

NCPRSA 2025 Strategic Communications Conference Agenda

“Future Forward: The Fusion of Human Creativity and Digital Evolution”

Friday, Nov. 21 from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

McKimmon Conference and Training Center | Raleigh, NC

REGISTRATION/BREAKFAST (8-9 A.M.) | Location: Room 1C/D

Join us for a morning of networking and light bites and beverages as you connect with fellow strategic communications professionals from across the region.

At 8:50 a.m., Victoria Moore, NCPRSA president-elect and conference chair, will deliver a warm welcome and kick off the day’s events.

OPENING KEYNOTE (9-9:50 A.M.) | Location: Room 1C/D

“The Human Edge in the Age of Machines: Why AI Alone Won’t Save Your Company”

Speaker: Greg Boone, CEO, Walk West

Artificial intelligence is no longer on the horizon – it’s here, reshaping every industry in real time. From automation to prediction, AI is rewriting the rules of business faster than most organizations can update their strategy decks. Yet, amid the excitement, too many leaders are making a dangerous assumption: that technology alone will deliver transformation.

In *The Human Edge in the Age of Machines*, Greg Boone, CEO of Walk West, reveals why the companies thriving in this AI revolution are not simply building smarter systems, but cultivating stronger cultures. The organizations winning today are the ones empowering their people to ask better questions, make bolder decisions and adapt with speed and conviction.

Greg argues that the real differentiator is not access to tools, APIs or data – but the ability to align teams behind a shared purpose and inspire belief in the future being built. AI amplifies whatever culture exists inside your organization. If your team is disconnected, AI magnifies the distance. If your leadership is risk-averse, AI turns hesitation into irrelevance. But if your people are engaged, empowered and inspired, AI becomes rocket fuel.

Through candid insights and real-world examples from leading digital transformations, Greg will challenge audiences to shift the narrative from *“What can AI do?”* to *“What can humans do better because of AI?”*

Key Takeaways:

- Redefining competitive advantage: Why empathy, context and courage – not just algorithms – remain the irreplaceable drivers of business success.
- The adoption equation: How AI + Adoption + Acceleration, led by purpose-driven leadership, becomes the winning formula.
- The culture multiplier: Why AI will either accelerate dysfunction or supercharge belief – depending on how leaders show up.
- Survival skills for the AI era: Why human traits like storytelling, de-escalation and conviction are no longer “soft skills” but essential leadership assets.
- Future-ready leadership: How to move beyond plug-and-play solutions and build cultures that care, adapt and scale in the AI age.

The future is not machine vs. human. It is machine + human. The leaders who succeed will be the ones who recognize that while AI can process data at lightning speed, the hardest – and most valuable – thing to scale is still the human spirit.

BREAKOUT SESSION #1 (10-10:30 a.m.)

Choose to attend one of the following three sessions (locations noted below):

“PR + ChatGPT: What Works, What Fails and What to Try Next” | Location: Room 8A

Speaker: Mikaya Thurmond, CEO, Milan Public Relations

AI is reshaping our industry, and PR professionals need more than hype. They need practical guidance. In this breakout session, Mikaya Thurmond will draw on her experience leading hundreds of real-world campaigns to unpack the true potential and pitfalls of using ChatGPT in public relations. You'll learn:

- Which AI-powered tasks deliver the greatest ROI, from drafting media pitches to aggregating data.
- Common missteps that can undermine credibility or damage stakeholder trust, and concrete strategies for avoiding them.
- Hands-on tips and prompts you can test immediately, plus a forward-looking framework for piloting new AI tools as they emerge.

Attendees will leave with a clear roadmap for leveraging ChatGPT's strengths, mitigating its weaknesses, and confidently charting the next phase of AI-infused PR practice.

“Lights, Camera, Connection: Bringing In-Person Energy to Your Virtual Presentations” | Location: Room 8B

Speaker: Valonda Calloway (“The TV Lady”), spokesperson, TV Host and actor

In the age of virtual meetings, the difference between being heard and truly remembered comes down to how you show up on screen. In this fast-paced, interactive 30-minute session, accomplished spokesperson, TV host, presenter and media trainer Valonda Calloway shares the insider secrets she's honed from years in front of the camera – tips you can apply immediately to elevate your presence in any virtual setting.

From a picture-perfect setup – including laptop placement, lighting and camera angles – to wardrobe and accessories that boost credibility, Valonda shows you how to create an on-screen image that works as hard as you do. You'll refine your voice through tone, pacing and storytelling to connect emotionally, whether delivering a quarterly update or pitching a new idea.

You'll also learn calming techniques to quiet nerves, plus strategies for crafting concise, compelling messages that hold attention in our distraction-heavy, digital world. By the end, you'll have the tools to look, sound and feel like the most engaging version of yourself, every time you click “Join Meeting.”

“Help or Hype? How to Use AI Strategically in Crisis Response” | Location: Room 9

Speaker: Stephanie Llorente, founder, Prep Communications

In the high-stakes world of crisis communications, every second counts – and AI is proving to be both a powerful ally and a potential liability. This breakout session explores how strategic communicators can use AI to enhance preparation, accelerate response and deliver relevant messaging when issues arise. Through real-life case studies and personal anecdotes and examples, attendees will learn where AI adds value and where the human element remains

irreplaceable (Fun Fact: This was written with AI, but edited by a human...proving we can, in fact, work well together).

BREAKOUT SESSION #2 (10:40-11:10 a.m.)

Choose to attend one of the following three sessions (locations noted below):

“From Gut to Data: A No-Budget Approach to Audience Targeting with AI + Strategy” |

Location: Room 8A

Speakers:

- *Roxanne Raynor, director of marketing, Children's Home Society of North Carolina*
- *Kristina Geddings, digital strategy manager, Children's Home Society of North Carolina*

What do you do when you're tasked with recruiting foster parents, but you have no audience data and no budget for market research? At Children's Home Society of North Carolina, we decided to test what generations respond best to targeted messaging by creating an internal, low-cost generational marketing campaign using only AI tools and our own team's insights.

This session walks through how we built and A/B tested a campaign targeting Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z – with no external funding and no research firm. We'll show how we used ChatGPT, Mural and Avoma to develop generational profiles, create targeted Meta ads, and gather insights about which generation is most likely to engage with foster care messaging.

Spoiler alert: Gen Y showed the most promise, Gen X still has potential and Gen Z is a long game. Join us to learn how we turned constraints into creativity and uncovered actionable insights that are now driving our recruitment strategy forward.

“Is It Time to Add AEO to Your Communication Strategy?” | Location: Room 8B

Speaker: Carrie Cousins, vice president, LeadPoint Digital

AEO, or answer engine optimization, is more than a buzzword. As search engines are replacing traditional results with AI-generated results, and as more people are turning to AI engines, such as ChatGPT for search queries, question and answer search has never been bigger. In this session, you'll learn how to incorporate AEO into your SEO strategy with practical tips and applications to help your content rank in AI overviews and AI engines.

Key Takeaways:

- What AEO is (and is not)
- How to incorporate it into existing content
- Best practices for writing for answer optimization
- Case studies to show it in action

“Junk the Jargon: A Modern Framework for Clearer, Smarter Storytelling” | Location: Room 9

Speaker: Evan Boyer, founder and CEO, Leaders PR

GenAI has accelerated content production, and with it, message fatigue. Meanwhile, the mere thought of a long, jargon-filled messaging workshop sends many teams running. But skipping the messaging strategy doesn't just avoid pain. In reality, it sacrifices clarity, and with it, your most valuable competitive edge: your story.

There's a way through this process that is both engaging and effective. Drawing from nearly 15 years of experience leading messaging strategy for Fortune 500s and multinational companies, Evan Boyer shares a tested approach to building narrative frameworks that are rooted in humanity and truth-telling.

This session will unveil a repeatable discovery process Evan used with clients at a global PR agency, and has since refined into a founder-friendly framework at Leaders PR. You'll learn how to move beyond generic key messages to uncover your organization's deeper "why," frame credible proof points and align messaging across earned, owned and executive channels.

Whether you're shaping internal strategy, building thought leadership or prepping for media engagements, this approach helps address real audience issues and create narratives that last. Expect practical tips, real examples and a lens on cutting through GenAI noise, all in a format you can adapt without massive agency retainers.

BREAKOUT SESSION #3 (11:20-11:50 a.m.)

Choose to attend one of the following three sessions (locations noted below):

“Behind the Headlines: The Role of AI in Today's Newsroom and Beyond” - National Association of Black Journalists (RDU Chapter) Panel Discussion | Location: Room 8A

Moderator: Rod Carter, reporter and anchor, CBS 17

Panelists:

- *Greg Funderburg, weekend evening anchor and reporter, CBS 17*
- *Alice Fuller, principal consultant and social media strategist, Sheer Social*

AI's growing influence is changing how stories are sourced, shaped and shared. This panel brings together journalists and media experts for the inside scoop on what's really happening in today's newsrooms – from new production pressures to how content circulates across social platforms. With candid hot takes and forward-looking insights, panelists will unpack where AI creates opportunities, where it sparks pushback and what it means for the future of media and public perception.

“Smarter Public Affairs: Integrating Technology and the Human Touch” | Location: Room 8B

Speakers:

- *Kate Payne, principal, Kate Catlin Payne LLC*
- *Jenny Bo, co-founder and president, Roboro*

In today's fast-paced policy environment, public affairs and advocacy professionals are navigating a flood of information while striving to influence key decision makers. Jenny Bo, co-founder and president of Roboro, and Kate Payne, principal at Kate Catlin Payne LLC, will explore how generative AI tools can transform the way you monitor legislation, shape messaging and mobilize stakeholders. Drawing on their experience in enterprise technology, government relations and strategic communications, they'll share practical strategies for integrating AI into your advocacy work – boosting efficiency, uncovering actionable insights and amplifying your message without losing the human connection that drives real change.

“Human+: Using Technology to Amplify Human Creativity” | Location: Room 9

Speaker: Jake Coltrane, associate creative director, French / West / Vaughan

Creativity is the heart of advertising and marketing, but today's professionals are increasingly faced with the demand for innovative content at a faster pace than ever before. In this session, we'll explore how AI can be harnessed for good, acting as a powerful amplifier for human creativity rather than a replacement. Through compelling real-world examples, attendees will see firsthand how AI tools can elevate creative processes, from generating sophisticated storyboards and high-impact visual content to sparking inspiration for messaging that turns into immersive campaign concepts. Moving from abstract ideation to technical execution, we'll discuss the role of creative professionals as curators and collaborators with AI, demonstrating that human ingenuity combined with AI can deliver greater authenticity, emotional resonance and measurable results. Attendees will leave inspired and equipped with practical strategies for integrating AI into their workflow in ways that foster, not diminish, the distinctly human art of storytelling.

INSPIRE AWARDS LUNCHEON (12-1 p.m.) | Location: Room 1C/D

NCPRSA's InSpire Awards honor our region's most successful and innovative communications programs from the past year. Communications professionals from agencies, corporate, nonprofits, associations and government offices, as well as solo practitioners across our area, produce outstanding work and achieve fantastic results each year. The InSpire Awards celebrate the best campaigns, projects and initiatives in our region!

This year's ceremony will be emceed by Angela Taylor, evening anchor at CBS 17, and attendees will enjoy a buffet-style lunch service.

AFTERNOON KEYNOTE (1-1:50 P.M.) | Location: Room 1C/D

“When a Dynasty Falls: Lessons from the Murdaugh Scandal in an Era of Digital Amplification”

Speaker: Valerie Bauerlein, best-selling author and national affairs reporter at The Wall Street Journal

What happens when significant power collides with relentless digital scrutiny – and a once-untouchable legacy begins to unravel before the world's eyes?

Raleigh-based *Wall Street Journal* reporter and author Valerie Bauerlein takes audiences inside *The Devil at His Elbow: Alex Murdaugh and the Fall of a Southern Dynasty*, her instant *New York Times* bestseller and detailed investigation into the rise and fall of Alex Murdaugh, whose once-unshakable reputation crumbled under the weight of scandal, murder and intense media attention. In this keynote, Bauerlein will explore how the Murdaugh saga became a national obsession, fueled by viral news cycles, social media amplification and a 24/7 appetite for digital storytelling. Drawing on her deep reporting on Southern culture and small-town America, she will also examine how digital platforms transformed the Murdaugh story from a local scandal into a global conversation. Bauerlein will unpack lessons that communications and marketing professionals can glean from the implosion of a powerful brand, addressing reputation management in an AI-enhanced, misinformation-prone media environment. Touching on ethics, narrative control and the shifting boundaries between truth and perception, she will offer fresh insights before opening the floor to an interactive audience Q&A.

NONPROFIT PANEL (2-2:50 p.m.) | Location: Room 1C/D

“Navigating Nonprofit Communications: Challenges, Rewards and Optimization Strategies”

Moderators: Kristy Fair and Kiersten Wolf Williams, PR for Good co-leads

Panelists:

- *Amy Brundle, director of marketing and communications, National Alliance on Mental Illness, North Carolina (NAMI NC)*
- *Brandi McCarn Gerew, senior vice president, financial advisor, Pinnacle Financial*
- *Amy Smith, executive director, The Women's Center of Wake County*

Join us for an interactive discussion hosted by NCPRSA's PR for Good team. We'll delve into the opportunities and challenges that regional nonprofits face and explore how effective communications can help secure their future – with your ideas.

**This will be an interactive session.*

CLOSING REMARKS (2:50-3 p.m.) | Location: Room 1C/D

David Hamilton, NCPRSA president, and Victoria will wrap up the day with closing reflections and a look ahead to what's next for our chapter.