

# Are you marathon fit?

 By Sharon Piehl

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Over the last week, we have seen a series of articles covering the top trends for 2019, including what we can expect from consumer behaviour to predictions for the PR industry - all valid, and certainly, things to watch. The industry moves quickly so to deal with these trends marketing and communications professionals will have to stay agile.



Sharon Piehl, managing director at FleishmanHillard.

I have a slightly different view on 2019 when looking at managing a brand and-/or corporate reputation from a communications point of view. For me, this is less about trends and agility and more about long-term meaningful investment. Managing a brand's reputation is a marathon; it's about going the distance, having the stamina for the up-hills and the resilience to face harsh external conditions.

2018 saw a number of corporates face tough situations and, what is more, we saw consumers and stakeholders being unforgiving and holding these companies accountable in the public space and on social media platforms.

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This environment is driving a shift in corporate behaviour and the way companies communicate in times of reputational crisis with brands taking a firmer look at their internal culture, executives standing up and walking the talk and corporate South Africa joining important conversations that matter on a macro level.

So, heading into 2019, I have highlighted what I believe Corporate SA should be investing in for the reputation capital endurance race:

- Refocus on internal communication – it starts with your people. Spend as much time investing, engaging and empowering your internal people as you do your customers or clients. Your internal culture should reflect externally, it is about making sure that what you say about yourself is echoed by your employees and ultimately heard by your audiences.
- Leadership should be front and centre. It is not enough to run a business from behind your desk and leave the communication up to your marketing and subject matter experts. Authentic leadership is about having conversations with your stakeholders (including your employees) across various platforms. These conversations are about having a point view not only about what you are “selling” but about the challenges facing your industry, the country and society. The objective here is to focus on content with perspective.
- Let insights lead you. Today we have the ability to really listen to what is happening around us. Having access to big data is no longer a differentiator; but interrogating the data to find real insights about your audiences, the industry and greater business environment is really where the magic lies. Organisations who invest in deep insights and analytics and take the time to hear and act on these insights will certainly lead the conversation. Furthermore, with predictive analytics, we are able to help brands be better prepared for the magnitude of risks facing businesses today. And therefore, should be fewer reasons for companies to say; “we did not see that coming”.
- Inspiration will win the day. Corporate SA is being held to a higher standard than just providing the best product or service. How you show up and what you say about issues such as transformation, societal impact and good corporate citizenship is now business critical. These conversations must be at the centre of your brand narrative and be driven from the top down. Purpose has become key to the business decision-making process and it will drive who stakeholders choose to partner with in the future.

Building brand and corporate reputation strategies that focus on these priorities will certainly be influenced by the trends we are going to see across the communication landscape in 2019. However, while the how and where we communicate may constantly change, I believe that the need for investment in the commodity of reputation will remain for a long time to come – especially in South Africa, where audiences are fast becoming more vocal.

When it comes to managing your brand or corporate reputation communications is about so much more than just sprinting between campaigns. It's a marathon for which companies must become endurance ready.

## ABOUT SHARON PIEHL

With over 20 years' experience in the communications industry, Sharon Piehl was appointed as managing director of FleishmanHillard Johannesburg in May 2016. Prior to her appointment, Sharon spent several years as the lead of many multi-national client accounts at FleishmanHillard. In addition, Sharon heads up the consumer practice sector for FleishmanHillard EMEA and runs the new business track for the Johannesburg office...

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