

# The evolution of the public relations practitioner

 By [Maiyo Febi](#)

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Do you know of a public relations (PR) practitioner that responds to press queries 2-3 days after they are posted? Or a PR team that occasionally interacts with the marketing team to get details of a new product/campaign and carefully draft core messages for a press release? A decade ago, maybe, if you and your team can still relate to some of the above, I have bad news for you! Times have changed. A lot!



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The internet has changed the way news is produced, who produces it, and how it is distributed. News now spread faster through non-traditional media than ever before. A prosumer's (producer – consumer) blog post... an influencer's social media post... a YouTube video upload... all have a major impact on PR in today's fast-paced environment. You might think: "So what?" If your PR team reacts to outside-in communication timeously and kills off the potential crisis in its stride, surely that should be enough!

Luckily, we learn from others' mistakes, think back to Ford South Africa's exploding Kuga cars fiasco – a perfect example of how not to handle a PR crisis. **Agility** becomes the modern PR team's secret weapon; at the heart of success in the PR industry is being **ready to move quickly and easily**.

Today the PR practitioner must be responsive and well versed in many areas, mainly: marketing, social media and influencer management, while remaining tuned into the latest trends likely to affect the industry.

## Responsiveness

The PR team no longer has the luxury of days to respond to customer issues, press queries or social media comments. In our instant generation, it is literally down to minutes and [PR must be equipped](#) to handle these effectively. This is when holding statements and positioning documents forecasting crisis scenarios become key. And as many can attest to, the **quicker a company responds**, the more likely they will control a situation. Even if responding means simply acknowledging the situation and/or committing to give updates.

## Marketing

Marketing and PR should have commonality in their approach as their end goals with customers are similar and/or have

merged in some areas; i.e. both build the image of a product, and both realise customers tend to research products online before making a purchase. Marketing can inform PR about the types of content, messages and delivery channels that best drive customers to purchase a product so PR can formulate content with aligned messaging. This will help a business maximise its overall relationship with customers. In turn, PR can report back on what influencers are **currently saying** to further refine the marketing campaign.

## Social media

Social media continues to be an important avenue for companies to reach customers with a wealth of feedback on how to position products and services in a more strategic way. Customers share their brand experiences **in real time** and do not hesitate to voice out their worst experiences. Social media has the most intimate interaction with customers and it's critical for a company to have a well-articulated messaging hierarchy. Is it to push a company's products? Brand building? Reputational messages? When big calendar events/crises/product launches, etc. occur, social media is a great way to **spread** a company's message to a broad audience **quickly**.

## Influencer PR

Spreading your message and telling people what your brand is about, is important. But what people say about your brand is priceless! In recent times, influencers have become the evangelists of a company as they have the power to convert people (within their sphere of influence) to products and services that they ordinarily would not have taken up. Relationships with the seasoned trained journalist remain key; however, the influencer must be treated with the same zeal and effort, and this should be reflected in the PR strategy.



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## Staying abreast of the latest trends

The expansion of new communication channels and greater use of data analytics are prompting significant changes in PR. This continuous evolution will be so marked that, according to [PR Daily](#), “*public relations* may no longer adequately describe the profession (by 2020)”.

In terms of future trends and developments, artificial intelligence, better known as AI, should be on every PR professional's radar. According to the [Oxford Dictionary](#), AI is “the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages.” Essentially, AI is making everything simpler and smarter, so what can the PR practitioner do to prepare for AI?

[Meltwater.com](#) shared an insightful article that suggests the following:

- Learn all about how modern data analytics work, and how to read the real stories it is telling you (go beyond ego metrics).
- Play around with bots and AI now, early, so you can start leveraging AI as it grows and changes.
- Get fluent in the multiple ways to tell brand stories: visual, voice, automated, textural, and experiential.
- Develop (or enhance) your existing network of partners who are experimenting with new technologies. This will **enable your agility**.
- Include R&D in your PR budget. By helping clients think of things as “test and learn” as well as ROI-driven, clients will be poised for future success.

PR practitioners should stay updated on the latest trends and developments, equip themselves with the necessary skills and training, and continuously build relationships with their most influential consumers so they can stay on top of their game. A

game that requires strategy and agility – for [marketing, PR and social media to work together](#) effectively, there must be an overall end goal in mind that is clearly stated at the onset. Without a measurable goal, all efforts can quickly become a confusing exercise leading to silos internally and brand misperceptions externally. A lethal combination no brand can afford!

## ABOUT MAIYO FEBI

Maiyo is the founder and managing director of Native Worx, a boutique consultancy that empowers leaders to position transformation as an essential part of an organisation's growth & development through solutions in change management, corporate affairs and building a culture of personal accountability.

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