

Public remedies

By [Michelle Sturman](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

3 May 2005

The public relations industry has, for too long, been perceived as the poor cousin of the marketing mix and plagued by accusations of poor quality service and a lack of transformation. Now it's time for PR to bite back.

"There is a widely held misperception that traditional advertising and PR activities are very different genres. It is even believed that the two are unrelated." - Kim Ferreira, FCB Redline.

The public relations (PR) industry has had a tough time of it over recent years, but it seems to be changing for the better. PRISA (the Institute for Public Relations & Communication) is working on charters and a SETA programme, large PR consulting firms are announcing BEE partnerships, and relationships between the media and PR are improving.

Most PR firms will agree that while perceptions have improved there are still companies that let the side down. "Some PR 'agencies' have a reputation for flooding journalists with poor quality press releases of questionable newsworthiness, and then nagging them about using them. Some PRs also have a reputation for serving their own interests by acting as gatekeepers rather than facilitators in the dissemination of their clients' information," says Karen Ballard, managing director, Citigate Johannesburg.

However, "most professional PR agencies provide journalists with a very real service by giving them interesting leads for articles and well-researched background information; by facilitating interviews with busy executives; opening doors for them and assisting them with information when deadlines are tight," says Marilyn de Villiers, strategic content director, Citigate Johannesburg.

The poor quality service provided by some companies can be attributed in part to one major problem: there are virtually no barriers to entry; anyone can set up a PR firm and pitch for clients. It is a problem that has been recognised not only by agencies, but also by PRISA, which is currently working on company accreditation schemes. The industry is segmented with most large PR agencies being affiliated to international companies, with the remainder being smaller agencies that consist of one- and two-man bands.

A new face

Whatever the size of an agency, the same rules of good PR still apply, although the days of traditional PR involving girls in little black dresses handing out cocktails seem to be over. "Traditional PR has changed; back then many PR firms did not have the strategic relationship with clients that we enjoy now," says Peter Wallington, managing director, Ogilvy PR.

"PR used to be the domain of the PR doyenne - an elegant woman of a certain age who used to lunch regularly with magazine editors. Now, PR like advertising, has changed because of client pressure and is now much more bottom-line driven. Clients won't accept the nebulous intangibles of PR - an industry that charges with no guarantee of results - and a cocktail party is no longer considered a justifiable use of resources," says Marcus Brewster, CEO, Marcus Brewster Publicity.

This has led many PR firms into the branch of strategic communications, such as Gillian Gamsy International (GGI). Darryn-Lee Gamsy, executive director, GGI, says: "The current PR that we do has moved away from the golf days, etc. However, there are still many companies that do continue in this way, and I think this is the cause of the negative perception of PR. We're in the communications business now and we work as consultants. We're also an extremely important communications tool which is contained within the broader mix of communication disciplines."

Most PR firms feel however, that within the marketing mix, PR is still seriously undervalued. While the industry is beginning to be taken more seriously by clients and more budget is being allocated to PR, it still needs work. "Companies are prepared to benchmark their advertising but not their PR, because advertisers have worked hard to grow marketers' faith in advertising. If PR were to work more closely with advertising agencies, the client would benefit from an integrated, strategic approach to a communication problem," says Kim Ferreira, managing director, FCB Redline.

"There is a widely held misconception that traditional advertising and PR activities are very different genres. It is even believed that the two are unrelated. As a result, many opportunities to maximise the effect of PR or advertising are wasted, because there is no leveraging of the joint power of the two marketing forces," adds Ferreira.

In the mix

The increased use of PR within campaign and brand building is another battle the industry is fighting. "There is still a tendency among the so-called marketing 'doyens' of the local industry to equate marketing with advertising (below, through and mostly above), and to regard other disciplines, particularly PR, with somewhat contemptuous disdain," says Citigate's Ballard.

The cost of advertising versus PR is another hotbed of debate at the moment, and one that the PR industry is determined to win. "Today, PR can be far more efficient and cost effective than advertising in disseminating messages to an audience. Not only does it cost less, but more importantly, the value of the message is much greater. In PR, the chosen medium acts as an independent, third-party 'endorsement' of the message. This means that the PR portrayal of a brand is highly believable," says Ferreria.

Communication in the 21st century is taking on new meaning and the marketing industry is slowly waking up to the fact that integrated campaigns (including PR), are the most effective way to build awareness and branding. "Converged communications or integrated communications don't discard the various marketing disciplines of the 20th century; it brings them together in a bouquet from which marketers can select the most appropriate offering for a specific strategy. It allows marketers to define strategy first, and then to use the appropriate tools for delivery, rather than, as was so often the case in the past, allowing the tools and the budget split to dictate the strategy," says Ballard.

Transformation

While some PR agencies are taking the integrated communications route and positioning themselves as consultants, others have become more specialised. "We used to be a traditional PR company focusing on press releases, events, etc. We then changed to media relations and instead focused on core competencies as we realised we couldn't do everything. It's impossible to be a jack-of-all-trades and still expect to deliver the results," says Marie Yossava, managing director, Grapevine Communications.

Smaller PR agencies such as Grapevine may have overcome the challenge of positioning themselves in the market, but they are still left dealing with the issue of transformation. Even for the larger agencies, finding partners has been difficult. "The money to be made in PR [compared to other industries] is not huge so it makes it less attractive for significant BEE investors, especially those requiring 51.1 per cent. Previously disadvantaged people who want to get into the industry just set up their own business. There is a real need for transformation but until the barriers to entry change and PR is regulated, it's going to be difficult," says Gamsy.

Smaller companies face a different problem. It is not viable to expect an agency that employs six people to go the full empowerment route. "The PR industry is dominated by one-man shops and small boutique-sized consultancies. When you're dealing with these small, entrepreneurially driven organisations, transformation is not high on the agenda. These consultancy owners are much too busy coping with the day-to-day exigencies of keeping their businesses running and meeting media deadlines, than looking to long-term, long-range strategic plans for BEE," says Brewster.

However, transformation is taking place. "For small businesses, such as Grapevine, a great way to contribute to BEE is

through mentoring and training," says Yossava.

Ogilvy's Wallington agrees: "For the large PR companies, transformation is a must. Smaller companies can become involved in training, offering bursaries, etc. We're talking about becoming more involved with training programmes this year, especially with regard to transformation."

"Clients won't accept the nebulous intangibles of PR - an industry that charges with no guarantee of results - and a cocktail party is no longer considered a justifiable use of resources." - Marcus Brewster

SETA

PRISA is developing a PR training course through SETA. "The public relations industry falls within the Business Chamber in the Services SETA. The main focus of a SETA is to distribute the skills levies paid by employers in the form of learnership grants. Public relations learnerships have been developed for Levels 4, 5, and 6. Level 4 has been registered and the industry should be able to access these learnerships by the end of this year," says Margaret Moscardi, executive director, PRISA.

For more information visit: www.serviceseta.org.za.

"There is a real need for transformation but until the barriers to entry change and PR is regulated, it's going to be difficult." - Darryn-Lee Gamsy

Source: *Marketing Mix*, Vol. 23 No. 3 2005

" I love what I do 16 Jan 2023

" Another high end brand engages Grapevine 13 Jan 2023

" Bitventure teams with Grapevine to boost profile and raise awareness 10 Jun 2022

" It's all about the energy 12 May 2022

" Real Heroes Connect success shows South Africans are eager to increase coronavirus knowledge 28 Jul 2020



Grapevine Communications

Grapevine Communications is a highly successful and niche media relations consultancy.

[Profile](#) | [News](#) | [Contact](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [RSS Feed](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>