

Five reasons governments need PR practitioners with agency experience

 By [Thabiso Dlamini](#)

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According to the Promotion of Access to Information Act of 2000, government entities have a duty to make information available to their stakeholders. Having said this, I acknowledge the steps that have been taken in an effort to bring transparency within these entities after years of apartheid rule hid a lot from the public.

We have witnessed public relations roles pop up at a rapid pace within government departments yet innovation and the effective use of new media platforms have taken a back seat. However, this does not mean nothing has been done in this regard. We have witnessed government adopting social media in its communication strategy as evident through the appointment of our very own hero, Aslam Levy, who now heads the social media directorate at government communication.

I believe government entities need to hire more PR practitioners from agencies and I have good reasons for suggesting so. Having conducted my experiential training at the KZN Department of Health and worked in agencies, I believe I have a bit of credibility for compiling the list. Below I shall state why I am rooting for government to include more agency-cooked individuals when recruiting talent for public relations and communication posts.

Skills and expertise

Agencies are abuzz with individuals who get the opportunity to work with clients from various sectors and this has in turn given them an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and adapt to different scenarios affecting those clients. I am one of those people who was extremely fortunate to be selected for an internship opportunity at a social media agency in Johannesburg.

While the members of the team had different tasks, which included community management, content creating, strategy formation and social media analytics, I was impressed by the strategic sessions that brought the team together for the purpose of devising strategies for clients. Responsibility for the day-to-day management of a client's social media platforms did not result in you spending the entire day glued to your computer but you got the opportunity to work with other clients as well, hence why agency talent get to know about PR in different sectors of the economy.

Social media community management

Talent from agencies acknowledge the importance of social media in PR and how a good strategy is integral for obtaining a return on investment (ROI) for your social media efforts. It does not come as a surprise that a substantial number of government entities have been slow in adopting this opportunity to reach a much wider audience which could be attributed to the fact that a huge chunk of the employees responsible for public relations do not have agency experience.

Continuous skills upgrade

Agency talent get the opportunity to work with different clients thus attaining valuable skills for being a step ahead in light of a potential disaster. PR practitioners with agency experience fear a PR disaster and agencies invest a lot of time and effort on equipping their personnel with the right skills because they know that they are responsible for their clients' favourable public image. Equipping sessions play a big role in the development of employees.

Communication strategy

My experiential training gave me the opportunity to log on to the department's intranet and get to know about the different

policies one had to be mindful of within the department. There were policies which covered issues such as media liaison, notice boards, the department's logo etc and what came as a big shock is the level of disregard for policies as basic as the notice board which I know a practitioner with agency experience would not take for granted.

PR practitioners with agency experience know a communication strategy is not something you draft to impress the big guys then chuck away, but they realise the value of a good communication strategy owing to having worked with different clients who obtain a different set of results.

Thought leadership

You need not go far to witness how PR agencies are a breeding ground for industry thought leaders. If you get the opportunity to attend a PR gathering, you get to realise a majority of the speakers come from agencies.

If you go through PR Daily, PR News and Bizcommunity you notice a large majority of the contributors are from PR agencies, thus indicating their passion for the field, which is evident through their willingness to learn and contribute.

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