

The age of smart PR is imminent

 By [Marcus Brewster](#)

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Dinosaurs roamed the earth in 1986 when I first entered the world of PR. My first job was as Promotions Manager in the music business and I arrived in the industry right at the tail end of the telex machine. It was only later in 1986 that the fax machine was introduced in the RPM Records offices - as revolutionary a communication enabler as email or social media were to become to the PR game in subsequent decades.



No free lunch: a youthful Marcus Brewster (left)

Age of the Doyenne

My first decade in PR (five years in the music industry, one year in consultancy and four years of running my own PR start-up), I would characterise as the 'Age of The Doyenne'. The PR universe was ruled by a pantheon of middle-aged ladies: legendary names like Wilma Lawson-Turnbull and Adele Lucas. Their PR tactic of choice was The Lunch: they would secure coverage for their clients by taking lady editors from the glossy magazines to linen napkined establishments for a midday repast.

It seems very quaint to think that PR was largely practiced like this (power queen to power queen) but no more anachronistic than the advertising industry portrayed in scrupulously researched detail on television's *Mad Men*.

The Great Dame hegemony led me to the first of my disruptive approaches to the PR industry. The lesson I would offer my staff was direct and to the point: "Jane Raphaely is Not your Friend". The take-out from this was to indicate that it was pointless to try and pitch to as senior an editorial figure as a Jane Raphaely. Instead, I would encourage each of my team members to find a connection on the masthead that was closer to their standing. If you were an intern at [marcusbrewster](#), then I would encourage you to break the ice with interns at Associated Magazines. This year's intern is next year's Junior Fashion Editor - walk the relationship path together as both PR and journalist rise in their careers.

All Access Age

My second decade in PR was the 'All Access Age'. Us bright young things in public relations knew everybody in the media. Importantly, newsroom floors were not security-restricted zones. We had the run of place and were familiar figures to media workers. On an almost daily basis I would be down in Newspaper House walking the floors, stopping at desks to either hand deliver a press release or just to say hello to a journalist.

We did our product drops ourselves and went through reams of compliment slips because (in those pre-jpeg days) in order to issue a photograph we always had to append transparencies to labelled comp slips. The tactic of choice was the promo item and we spent many unbilled creative hours hunting down gadgets and knick-knacks. (I remember that to promote Crowded House's new album - vinyl of course - I commissioned a retired gentleman one year to produce bespoke dolls house furniture). Journalist desks were a veritable playground of bric-a-brac and we were often shown the latest toy that another PR agency had just delivered.



Bringing home the bacon - Marcus Brewster

The DNA of the All Access mentality drove business decisions as well. The fact that I chose an office building in the Cape Town CBD is directly linked to a geographical imperative. Just like a millisecond in faster internet access is a million-dollar competitive advantage to a stock-broking firm, so proximity to the various newspaper publishing houses was a success catalyst. I used to get calls saying, "I can't find the picture you gave me - if you can get another one down to me in the next

15 minutes, I'll give you the front page". And off I'd run - literally. Happy that I'd secured such a coverage win for a client, but even happier still to be able to swoop in and save the day with a publication on deadline!

Age of Transactional PR

Technology fundamentally upended the PR approach. Firstly, the advent of email meant that the new generation of PR practitioners didn't need to learn faces and names. Everything was done remotely from behind a desk in the airconditioned splendour of the consultancies who employed them.

I call this the 'Age of Transactional PR'. The term press-release is considered anachronistic; it's now content. PR is now the business of supplying copy to downsized newsrooms. The further change in my third decade of PR was the gold rush to social media.

Now it's a given that PR is a hybrid between traditional media (we're now accustomed to using that prefix to refer to editorial coverage) and social communication, which is all about reaching audiences through their devices.

Age of Smart PR

Where do I think it's going? I believe the PR industry will evolve to a fourth age, the one I'll call the 'Age of Smart PR'. Smart PR believes in the axiom of working smart not hard. Quality over quantity. Impact over AVE. Swift, informed decision-making guided by data analysis. A lean start-up mentality that favours rapid, incremental improvement over large sweeping changes. A no-nonsense attitude toward wasteful expenditure of precious time and energy. The marriage of media planning with publicity outreach (if a media agency has already calculated where the ad budget is best spent, why not let PR access that research to guide where editorial placements reach the best audiences?)

Change is nothing new. We are naïve if we think that current digital innovations are more revolutionary than older technologies were in their era. Facebook more important than the invention of the printing press? Hardly. Pinterest more groundbreaking than the introduction of the car? I think not.

We used to say that in our grandmothers' lifetimes, they went from the ox wagon to the space shuttle. In my lifetime, I'll probably go from the telex machine to The Singularity. But whatever happens, PR will continue, tying the shoelaces and combing the hair of brands and companies to ensure they look as smart as the PR pro representing them. It's an exciting time once again, just as it's always been.

ABOUT MARCUS BREWSTER

marcusbrewster is a brand synonymous with PR excellence in SA. An industry innovator, leader, and inspiration, Brewster affiliated his multi-award winning boutique firm with larger Level 1 BBBEE marketing/comms agency MediaRevolution for scale in 2016 and went on to launch Marcus Brewster International in Europe the following year. Marcus currently lives on - and actively promotes - the Mediterranean island of Malta. For African, S. African and European PR enquiries, contact marcus@marcusbrewster.com or WhatsApp on (+356) 9931 3322

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