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Dialogue and transparency take centre stage

By A. Paris

The fundraising environment over the course of 2020 was far from easy – the shift to remote working coupled with the uncertain outlook from an economic and a well-being point of view did not bode well for PE managers looking to raise capital. However, figures show activity in the space may not have taken such a hard hit. This may have been likely due to the proactive response of investor relations (IR) teams within the industry which sought to maintain dialogue with their clients and their broader network.

According to a report by EY, despite being a tumultuous year on most counts, fundraising activity within private equity appears to have remained robust. "Fundraising declined from last year, but remains in line with the preceding five years," the report highlights.

Outlining the challenges of the shift to remote working, the report notes: "While recent studies suggest LPs and GPs are becoming increasingly comfortable with virtual due diligence and remote ways of working, there exist concerns around the impact to firms' culture, the relevance of physical meetings and the criticality of face-to-face relationships."

This difficulty is echoed by players in the industry. Edouard Boscher, COO for the investor relations department & head of sales France, Ardian, comments: "The relationships we cultivate with current and prospective investors are hugely reliant on face-to-face interactions, so learning how to maintain these virtually has been a challenge."

In dealing with this change, services like investor relations have come to the fore. Cary Gibson, director and head of investor relations at Pemberton, notes: "The pandemic has

increased the cadence and nature of the communication between GPs and LPs, and highlighted more than ever the importance of client service."

Andrew Bernstein, Senior Managing Director, Head of Private Equity at Capital Dynamics agrees: "From an investor relations perspective, the frequency of contact with our investors has greatly increased, in both directions. Many investors have been reaching out to us with questions about the health of their investments and our expected timing of capital calls and distributions. We have been more communicative as well, holding periodic webinars, releasing white papers and generally providing more transparency."

Firms that provide support services to the industry also attest to the rising value of a strong investor relations team. Sunibel Corporate Services writes: "A private equity fund with a well-established and effective investor relations team certainly has a clear competitive advantage. Investor relations' ability to build strong relationships with investors and analysts, coupled with the strength of the executive team, are factors considered most critical to the success of these relationships globally."



> *"The pandemic has increased the cadence and nature of the communication between GPs and LPs, and highlighted more than ever the importance of client service."*
>
> **Cary Gibson, Pemberton**

Strategic change

As market dynamics shift, so have the priorities of investor relations teams. Gibson outlines: "With the environment fluid and uncertain, LPs are more frequently looking to their GPs for more detailed information. We expanded our IR team in late 2019/early 2020 in an effort to continue to provide best-in-class client service alongside our growing LP base.

"The investment in our IR team alongside our BD team has been instrumental in providing enhanced reporting to LPs throughout the pandemic. Critically, this was also made possible by the size of our investment teams enabling us to have very frequent and detailed discussions with both the management and the sponsors of our portfolio companies throughout the year."

From his perspective, Phil Nunes, Senior Vice President, BackBay Communications, observes: "The current environment has made the need for transparency more acute. At the same time, Covid has created some obvious obstacles in utilising more traditional venues through which to interact with investors, most notably the AGMs. To accommodate, GPs have adapted pretty seamlessly to digital channels to recreate these in-person events and in some cases make them even more dynamic, engaging, and user-friendly."

Boscher details the constructive impetus the pandemic provided: "The way in which we accelerated our digitalisation programme due to the pandemic has been a positive development. We were already developing our online investor portal, however we were forced to progress with this more rapidly in order to ensure we could continue to keep in touch and deliver best-in-class service to our investors."

Ardian invested in developing its own investor platform, something which is now becoming a trend. Boscher says: "There are an increasing number of parties developing their own platforms which can be made to be bespoke for smaller funds by allowing them to incorporate their own branding. These sorts of systems will make maintaining the GP/LP relationship more efficient for smaller funds navigating the shift to digital."

The change has also led to teams providing their clients with new tools and services in their efforts to maintain dialogue and strengthen relationships throughout a challenging period.

Gibson gives an example: "We have always prided ourselves on providing proactive as opposed to reactive information to our LPs. One example is our proprietary traffic light reporting system. We issued our first report in February 2020, well ahead of our peers, and we have continued to refine and expand our analysis. We issued seven traffic light reports throughout 2020 and will be issuing our 8th iteration in late February. This level of information and transparency was extremely well-received by our investors."

From its perspective, Ardian has also broadened its outreach format. Boscher elaborates: "We have been holding



> *"The time has come for PE to embed a digital strategy throughout the deal cycle – from origination and due diligence, right through value creation and exit – as well as within the infrastructure of the firm itself."*
>
> Glenn Engler, EY-Parthenon

various webinars for existing as well as prospective investors as part of our efforts to adapt our investor relations efforts to the new way of working. These have focused on our investment activities, such as Buyout, Private Debt and Infrastructure, as well as wider business considerations such as ESG and sustainability. Our sales and investor relations teams have used the feedback generated from participants to more accurately identify which areas we can improve on."

Embedding digitisation

According to Glenn Engler, EY-Parthenon Global Digital Leader and Richard Bulkley, EY-Parthenon Partner: "The time has come for PE to embed a digital strategy throughout the deal cycle – from origination and due diligence, right through value creation and exit – as well as within the infrastructure of the firm itself." In their view, "the pandemic has exposed organisations that lack strong digital capabilities, relegating them to the sidelines as their savvier competitors' foresight delivers measurable business benefits and attractive returns for investors."

However, even organisations which have embraced digitisation face challenges in terms of timelines, depending on the sector they work in.

Boscher at Ardian notes: "Because we operate close-ended funds, investor due diligence takes time. Pre-Covid, our IR teams would visit potential investors to present them with all the initial information they would need. After this, investors would visit Ardian's offices to continue their due diligence, which was an operationally complex exercise that could last over a month.

"Now we have to carry out this process digitally, with videos from the relevant activity head replacing our initial presentations in order to maintain as much of the same rapport as possible."

The provision of information is critical to maintaining and building on the GP-LP relationship. Gibson comments: "We have always been extremely transparent, and throughout 2020 we expanded our LP base with a number of new institutions across the globe, who together with external consultants, conducted their entire diligence process virtually. While there is no replacement for the value of an in-person meeting in building long term relationships, LPs and GPs have embraced conducting virtual IDD and ODD throughout the pandemic."

A virtual future

Boscher muses over what things will look like post-pandemic: "We think a lot of these virtual processes will continue, especially factoring in climate considerations and the responsibility that we have as a large fund to prioritise our sustainability.

"More essential business travel will remain, however we have demonstrated that we can work differently and so it may be that many of the large events of the past, such as AGMs, will be held in a different format from now on."

According to Nunes: "Going forward, the more sophisticated IR teams will likely embrace a hybrid approach for their annual meetings, where LPs will have the option to attend in person or via Zoom. And philosophically, many firms better recognise the value of consistent communication with their LPs. For instance, we're seeing more interest from GPs to help create thought leadership and videos and then distribute that to key constituencies on a recurring and regular basis."

In Bernstein's view: "The increase in frequency of GP-LP contact and overall transparency is here to stay. These were trends that were already developing and have just been accelerated as a result of the pandemic. What will be interesting to see is whether virtual meetings become a permanent fixture. One element of the current process I hope does not become a trend is the creation of pre-recorded due diligence sessions. Certain GPs have embraced video technology to the extreme of pre-recording themselves, eliminating the opportunity to engage them in a two-way dialogue. Of course they still make themselves available for follow up meetings, but I find this methodology to be very impersonal for an industry that is all about relationships." ■

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Strengthening relationships and hitting hard-caps in the new normal

Q&A with Cameron Nicol

Which elements of the GP-LP relationship have been most impacted by the pandemic, both in a positive and negative way?

The most tangible positive, I think, is that five people no longer need to get on a plane, travel to the other side of the country (or world), and spend hours in transit and expand their carbon footprint just to close on a commitment.

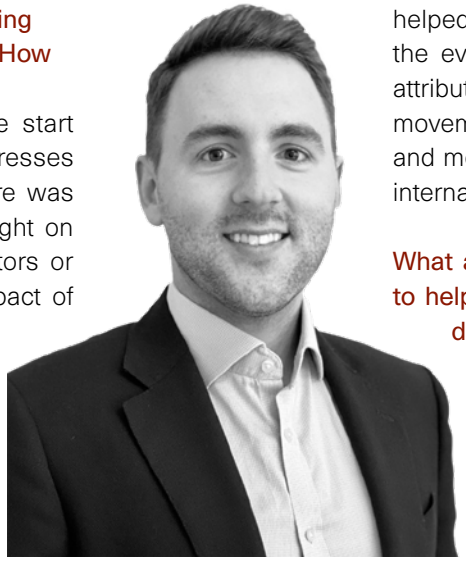
As highlighted in the year-end edition of our *Private Markets Monthly Monitor* report, pension plan LPs actually reported 20 per cent more commitments (by dollar amount) to private equity in 2020 than in 2019. By necessity, virtual fundraising can be done and the realisation that it can streamline much of how the industry operates while at the same time reducing its environmental impact means it is here to stay in some form.

A negative has been that the majority of LP commitments have gone to existing managers, without the availability of onsite due diligence. This has put a lot of strain on emerging managers in particular.

Do LPs have additional or new reporting and data needs in this environment? How are GPs servicing these needs?

I'm sure many GPs look back at the start of 2020 and are reminded of their stresses and trepidation. Almost overnight, there was an influx of requests from LPs for insight on the exposure of funds to specific sectors or geographies, and the performance impact of nationwide shutdowns, travel bans, etc. This persisted through the year.

The best GPs were able to provide their investors with an early, high-level view of fund performance and exposure, and not make them wait until long after quarter-end. This was one of the main reasons we accelerated the release of our custom performance report builder in our portfolio intelligence tool, TopQ. Knowing that unstandardised requests across their LP base can be a huge time-drag, and the importance of delivering information quickly but accurately, this new functionality enables GPs to populate custom templates with their latest performance at the click of a button.



The volatility also created a need for GPs to not only provide a static, point-in-time view of their funds and deal performance to LPs. Instead, LPs and GPs alike need clear insight into the biggest movements from one period to the next, whether quarter-to-quarter or over longer time frames, and what are the underlying factors driving changes.

The challenge has always been in being able to carry out this analysis efficiently and accurately. The data required to show this can often be confined to a spreadsheet-driven process and consequently unwieldy to produce. The Multi-Period Analysis module in TopQ has helped our GP clients easily get insights on the evolution of NAVs, IRRs and other deal attributes over time, see the impact of market movements versus deal-specific movements, and more, to give true insight to investors and internal teams.

What are the tools and solutions available to help GPs raise assets? How can they differentiate themselves in a virtual world?

The good news for GPs is that they have more at their disposal than ever before! In recent years, the ecosystem of tools and technology created for the private markets has exploded.

For raising capital specifically, GPs combining market and portfolio intelligence are equipping themselves with the efficiencies and insights required for powerful positioning and relevant differentiation.

Our most effective clients aren't trying to differentiate from the market in an information silo. Or rolling out the same fund pitch regardless of investor. They are turning data into insights to create persuasive positioning.

Using our platform GPs know how and why their investors are committing to specific strategies and funds, how those groups pitched and presented themselves, and then turning the due diligence lens on themselves: using portfolio intelligence tools to translate returns data into evidence of their strengths and key points of differentiation.

This goes beyond quartile benchmarking, too. What is more powerful is using deeper analytics to evidence your value creation skills, the team's capital preservation capabilities, or how your recent shift to sector specialism outperforms previous generalist funds in your series.

Are LPs making use of any new solutions and services to help them conduct virtual due diligence exercises? Are the days of the traditional process over for good? What elements of the current set up will be retained post-pandemic?

Obviously face-to-face has long been a part in LPs' decision-making processes. For the most part, they are committing to a blind pool and on the basis of trust. Conducting diligence in-person helped them to understand team dynamics and more. What we're seeing, is more of our LPs clients bringing quantitative analysis into their due diligence process much earlier, and using it more often throughout, to help underwrite investments.

By doing more analysis on GP performance at the beginning, which can include applying quantitative analysis of the qualitative (i.e. team), they are uncovering the real questions and red flags they need to ask when they "meet." At the end of the day, due diligence is about asking the right questions of a GP. The data by no means replaces the qualitative aspect of due diligence, but it does enhance it.

Of course, this was always best practice pre-2020, and will certainly be retained post-pandemic. No LP will reduce the amount of data or information they ask for from GPs just because they can have a face-to-face meeting. GPs need to be prepared for this new approach by LPs.

Has the current environment driven more PE firms to use platforms and third parties to support them in reaching new investors? What are the pros and cons of doing this and how can they be selective in this regard?

Absolutely. GPs and LPs can't meet and uncover new opportunities via events and networking in quite the same way they used to before.

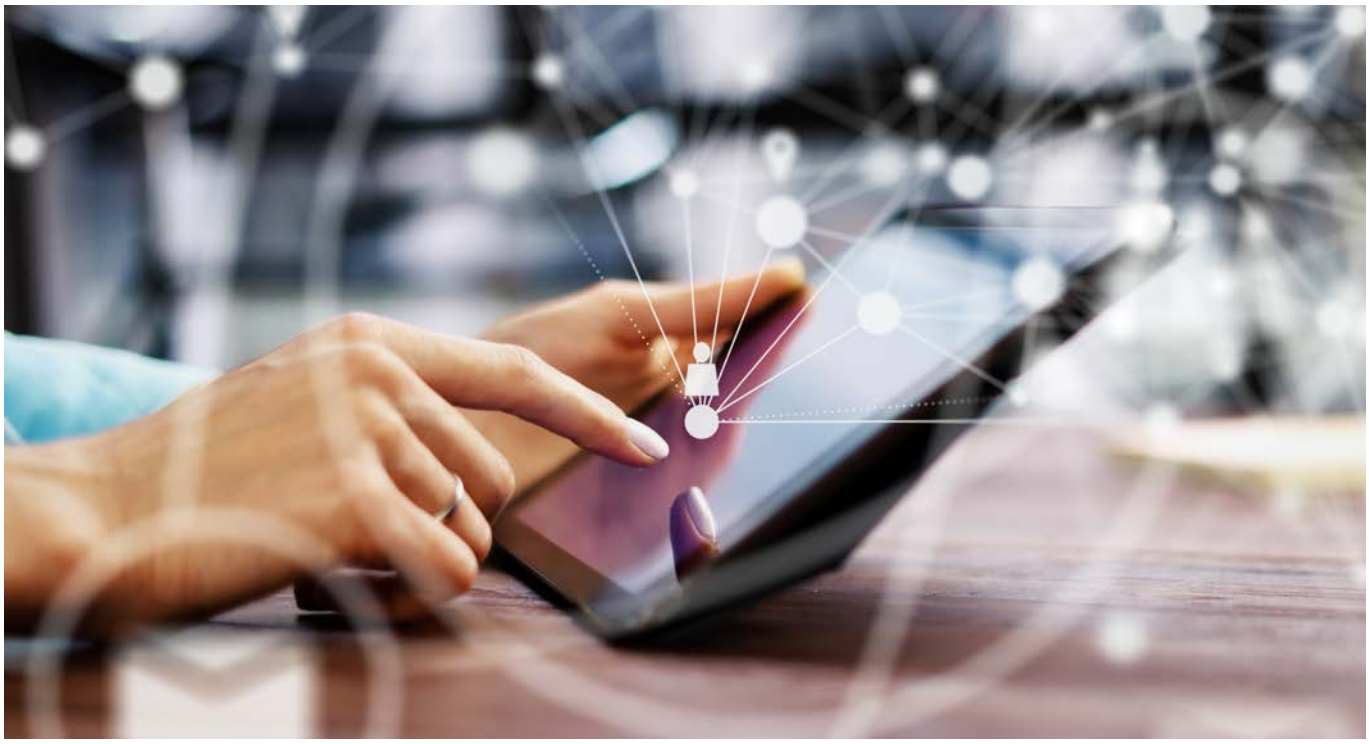
For GPs it hammers home the need to 1) be present in the places LPs are looking (databases) and 2) be able to find the right investors for their funds.

To the second point, there are plenty of market databases available for GPs' investor research. What they need to consider is how actionable the information presented in them really is to determine whether an investor is a good fit. Is it "data" or is it "intelligence"?

Using market intelligence platforms, like eVestment Market Lens, has huge advantages over more traditional market databases. Knowing "what" investors have done is useful, of course, but it is less actionable. And that's where market databases' value stops. Market intelligence platforms provide deeper insight on the "why" behind certain decisions about asset allocation changes or even commitments to them and their peers, as well as the more forward-looking "how": How might an investor shift their commitment pacing in the future? How is the advice of their consultant altering their appetite for a fund like ours? This is where the true value lies for GPs when looking to find, reach, and win commitments from investors. ■

Cameron Nicol
Marketing Director, eVestment Private Markets

Cameron Nicol is the Marketing Director for eVestment Private Markets where he oversees marketing strategy, communications and content, working closely with sales, client success and product to identify and construct valuable insights and interactions for the industry. Cameron joined eVestment in 2015 after its acquisition of TopQ Software Ltd, a provider of SaaS-based track record analytics solutions, where he was an early employee.



Leveraging technology for increased investor engagement

Interview with Angelica Tigan

Limited partners (LPs) are becoming more risk-averse and demanding increased transparency from the general partners (GPs) with whom they work. In turn, GPs recognise the value in strengthening their relationships with LPs, and are more open to using technology to provide LPs with a seamless experience. Angelica Tigan, Director at BlackRock and Global Head of Business Development for eFront Investment Café, discusses the impact that the pandemic has had on LP/ GP relations, as well as recent developments in investor relationship management tools.

During the current pandemic, how has the use of technology evolved when it comes to private equity investor relationship management?

We have observed a shift in the way GPs leverage technology to keep their clients loyal. Our analysis has shown that 75 per cent to 80 per cent of our clients are currently using an investor portal to share analytical data related to the funds' performance with their investors. This compares to 60 per cent of clients who used this feature pre-pandemic.

Technology now plays a key role in the way GPs relay performance indicators and more extensive data points to their investors; this trend is expected to continue into the future. The investor portal space is moving away from simple document-sharing tools to fully-featured platforms for running a firm's investor relations throughout the fund lifecycle.

Investor onboarding and an investor self-service offering are becoming a requirement, along with the ability to sync across multiple systems. This structure provides administrator users with seamless processes while end-users get a fully customised and interactive experience. Our GP clients increasingly rely on standard templates and pre-configured dashboards, which will allow them to share

fund performance and risk exposure with their investors easily.

As disclosure and transparency become more important, how can GPs overcome the difficulties caused by not meeting in-person?

GPs have been under pressure to bolster their investor relations in an increasing environment of disclosure and risk focus, as well as to overcome the physical distance caused by the pandemic. Due to the absence of business travel and face-to-face networking opportunities, GPs are leveraging technology to a much greater extent for their fundraising activities.

Being able to market their services online has become exponentially important, and technology that can service the fund's full lifecycle has now become vital. Our clients have shifted from using basic tools like email and data rooms to using fully-fledged fundraising portals with investor onboarding, marketing and newsrooms, reporting, data collection, and due diligence capabilities.

What are the primary benefits of leveraging sophisticated investor portal technology?

The obvious advantage is a streamlined and expedited fundraising process. Fully outsourcing implementation, maintenance, and support means clients save a significant amount of time and resources. This is beneficial throughout the fund lifecycle, not only for fundraising and onboarding but also for investor reporting.

Additionally, data security is becoming a top priority. Although the influx of new fintech vendors on the market is driving technology prices down, these lower-tier platforms could come with less secure and stable infrastructure, as well as limited support and sync capabilities. For this reason, clients are choosing more advanced investor portals that are secure, stable, and come with adequate support services.

How do managers go about choosing a provider or portal?

When selecting a partner in this space, managers must be highly cognisant of their chosen platform's level of security of standards and the certifications it holds. They need to make sure it is SOC 2-certified and has its ISO 27001. The platform's support team availability is also critical. Beyond the demo and visual appeal, other factors such as implementation, capabilities or maintenance, and support are even more important.

Some managers may prefer to build their portal in-house. How could they decide whether an outsourced route is more appropriate?

Larger GPs often need to decide whether to build investor portal capabilities in-house or to outsource this task. There are a few factors to consider. Building in-house often comes with a seven-digit initial budget and very high annual costs for maintenance and development. Further, from a data security point of view, if the platform is hosted on the GP's premises, that creates additional risk. Also, by the time they complete the build and deploy their system, these products are often semi-outdated.

Professionals often complain about having to copy-paste data from a client relationship management system into a portal or from their accounting platform into the portal. Having one integrated technology stack platform helps mitigate this inconvenience.

What differentiates your solution?

The eFront Investment Café solution can be used stand-alone or be fully-synced with any third-party application. This means it is flexible enough to cater to a smaller fund manager that only requires a portal, as well as a larger investment house that uses various technology solutions and third party tools.

eFront Investment Café addresses security or support concerns as a SaaS solution with a minimum of five releases per year. As a white-labelled solution, it allows GPs to tailor the portal and customise content to promote their brand. Additionally, we partner directly with fund administrators to include the Investment Café portal as part of their offering, thus providing their GP clients with a fully outsourced, hassle-free fund administration experience. ■



Angelica Tigan
Director, Head of Business Development Portals at BlackRock

Angelica Tigan is the global head of business development for the eFront Investment Café solution at BlackRock. She has been with the firm since 2017, when she established and currently manages a business development team focused on the investor portal offerings. Angelica has cumulated 10 years of experience in the fintech space and 7 years in retail and private banking.

GPs establish their ESG narrative

Institutional investors are leaving fund managers with little choice but to develop a POV around sustainability, writes Ken MacFadyen

If 2020 was a transformative year in private equity, 2021 is when GPs will look to adapt to rapidly evolving LP demands. Over the past 12 months, for instance, sponsors have had to reimagine traditional IR activities through a digital lens. While many will continue to leverage these tools long after the pandemic becomes a bad memory, other tectonic shifts across PE have the potential to leave an even more indelible mark.



Most notably, an intensifying focus on ESG from limited partners is forcing many to rethink the role of sustainability, both, in their investment strategy and how they report non-financial metrics to key stakeholders. And as pensions, endowments, and foundations continue to embed an ESG lens into their core investment framework, GPs unable to convey their own "sustainability story" will encounter an increasingly higher bar to attract institutional funding.

Many LPs, themselves, are under intense pressure. Divestment campaigns focused on climate change, for instance, have become more common and effective. In Europe, the "**Unfriend Coal**" campaign is targeting insurance companies with investments in fossil fuels, while public pensions in the US, from **New York City** to **Los Angeles**, are facing similar calls to go green.

Social factors are also in focus, particularly after the BLM and "MeToo" movements spurred critical self-reflection among employers and investors. LPs, in turn, are scrutinising the extent to which fund managers embrace diversity within their own firms. And this is already beginning to influence recruitment strategies. According to **EY's 2021 CFO survey**, over 50 per cent of respondents cited increasing gender and ethnic-minority representation as their top priorities, while over 70 per cent identified plans to establish diversity and inclusion programs.

LPs, of course, have always scrutinised governance. In a Covid world, business continuity and cybersecurity have stood out among the focus areas. But following high-profile scandals at Wirecard, Uber, and WeWork in recent years, LPs are even more intent to ensure alignment between themselves, their fund managers, and **other previously overlooked stakeholders** – from portfolio company employees to local communities.

So, against this backdrop, many sponsors are realising that attention around sustainability isn't going away.

To be sure, a growing number of PE firms in recent years have become signatories of the UN's PRI. But the pressure is ramping up to turn this commitment into action.

Across our client base, we're seeing this from institutional investors who have already incorporated ESG factors into their core investment framework to fund managers producing inaugural ESG reports to document traction against non-financial KPIs. Some private equity firms are helping their portfolio companies initiate their own CSR journeys, while fintech companies are introducing new tools to standardise data and facilitate ESG reporting.

Five years ago, these themes were confined to specialist managers who focused exclusively on impact. Today, sustainability has become universal and can be expected to become a core part of investor relations for the foreseeable future. ■

Ken MacFadyen
Senior Vice President, Head of Content Development

Ken MacFadyen works across BackBay's private equity, asset management and fintech verticals, overseeing content development. Bringing approximately 20 years of experience in journalism, investor relations, and as an executive speechwriter, Ken helps conceive and create content on behalf of clients, ranging from white papers and research to bylined articles, video scripts, strategic talking points, and traditional marketing copy.

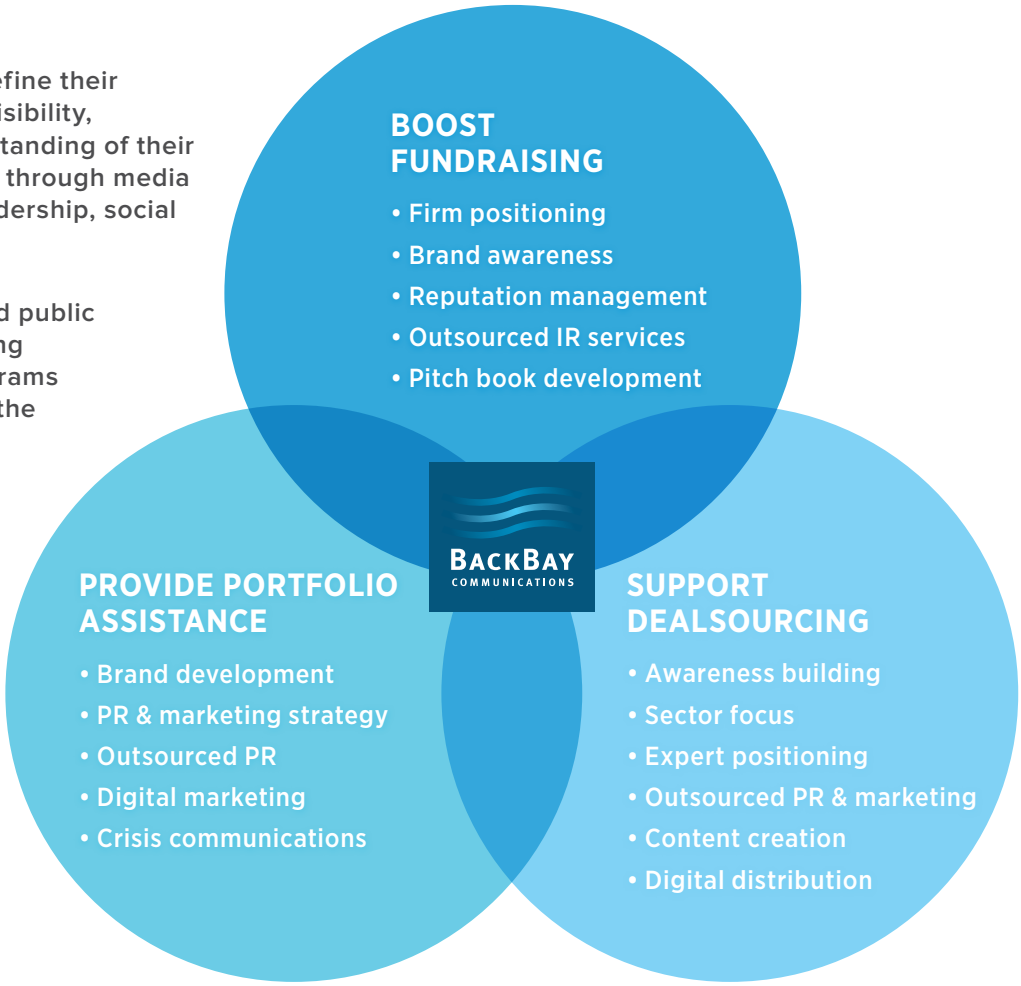
Prior to joining BackBay, Ken spent over a decade in journalism covering the private equity industry, having served as the editor in chief at Mergers & Acquisitions Journal and news editor of Buyouts Magazine, in addition to other editorial roles at Investment Dealers' Digest and Private Equity International.

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eFront is a leading technology solution for alternative investment management, covering the needs of investment professionals end-to-end, across all major alternative asset classes. From fundraising, fund administration and reporting to data services and analytics, the platform provides capabilities to support decision-making and investment oversight.

As a part of BlackRock, eFront and BlackRock's Aladdin® investment technology platform bring together public and private asset classes to create an industry-leading multi-asset investment technology solution for investment professionals globally.

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eVestment Private Markets provides market and portfolio intelligence solutions for GPs, LPs and Consultants, and is a division of eVestment, a Nasdaq company. We are focused on enhancing access to data and insights to empower private markets participants to achieve their respective goals across fund selection and investor relations. With TopQ, our sophisticated performance data management and analytics tool, clients can more accurately calculate, more securely communicate, and more efficiently analyse private markets performance at the track record, fund and deal level. Market Lens, a one-stop market intelligence platform provides fund managers with more granular, timely and actionable insights into commitment plans, fund selection decisions and much more from leading US, UK and Canadian public plans and their consultants.

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