

Social media: synergy with PR agencies

By Marie Yossava, issued by Grapevine Communications

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With social media's popularity increasing rapidly, PR and advertising agencies have been feeling the pressure to embrace this global development and incorporate social media into their client offering. This has resulted in many ad agencies hiring social media professionals.

However an article on www.socialmediaexplorer.com calls the combination of social media and ad agencies a 'culture clash', pointing out that each has very different goals and disciplines. "Social media is, in many ways, the antithesis of advertising. Advertising is one-way communications aimed at large groups of consumers. Social media is two-way communications that requires listening, as well as speaking." Ad agencies sell; social media platforms are centred around conversation and customer service. Social media is all about content creation, while ad agencies are concept creators.

It makes sense then that the social media offering should be incorporated into PR agencies, because it's all communication at the end of the day. In fact, they make a perfect pair as both are intrinsically about building relationships. PR agencies are perfectly positioned to craft the content and convey information directly from a reliable source, which also mitigates rumours.

The danger of incorrect information on Twitter and whether news on this platform should be believed was highlighted in an article on 1 March in Bizcommunity by news editor Francois Rank (<https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/15/71624.html>). He told of how ZA Media was the first to break the story on Twitter about Julius Malema's expulsion from the ANC, yet journalists outside the court were still waiting to hear the verdict. Nevertheless the rumour spread around the twittersphere. This is a great example of when a PR agency working for the ANC, the courts or even Malema could step in and squash the rumour and replace it with the truth.

Social media can be regarded as an additional, important vehicle 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 radio. From the outset, however, social media needs to be aligned to the client's communication strategy and goals and not seen in isolation or as an afterthought. It is also important to understand that it requires regular content updates to gain a following and decisive, quick responses to build credibility.

Both social media and PR connect a brand with its target audience, but social media offers the added two-way element of customer feedback and the opportunity for the client to respond. This makes customers feel that they matter, that the company cares, responds, interacts, and this ties in with customer satisfaction and brand building. Because of the nature of the Internet, online comments cannot be deleted and this poses a risk to companies' reputations. A good measure of successful communication is when the number of complaints on the popular consumer website Hello Peter, for instance, is reduced. This also presents PR agencies with an opportunity to encourage their clients to become 'A Company who Responds' on this website and to take charge of handling the comments.

Other ways in which PR agencies can use social media include sharing and retweeting interesting articles in the client's sphere of business, engaging in relevant conversations, introducing new products, running competitions, increasing the use of these platforms by directing traffic on one platform to another, and most importantly, it can be used for crisis communication. Builders Warehouse used social media combined with traditional media to great effect to quickly respond to the shooting of a shopper at the Sunninghill branch on 22 February this year, when would-be robbers tried to hijack a vehicle.

These days there are many analytics tools available online to track social media - success can be measured by the number of friends and 'likes' on Facebook, followers and retweets on Twitter, blog readership, YouTube views etc. Just as PR

agencies provide clients with monthly reports to show return on investment, they can just as easily include Google Analytics reports.

The synergy between social media and PR is clear. It's time to bring social media into the PR fold and let ad agencies off the hook.

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