

Remaining relevant as a PR/communication agency in a tech-driven world

By [Marie Yossava](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

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Grapevine was registered in the mid-1990s, and as such, experienced the advent of the internet and South Africa's transformation into a democracy. Since then electronic and digital communications have dramatically changed the way, as well as the pace, with which we conduct business and communicate with one another. To survive, the old adage - adapt or die - continues to apply.



When Grapevine started out, we were drafting press releases, proposal documents, PR strategies and preparing budgets on PCs, while the remainder of communications was conducted via analogue phones and fax machines. Then we saw the advent of the first cellphone in Africa, while the first cellular network operations were launched in June 1994. South Africa could not have anticipated the uptake and market saturation, as well as how mobile technology would change the future and consumption of information.

Advent of the internet

In 1991, South Africa got internet and as connectivity improved, we went from traditional hard copy media to online. With the internet came e-commerce - faxes and typed letters fell away to be replaced with email and websites. The internet became a vast research tool and newsgathering resource for journalists, replacing traditional sources of information like encyclopaedias.

The internet also opened up a host of new platforms, including the first electronic versions of printed news in a format known as e-zines. Articles had to become shorter and more succinct, so as not to lose the reader. (Research shows that people who read online rarely read word for word, instead they scan).

Visuals and video clips started replacing lengthy copy, lending immediacy to content and as cellphones became more sophisticated, how messaging was packaged and length of content became critical. PR agencies that want to survive have to ensure that content is a key component of their strategic plans.

Social media

Social networking began in 2004. Despite a number of other platforms that were tried and tested, Facebook led the pack. Brands and companies came to realise the potential of social media to reach and influence defined audiences on a global scale and today it is a vital communications platform.

Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and LinkedIn can be successfully linked to create effective social media campaigns. We regard social media as an important platform for PR agencies to communicate key client messaging, urgent press statements and announcements at a speed that cannot be matched by any other medium, not even broadcast. It also opens the door to direct communication with customers, stakeholders and journalists.

For several years now, social media has been working its way in to the offerings of many PR practitioners, as well as advertising professionals. PR agencies are perfectly positioned to craft content and convey information directly from a reliable source - the client - which mitigates rumours and speculation. It therefore makes sense that social media be offered by PR agencies, because it's all communication at the end of the day. In fact, it's a perfect combination as both are intrinsically about building relationships.

From the outset, social media should be part of media relations and therefore needs to be aligned to the client's communication strategy and goals, not positioned in isolation. It is also important to understand that social media content needs regular updating to gain a following, as well as decisive, quick responses to build credibility.

The PR industry needs to embrace social media as part of their media relations and look at doing communications differently. If 140 characters can reach stakeholders directly with a message, it must be regarded as even more effective than a press release.

Media relations

Just as social media is impacting on the PR industry, we need to acknowledge how it is changing the role of journalists. Twitter is an ideal platform to develop relations with journalists through direct messaging, re-tweeting, #FF where you recommend Twitter users. Grapevine has been able to develop new media contacts not only in South Africa, but worldwide due to this medium and we enjoy the informal environment to stay in touch. PR agencies can define audiences for their clients and select who to follow anywhere in the world, as well as send information across borders.

Bloggers also cannot be ignored as they are the consumers' voice for brands and products. We ensure that bloggers are on our media lists for press releases and invitations and in some instances, we have sponsored their blogs.

So while PR agencies might think that their media lists are diminishing due to print titles that are falling away, they should, in fact, be growing their contacts by following journalists and bloggers on social media - so the media pie is, in fact, growing.

While Grapevine acknowledges that online media is becoming an increasingly influential means of communicating with stakeholders without the need to go through the mass media, there is still an opportunity for traditional and social media to work hand in glove, particularly in a crisis situation or where there are fragmented target audiences, some of which without internet access.

The future

Online communications methods will certainly not be the death of PR agencies that are forward-thinking. Practitioners need to adopt the new platforms and ensure that they individualise their communications for multiple audiences. While print titles are battling for revenue and we have seen niche ones come and go, as well as longstanding titles folding such as Shape SA in September 2012, we believe traditional media in South Africa will remain with us in the foreseeable future.

Due to the nature and diversity of our local demographics, there will be a continuing need for PR agencies to maintain and nurture their traditional media relations, while growing and developing knowledge, capabilities and media relations in the social media sphere.

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