

The power of a brand

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Never underestimate the power of a brand. This is the message to all business owners from Marie Yossava, founder and owner of Grapevine Communications, a Johannesburg PR and communications agency.

She has been building the Grapevine brand over the past 18 years as a boutique agency that delivers professional consulting services in PR and media communications. "But it did not happen overnight," she points out.

As a fledgling business back in 1995, it had no references, testimonials, case studies nor awards to present to clients. New business was gained by pure hard work and demonstrating that Grapevine had a proactive approach, offered value for money and while still relatively young, had sufficient knowledge and passion to deliver tangible results.

From the outset it was all about people and establishing networks. Whether doing business or at social events, it was about putting out the word that Grapevine was in the marketplace and serious about publicity. "One of our first major clients, the Pecanwood Golf and Residential Estate, was acquired from networking at a wedding reception with a guest who happened to be the developer," Marie says.

Grapevine later joined the Businesswomen's Association and got involved in the PR sub-committee that networked with some of the country's top businesswomen. "This enabled us to pitch for the annual Nedbank Businesswoman of the Year Awards, which we secured for three consecutive years and which also added weight to our client portfolio."

Grapevine has made invaluable contacts over the years. At the beginning of 2013, the agency secured repeat business with three former clients from 10 years prior. They easily found Grapevine despite the time lapse, however, had the agency changed name, scope or even contact details, the opportunity would have been lost.

"Over time we started to seek out communication platforms that would take us to new heights, as well as industry associations like the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (Prisa) and their Consultants Chapter. Grapevine committed to their Code of Ethics, which provides clients with a channel for recourse, should the agency not deliver or uphold industry ethics," says Marie.

As the Grapevine brand grew, the agency was handpicked by international organisations, including UK-based LEWIS PR, which selected Grapevine for PR projects in the EMEA region (Europe, the Middle East and Africa).

"We found it was also necessary to publicise ourselves and in time, we looked at various platforms such as case studies," Marie says. "The first one was about the former community radio station Radio Safari 94.4FM and the success we achieved with this client. This opened doors to the trade and media arm of SABC radio and TV, which became a new client."

The media and marketing journalists started to acknowledge Grapevine, especially once it outlived the three to five years required for a start-up business to become viable. The agency began to get offers for profiles, such as in the December 2002 issue of AdVantage, was asked to contribute PR opinion pieces and regularly mentioned in industry publications. In 1999, 2000 and 2001 Independent Newspapers' then Media & Marketing editor acknowledged Marie's contribution to the industry naming her among the Best PR people.

Grapevine evolved with the Internet revolution and used the platforms available to profile the agency locally and internationally. It was one of the first agencies to take up a press office to market its services and promote past and present clients. More recently, Grapevine can be found on social media promoting its brand, and as well as using it for clients.

Last year, the agency was selected as the first South African representative for PR Boutiques International and the first member on the continent. The network screens and selects the best small agencies worldwide to become members.

In the latter part of last year, Marie achieved the highest level of registration of Prisa - Accredited Public Relations - which is internationally recognised. This further enhanced the credibility and professionalism of the Grapevine brand.

"Take all of this away and we would be starting from scratch as an unknown entity. We cannot begin to put a value to the effort and time that has gone into building the Grapevine brand over the years. Often we walk through a new customer's doors to hear them that they already know of us - this is priceless," concludes Marie.

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