

# Two worlds...one message

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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PR practitioners frequently counsel clients to 'stay on message' despite tactical distractions and fast-changing market conditions. It's good advice - so good, we should take it ourselves.

Our roots are in the developed world, but decades of global growth ensures broad representation in emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and many more, including the increasingly dynamic societies of the Muslim world.

Our founding principles of ethical dealing and truthful communication may originally have been enunciated in Western Europe and North America, but their relevance in emerging markets is not in dispute. Facts remain facts, whether you state them on Threadneedle Street, London, or Arab Street in Kampong Glam, Singapore.

## Don't tell lies

This does not mean we can ignore local realities. Pressures differ market to market, but the overall response, in my view, remains the same ... don't tell lies. When controversy arises, react promptly and honestly. Deal with all stakeholders in a fair and open fashion. Always.

It's simple really, and it works.

IPRA's (International Public Relations Associations) ethical message is powerful because of proven efficacy in all geographies.

Our global growth and the rising incidence of emerging nations in our membership mix are unqualified positives. There is no implicit danger that standards may drop because the yardstick changes to the south and east.

I say this as a pragmatist rather than a moralist. In whichever market you're in, the truth comes out in the end and those telling it do better than those who don't.

## The ethical position is the preferred position

Recent experience from emerging, newly democratic South Africa supports my case that the ethical position is the preferred position whether you are addressing publics in the southern or northern hemisphere.

Payment of 'lunch money' to lowly paid traffic officers to escape a traffic fine is a growing problem; so is abuse of tendering and procurement processes. The result in the public and private sectors is a redoubled effort to foster and entrench ethical values.

No one says 'bribery is OK; this is Africa'. It's not OK and the local growth of whistleblower processes and increasing emphasis on organisational values indicate that outrage is widespread.

Similar outrage is evident over dubious practices in the UK media and in the US sub-prime mortgage market. Evidently, a similar ethical compass guides public reaction and corporate strategy whether you work in a developed or a developing country.

This explains my confidence that PR's growth in the emerging world will be underpinned by ethical practice.

## **PR's growth in the emerging world**

PR will grow in new markets because these economies are getting stronger, political processes are becoming more democratic, media access is widening, the middle class is expanding and the need for investor information is becoming acute.

Economic strength is widely acknowledged. Asia is already estimated to account for 30% of global economic output.

Africa is also rising. *The Economist* pointed out at the end of last year that over the past decade, six of the world's ten fastest-growing countries were African. For most of the last ten years, Africa grew faster than East Asia.

Emerging market demand underpins the performance of many multinationals. SABMiller, a global brewer with African roots, makes 70% of its profits in emerging markets thanks to strong volume growth in Africa, Latin America and Asia Pacific.

Volume growth does not occur in a vacuum. We also see population growth, a growing youth market and growing awareness of sustainability issues and corporate governance.

In areas like reporting and performance tracking, emerging countries are quick to catch up with the sophisticated West.

To give one example, when it comes to integrated corporate reporting encompassing financial and non-financial performance, standards in my adopted country of South Africa are on a par with the best in the world.

## **Innovation that works is valued and rapidly adopted**

The Dow first developed a sustainability index back in 1999 and the British followed in 2001, but South Africa's Socially Responsible Investment Index was in place by 2004 and Brazil came out with something similar a year later.

Other indices can also be illuminating; for example, the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders. On the 2010 index, the emerging East European nations of Estonia and Lithuania (with rankings of ninth and 11th respectively) outscored both the UK (19th) and USA (20th).

Already, some emerging nations dispute their categorisation. They're not emerging, they've emerged.

It's wrong to regard them simply as poor relations. It's equally wrong to assume they are ethically under-developed.

They can perform to the same ethical and professional standards as anyone else. PR practitioners that insist on it, respond to one of the great drivers of exceptional performance in the emerging world - the determination to meet world best practice and succeed against global competition.

The 'developed' and 'developing' categorisation remains useful. But when it comes to standards there is no need for separation or distinctions. Our members can safely stay on message - a highly professional one - no matter which world they inhabit.

## ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopen Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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