industry, realize we've got to be on our P's and Q's in terms of understanding and being grounded in our code of ethics, because even though the PR Council and PRSA put out guidelines for how we're all to operate in this new world of AI, our ethics and principles remain the same. We're getting instruction about me how to operate with these new tools, but there will be even newer, better, different tools a decade from now, and that means we still need to abide by our code of ethics. We still have to be weary of the ways we're operating as PR and communication professionals so that we're not, we don't run the risk of violating any of those ethical principles or even advertently or inadvertently creating information that results in disinformation, misinformation. We just have to remember that we have a code of ethics and abide by it. Or, if we just get, your gut and conscious will usually tell you if you're off track, you just need to listen.

Lyn Wineman

Monique, I love so much about what you just said because I think that sometimes these AI tools, you don't really know where they're pulling the data from. If it's accurate and if you're not in there checking it, you could really get yourself and your client or your organization in some trouble. I appreciate that you brought up the fax machine and the exacto knife because when I started as a runner at an advertising agency, they used to send me to the bus station and if we were running late we would put the layout for the ad on a bus and it would get delivered to a different town and the newspaper would pick it up. And that's how they ran the ad.

Monique Farmer

That's crazy to think about, but you got it done somehow.

Lyn Wineman

Yep, the other one last thing I want to say about AI, and I want to ask you one more question on AI as well. But because AI essentially assimilates information that it has gleaned from other places, AI is not possible of coming up with new ideas. If you want a new, original, authentic idea, you can use AI to help

support you, but AI cannot come up with a new idea, and I think that's an important thing to remember. I'm really curious how are you using AI in your work day? Do you have any recommendations for tools that you like or ways that you're using it?

Monique Farmer

Yeah, I love it as a brain partner, just like feeding it something and asking it questions. I haven't done this yet, even on quality assurance. I'm thinking about training AI so that, in putting together SOPs and processes for the team, I have a formulaic structure for example, how we write news releases, I teach it to my undergrad students and so it frustrates me when I get a news release from somebody on my team that's in first-person or it's not in that formulaic structure. I'm like what is this?

Lyn Wineman

I can't even look at it. I can't even look at this. You have to take it back, right?

Monique Farmer

Or I don't want to be the one, when I see it, I want to have a change or two, I don't want to rewrite your press release. I'm thinking about training AI on like here's the guy, grade, this, then it can be run through. You can make these little separate GPTs. Have you heard of this? I have.

I'm thinking about training one for quality assurance and have it, as long as it's not proprietary stuff, having the team run it through that before I get it. Then, that way I'm not changing stuff that should have already been checked in the checklist. We'll see. That's one thing, but yeah, it's a great brain partner. I've used it to find sources, though, too. What I mean by that is you mentioned, and I say this a lot. You can't trust it, but what I have found is if I'm talking about a topic, for instance, and I've gotten a little bit of maybe an idea written up, I can prompt AI to find credible sources and I'll give it some instructions like only government websites or only parameters that I know are sources that I can trust. I will tell it, give me the URL.

Lyn Wineman

Nice.

Monique Farmer

Don't have to run all around and figure out. I can check it and see who's funding this website. Is this a source that we can trust and use for what we're trying to do?

Lyn Wineman

That's a great idea, Monique, I have not used it that way. That is a great idea.

Monique Farmer

Yeah, sometimes it will tell me it can't and I'll say, give me the URL again, and then it will. It's weird, but that saves me time too, because otherwise I've got to go try and figure out where these sources came from and I don't know if I can trust them. I'm trying to think of there's other ways. Those are probably the main ones right now that are saving me time. I'm really excited about getting this plug-in that lets me just talk to it Instead of typing it every time. I can be in the kitchen or something. Then I'm talking to Siri.

Lyn Wineman

Yeah, I know you can never say that. Everybody's devices in the room are going to come on.

Monique Farmer

It feels like when I'm at the store and somebody says Mom and I'm like huh. Yeah, that's my name too, my name's Mom.

Lyn Wineman

I love it. I love it, Monique. Well, this is a good time. I'd love to switch gears and talk a bit about the book. People who listen to the podcast know that I have a goal to write a book, and I love to talk to authors. Yeah, tell us you have got a book. Chart your Path: a Nine-Step Method to Getting Unstuck. Can you tell us more about the book?

Monique Farmer

Yes, the book. First of all, I've always wanted to write a book. I'm like you right. It's like, okay, that's on my list. We're writers too. I think most of us were writers before we found PR in communication, because we mostly started in J-Schools. I didn't know what PR was until second semester of J-School or maybe even sophomore year, but to my point, I knew that it was something that I wanted to do. I had a couple friends, they're from Omaha, Jeff Shannon and Nicole Bianchi, both over at Bravium. Hopefully I'm pronouncing that right they both had written books. I had pulled Jeff aside to talk me through what this was and what was it like. He was encouraging me. He plugged me in with his self-publishing company that he used. I reached out to just do a consultation, my very first one. This guy's telling me what all you have to do is a cohort. So it's like a class. You do it like a class.

Lyn Wineman

Oh, that's nice because you have people to guide you. Sometimes just that blank page of going I'm going to write a book and the cursor's just flashing at you and you're like what am I going to?

Monique Farmer

It would not be done if I hadn't done it that way. It wouldn't. I think it would have been a three-year venture, but it's almost like if you had a personal trainer and a dietitian. I'm not going to do this stuff because nobody's watching, no one's paying attention, and I'm definitely not doing a workout that has me drenched in sweat unless somebody's standing there making me do it. So that was helpful. I'm one

of those people that I just need that. But the initial console, he was explaining all this to me, I literally said I don't have time for this. Because I'm like it's a lot. And he said you're never going to have time.

Just start, and so that kind of my gauntlet. But really how it all got birthed, Lyn, was last year, as I was transitioning out of the full-time employment, out of the classroom, into like you're going to do this, you're jumping all in doing this firm. That's so scary and I ended up needing some support for that. I knew I did. I ended up in a life coaching cohort first and I did that with about 12 other women and we were each other's squad and support group. We still are right. Let me have our little WhatsApp group and we talk and support each other.

But going through that experience it was a year long experience I just learned a lot about myself, my strengths, what my belief system is. There was homework that we got that helped us have other people kind of reflect some of that back to us so we could validate what is my purpose, what am I supposed to be doing with my life. All of that and as part of that coaching, the coach that I worked with I loved her, she is really good.

We had maybe like about five conversations and I didn't realize what she was doing during those conversations, but anyway, she ended up like digging out of me what she calls your unique problem solving formula.

Like in life, like when you run it difficult challenges in life, Monique Farmer, how do you usually get out of them? If you've had a relationship that you fell out with somebody or, you know, if you had to overcome difficulties that came out of your childhood like she was just kind of like pulling it out of me, almost like when we're doing like trying to put together a news release or an article, right, and so she ended up helping me identify this nine step process that she's like you repeat this process when you're in the middle of something sticky. This is what you do, and that's the book is about that, my nine step approach to problem solving. So it's me sharing that. Is it positioned as the only way? No, it's a way. It's a tool in a toolbox for people who feel like I felt so many times and how I got on the other side of of, from stuck to unstuck.

Lyn Wineman

That's so amazing. Alright, I have to ask you because I do a lot of driving, so I'm a book listener. Are you going to do an audio version of the book?

Monique Farmer

I am. You can't see it but the, so I'm still in class, right. So if you want to do the audio book, you get to do it. So they mailed me from Amazon the professional mic with the little I don't know what this thing is called the whole soundproof part of it, and I start that class March 11th, so there's a whole class to teach me that's awesome how to use my voice correctly to record my audio book. So that's next.

Lyn Wineman

I love to listen to authors read their own books because I think the way that authors cover the content and the emotion they put into it is really interesting. So I'm really excited about reading it. I'm curious

can you give us any of the key, without giving away the book, give us any of the key messages or knowledges that you share?

Monique Farmer

You know the book has exercises, so the book is exercises. So I'm I literally kind of like, I'm not kidding, I woke up one morning and I thought this is my with my college professor had on, I can't write a book that's just theoretical. It has to have the practical. I'm big on that. If I teach a student a theory, I like for them to understand how does that actually work in the real world? Otherwise you can't figure out the connection. It's just theoretical, it's pie in the sky. And so I was like, oh my goodness, I'm writing this book and I don't have, I don't have a culmination, I don't have tactical exercises. And so that's when I decided part three needed to be exercises. So that's a big takeaway that it's not just theoretical, there is a culmination, and it is actually the chart your path map. So it is step by step and there's instructions that help you not only understand what this framework is, but how can you use it for your own situation that you're in.

Lyn Wineman

Sounds like it might be one to have a hard copy of and listen to it both. So, Monique, when the book comes out, how will we be able to find it and get ahold of it?

Monique Farmer

So it's going to be on Amazon, you'll be able to get it on your Kindle, you're going to get it in audible, Barnes and Noble, all the places. But if you just are itching to get your hands on it sooner than that or at least hold your spot you can go to AvantSolutions.org and click on the tab that says Chart your Path and place your order now. You don't have to wait and you will be one of the first to be able to get it. I am looking for some beta readers who like to write some book reviews. One of my friends is a magazine publisher, so she's actually going to have somebody on her team book review it. If you have listeners who are interested in that, they can learn more by getting in touch with me, and I know you're going to share how people can do that when we get to that.

Lyn Wineman

We will. Yeah, We'll make sure to have all of the links in the show notes. Go to kidglov.com and click on Monique's episode for Agency for Change and it'll all be right there. Monique, very exciting. Last thing I want to ask you about the book. Any insights on four people like me who would like to write a book, any suggestions you have, things that you've learned along the way.

Monique Farmer

Oh yeah, the first one is what I had to learn when I got my own swift kick in the butt. And that is don't wait, start now.

You're never going to have enough time. The other one that I would say is writers write, that seems intuitive enough but it means you're going to have to set aside time to do it. You have to just have blocks of time that you put on your calendar and you do what we call the sprints, writer sprints. I had

lots of those, especially if deadlines were coming up, and I have a very patient family because it's like listen, I'm on a deadline, I'm not going to see you all this weekend. I'm going to be in my office all day Saturday, all day Sunday, and when I did those sprints, that's when I got a lot done, a lot.

The other is just trusting the process. There's definitely times of frustration or there were times when the first part of how my cohort worked was called, you work with your developmental editor, and that is just get it. That's get it out, like just get it out, get it on paper. It doesn't have to be perfect. Get it out, it's the framework, it's the skeletal version, and that's frustrating for me because I can be a perfectionist.

Lyn Wineman

Oh, yeah, right, you want everything to be just right.

Monique Farmer

And so the nice thing about that is you get your word count because it's math, it's all math at first but you realize that getting to write a book, whether it's nonfiction or fiction, really is a matter of words and word count. You need to have about 40,000 words to have a good start for a good nonfiction book. And so we didn't have that. But then, as I was rereading it from the first, I mean the book is so different than what we wrote, like I gotta rewrite all of these chapters. But it's like that's the journey, right.

So yeah stand with the journey and stand with the process.

Lyn Wineman

I appreciate you sharing that. So, since writers write and communicators communicate, I'm going to ask you my favorite question. We've asked it on every episode of the podcast. I feel so lucky that I get to speak with knowledgeable, inspiring people like you, Monique. I'm wondering if you can give us a few original words of wisdom to inspire our listeners.

Monique Farmer

One of my favorite and I don't know if I say it externally enough, I say it in this house a lot to my children and it is external validation is artificial validation. And why I say that is because we live in this world of social media where, if you're comparing or you're looking at what people are posting on a day to day basis, most people are painting this picture that life is this glorious, perfect, all the time journey and it's just not true, right? And if you're trying to compare your life to other people's lives. Or if you're waiting for someone else to validate you before you feel good about who you are and what you have to offer to the world, that is a dangerous space to be in. If you don't already know or learn who you are and find your own value and then stand on that to go out into the world, you are at a lot of risk for always waiting to get that from outside of yourself when it really lives inside of you.

Lyn Wineman

Monique, that is beautiful. I'm just going to repeat it. External validation is artificial validation. That is so good, and you know what I love about that? It brings us full circle, because when we were talking about the 2024 public relations trends, your top trend was authenticity, and I think that ties so much back to

the quote you just gave us. It's amazing. Monique. I love every time I get a chance to talk to you, and today has been no exception to that. As we wrap up our time together, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Monique Farmer

I would have to go to passion. For me, my first love was writing and then I got introduced into this world of public relations and communication and I can't think of anything else that I would rather be doing. In terms of having the privilege to be able to help other communicators be better. We get to coach leaders on how to put their best foot forward and when they're getting on camera or speaking to the world, we get to help people frame their narratives in a way that helps people better understand what they're doing that's creating impact in communities, and I think that that is born out of just true passion, and the seed that, for me, got planted when I was a nine year old girl and I like found my love for writing. So I would hope that listeners can remember that if they can find their own passion, you're not going to work every day right. If you're doing something you love, you get to do it.

Lyn Wineman

That's amazing. I love that you said that. I am a very passionate person and feel very lucky to be in this field of communications. It's my favorite thing about the podcast to get to talk with people who are passionate about what they do and making a positive difference in the world. So, Monique, on that note, I just want to say I truly believe the world needs more people like you. I can't wait to read the book and I just love the work that you and your team are doing at Avant Solutions. Thanks for joining us today.

Monique Farmer

Thank you so much, Lyn. I look forward to hearing the podcast in its entirety and I appreciate you inviting me.

Announcer

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from. Visit KidGlov.com at KIDGLOV.com to get in touch, as always. If you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.