

PR industry faces huge opportunity... and great threat

 By [Andre Fourie](#)

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Chinese military strategist and author of *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu, said nearly two-and-a-half thousand years ago that "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory; tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."

If the PR industry fails to quickly and definitively come to grips with the difference between a PR tactic and a strategy, it faces a noisy defeat indeed.

Do you nod sagely whenever a colleague, peer or industry leader proclaims that PR deserves a seat at the boardroom table? Do you converse excitedly at networking events whenever the topic of the changing media landscape and the challenges it presents to reputation management is discussed, thinking PR is the best suited of all communication disciplines to navigate this tricky new environment?

"Over the past few years the PR industry has truly staked a claim for a seat at the boardroom table, mostly through a consistent and honest effort to prove its worth at the C-level," says Judith Middleton, CEO of DUO Marketing + Communications. "With everything from advertising to digital to PR in a state of flux due to the shifting environment - made all the more challenging because of the effects of disruptive technology - we're in desperate need of a sense of order and stability. You could call it a project manager of sorts - someone to hold all the disparate pieces together."

Weaving a strong narrative

Middleton, who runs a successful business-to-business marketing and communications agency servicing the technology sector, believes that it's this factor that makes PR the favourite child of tomorrow's marketing mix. "PR is at its core storytelling, enabling it to hold all the pieces of the marketing mix - from Facebook campaigns to TV interviews and websites to speaker engagements - together in a single narrative."

But, says Nicole Capper, owner of Cape Town agency Mango-OMC, without a proper strategy in place, there's no hope of weaving a strong narrative. "With no strategy, you're literally shooting blanks - lots of noise but no lasting effect. In order for any communications campaign to have lasting value, we need to know what the end-goal is, and how this ties in with the long-term business goals. Only then can we establish parameters for measuring ROI, which is the very essence of strategy."

Tragically misunderstood

Anecdotal evidence and chats at the water cooler are rife with examples of agencies pitching 'a Facebook page' or 'an etv interview' or even 'a front page newspaper story' as a strategy.

According to Sarah Rice, partner at Batstone, which helps emerging tech and financial services companies go to market, this mostly comes down to the fact that strategy in its purest, most effective form is not at all sexy. "PR pros often fear losing their clients in the nuts and bolts of the campaign (strategy), and instead skip straight to the shining lights and rapturous applause that tactics can bring. In the short term this might serve their interests, but looking one, two, five years down the line? The most likely outcome is unhappiness and dissatisfaction - on both client and agency side."

Middleton agrees: "Tactics enable you to tell your client what is next, but only strategy can explain why that particular tactic should be next. Clients know what they want from PR and how it ties in with their long-term business goals, but often don't care for how it happens. It's our imperative as an industry to be in a position to explain how certain PR activities (tactics) help to achieve the broader vision, and we can't do that without a well-defined strategy firmly in place."

Top of the list of strategic imperatives is the need to set measurable, realistic goals that are aligned with the customer's long-term business goals.

"As an industry we need to move away from AVE-based reporting to measuring what is important to each client's particular needs," says Capper. "Did more people visit the website? Are media regularly calling them for comment? ROI is not a term to steer away from; it's the only way PR can prove its lasting value."

Keeping that boardroom seat warm

While most advertising and digital agencies have full-time strategists that are often revered by clients and colleagues alike, most PR agencies lack the services of a specialist whose sole occupation is strategy.

"Our agency focuses on strategy first. All team members, regardless of their level of seniority, are required to apply strategic thinking in their client campaigns, most of which they are solely responsible for," explains Middleton. "There is of course mentorship of junior staff by their more experienced peers, and as the business owner I retain overall oversight, but the sense of responsibility I try to instil in my staff encourages them to take ownership of the strategy they implement for each client, as well as the resulting tactics."

Capper agrees: "I discourage the following of a formula during implementation of our client campaigns. Blind send-outs are banned. The primary strategic thinking rests with me, but all staff members complement our in-house proficiency, which also teaches them the value of taking a longer-term approach over the ease of quick - and ultimately meaningless - wins."

For Middleton, a good strategy is greater than the sum of its tactics. "Alfred Hitchcock once said: 'If it's a good movie, the sound could go off and the audience would still have a perfectly clear idea of what was going on.' A good PR strategy should be the same - even if you remove certain tactics, the overall narrative - the story you're telling on behalf of your client - should remain. It's a great opportunity for the PR industry, but if we don't get it right and dilute our strategic value, we risk losing that hard-earned seat at the boardroom table."

ABOUT ANDRE FOURIE

Andre Fourie has worked in the field of public relations and strategic communications for the past ten years, managing the strategy formulation and campaign implementation for clients in the ICT, leisure, government, political, academic and business sectors. He is the founder of South Africa's first on-demand strategic communications consulting firm, Fury Strategic.

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