

“Our new communicator should like all four words of our name”

From Asterix to tweets, via corporate alignment and radio extension

Paul Castle runs our Communications. After eight years on his own, he is now recruiting a team member*. We asked Paul about the role, about other changes in the Foundation’s communications, and why he believes corporate foundations work best when thematically aligned with their supporting companies. Some other topics came up as well...

***Syngenta Foundation (SFSA):** What sort of person are you looking for to boost communications?*

Paul Castle: I personally have two main aspects in mind: The best candidates will complement my strengths and weaknesses, and feel good about joining us.

What does that mean in more detail?

SFSA has a lot of scope for improving its digital communications, notably in the area of Social Media. So we’re looking for somebody strong on that side. The language skills should complement mine as well. My wobbly French, for example, reminds people of “*Astérix chez les Bretons*”. But fluent French is important both for a Swiss-based organization and one working a lot in West Africa. There are other language options as well. What I definitely don’t want, however, is somebody who can only write and discuss in one. It would also be good to find someone with a different academic and professional background to mine.

That’s half the answer. What would make a candidate “feel good about joining” SFSA?

There’s a big clue in our full name. We are the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture. All those words are important. We are a corporate foundation, and proud of it. Our new communicator has to be happy working in the non-profit sector, but also close to industry. She or he additionally needs to be passionate about development work, and ideally know a fair amount about agriculture.

What about the word “Sustainable”?

That’s crucial as well. To us, sustainable agriculture has three pillars. There are the environmental and social aspects which everybody values, and rightly so. But some development organizations tend to neglect the third pillar, that of financial sustainability. Without business success for the smallholders and other commercial partners in our initiatives, the progress achieved simply won’t last. Our new communicator needs to identify with that thought, and believe strongly in close cooperation between the private and public sectors.

*Your former Director and you recently published a paper on corporate foundations**. You argue that such foundations work best when thematically aligned with their companies. Not all your peers elsewhere agree...*

That’s correct – everybody is entitled to their own opinion! There are foundations doing great work that has nothing to do with their companies’ activities. But that seems to us like a lot of missed opportunities.

Could you give an example?

There are several good reasons for close subject alignment. We see the largest opportunity in transfer of expertise. There must be a clear distinction between the foundation's non-profit, public-purpose work, and the corporate's activities for profit. But my analogy would be companies' usual business practices. Any corporation pauses before entering a completely new sector. A Chilean tractor manufacturer is unlikely to set up a Norwegian wristwatch business. This caution is wise. So why do some companies throw it to the winds when creating foundations? From 35 years' experience we know that being able to ask company experts for relevant free advice is invaluable. And numerous corporate foundations agree!

You mention that the new SFSA communicator should have strong "digital" skills. What will he or she find as a starting point in this area, and where will you be aiming to go?

The central product remains our website. We completely redesigned this a year ago and migrated it to a new software platform. It has continued to evolve, thanks both to some very active colleagues in our project streams, and to external partners. But there is a lot, lot more we could do here! Another focus are the "Social Media". We only began tweeting on our own (@syngentafdn) this July*** – again mainly thanks to a motivated team member who got this going alongside her day-job. We're still learning, and have plenty of scope for enhancement. Then there's the likes of LinkedIn to consider, and Instagram, or whatever services we decide make most sense in support of our international activities.

But why all the extra bother? As a corporate foundation, you don't have to ask the general public for donations.

That's true. But firstly, we have both a duty and a right to communicate what we're doing, where and why. Our website readership alone is very heterogeneous. Other audiences prefer other channels, both to hear from us, and to get in touch. It's important to match our tools to the talkers, tasks and topics.

Secondly, we communicate in support of our work. And while you're right that our core funding flows differently to that of a charity, SFSA initiatives do draw in external funds for the work itself. The Foundation recently advertised for another new post, a Programme Development Manager. That role includes project fundraising, to which we communicators will contribute as appropriate.

It sounds as if you'll be learning quite a lot from your new team member! What might be areas in which he or she doesn't need to be so strong yet, but can develop new skills at SFSA?

That's a very important point. Our Foundation offers a lot of room for personal growth. In the communications area, for example, we're already quite strong on presentation skills. My fellow speakers from the project streams and I will be happy to work with a colleague who wants to progress here. And being a small organization, SFSA also offers opportunities for challenges outside one's immediate focus area.

What are some examples in your case?

The short answer is "personnel and projects". Our Foundation is a recognized organization for Swiss nationals doing volunteer Social Service in lieu of the military draft. We've had the good fortune to attract a series of extremely able, committed and pleasant young men to join us for three to six months. Running that program has been my pleasure and honor from the start. I've also been able to help establish a Farmer Support Services# initiative in Kenya. We work with local radio stations there to build up agricultural advice programming in minority languages. Phase 2 with further stations is now just starting. That work has some links with "communications", and with my hobby of sports

commentary, but requires completely different skills to my usual tasks of editing, presenting or tweeting. I'm still learning!

Paul Castle worked for a decade each in the healthcare and agribusiness industries, and for several years as a freelance journalist and translator. He joined SFSA in 2009. Three decades after graduating in the UK, he completed a Certificate in African Studies at Basel University. His concluding specialization was on radio extension for smallholders in minority languages. Paul is a Trustee of the Basel Children's Cancer Foundation and an international rowing commentator; the 2016 Olympics were his fifth.

*For details, see <https://www.syngentafoundation.org/current-opportunities>

**https://www.syngentafoundation.org/sites/g/files/zhg576/f/agriphilanthropy_corporate_foundations_sfsa_2017.pdf

***<https://twitter.com/syngentafdn>

<https://www.syngentafoundation.org/farmer-support-services> (Kenya)