

Five things the PR industry does that undermines its value

 By [Andre Fourie](#)

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Over the past ten years of working in the PR industry I've encountered varying degrees of admiration, disinterest and complete distrust when telling people what I do for a living. As an industry, we've largely failed to build our own reputation as invaluable contributors to companies' bottom line. In some part, this is thanks to the abstract nature of our work. But we've also simply not lived up to the high standards we proclaim to hold ourselves to.



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Let's face it - important discussions about a company's future are rarely led by the PR director (crisis communications is the standout exception here). And when times are tough and the purse strings tighten, PR is often the first expense to be seen as 'unnecessary'.

What are we doing wrong?

You could argue that PR has a perception problem, that we just haven't put in the same amount of time, energy and smarts to build our reputation as we do for our clients. You could argue that technological disruption has made digital and full-service integrated agencies far more attractive to clients, who might be trying to reach customers in new ways. The decline of print advertising and other traditional media has also made publicity less attractive than it was even five years ago.

However, I also think that in many ways we've undermined our own value by making five key mistakes, which can be summarised as:

1. An abundance of jargon

Why do we keep using jargon? Gobbledygook is not a recognised language. We are communicators. And yet we just can't help ourselves. I was once asked (with a straight face) to prepare a "digital brand content amplification strategy". In a meeting with a CEO, I was tasked with "distilling the nectar". If you know how to do either of these things, please contact me. I'd love to know.

Until we abandon jargon for plain English, we will continue to be met with blank stares and bemused looks. Clients

themselves often use jargon. But it's our role as communication experts to lead by example. Forget the jargon; use plain English.

2. An inability to measure effectively

Or, rather, an inability to measure effectively and consistently. There are ample metrics for measuring return on investment (ROI) of PR activities, including share of voice, market penetration of key messages, traditional media reach and, in the case of digital PR, engagement, impressions and mentions are a staple of the industry. Subversive metrics such as keeping competitor brands out of the news, or preventing media coverage in times of crisis (when any coverage is likely to have a negative tone) are also known to most of us.

But it's our inability to standardise reporting of PR activities that makes it difficult for clients to trust us to show positive ROI. I believe this is an area where our industry bodies need to take the lead. We need to give clients a consistent, transparent view of our activities and what they mean to their business.

3. Forgetting about the people

If I can reduce the entire mandate of PR to a single word, it would have to be 'relationships'. That is essentially what we do, what we trade in, what we aim to build and grow and maintain. Relationships are the "why" of PR. But we seem to forget that all too often. How is it that we don't pride ourselves on our relationships with staff? The last time I checked, there was a shortage of great PR talent in our country. Pockets of excellence notwithstanding, PR needs to not only retain its most talented practitioners, but empower them to train and develop the next generation of great PR pros.

We are very good at building relationships with media and clients. Until we learn to do the same with our staff, we'll continue to see high staff turnover and a lack of passion from our most valuable asset - people.

4. Relying on style over substance

We sure have a lot of cool new toys to play with. Social media is one thing, but we're yet to even scratch the surface of new technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality. New breeds of digital-first, experiential PR agencies are emerging. It is an exciting time to be in PR.

In all this excitement, it's easy to forget the basics. There are practices and rules to PR that are fundamental and unchanging, no matter how new the tool or technology we use may be. Selling tweets and likes is not a way to engender long term trust in the power of PR. Not every brand needs to 'kick it Kardashian'. Common sense and old-fashioned smarts should always form the foundation of a campaign. Don't dilute your - and your clients' - brands by chasing glitz and glamour at the expense of smart reputation management.

5. Following instead of leading

Why is it that there even is something called 'content marketing'? Surely this is duplicating what PR is really, really good at? Why don't we get called in to lead integrated communication campaign brainstorm sessions? Outside of larger agencies where PR is only one division among a suite of integrated departments, we are often lucky to even be invited to brainstorms that involve the above- and below-the-line components to campaigns.

I'd argue that in a market where trust and relationships trump most other brand attributes, PR should step forward and lead the development of integrated campaigns. Creating compelling content has always been one of the PR industry's greatest strengths. Building relationships is our ultimate objective. It's time we started playing a leadership role instead of just following everyone else.

ABOUT ANDRE FOURIE

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