



**LIFE AFTER PR: Nathan’s Story-- How a Passion for an Industry turned into a top tier career track when all the right pieces fell into place. It wasn’t just luck.**

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**WHAT WAS SPECIAL ABOUT NATHAN IN ADDITION TO HIS SKILL AND PROFESSIONALISM AS A LEADER OF THE CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION? WHAT WERE THE REASONS FOR HIS EARLY SUCCESS DESPITE A LACK OF FOCUS?**

To lead and inspire takes a genuine passion for the organization and what it produces. Nathan had that passion for the transportation industry so despite lacking career goals, he took any job he could in the industry. That put him where he could be “discovered.” He was also fascinated by the media. His energy, focus and curiosity were impressive and obvious.

Here is the story of a VP who has held the titles of Chief Marketing Officer as well as Chief Communications Officer for two different companies in the same industry. Even before college he was focused on the transportation industry and the media. He never expected that his two passions would take him to where he is today.

Nathan was intensely curious about the world. He wanted to travel and even thought he would be a foreign correspondent. For some reason he was fascinated by the media and how news was communicated. At the same time, he had a hobby, a passionate interest in the transportation industry. He loved the potential of trains, planes, boats and cars to free up adventurers to explore the world. He never thought that he would be able to convert his hobby to a career, but that happened.

Here are reasons for his success. He loved where he worked because he loved the products his company produced. He was genuinely curious about the industry, how the products were engineered, what performance they could deliver, and what other competitors were doing. He was invested in the company as much as his CEO and could hold his own with the engineers who designed the products. There is no way to “fake” that level of commitment. His focus was real and that inspired trust in his judgement to make the right decisions for company to grow.

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**WHAT ACCOUNTED FOR NATHAN’S EARLY CAREER SUCCESS THAT PREPARED HIM FOR WHERE HE IS TODAY? IF HE DIDN’T HAVE A PLAN, HOW DID HE LAND IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME?**

Nathan would probably say he did not plan his career, yet he did follow the right path for a bright future. Nathan put himself in the right place to be noticed for his growing knowledge and willingness to work as much as was needed. He had the right attitude and was curious without being overbearing. That made conversations about what he wanted to do next, natural discussions to have with superiors.

Clearly, he was ambitious and talented. Here is his career progression from college to a corporate job as Press Officer for a major US company.

College educated in England, he admits that he was a rather mediocre student. He had no master plan where selecting the right major would lead to a path he wanted to follow. He was not motivated to achieve a goal for a purpose. He said his first job was as a salesman for a company in the industry he loved. He had no idea about where that might take him. He was drifting. However, he did make contact with a marketing rep from a major firm that led him to a professional job.

He applied for and was hired to work for a consulting firm that had a comms contract with an industry-leading transportation company. His role was low-level research for the client's internal communications activities. These activities involved broadcast-quality TV news, which were years ahead of what other companies were producing. It was a wonderful training ground for him, and he succeeded in the role. (I think he really loved what he was doing and was extremely productive.)

At the time there was a well-established career path to leave an agency at a relatively junior level for a professional comms role one step up in a corporate environment. He did just that. Within 2 years, he became a press officer for a major company based in the US. He said that he had a "gift of gab" that fit PR practices.

He commented that the opportunity he had does not exist any longer; that those entry level corporate roles are gone. In those days he said they were faxing press releases or using couriers to deliver hard copies of the documents. He said he loved the job and was highly motivated to work with the media and the people he admired.

He added that his start in internal communications was linked to producing broadcast quality work, that he never understood why PR/Marketing/Internal Communications were separate functions. He instinctively felt they should be combined. He said that his belief in the value of the marketing communications role was instilled in him at that time. He felt there were missed opportunities because these roles were not linked. He remains a tireless advocate for the importance of internal communications as a component of an integrated communications initiative.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-nathan-part-2-what-accounted-for-nathans-early-career-success-that-prepared-him-for-where-he-is-today-if-he-didnt-have-a/>

### **IT IS NOT EASY TO BE PROMOTED TO A VP OF COMMUNICATIONS. HOW WAS NATHAN ABLE TO BREAK THROUGH MID-LEVEL RANKS TO LEADERSHIP OF THE FUNCTION?**

Nathan was gifted. He had the instincts and judgment to respond to situations that demanded quick decisions. His actions and recommendations were, in retrospect, the most effective way to defuse crises and threats to his employer and its leadership.

Thrust into handling crises early in his career was a shortcut to rising up the ranks. That pace was important. It leaves time to make major career shifts before age becomes an issue.

Once he proved himself, his assignments became so demanding that he made his work his life focus. There was no "balance".

Once Nathan transitioned to a corporate role in media relations, his career track accelerated. He was promoted quickly, by his mid 20ties, to the Corporate Affairs department in the UK (his home). He was asked to handle a crisis situation, which he defused successfully. He was then promoted to a job back in the US. By this time, he was responsible for developing strategic programs and major product launches. For 17 years he was in the US as an expatriate working for different international companies all in the same industry rising to a VP Communications in record time.

Nathan said he never planned his career. One job led to another as he succeeded in each role. He said he was in a mid-level comms job when he was offered a global communications role and thought that sounded like good experience, so he accepted. He said he had a strong work ethic and was going nonstop, traveling relentlessly. In 2003 he was approached directly by an international company with offices in Asia and the West Coast. After a year in the US he was asked to move to Asia as the head of communications.

It was a huge responsibility and he said it was an enormous test, especially considering the language issues, with a direct report to the CEO. He said he was overwhelmed initially and was working night and day—all by instinct. After 6-months he asked for feedback and was told to keep doing what he had been doing. He became the youngest corporate officer in the company's history at 35. He was a decade ahead of his peers and that made it possible to explore his options through the prime time he was an attractive candidate.

He said the job accelerated his understanding of the world. He was at Davos, meeting Prime Ministers and heads of state. It was an incredible experience. He was less involved in employee communications and more heavily involved in leadership communications. He had oversight of all press releases worldwide and said, "the buck stopped with me." He added, "I provided leadership and I owned success or failure. I didn't blame others—that was my responsibility."

Nathan said, "A job with this level of responsibility demands a high price; you make choices and trade-offs. You are married to the job. I am 'all in'. I had to have people around to help; you can't have it all {there is no balance.}. I'm GenX, the best generation to do what has to be done. Millennials, GenY are about work/life balance. If you have a global senior level job you are fully committed."

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### **WHAT CAREER DECISION DID NATHAN MAKE THAT TOOK HIM INTO A NEW INDUSTRY AND DID HE STAY IN THIS NEW INDUSTRY? DID HE QUALIFY FOR A SENIOR VP ROLE?**

There is only one way to determine if Nathan could succeed in a new industry and enjoy learning about it compared to the industry he had always loved. He would have to take a major leap in a new direction knowing the risk. That opportunity came up and he accepted an offer. The answer became clear. He also felt ready to assume a strategic, leadership role.

*See analysis below about the issues involved in his decision-making process.*

There was only one opportunity outside of the transportation industry that was interesting enough to lure him away to see how he liked it, and that was short-lived. While the company was a successful technology market leader, he stayed less than a year. He realized he had made a mistake and accepted a challenging opportunity returning to a transportation company, the industry he loved. He would never veer off course again.

He realized that the scope of the job he wanted was at the Senior VP level and he would have to be open to relocation anywhere the job was based. He became a global leader in viewpoint and experience. In every role he took, his ability to offer strategic counsel to senior executives, his operational skill to execute programs and his ability to manage crisis situations, led to reporting to the CEO.

Over the course of his corporate communications career, he commented that, "The rest of the world caught up with the tools used for employee communication—videos, texts, etc. We are now somewhat at a crossroads. Employees get so much information but what has been lost is the art of personal communication. Employees want to hear from their bosses and those managers need to step up their communications. Managers must learn how to communicate effectively and build trust. Surveys tell us people trust their friends most like themselves." This commitment to employee communications is a viewpoint he has held since he began his career.

### **Analysis, Judith Cushman**

The issue of being a "one industry" communications leader has both pros and cons. I have seen executives who love sports or consumer travel or the telecom industry, progress until they are qualified for the most senior positions in their industry. That depth of knowledge is invaluable but limiting. When professionals are ready for that role, if the industry is in a slump, or if those jobs are not in "play" there is no way to move up to a VP communications post. It ultimately is risky to have only one path to a VP role.

In Nathan's case, he has exceptionally strong credentials that put him at the top of any list and he has the flexibility to relocate without restriction for an appealing offer. He has been able to advance his career without any struggle about timing or lack of opportunity. That is very rare.

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### **HOW DID NATHAN'S CAREER TRANSITION FROM A HEAD OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS TO A BROADER MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING ROLE? WHAT TALENTS ARE REQUIRED TO MAKE THAT TRANSITION?**

It seemed so natural for Nathan to succeed but what made him exceptional? He had an impressive capacity for embracing and managing change.

Nathan described what he found fascinating about the transportation industry. He said the industry is in flux with new technologies, new branding opportunities and regulatory issues. He knows that to be relevant he must be constantly learning about the product category, societal values, mobility, safety issues and more. He also sees that the industry itself is in transition as the consumer selects when and what means of transportation to use.

That viewpoint tells us that he is flexible and responsive to developing strategies appropriate for a complex business environment. He enjoys the process of reinvention. He is able to incorporate his insights into competitive messaging campaigns across the organization.

His career in Corporate Communications broadened to a Global Marketing Communications role about 10-years ago. He was successful in implementing his early vision, uniting both the internal and external aspects of corporate and marketing communications under one leader. While a theoretical case can be made for the value of merging the functions, it takes an executive with the expertise and management ability to assume such a broad role and bring about the synergy that Nathan knew was possible.

With the right leader in place, that transition occurs seamlessly, and no one questions the decision. That is what Nathan accomplished. The truth is, if a leader cannot implement an integrated plan, the leadership will abandon the experiment and revert to a model they understand. There is no second chance to get it right. It takes an exceptional, smart leader, with excellent instincts to succeed. That is in addition to the ability to lead and manage a team.

His career track showed a natural progression as he took on broader roles with 3 global companies. At that point he was qualified to assume a worldwide senior communications leadership role. He didn't take that step.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-nathan-part-5-how-did-nathans-career-transition-from-a-head-of-corporate-communications-to-a-broader-management-and-marketing-role-what/>

## **WHAT WAS NATHAN'S NON-TRADITIONAL CAREER DECISION AFTER HE HAD WORKED SO HARD TO REACH THE TOP?**

Why wouldn't he want one of the most senior and lucrative communications jobs in the industry? What else was Nathan qualified to do? Instead of being lured to a Fortune 500 company which was an offer he could have accepted as CCO, about 6-years ago he accepted a promotion into a management role. He became Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer with a highly respected luxury brand, at a company he knew well, in the industry he loved.

This was a major career shift. He saw the potential to have a significant impact on the company, if he succeeded. It gave him an opportunity to explore new ways he could develop as a leader/manager. Since the learning curve was short, and it was small scale, his impact could be felt quickly. He could see if his ideas would be effective and productive—or not. He did not know if he could be successful in a sales capacity in related categories from his core strength in transportation. Nor, did he know how he would feel about shifting away from transportation as the company extended the brand into new markets.

Tackling this challenge was rare opportunity to stretch in new directions. He assessed the risk and decided it was worth making a non-traditional career decision but one which could open new options for him.

It was a company with a tightly knit leadership group that took great pride in its product and reputation. The challenge was to refresh the brand and find new ways to create excitement about the company. It would also mean the company would be entering new product categories, away from transportation.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-nathan-part-6-what-was-nathans-non-traditional-career-decision-after-he-had-worked-so-hard-to-reach-the-top/>



## **WHAT WERE THE FACTORS THAT LED NATHAN TO MOVE FROM HIS POSITION AS VP AND CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER TO ASSUME THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS GLOBAL VP AT A LEADING FORTUNE 500 TRANSPORTATION COMPANY?**

The focus and culture at the company he left were an excellent fit for Nathan's values and how he felt a corporation should be run. After several successful years, Nathan began to think about his future. He realized he had a choice to make. He was in the enviable position of having two viable options.

He had demonstrated his ability as a manager and corporate leader. He had succeeded in revitalizing and extending the luxury brand for his company. That was in addition to his competence as a Chief Communications Officer.

While he was not actively looking for a new challenge, he was open to listening. Always intrigued by a major problem to fix, he understood that his current job was no longer as rewarding as it once was. His instincts were telling him it was time to evaluate his options.

Looking at his career track, the only remaining traditional challenge left was to assume the top communications job at one of the largest Fortune 500 global transportation companies. He had considered that option once before and decided it was not the right time to choose that path. At the time did not know if he would find a general management role more rewarding than a CCO role. Now he had his answer.

On the one hand, he knew he could be successful in a GM role. At this point in his career he could pursue a role as General Manager and follow that direction until he chose to retire. He was approaching 30+ years in the business and if he were to decide that was what he wanted, his timing was perfect to stay with his current organization or find a company that would promise that career track.

However, he understood instinctively that he was more drawn to a leadership post in communications than a General Manager's job. Although he was not actively seeking a new role, he was more inclined to listen when approached about comms roles. With his reputation, Nathan was contacted regularly about these opportunities.

The compensation packages and the written job descriptions for the top comms jobs are tempting since they are the most important in the industry. However, cultural fit is key to success and there is always the risk that the new job will not be a long-term solution. For Nathan, who had always trusted his instinct, cultural fit was absolutely a key factor in any career decision and one of the most difficult characteristics to evaluate. Here is where there are no good answers since attempting to find them in advance can lead to embarrassing situations. There is no way to avoid risk and decision-making is a balancing act.

Nathan was thinking about his next 5-years. I believe he could not see himself in his current role over that length of time. There is no doubt he still felt loyal to the organization, but several market factors were slowing down his options to extend the brand into new categories. Meanwhile, he had accomplished a major reinvigoration of the company's core products and that was flourishing. Nathan's appetite for new challenges was unabated and he is incapable of resting on his laurels.

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## **HOW DO I ANALYZE NATHAN'S DECISION TO TAKE ON ONE OF THE TOP 5 JOBS IN THE INDUSTRY AS CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER? WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

**Commentary:** There are critical moments for making career decisions that will affect all future options. One of those points is roughly mid-30ties to early 40ties when a jump to a VP Comms role is ideal. In this example, it is about assuming the CCO role at the age of late 40ties to early 50ties. That is when an executive can make the best move for the remainder of his professional career.

This is the time for thoughtful reflection about what the last major move (hopefully) should be. If an executive has been gaining valuable experience (and not doing the same job year after year), s/he should be ready for a leadership position. Once a candidate approaches retirement age, companies will hesitate to hire him/her, particularly if there are long-term challenges ahead. To delay much past early 50ties is to make it extremely challenging to find in-house work.

While considering the opportunity to consider an industry leading corporate communications role, Nathan evaluated the future with his current company. He had already been accepted into the inner circle by the company's leadership team and was highly respected. He knew that he had their confidence to expand his role and he had already assumed bottom-line responsibilities as Chief Marketing Officer. He more recently had been given full responsibility for a major initiative to expand the brand into new business categories. He essentially was entrusted with the future growth of the organization.

As he weighed the two options, he understood that the Chief Communications Officer would be the most senior role he could expect in a Fortune 500 company. He also understood that it would take about 5+ years to accomplish what he saw as the challenges that needed to be addressed. After that, he would have the option to decide what he wanted to do either relating to a career or a completely different direction. He would be financially independent.

The risk at this point for Nathan is that he is 50 and if a job is not a match at this level, it usually takes 2-years to discover the problem and arrange for an acceptable disengagement. It then takes months of looking. He could easily be close to 55 and his window to find another corporate job would be severely limited.

As Nathan assumes a new role in a changing corporate environment, there is potentially an opportunity to implement structural and staff changes to align with his management values. Nathan has always been passionate about the products he represents and committed to a set of values about strategic communications. He has an instinct for leadership.

It is essential that he be, not only allowed, but encouraged to do work that aligns with his vision. Some communications professionals are committed to doing a professional job and say they can do that for any company or product. That is not possible for Nathan. He is well aware of how important it is that he: 1. fully supports the company he represents, 2. is excited about its products and 3. is encouraged to innovate, to do his best work.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-nathan-part-8-how-do-i-analyze-nathans-decision-to-take-on-one-of-the-top-5-jobs-in-the-industry-as-chief-communications-officer-what-are/>



## **DID NATHAN FOLLOW A CAREER PATH? WHAT WERE HIS REASONS FOR MAKING MAJOR MOVES? HOW MUCH DID INSTINCT PLAY A PART IN HIS CAREER DECISIONS?**

Nathan did not have a career plan in mind. What he did was make choices about what was important to him at the time he was looking for work. It all made sense because he was clear about his values. His instinct, judgment, and acuity were first rate and he didn't second guess himself. He was straightforward, took responsibility for his actions, loyal and worked tirelessly. While the pattern is not precise, Nathan clearly enjoys tackling big challenges that typically take 5-years to accomplish. I would say he sees his future in 5-year segments.

He also took risks and made decisions at work, without the hesitation, that affected the most senior officers. He knew he could have made horrendous career-ending mistakes. The fact he was willing to do that and then stand by those decisions, earned him respect from the leaders he served time after time. Also, early in his career, he understood the synergy derived from integrating internal and external messaging and marketing communications. That has remained a core value throughout his career.

Nathan did not plan to become one of the most senior communications executives in transportation. He achieved success because he wanted to do what was most challenging and he enjoyed the work. He had the talent and potential to succeed. He did not see the move to Chief Marketing Officer as a major change in direction. Instead, it was a natural evolution to taking on bigger challenges for a company that needed his expertise. To an outsider, however, he achieved a major success and transition into a management role. What he has accomplished may seem natural to Nathan, however it is not anything to take for granted.

Now as he starts a new corporate chapter, with an industry leading company, his experience and viewpoint about integrating messaging and seeing problems holistically will be a tremendous asset. Each step in his career has added to his capability to succeed at the scale and scope required for this Chief Communications Officer role.

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