

The future of PR

By Catherine Lückhoff

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In his recent post, [Does PR have a future?](#), David Armano, SVP of social business planning at [Edelman Digital](#), predicts that as business becomes more social, job descriptions will change. Each employee will become the face of the company, acting in part as the marketing, communications and sales agent for their organisation every time they engage publicly, especially on social networks. [\[view twitterfall\]](#)

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Employees have been doing this for years at conferences, launches, client meetings, functions, and on the shop floor, but with the proliferation of social media platforms (both online and mobile) this expectation and requirement of employees has certainly increased. Now everyone is a brand ambassador, online and off, in and outside of the organisation.

What does this mean for the role of the public relations department and agency?

In his post, Armano asks if PR will cease to exist if everyone is a spokesperson to some degree. He answers: "It's probably not that simple since the reality is that 'communications' will not end up as a free-for-all activity, but as something which evolves into more than just communicating but also interacting. In my mind - the key is relationships. Manage the

relationships between all critical stakeholders who can make or break your business, and you hold the key to a more sustainable way of doing business. Sound like PR?"

Armano, together with Richard Brewer-Hay, chief Blogger for [eBay Inc.](#), lead what is referred to as a core conversation at [SXSW Interactive](#) entitled *Why PR's Future May Not Look Like PR* ([#FuturePR](#) if you want to look it up).

US PR facing same issues as SA PR

What struck me from the conversation was that it would appear that the PR industry in the US seems to be facing many of the same issues as the South African industry, namely: What role does PR play in the communications mix? When will PR do its own PR? Who should lead the charge for social media strategies and fulfil the role of community manager? When do we stop calling it PR? And how do we convince clients to justifiably increase budgets?

It being a core conversation where everyone was invited to contribute, I shared with the room that MANGO-OMC is increasingly finding itself in the position of lead agency.

Clients tend to brief us at a business strategy level; we develop the key messaging and communication strategy; identify the channels for dissemination; and subsequently brief the designers, photographers, website developers, mobile developers and copy writers. We also draft the content strategy, liaise with the media and bloggers, build the Facebook and Twitter pages, set up the online and offline tracking accounts, monitor the conversations, respond, activate, seed, lobby, educate, manage perceptions... the list goes on.

Only one other person in the room related, and commented on what I was saying. Everyone else wished they could relate.

Could and should lead the charge

This got me thinking. Here I am in a room filled with America's top PR professionals, all of whom are facing the same issues and very few of whom have thought it possible that PR could and should lead the charge. I refer to an article I recently wrote for a trade media publication in South Africa:

"In years gone by, PR practitioners all too often allowed themselves to be pigeon-holed into a traditional media relations role. They would be brought on board to conjure up publicity for pre-planned campaigns, often without being briefed on the bigger picture. Now companies are beginning to understand that communications skills need to be incorporated from the word go and be applied across all the relevant channels. In essence, the communication campaign should be guided by the business objectives.

"So, whether planning a new campaign, communicating a business decision, or fire-fighting community backlash through a crisis communication plan, the communication industry's skills are essential to understanding an audience's motivations, correctly packaging the message to be best received across various channels, and managing ongoing engagement to achieve the desired outcome."

I ended my comment to the audience by saying that PR is about collaborative advantage as opposed to competitive advantage, and it seemed to resonate.

Inter-agency collaboration

In the past, clients often veered away from inter-agency collaboration, expecting the result to be bitchy in-fighting and a distinct lack of co-ordination. More recently, as the media continues to fragment and brands frantically try to position themselves consistently across all the channels to reach their customer base, inter-agency collaboration has become a necessity.

As someone at the #FuturePR core conversation mentioned, the future of PR is moving from a traditional spokesperson model to a scalable ecosystem model that is able to manage multi-layered and complex relationships. The big question PR agencies and internal communications departments have asked is: how do you scale and leverage those relationships - both internally with staff (marketing, sales, R&D, customer service) and externally with consumers, third party suppliers, investors and government?

Guy Kawasaki said it well during his presentation on The Art of Enchantment: "The nobodies are the new somebodies."

While standing in Whole Foods in Austin - arguably the best grocery store in the world - I was faced with analysis paralysis. All I really wanted to know was whether the olive bar was included in the price of the salad bar. I approached an employee to ask. When she heard my accent the conversation naturally drifted to where I was from and how, in South Africa, nothing like this exists.

All rolled into one

The woman proceeded to tell me about when the store was opened, how it is the flagship store, how many other stores exist and are being opened, and how she had even been on a site visit. She lived the brand, could tell me all I wanted to know and sold me on the philosophy. She was the PR, marketing, sales and customer service liaison all rolled into one.

That is the future of PR: micro-interactions.

The onus is now on us to assist our clients in empowering their networks and building meaningful relationships in an interconnected world.

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