

PR: adapting to change

 By [Janice Spark](#)

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The public relations industry, much like other parts of the economy, is going through massive changes, brought about by rapid and continuous evolution in communications technologies. PR professionals are under pressure to keep pace with the changing ways that people are communicating and with adapting their business models to the quick pace of change in a world where information flows faster than ever before.



1. A hybridising communications sector

The lines that separate different communications disciplines are not as clear as they once were. Cell C's use of comedian Trevor Noah as a prominent 'face' for its rebranding campaign is a case in point. Love it or hate it, Cell C's initiative blurred PR, marketing, advertising, experiential marketing, digital and social media into a powerful hybrid campaign.

In this world, communications agencies are increasingly delivering hybridised offerings. PR agencies now offer more above-the-line creative offerings, while ad agencies incorporate relationship and community elements that were traditionally the domain of PR. Digital agencies, once considered niche players in the communications mix, are enjoying boom times, while specialist social media agencies are emerging.

But one certainty is that strong relationship and reputation management skills are more important than ever in this fragmented, overlapping environment.

2. Social media

South African firms need to catch up in the social media space, but there is little doubt that they are beginning to understand its important role in customer service and reputation management. They will look to their potential PR partners to demonstrate social media theory in practice within their own businesses.

As a result, PR execs will themselves embrace the social media mediums and channels they are analysing and discussing on behalf of their clients.

3. Transparency as strategic asset (and operational challenge)

Transparency matters in a world where companies can no longer control the flow of information. BP, Toyota, Nestlé and Intel have all faced crises of transparency in recent years, providing case studies in the strategic importance of transparency and the bottom-line consequences of transparency failures.

Against that backdrop, the PR sector will have a major role to play in giving corporations and brands the tools to cope with this new strategic context. That's the theory, anyway.

In practice, PR will remain a reactionary tool in many corporations. Here, the specialists are called in as crisis managers, after all the important events have taken place.

In those contexts, the ability of the PR experts to engender meaningful organisational shifts will remain limited.

4. The evolving SA social context

In the last two years, we have seen many major brands follow Outsurance's example by integrating corporate social investment (CSI) with their marketing efforts. This trend will continue throughout 2011, especially with many brands seeking to re-establish their social credentials in the face of increased competition and 'social clutter'.

Social development and community support is a complex area of brand operation. It involves the interaction of many people with dramatically different points of view and cultural contexts - from community members to the press, government representatives, corporate leaders and community activists.

Brands must ensure that nothing goes wrong - that false expectations are not created and that delivery on project promises is always on track. Communication will be the crucial factor to leveraging CSI to build brands and reputations.

5. Measurement

Historically, the benefits PR brings to an organisation have been notoriously difficult to nail down, with most companies today seeing limited value in benchmarks such as advertising value equivalencies (AVE).

Instead, expect to see new models emerging that attempt to quantify integrated PR value across a complex matrix of multiple dimensions. These new models are important steps forward for clients and agencies alike, especially in an environment where media agencies are offering hybridised, overlapping services.

Online reputation management (ORM), data analytics tools and other sophisticated technologies will be put to use to measure and understand customer behaviour, organisational reputation, and other factors companies wish to influence through their communications.

6. Mobile mobile mobile

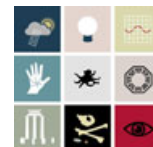
If you need proof that mobile matters, consider the following: BBM (BlackBerry Messenger) - the instant messaging application written specifically for BlackBerry smartphone users - has seen a staggering 500% increase in use over the last year, and currently has more than 25 million users worldwide.

MXit, which allows for instant messaging without the hard cost of always on Internet connectivity that many other mobile phone applications require, now claims almost 27 million subscribers, most of them South African.

Data connectivity and phones are becoming faster and cheaper in leaps and bounds, so that is just a small taste of the future. The challenge for PR practitioners is to understand this new medium, use it appropriately (bearing in mind looming legislation such as the Consumer Protection Act) and measure the results of actions and interactions effectively.

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