

The value of PR in the new media space

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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The value of public relations is increasing by leaps and bounds in the overall marketing mix thanks to a combination of social media and a move by marketers to engage directly with their customers.

Now, I know I have written about this before, but it bears repeating because for a significant number of companies this penny still has to drop.

While the era of mass media is by no means over in spite of above-the-line inflation making the shotgun approach to marketing communications more and more expensive, social media has given marketers a wonderful opportunity to indulge in two-way conversations.

And this is precisely where PR becomes an extremely important player.

Its first step is to persuade corporate CEOs that they can't skulk behind their PAs or PR departments anymore. Well they can, but they'd be missing wonderful opportunities.

For example, when part of the Vodacom network suddenly crashed in mid-2011, customers were furious as their mobiles just died. Vodacom CEO, Pieter Uys, already a dab hand on Twitter, started banging out social media messages starting by apologising profusely and then giving assurances that he would personally not rest until the problem was fixed.

Now, many might argue that Uys certainly did not have all of those frustrated Vodacom customers registered as his followers on Twitter or FaceBook.

But here's the kicker. Uys certainly had the majority of the media following him and instead of having to wait to call press conferences he could keep everyone updated by the hour.

The real value in his efforts was that through evoking the power of apology and being honest and open about the situation he managed quite quickly to get the understanding and sympathy of the media.

And the fact that his Twitter messages were being sent out late into the night also showed that Uys was burning the midnight oil getting the problem solved.

There is no doubt that had Uys not been social media savvy, Vodacom would have taken an enormous pasting.

And when you think about it, how much time did it take out of his work day? Not more than a few minutes at a time. For someone used to Twitter and other social media, it's hardly a distraction at all.

Uys gained a lot of friends among the media as a result and from now on in if there are serious questions to be asked of Vodacom you won't find many hacks simply rushing into print or going on air with one side of the story. They know they can contact the boss man in seconds and probably get answers just as quickly.

Another chief executive who had clearly taken some good PR advice was Michael Jordaan when he was CEO of FNB.

Once again, he had a lot of media followers and is clearly benefitting from being openly available.

And when it comes to social media, Jordaan knew his oats. Whenever someone tweeted about getting bad service from his or her bank, Jordaan was onto it like a hungry cat after a Parkmore Prawn. He didn't mince words and was pretty direct in his advice to the unhappy customer to "switch to FNB".

He goes beyond that; when it was a FNB problem he offered to fix it.

Again, it doesn't take more than a few minutes out of his day.

Of course, there are those cynics who claim that people like Uys and Jordaan aren't really personally involved in social media but have simply hired some PR people to do it for them.

Frankly, it doesn't matter - even if they do rely on their PR people to give them the heads-up, it's not important. What matters is that their names and reputations are being put on the line and when the boss puts his name to something, woe betide any staffer who doesn't act fast and get things sorted.

Other PR by-products of social media are the things ordinary people say about others. Getting back to Uys, I picked up on Twitter at the time that Uys had been spotted flying economy on a flight from Durban to Johannesburg during the crisis. This clearly impressed a fellow passenger who was glowing in his praise of this "humble CEO".

The thing about new media is that it involves the capacity for brands to talk directly to their customers.

More and more companies are creating departments or outsourcing specifically intended to monitor media and to be able to respond to a crisis immediately. Or to join in an online conversation to defend or promote brand reputation.

And the best news of all is that the increasing involvement of PR is actually reducing the overall cost of marketing and increasing its efficiency.

New media will never replace traditional above-the-line advertising. But it will force ATL to become a lot more efficient.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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