



Shelley Grell is director of Christchurch-based PR and marketing company Communicate IT Ltd. She fields 10 questions in 10 minutes and her time starts... now:

Q1: How did the earthquakes in Christchurch change the way you operated your business?

SG: It was the February 2011 quake that proved the final straw for Communicate IT. Shannon, Janine (our accounts lady) and I were working in the office when the quakes twisted and buckled our converted 1910 villa; furniture and computers toppled around us, and the bricked chimney between the adjacent rooms spewed bricks and mortar over our files and archives. The power, phones, Internet, water and sewerage were out, and being in the munted side of town, the roads and bridges were wrecked. My son's nearby preschool was also severely damaged.

Working from the Avonside office was impossible, so we made the decision to work from our homes and take things one day at a time – like so many other people in Christchurch in those early days.

Q2: What were your toughest challenges post-quake?

SG: Trying to keep the business running while looking after our son and his anxious 80-year-old grandparents whose house and land were also damaged. Luckily we had our house in North Canterbury to



they only had a few childcare hours available. So I worked nights and weekends to keep up.

Q3: Looking at your business today – what have been the positives?

SG: The biggest positive is that we survived, and thanks to our clients, managed to keep the business going. As Shannon's home was largely undamaged, she took over the bulk of the work while my husband and I dealt with emergency repairs, clearing debris, shifting furniture and setting up the remote office. As the weeks

Q4: What role has technology played in the rebuilding of your business?

SG: After the quake we tried accessing the server remotely but the connection kept dropping out. In the end we abandoned the server and started using Dropbox to store and share files online. It's working really well, and the flexibility of accessing and sharing data anytime, anywhere is proving very handy. We are also making great use of Skype – to talk to each other and to our clients. I use mobile broadband when out of the office, and often take advantage of the free phone, Internet and office facility generously provided at the Westpac Business and Community Hub set up for quake-displaced businesses.

Q5: What amazing business stories have come out of the quakes' aftermath – any involving your clients?

SG: There are lots of amazing stories. Some clients have had to relocate their office two or three times and cope with not being able

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escape to. But the nearest pre-school was 30 minutes away, and in the initial few weeks, with so many other earthquake refugee families,

went by more childcare hours became available, allowing me to refocus on the business.

to have access to their systems for months, if at all. Others, whose buildings were undamaged, are sharing their premises with organisations that have lost theirs. To add to the disruption some clients have had to replace staff who left Christchurch. Yet despite it all most have managed to keep the business going.

Q6: So how is business today? Are you back to where you want to be?

SG: Business is doing really well, and apart from the fact that our Christchurch office is still awaiting its fate, being on TC3 land, I think we've reached the stage where most of the drama is behind us. The virtual set-up suits us really well. Shannon and I catch up every day on Skype and life outside of work has found a new normal. I think we've done well to get to this point. Not only did we make the best of a horrendous situation, we inadvertently opened up the Auckland office of Communicate IT, and this is already proving a real advantage for us and our clients. We're still working from our home offices and have access to some of the best contractors and partner PR agencies, giving us the flexibility to add additional resource when needed. We find there are a lot of benefits and flexibilities when working virtually, and really our clients have not noticed any difference to our service.

Q7: How tough is the local PR and marketing industry? What does it take to succeed?

SG: While the last couple of years have been challenging, there are still many opportunities. The downturn in the economy and earthquakes did see many businesses putting their PR and marketing on hold,

but now they're realising that their content is old and in desperate need of updating. There has always been strong competition in the industry, not just from other agencies but also from shops that knock out press releases 'a dime a dozen' and copywriters that spurt web and marketing content with more focus on SEO than what the customer's customer actually wants to read. Success is not just about having good communication skills, it's about getting to know the business, its customers and its value proposition; knowing what impact your efforts will have on the company's profile and reputation; and working with the client to deliver and implement a communications strategy that meets their business objectives and generates the desired results.

With New Zealand being so strongly export-focused we also pride ourselves on our international experience – both of us have worked for tech companies in the UK and Shannon is originally from Canada. That experience counts when you have limited marketing budgets and want to execute the right strategy the first time.

Q8: Have there been any amusing moments come out of the whole experience?

SG: When a teary-eyed Shannon told me her family was moving to Auckland because her husband's employer was relocating its head office, I asked if she wanted to leave Communicate IT. If she didn't then I didn't see the problem. By then we'd been working remotely for almost nine months – what difference would an extra 1000 kilometres make? She was delighted, and so was I. In our heart of hearts we both really wanted to make it work. Before the

quakes I might have faltered, but the disruption forced us into uncharted waters. Now when we meet with our Canterbury clients in person, Shannon joins us via Skype. It's just brilliant that everything has come together. Plus, we've now got 'feet in the street' in Auckland – which helps in both meeting new North Island-based clients as well as helping to service existing Canterbury businesses which are also relocating, expanding or directing marketing activities at the Auckland market.

Q9: Who has been your favourite Canterbury client? And why?

SG: We're lucky in that we have many favourite clients, including Canterbury Scientific, CreatelP, Lincoln University, Nightside Test Design, Emendo, and TimeFiler – not just because we do a variety of work for them but because they are such lovely people to work for. We also enjoy working for entrepreneurs Phil Holliday and Peter Montgomery who have earned tremendous respect for their business achievements. We're privileged in that we get to learn so much through our clients.

Q10: What are your goals for the business?

SG: Grow the business locally and explore new opportunities and more national and international work for existing and prospective clients. Also, implement more virtual systems to enable us to work smarter.

We are really passionate about the work we do and the role we play in our clients' success, and we want to continue to make a difference for them.