

PR in the boardroom - pipedream or reality?

 By Sarah Gooding-Kobus 29 Aug 2016

As they exited the lift, the alarm and pitch in their voices made me think there was a medical emergency, or that a woman had gone into labour in the foyer of our hotel. "Our lives are over if we don't get this right. We're dead, dude," barks ad man one. "That's right," intercepts ad man two, "We're about to miss the print deadline." And so began my Loeries Creative Week at the Elangeni Hotel in Durban.

One has to laugh at the inflated sense of importance that exists in the media and communications sector, particularly in advertising. After all, we're not saving lives.

Or are we?

For the first time in South Africa, the public relations and advertising industries shared the same space and venue for the 2016 PRISA conference and the 2016 Loeries, all wrapped up into the Loeries Creative Week. At face value, this may seem insignificant, but historically, especially here in SA, PR has generally been perceived as the poorer cousin to advertising, for reasons ranging from lower barrier to entry and scope of activity, all the way to the obvious budget gaps.

But as more emphasis is placed on image and reputation management in an ever competitive and complex business world, PR has become increasingly significant and strategic. Similarly, we are seeing the lines between the two disciplines blurring in our always on/connected world, which requires an integrated approach to all brand communications.

Ultimately, being able to take brands and their stakeholders on a journey, via narratives that ensure optimal impact at all points of exchange between these two is where PR has the edge – very little is quite as effective at transformational storytelling.

We had the pleasure of attending PRISA president, Thabasile Phumo's session on Business Acumen. Whilst the topic itself isn't anything new, Thabasile drove home a few pragmatic realities, challenging the industry to re-position its thinking.



Firstly, she highlighted that PR has its place around the boardroom table, should be represented at executive level and that it is pointless preparing communication plans that aren't directly linked to the objectives of the business. Whilst this is painfully obvious to many, the larger point is that it isn't being done at scale (certainly in SA) and this undermines the true value of good PR.

Her second point was that we operate and integrate within a broader business and global environment. No knowing what is going on with Brexit or the US elections simply isn't good enough, regardless of your level in an organisation. Global events impact local business, markets and indeed budgets.

Thabasile's session got me thinking. The fact that we're having a discussion about PR having a rightful place at the boardroom table means that the status quo is that PR doesn't *actually* have a seat on the average exco team. More importantly, any crisis that exists in communications is ours to turn around. The responsibility doesn't lie with our clients, nor with different segments within the broader marketing function.

But most importantly, this year's session made me realise how we really value or as is often the case, don't value ourselves as an industry. I overheard multiple conversations around difficult clients, smaller budgets and, at worst, a "master/slave" relationship between agency and client.

Stop the press! My biggest bug bear is PR people that moan incessantly around their client set up, but they do absolutely nothing to set expectations, educate and put boundaries in place. When it comes to budget, whether it's small or large, we need to deliver the same level of excellence, and top and tail output accordingly. Also, if your client doesn't understand PR, educate them. It's not their job to understand our industry, but it sure is ours to understand theirs.

It's also our job to educate our clients about how our business works, in as far as this is possible. If you're hours-based consultancy, be transparent, share your thinking and methodology. If a deadline is totally unreasonable, negotiate – otherwise your client will justifiably believe that six opinion pieces can be turned around in 24 hours. Start with respecting the value we provide and then we can start expecting the same respect from clients and the broader industry.

The bottom line; we're the masters of our own destiny and can be as big, or as small, as we so choose.

ABOUT SARAH GOODING-KOBUS

Sarah is passionate about the organisational structure of the growing team at WE in Johannesburg and maintaining an open, integrated culture that is geared for long-term success. [View my profile and articles...](#)