

## A time for reflection

At this time of year when most business activities wind down, retail and tourism being notable exceptions, of course, it is perhaps appropriate to reflect on where communications in South Africa has come from, where the profession is now, and where it is heading.

By [John Bradfield](#) 17 Dec 2003

Memories are sometimes short and it's often a good idea to look back where we were a few years ago to see how far we have come. Knowing where we are headed is a bit trickier to predict, but at least there are some pointers that can give us a possible broad outline of the road ahead.

Each of us involved in the communications business has a different time point when we entered the industry. Some of the best ones who have managed to re-invent themselves a couple of times along the way, go back a few decades. Others may have begun a decade or two ago. Yet others, perhaps the recent majority go back a couple of years. Whatever your starting point, you carry some of the context as well as collective experience of those who practiced before you.

I came in contact with this business about 20 years ago when I was still a newspaper reporter, and subsequently a writer for business magazines. My main experience of communications has been in Johannesburg. Coming from a small fishing town in the Cape and subsequently working as a journalist, the world of communications seemed to be magical, almost ethereal - one day one was writing and reading about top people in society who had risen to great heights, and the next day headline stories captured the details of those who had fallen from grace whether through misjudgement, corruption, recklessness, or just sheer stupidity. Reputation management wasn't a vogue word then as it is today, but certainly there were many who needed advice in this critical area.

Looking back at my first encounters with pr people, I realise that that they were mainly press agents or promoters. I recall meeting some of the pr consultancy owners and corporate pr managers in the early 1980s. They were out to curry favour with journalists in many forms - free lunches, token gifts, free trips, training courses, opportunities to test drive cars or even glider planes. Some were serious minded individuals who looked no different from the business people of the day - dark suits, immaculately groomed, fancy cars and expense accounts that seemed to have no limit. A few even resembled lawyers (I remember one was an ex lawyer) and took their profession just as somberly. Their business methods all seemed so mysterious to me back then; all this effort to get their client's story across, a small mention of a product, service or project.

What was this seemingly dark art they practiced for their clients, and were able to extract what seemed to be a good living from their endeavours? They seemed to have developed their skills themselves through self taught experience rather than any special training. Interestingly, they were defined and limited by the rather simple model of communications they practiced. Their acquisition of experience and skills was really not that different from the good journalists of the day who had learned their craft in the newsroom and through a process of osmosis in the nearby bar (Federal or Liz to be specific, depending on the newspaper group you worked for) had accumulated the necessary street smarts and accompanying essential traits of scepticism and cynicism. In the other community of pr, endless product launches and mind numbing cocktail parties with often poorly written press release puffs handed out afterwards, all in pursuit of influence of the printed word.

seemed like a side show to the real world that journalists inhabited. For a young mind it was intriguing but the sober world of journalism intensely despised these people.

Crossing over from the real world of journalism to the twilight zone of "pr", with its accompanying derogatory undertones, was scorned by hard-nosed reporters and other members of the press. It was no less than a sell out.

Somewhere in the early 1990s the times began to change and public relations as a one-way or asymmetrical model of communications became outdated - though there are still some who practice from this narrow platform - and started to give way to communications as we know it today. A new euphemism some might say, but the practitioners had better training, knew about symmetrical or two-way communications theory, and were living in a world that had become increasingly complex.

Influencing the printed and spoken word was still important but there were now internal company audiences that needed to be informed and persuaded, not just through a poorly designed, badly written propaganda tool called the house organ, which gave more exposure to the handshaking top brass than the downtrodden lowly workers. Stakeholder management was now being talked about and soon reputation and relationship management was starting to be practiced rather than just preached in our rather tedious and gloomy higher learning institutions. Integrated communications was steadily gaining in practice rather than remaining a buzzword. Culture change in organisations started to gain currency - who can remember all those tiresome mission and values statements and the various creative ways of getting the messages across in printed posters, plastic encapsulated credit-size cards, slide shows, and dull corporate videos.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s it was a different world. New media such as the internet and corporate intranets burgeoned and communications practitioners were more involved in the totality of business - from image and reputation management to brand management and to internal culture change programmes. Communications budgets were tighter and return on money invested in communications activities also came more under the spotlight.

Where to from here? One certainty is that communications among humans is a dynamic, ever-changing process where the stakes are so high that people in organisations can get it wrong. The cost of not communicating or communicating ineffectively is more apparent in a business environment where every Rand spent counts. Employees have become more assertive in corporations and companies have had to become more transparent, ethical and open to outside interested parties such as customers, suppliers, business partners, investors and the media. Journalists today are generally better trained and have little time for long lunches, and many reputable publications forbid the acceptance of even the smallest gift. Advertising revenues not only in South Africa but elsewhere in the world are a shadow of what they were, editorial staffs are leaner with much multi-tasking and skilling prevalent, and so have little patience for the long-winded "story pitch" or for flimsy excuses of leisure pursuits to lure them from their screens or interviewing during working hours.

Just past this horizon, it seems that communications people will increasingly become more of business advisors than strictly the communications advisors they are mainly now. Communicators have greater collective experience of business, are closer to the management team and CEO than they were just a few years ago; and in a more transparent and competitive world, are more consulted before business people take actions than ever in the past. Communications, with its own special economies of scope, is increasingly seen as an integral part of the business, contributing no less than any other of the typical staff functions.

Those practitioners that still don't understand the business environment they work in and how they can change or influence activities and people in pursuit of achieving the larger business aims and objectives will most likely remain stuck as technicians in their functional roles in communications productions. The aim is to become not only more of a business consultant, using the specialisation of communications, to the organisation, but an active participant in changing attitudes, culture, processes and, of course, perceptions for the benefit, in the short and long run, of the business. Creativity, ideas, speed and strategy will remain the ever-important personal ingredient for all practitioners. It may all seem far away now but the future always has an uncanny way of coming up at us faster than we would ever like it to do.

## ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD

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