



2025 connect

ANNUAL ONE-DAY CONFERENCE | NOVEMBER 13, 2025 | 8:30 A.M. – 4:30 P.M.



aaf® midlands



International Association
of Business Communicators
South Carolina

South Carolina Chapter



AGENDA

8:30-9:30 A.M.

CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST/REGISTRATION/NETWORKING

9:30-9:45 A.M.

Auditorium

WELCOME AND CHAPTER GREETINGS

Lauren McAlexander – AAF Midlands President

Bailey Lewis – IABC/SC President

Staci Gouveia, APR – SCPRSA President

9:45-10:30 A.M.

Auditorium

FROM NEWS TO NARRATIVE:

LEADING WITH PURPOSE IN COMMUNICATIONS

Darci Strickland Rush – Richland School District Two

From the anchor desk to the executive suite, Darci Strickland Rush has spent her career mastering the power of communication. In this keynote, she shares her journey from award-winning news anchor to senior chief of communications for Richland School District Two, offering insights on how to lead with purpose, build trust and shape narratives that inspire and inform. Attendees will walk away with practical lessons on resilience, adaptability, and the role of authentic storytelling in leadership.

10:30-10:45 A.M.

BREAK

10:45-11:45 A.M.

Auditorium

**BUILDING A COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT FROM THE GROUND UP:
WHERE TO BEGIN**

Lesley Jones and Jade Reynolds – S.C. Department of Environmental Services

Starting a communications department from scratch can feel overwhelming. Where do you even begin? In this session, Jones and Reynolds will share practical steps and lessons they learned from building a new state government department. From identifying your organization's needs, gaining leadership buy-in, and establishing processes, to creating a strategic foundation for long-term success, attendees will walk away with a clear roadmap for developing or strengthening their own communications function.

Wachovia Room I

**YOUR LEADERSHIP BRAND: COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY,
LEAD WITH PURPOSE**

Dianne Chase – Chase Media

How is your leadership known, and how do you want it to be known?

It's not about marketing yourself, it's about leading with clarity, consistency, and purpose.

In this session, we'll explore how to define your Leadership Brand, communicate it with intention, and use it to inspire trust and alignment.

Attendees will leave with a new understanding of a personal vs. leadership brand, a framework to draft a Leadership Brand Statement, and practical strategies to apply it across teams and organizations.

11:45-12:45 P.M.

Wachovia Rooms I-III

NETWORKING LUNCH

AGENDA

12:45-2 P.M.

Wachovia Rooms I-III

ENHANCE YOUR ELEMENTS OF THE CRAFT

Voice your opinions and share your experiences with fellow communicators on the following topics:

- AP Style led by Doug Fisher
- Digital Accessibility led by Mary Alex Kopp, Able SC
- Memberships and Professional Certifications led by Staci Gouveia, APR, SCPRSA President, Bailey Lewis, IABC/SC President and Lauren McAlexander, AAF Midlands President
- Storytelling led by Ben Culbreth, Culbreth Copywriting LLC
- Videography led by Dr. Thaddeus W. Jones, Jr., Fanatik Productions, LLC

Every 12 minutes topic moderators will change to engage communicators in a different topic until everyone has the chance to discuss all five topics. Be ready to share your best practices for each topic with your peers.

2-2:15 P.M.

BREAK

2:15-3:15 P.M.

Auditorium

BEYOND KEYWORDS: HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS CHANGING SEARCH, STORYTELLING AND BRAND VISIBILITY

Olivia Hyatt – Flock and Rally

Artificial intelligence is speeding up how audiences consume content and make decisions. Learn how advertising, marketing and public relations can continue to evolve to stay visible and trusted in a rapidly changing digital world.

Wachovia Room I

YOUR WEAKNESS IS YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH

Bailey Lewis – Bailey Sends Word

What is the “weakness” that other people have told you to fix or change about yourself? Maybe it’s that you’re: too sensitive, too difficult, not a team player...it’s always about being too much of something or not enough of something else. The truth is that words are keys. They can either keep doors locked to us—if we let them—or they can open new doors to our potential and our future. In this lightly interactive presentation, attendees will reclaim the words that have de-centered them, gotten into their heads, or made them doubt themselves. Before leaving, attendees will create a personalized key to carry with them, a reminder that their so-called “weaknesses” are actually their greatest strengths.

3:15-3:30 P.M.

BREAK

3:30-4:30 P.M.

Auditorium

NAVIGATING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM HURRICANE HELENE

Daniele Ligons – Aiken Electric Cooperative

Mary Miller – West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperatives and subsidiaries (West Carolina)

Brittany Myers – South Carolina Department of Transportation

Learn from those who were in the trenches handling crisis communications as Hurricane Helene, one of the deadliest inland hurricanes on record, moved across South Carolina. Helene made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane Sept. 26, 2024, near Perry, Florida. Nearly 400 miles wide with a fast forward movement, Helene’s winds were still powerful as it made its way across Georgia and South Carolina. Residents in these inland areas rarely experience sustained damaging winds. Helene left more than two million people without power across two states, and more than a quarter-million of these people were still without power a week after the storm. Hear from the panel, Daniele Ligons, Mary Miller and Brittany Myers, about the communication challenges they faced and the lessons they learned from Hurricane Helene.

MEET THE SPEAKERS

4:30 P.M.

CLOSING AND THANK YOU

4:30-6 P.M.

HAPPY HOUR NETWORKING MEET UP

MEET THE SPEAKERS



DIANNE CHASE

Chase Media – Principal and Founder

Dianne Chase is an award-winning communication professional and Founder and CEO of Chase Media and Communication, where she empowers corporate, nonprofit, and government leaders with tools to thrive, especially in high-stakes moments. A trusted advisor in crisis, risk, and reputation communication, she draws on a distinguished career in broadcast journalism and decades of consulting to help clients navigate complexity with clarity and confidence.

She is past global chair of IABC, past IABC Southern Region Chair, and current president of IABC North Carolina.

As one of only two Accredited Partners worldwide in the GENIUS Business Storytelling methodology, one of Chase's key services is helping organizations and individuals achieve their goals through effective business storytelling.

Her work and mission have always been rooted in one belief: Communication can, should, and must be a force for good in business and society. Simply put, she is dedicated to effective communication that transforms organizations, careers, and lives.



BEN CULBRETH

Culbreth Copywriting LLC – Content Strategist + Copywriter

Ben Culbreth is a content strategist and copywriter and the only one who shows up for work at Culbreth Copywriting LLC. He helps folks develop branding and content strategies and writes copy for websites, emails, and customer stories. He lives in South Carolina. You can read his words and see his work at benjaminculbreth.com.



DOUG FISHER

Retired Senior Instructor at the University of South Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communications and Former Associated Press Managing Correspondent and News Editor

Doug Fisher is a retired senior instructor from the University of South Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communications where he taught editing, reporting, digital signage and other courses from 2001 to 2020. Before that he spent almost three decades in broadcast, newspaper and wire service journalism, including 18 years at the Associated Press. He is also the former executive editor of The Convergence Newsletter and for many years wrote the "Common Sense Journalism" column and blog. He is a former Kiplinger Fellow (Ohio State) and co-author of "Principles of Convergent Journalism" from Oxford University Press.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



DR. THADDEUS W. JONES, JR.

Fanatik Productions, LLC – Owner

Dr. Thaddeus W. Jones Jr., is a filmmaker, writer, director, instructor and storyteller. He made his talent and passion his career – filmmaking. Jones began his career editing self-published books and converting other authors' self-published works into screenplays. A forever student, he learned as much as he could before advancing to ownership of his production company, Fanatik Productions, LLC.

His company has produced several award-winning short films. Giving back and introducing the power of storytelling to rural communities is just as important to him. As a member of the Hampton Friends Arts, Jones recently created a summer camp to help middle and high school age children embrace storytelling in rural communities. Filmmaking allows others to bring their visions to the screen, giving a voice to unnoticed areas.

Jones is active in both the film and business communities. The business of multimedia is an important area often overlooked. He participates in 1 Million Cups and South Carolina Inventor Forum and was formerly the director of programming for the Nickelodeon Theater. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in media arts from the University of South Carolina, and a MFA in creative writing and a Master of Science in business from Full Sail University. He went on to earn a PH.D in business from Northcentral University.



BAILEY LEWIS

Title – Bailey Sends Word

Bailey Lewis is an independent writer, speaker and storytelling content creator. She has more than 15 years of experience in written and spoken media, and is known for narratives that reflect truth, prioritize clarity and celebrate the wonder in the world. As an expert in narrative consciousness, Lewis is always exploring the way stories shape our world and the way the world impacts the stories we tell ourselves.

Accolades for Lewis' work include bylines with Adobe, Progress, the CMO Club and more publications, as well as speaking appearances for the United States Senate staff, European yacht charter industry, World Usability Day and other stages. Lewis' award-winning stories have been recognized in Wingleaf's Top 50 and as a Pushcart Prize nominee. She can be found sharing her words on social media as @baileysendsword. For more from Lewis, visit baileysendsword.com.



DANIELE LIGONS

Aiken Electric Cooperative – Marketing and Strategic Services Manager

Daniele Ligons is an award-winning communicator and the marketing and strategic services manager at Aiken Electric Cooperative. A Certified Cooperative Communicator, she led AEC's crisis communications during Hurricane Helene, one of the most historic storms in the co-op's 87-year history. Her work has earned multiple national awards for excellence in social media and internal communications. Passionate about community impact and clear messaging, Ligons also serves on several local boards and mentors students pursuing careers in marketing and communications.

Outside of work, she's a proud mom and helps run her daughter's thriving lemonade business, Yummy in My Tummy Lemonade, which has grown from a yard sale stand to a local favorite.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



OLIVIA HYATT

Vice President of Strategy – Flock and Rally

Olivia Hyatt is a seasoned media strategist with more than 12 years of experience in marketing leadership, account management and client advocacy across agency, media vendor and corporate roles. As vice president of strategy at Flock and Rally, she leads the agency's paid, owned and earned media teams — bringing together data, creativity and collaboration to help clients meet their business goals.

A proud University of South Carolina alumna, Hyatt has held key roles at WACH FOX TV, Buonasera Media and La-Z-Boy Southeast. She has led multi-million-dollar campaigns, managed high-profile sponsorships and guided strategy for clients at both regional and national levels.

Her expertise spans across digital advertising, lead generation, content development and cross-platform media strategy. She received certifications in Google, HubSpot and IMPACT+, and is well-versed in programmatic platforms, paid social and streaming media.

Active in the community, Hyatt is a member and past chair of the University of South Carolina's Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management Alumni Society Board and a member of the Junior League of Columbia. She has also volunteered with March of Dimes, Historic Columbia Foundation and Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

Outside the office, Hyatt loves spending time with her husband and three kids – whether volunteering, attending events or cheering from the sidelines at their latest game.



LESLEY JONES

Director of Strategic Outreach – South Carolina Department of Environmental Services

South Carolina Department of Environmental Services – Director of Strategic Outreach
Lesley Jones is the director of strategic outreach at the South Carolina Department of Environmental Services, where she leads statewide efforts to increase public engagement and awareness of key environmental initiatives. With more than a decade of experience in state government, Jones combines a strong background in communications and human resources to support impactful public service.

A proud graduate of the University of South Carolina Aiken, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in communications and has built a diverse career in leadership development, strategic planning, corporate event coordination, workforce training, and digital media strategy. She is passionate about creating meaningful, mission-driven messaging that connects with communities and drives results.

Jones is recognized for her collaborative leadership, creative content development, and unwavering commitment to advancing the agency's mission to protect and enhance South Carolina's natural resources.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



MARY MILLER

Marketing and Communications Manager – West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperatives and subsidiaries (West Carolina)

Mary Miller is a marketing and communications leader with more than two decades of experience driving growth and engagement for broadband, electric cooperatives, and technology organizations. As marketing and communications manager at West Carolina and Upcountry Fiber, she has led go-to-market strategies, overseen major rebranding efforts and launched campaigns that helped double the customer base to 50,000 subscribers.

Previously, Miller served as manager of communications and events at National Information Solutions Cooperative, where she directed a national brand refresh, strengthened member engagement programs, and managed multimillion-dollar events and marketing budgets. Earlier in her career, she held progressive leadership roles at Basin Electric Power Cooperative, a generation and transmission cooperative serving nine states from Canada to Mexico.

Passionate about strategic communications, brand management, and executive messaging, Miller enjoys building cohesive campaigns, enhancing organizational reputation and fostering meaningful community impact.



BRITTANY MYERS

Public Information Officer – South Carolina Department of Transportation

Brittany Myers is a public information officer for the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT). She joined the agency in 2023 after graduating from the University of South Carolina with a bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communications. In her role, she frequently travels across the state, covering numerous SCDOT projects throughout the Upstate region. She enjoys the opportunity to explore different parts of the state and keep the public informed of road construction throughout their communities.

Prior to joining SCDOT, Myers was a corporate communications intern with South Carolina Farm Bureau Mutual Insurance Company, where she helped create and manage content for social media and wrote articles for the SC Farmer magazine. In addition to that, Myers also served as an accounts team member for The Carolina Agency.

NOTES



MARY REAVES

Director of Community Access – Able SC

As the director of community access, Mary Reaves ensures that buildings, programs, organizations, community spaces, and more are ready and willing to provide access to all members of their community, including those with disabilities. Reaves has worked in the accessibility space for almost 20 years and is passionate about accessibility as it is the pathway to true inclusion and belonging.

She is a rehabilitation counselor by training who worked in deaf mental health for nearly 10 years before co-founding Beginnings SC. Reaves spent more than 10 years with Beginnings SC building and managing programs that include parent counseling, services for child care providers, advocacy and policy, training and technical assistance, and awareness and education to support the families and professionals who serve deaf and hard-of-hearing children. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of South Carolina and a master's in rehabilitation counseling from the University of South Carolina School of Medicine in 2009, with a Certificate in Deaf Studies, where she learned American Sign Language. Reaves received a Certificate in Special Education Advocacy from William & Mary Law School in 2021 and has gone on to support families (including her own) as they navigate the educational needs of children with disabilities.

Reaves has served on the board of directors for community organizations, including Girls Rock Columbia, and is currently board secretary for The Hive Community Circle and DEIA Co-Chair for the Blue Ridge Institute Board of Directors. Her goal is to help remove the barriers put in place when access is not provided. She and her husband, Larry, have three children and one fur baby. When she is not working, she enjoys making cool stuff, baking, reading, learning new things and taking naps on rare occasions.



JADE REYNOLDS

Internal Communications Strategist – South Carolina Department of Environmental Services

Jade Reynolds is the internal communication strategist at the South Carolina Department of Environmental Services (SCDES), where she works with leaders and colleagues across the agency to develop and implement communication strategies that engage and inform employees. Reynolds creates innovative content to share across multiple internal communication channels, and she helps execute internal initiatives that enhance staff's understanding of organizational priorities, values and successes.

A graduate of Winthrop University and a native of the Palmetto State, Reynolds is pleased to help members of the SCDES team understand how their daily work supports a resilient and sustainable South Carolina as they work to safeguard the air, land, water and coasts for generations to come.

Prior to her communications career in state government, Reynolds worked in newspapers as a reporter, copy editor and page designer.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



DARCI STRICKLAND RUSH

Senior Chief Communications and Strategic Partnerships Officer – Richland School District Two

Darci Strickland Rush is a seasoned communications executive, Emmy Award-winning journalist, and passionate community leader. After more than 25 years of excellence in broadcast journalism, she now serves as the senior chief communications and strategic partnerships officer for Richland School District Two, leading a team that manages strategic communications and outreach for over 28,000 students and more than 4,000 employees.

A graduate of the University of South Carolina, Rush was recognized as a University of South Carolina Media Law Fellow and named the University's Young Alumni of the Year. She is a Riley Institute Diversity Fellow and a devoted member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., committed to scholarship, community service, sisterhood and social action. Her professional achievements have earned her multiple Emmy Awards, the South Carolina Broadcasters Association Masters Award, and the prestigious Order of the Palmetto—South Carolina's highest civilian honor.

Through every chapter of her career, Rush continues to use her voice and platform to inspire, inform, and advocate for positive change.

NOTES

[illegible]

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

VOLUNTEERS

Special thanks to the CONNECT Conference co-chairs Matthew Long and Alison Shuman
and our hard-working and much appreciated committee members
Chelsea Bennett, Nikasha Dicks, Eva Foussat, Brooks Hearn,
Bailey Lewis, Lauren McAlexander and Celina Oritz.

Program design provided by: Alison Shuman, Farm Bureau Insurance®



S.C. DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY LAYOUT

