

January 2020

To each their own? Inclusivity in business communications

By Nancy Ellen Miller



If you're in the business of communications, you may, like me, feel greater anticipation for the Word of the Year than you do for the Academy's pick for Best Picture. After all, what better speaks of a culture's zeitgeist than the word on everyone's lips? In 2003, Oxford Dictionaries chose *metrosexual*—a term that reflected mainstream culture's shifting attitudes towards masculinity. By 2012, billions of people had purchased smartphones and were posting on Instagram. It only seemed natural that Oxford Dictionaries chose *selfie* as its Word of the Year. And last year, dictionary searches for *they* tripled, which led Merriam-Webster to pass its title to the humble pronoun.

A hot-button issue in language right now, the use of *they* has caused a fair bit of confusion, if not contention,

in our culture. *They* can refer to a single person whose gender identity is non-binary. But apart from the American Psychological Association's (APA) decision in October 2019 to formally recognize the singular *they*, most style guides haven't kept up to speed. In 2020, is it ever correct to say: "To each *their* own"?

In her 2015 book *Between You & Me*, *New Yorker* copy editor Mary Norris, better known as the "Comma Queen," argues that using *they* or *their* with a singular antecedent is "just wrong." It's a "number problem," she writes, not a political one. Revising a short story by Kathryn Schultz for example, Norris rephrases "everyone thinks they are on the side of the angels" to "people think they are on the side of angels." She also argues that there's no harm in sticking to

the conservative masculine pronoun to stand for all genders once in a while. "To each his own," should, for Norris, stay that way.

As a copyeditor, Norris focuses on style, not politics. She contends that language is in flux and usage often comes down to context. If you're writing about a transgender person walking into a bagel shop, you might with good reason write "they *is* here" rather than "they *are* here." After all, you don't want the reader to question whether the character is entering the shop alone. But does "they *is* here" sound too awkward?

Maybe awkwardness and confusion are part of the program. Overcoming our own implicit biases implies a knotty, but necessary, task. Biases shore up unconsciously, often in the words we use. I for one can't seem to shake the habit calling a group of people "you guys" rather than the gender-inclusive "you folk," "you people," or "y'all."

Choosing gender-specific terms is not the only challenge to developing inclusive communication strategies.

Using acronyms like "OCD" or "PTSD" to describe everyday behaviours undermines the real struggles of those afflicted

by obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress. Culturally specific terms like "give me a ballpark figure" confuse people who grew up without any cultural knowledge of baseball. Such phrases may not be in themselves intentionally discriminatory, but committing to inclusivity means staying mindful of your audience—whoever they are. At every touch point, people deserve respect, tolerance and dignity.

It never hurts to write, speak and listen with greater sensitivity, empathy and clarity. Whether it's in the human resources department or marketing and communications, the same principles apply. Namely, people—not their descriptors—come first. At the end of the day, even the matriarch of grammar concede. "As your Comma Queen," [Mary Norris says at the end of Episode 4 of Comma Queen](#), "I think you should call people what they want to be called."



Nancy Miller specializes in marketing and communication strategies for education technology, higher ed and corporate learning and is PIC's Co-Director of Communications. She can be reached at nancy@nancyellenmiller.com

Feb. 19: Getting business by getting found

Wednesday, February 19, 6:30 to 9 p.m.
Central YMCA – Community Room
20 Grosvenor St., Toronto

Prospective clients are looking online for the services you offer. Do you know how to position your business to be found online?

In *How to raise your online profile and grow your business using Google and LinkedIn*, Tricia Belmonte, owner of [LikeUs Communications](#), will discuss the popular free and paid tools Google has developed to increase the visibility of businesses seeking clients and customers online. Through real-life case studies and online demonstrations, you'll learn how to use Google's easy and accessible online business marketing tools.

A second speaker, [Kristine Leadbetter](#), will share how to use LinkedIn's free and paid options to increase your business profile and connect you more directly with prospective clients. She is a marketing, reputation and relationship development professional and TV host of "Lead Better with Kristine."

This PIC seminar offers insight into some of the most cost-effective online marketing strategies for independent communicators. Register early before this event sells out!

This seminar counts towards professional development credits to maintain the IABC Communications Management Professionals (CMP) or Strategic Communications Management Professionals (SCMP) certification. [Learn more about these certifications.](#)

Registration fees:

\$20 + HST: IABC member rate

\$30+ HST: IABC non-member rate

6:30 – 7:00 p.m. Registration and networking

7:00 – 8:00 p.m. Presentation

8:00 – 8:30 p.m. Q&A

Holiday socializing at the Duke of York

It was great to see new and familiar faces at the PIC social last month. Thanks to those who participated in our scavenger hunt and donned a Christmas sweater for the occasion.



See you on social media

Build and strengthen your connections with other PIC members, advance your communications business, discuss business issues and network with PIC on social media: on Twitter at [@pictoronto](#); LinkedIn, [IABC Toronto Professional Independent Communicators](#); Facebook, [Professional Independent Communicators \(PIC\), part of IABC/Toronto](#).

Recent posts include a reminder to market to people you already know, how to create "person on the street" videos, and a low-risk strategy to leap to full-time freelancing.

PIC PERSONALITY:

Meet Mary Ann Prychoda

By Sue Horner



MARY ANN PRYCHODA is President of Prychoda Communications. She helps leaders tap into the power of communication to create high-performing organizations where employees like to work. She identifies the clients' underlying communication needs and develops tailored plans to address them. Learn more on her [website](#) and [LinkedIn](#), or reach her [by email](#) or at 647-990-3137.

When did you launch your business and how did it come about?

I've had three incarnations as an indie. The first, in 1985, I was basically a freelance writer, mainly in speechwriting. That lasted about five years, before a contract with CIBC turned into an in-house position. That got me into strategic internal communication, which became my passion.

The second time, I left CIBC to focus on internal, change and leadership communication, and to be home more with my son, who was then three years old. I did this for about 13 years before I again went in-house with a client. I stayed 10 years because it was a period

of massive change for that organization and industry. My job changed significantly almost every year, which kept me interested.

Eventually I realized I didn't want to manage people and wanted to be closer to the work. So, I left in 2017 for my third time as an indie. Now my focus is all about internal and change communication. I'm enamoured with that work, and there's such a need.

What do you enjoy most about being an indie?

I like a lot of change, and new clients mean new opportunities and challenges. I like being able to focus on my passion of change communications, and on my core skill, writing. As a contractor, I have more time to do really good work. I value the time to think, reflect and research best practices. And I like being able to take stress off clients. I've been where they are, so I can usually decode their needs and offer solutions.

What don't you like about being an indie?

Because of the work I do, I have a high "need to know" that can be difficult to fully satisfy. You have to work closely with your clients to get the insights you need, and clients have limited time. So that can be challenging.

What advice would you give someone new to independent life?

- Start with some solid contacts – people who

respect your work and are likely to hire or refer you. If possible, have at least one contract in hand before going out on your own.

- Get a few years' experience with an agency or company before you start your business. You'll gain contacts and an appreciation of the practical aspects of communications work. It will make you better at what you do.
- You need self-confidence, plus drive and determination.
- Plan how you're going to develop and market your business. Things might not go exactly as you envisioned, but your plan will keep you focused on your goals.
- Even when you aren't busy, you need to put in the hours and do your business development. If you aren't comfortable pitching or talking to clients, sign up for Toastmasters. It's a "warm hug" kind of place with so much opportunity to learn.

How long have you been an IABC/PIC member and what value do you get from your membership?

I've been with IABC on and off for decades and with PIC from the beginning. I like the feeling of community. There's always someone you can ask questions of, and so many ways to engage with members. It's so supportive, which is particularly nice when you're an indie. The Hub is great for sharing ideas; you're always learning or being reminded of great ways to do things. And I love volunteering for things like judging OVATION awards. I'm giving back but also staying on top of what's going on.



PIC members offer a range of talent, from coaching and media relations to video production and writing. PIC Personality randomly profiles our members. Let [Sue Horner](#) or [Nancy Miller](#) know if you'd like to be profiled and they'll be in touch to set it up. Sue is a writer, principal of [Get It Write](#) and Co-Director of Communications for PIC.

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THE INDEPENDENT VIEW

A resolution to do less

By Nkiru Asika

New year. New decade.

But enough already with the resolutions.

I have a better idea.

I plan to avoid the usual slump from the highs of "This Is the Year When I Achieve Everything!" to the lows of "It's Like Every Other Year and I'm Still the Same Person!"

Instead of tormenting myself with endless lists of endless tasks, I'm listening to my younger but wiser sister, who says we've got this January thing all wrong.

January is not a month for frenetic activity.

Look around you. It's hibernation season. Of course, I don't advise curling up and dozing till spring as a viable business strategy. I wish! But neither will stressing out over long, perhaps unachievable, lists of tasks.

Consider taking a new approach. Less busy, more big picture. Less hustle, more ease.

Last January, I shared a productivity tip on LinkedIn from the online marketing coach Eben Pagan. He advises investing your time the way billionaire Warren Buffet invests his money – by considering the opportunity cost. Before Buffet makes an investment, he weighs the comparative costs of not investing elsewhere. Pagan suggests that you choose how you spend your time based on the opportunity cost of not spending that time somewhere else. For example, what are the opportunity costs of not hanging out with loved ones or getting enough sleep?

Focusing on the opportunity cost of any activity allows you to identify and prioritize your highest-value tasks, the ones that add the most value to your business, to your life. As an independent business owner, it's easy to convince myself that I need to do more.

More social media, more speaking, more blogging, more cold calls, more networking, more emails, more courses.

All those activities can add value. But I also find value in taking a breath, stepping away and freeing up mental space to birth new ideas.

Here's to a healthy, happy and productive 2020. I hope to see many of you at the eagerly anticipated *Getting Clients by Getting Found* seminar on February 19th.

As always, if you have any ideas for professional development topics, possible speakers (including yourself) or any questions, concerns or ideas about PIC, please don't hesitate to reach me at toronto-sig@iabc.toronto.

Onwards and upwards.

Nkiru Asika

Chair, PIC; VP, Special Interest Groups IABC/Toronto



What's your resolution?

By Nancy Miller

Have you made any? For business? For pleasure? Do your resolutions involve doing more or doing less?

We'd love to hear your New Year's resolutions on social media. Check us out on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#) and tell us the goals you're setting.

I've resolved to get scrappier. Yes, scrappier! (In a good way). Last November, I picked up kickboxing and realized the permission to be aggressive has taught me that a little of the same spirit could be applied to pitching my business!

Let's do this!

[Professional Independent Communicators](#) (PIC) is a special interest group of [IABC/Toronto](#). PIC's mission is to support independent IABC/Toronto communicators through professional development, networking and marketing. [IABC](#) connects communicators from around the world with the insights, resources and people they need to drive their careers and the profession forward.

THE BUZZ *The Buzz* informs members about upcoming events, shares professional development tips from past meetings and keeps us connected. Editor this issue: [Nancy Miller](#) | Graphic design: [Deana De Ciccio](#).

Want to recap a meeting or do other writing for *The Buzz*? Contact [Sue Horner](#) or [Nancy Miller](#).

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Contact any of us with questions, comments and ideas for speakers or topics:

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Membership: [Kathy Lim](#)

Programming: [Judy Irwin](#), [Sharon McMillan](#)

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