Talk left, walk right - the anti-establishment era

By Lebo Madiba

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Monumental change has been in the air for some time, and it came of age in 2016 with events like Brexit, the on-going #FeesMustFall protests here in South Africa and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Like it or not, we need to adjust to this 'new normal'.



Lebo Madiba

For communications practitioners, this means we need to take a long, hard look at how socio-economic and political trends are impacting on our audiences and the ways in which we engage with them. Individuals, circumstances and lifestyles have changed - sometimes in dramatic ways - and it would be ignorant to assume that the ‘same old, same old’ still applies.

So what are the trends that will be shaping communications in 2017?

Globalisation

Globalisation - in the sense that money, people and products are now globally mobile - is here to stay. And consumers that embrace globalisation are a new breed: agile, curious, open-minded and individualised.

On the flip side, although we are more interconnected than we have been at any other time in history, there is a great sense of uncertainty throughout the world due to the political, social and economic developments of the past few years.

Brands and consumers have less control than they have ever had, and this has led to a pervasive sense of risk and fragmentation across the socio-economic spectrum.

As a result, we are seeing a definite shift towards protectionism and nationalism; towards a divided world characterised by discrete blocks of interest and influence. The biggest challenge for communicators is therefore to be able to identify and act on the opportunities this trend presents.

Disruptive innovation

Innovation has, of course, been a buzzword for some time now but, as a concept, even this has been cranked up a notch. Clients are not only looking for innovation in their communications, but for disruptive innovation; something that will catch the attention of restless and often fickle audiences. And, given current economic pressures, they are looking for disruptive innovation that costs very little to implement.

Changing attitudes

Disruptive innovation is so important because attitudes are changing rapidly throughout society. In such a fluid environment, people feel the need to be valued as individuals. They need the brands they interact with to be truthful and authentic; something they can depend on. And when a connection like this is established, they tend to be highly loyal.

Speaking to and retaining these loyal customers in such a fast-moving environment is a tremendous challenge for marketers and their agencies alike. So finding ways of keeping abreast of changing attitudes and of tapping into an evolving cultural ethos is vital for sustainability and success.

The new PR

Of course, all of this means that PR is changing dramatically too. This is being exacerbated by the blurring of the lines between advertising and PR due to the growing prevalence and influence of digital communications. In both business and at agency level, this means that talent needs to be identified, acknowledged and developed now more than ever before.

In the marketplace, it means that what we previously thought about PR has changed because consumption patterns are changing as attitudes and lifestyles change. Individuals just don’t see themselves in terms of their demographics or as target markets, but as individuals with unique needs and desires. They know what they want and are very clear about it. They know what they expect from brands and want these expectations to be met in an authentic way, so tolerance for deviation is very low.

In summary, 2016 proved to be a year of anti-establishment sentiment and this is a trend that is likely to become more entrenched in 2017. As communicators, we need to find innovative ways of tapping into this sentiment. We need to help our clients find their unique voices in a cacophony of other voices; to engage their audiences in an authentic way and to build loyalty that will ride out the winds of change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lebo Madiba @Lebonator, Managing Director, PR Powerhouse @PRPowerhouse.

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