

It's time to get the public back in relations

By [Francois van Dyk](#)

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"Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing." - John D. Rockefeller

In 2013 the History Channel ran a brilliant series, *The Men Who Built America*, which tweaked my interest in John Davidson Rockefeller. Naturally the name rings a bell with everyone but not many people know the story. He not only revolutionised the petroleum industry and subsequently created the foundations for modern philanthropy, but also created a massive fortune which still rates him as one of the richest men ever on the planet - \$664 billion in 2007 dollars according to Forbes. At the time of his death his fortune made up 1.5% of the whole United States GDP - no one has ever come close!

So obviously Rockefeller is one of the greatest business men in history and as we can see he considered public relations of utmost importance. And so do contemporary business giants like Bill Gates and Richard Branson who have all quoted on the subject.

Marketers will let you know it is usually the marketing, advertising and communications budget that gets tightened first in times of economic uncertainty, but sometimes I wonder if this is not a self-perpetuating prophecy. What is certain is that the environment that the modern public relations practitioner is finding itself in is rapidly evolving - the good news is that the ultimate objective has never changed and that is *building good relationships*.

Technological advancements has made it far easier to build and manage relationships but many communications practitioners have not utilised these to its fullest potential yet.

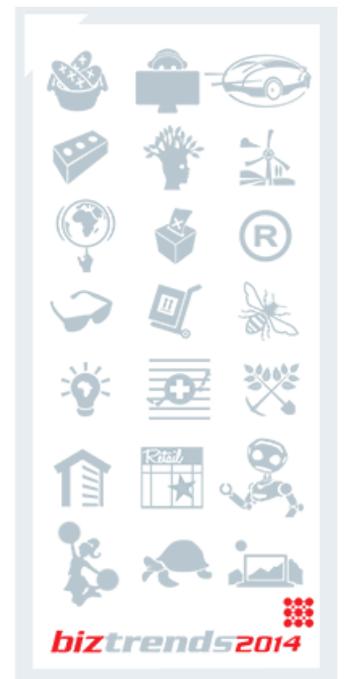
1. Be smart - on the phone

A lot has been said about the huge growth of mobile, particularly in Africa. For the first time in history people can communicate from anywhere on the planet, access huge knowledge resources, do banking etc. and they always have their mobiles with them. No communicator can ask for a better opportunity to have direct access to their target markets but yet the only communication you see is invasive little irritating SMSs or even worse - a phone call from an automated voice telling you about a product which is promptly ignored.

Great opportunities present themselves via mobile but the communicator needs to be very innovative - be useful to the target market instead of shoving your message down their throat. FNB's [@RBJacobs](#) on Twitter is a great platform for customers to get instant (ok, maybe you wait two minutes sometimes) feedback on their questions. The Gautrain app, and in particular, the "bus tracker" function which tracks its busses on a map via satellite, is another great example. The trains generally run on schedule so mostly passengers know when the next train is - however, the busses is a different thing altogether and now passengers can at least plan to be at the bus stop on time. Being kept informed like this builds great relationships.

2. Become the 5th Estate

Mass media has traditionally always been the most effective way of reaching a target audience. Being a numbers game, the idea is that, in reaching a bigger total audience, it may be assumed that you reach a bigger percentage of the intended recipients of the message.



In many ways the social media revolution has not escaped this thinking and many communicators still consider chasing higher numbers of Facebook fans or Twitter followers as a measure of success. Many forget that 50 fans who are actively engaged with your brand and act as brand ambassadors are far more important than 50,000 followers who never interact with the brand again.

Not to say that that the end is nigh for traditional media - traditional is transforming and many new opportunities arise such as social TV where mobiles can interact with televised content or QR codes where even print can be connected to the social sphere. WebDam, based in the US, reported recently that 52% of marketers found a client on Facebook with LinkedIn being responsible for 43% of communicators finding clients. Particularly in the business-to-business sector companies who ran their own blogs and created content increased leads by 67%. Utilising free social media or creating your own media is not only very cost effective versus traditional means but once again it creates the opportunity to have a conversation with the customer directly.

3. Collaborating with the 'enemy'

The storytellers of brands are still very much silo'd. Advertising departments fight their public relations and social media cousins for a bigger slice of the budgetary pie instead of working together to achieve optimal relationships with customers. This, however, is far bigger than just the marketing and communications discipline as front-line employees, receptionists, call centre staff, right through to finance needs to be involved.

As Rockefeller said, doing the right thing is the most important and no amount of PR work will recover a lost relationship through poor customer service. The importance of internal branding and marketing is often overlooked in the exercise of building great customer relations - the emphasis being put on beautiful creative or messages which ultimately may disconnect with the customer experience.

4. "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (Albert Einstein)

The USC Annenberg's Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) for Public Relations study found that spending on communication measurement increased from 4% to 9% as part of US PR budgets between 2009 and 2012. This was despite 80% of practitioners indicating that the overall PR budgets remained flat or even decreased. What is clear is that public relations practitioners need to provide better measurement of ROI on their activities.

The use of the traditional but discredited AVE (Advertising Value Equivalent) is thankfully dying on a global scale with only 33% of practitioners still using it as a measurement metric and many unwillingly - according to research by NASDAQ OMX/Ragan Communications. But the race is now on to develop measurement standards that tie communications activities directly to the growth of the business, measurements that look at the outcomes rather than the outputs - did the target market understand and respond to the message?

Global PR organisations are joining forces with measurement giants like AMEC (the international association for the measurement and evaluation of communication) and it will do South African practitioners good to familiarise themselves with the Barcelona Principles of measurement.

In many ways public relations has lost its focus - building relationships with journalists, bloggers, media, "fake" brand ambassadors (the medium) rather than with their real public. Creating a great customer experience is the objective and you will find no better medium than word-of-mouth to spread the brand's story - social media has just amplified the reach of word-of-mouth.

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