

Why the PR industry needs to hire journalists and editors

 By Louise Marsland

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Just this past week, I've had to correct grammar, fix spelling mistakes and rewrite press releases to make PR clients look better than they were portrayed, and to head off a potential social media storm. I also had to send a press release back with suggestions on how to make it newsworthy so that I could publish it. This is not my job, I'm not a PRO.



Image by 123RF

Public relations is often maligned by the media, sometimes unfairly so, as there are excellent PR agencies out there creating internal newsrooms and running social media campaigns and building brand reputation.

What is worrying - is that with the shrinking of media newsrooms, mass retrenchment of sub-editors at some media houses over the past few years, and the loading of more and more responsibilities on journalists in this multi-media world – is that there is no room for error, public relations has to take on more responsibility too.

Public relations agencies need to make sure that their press releases and other work that leaves their offices, headed for a media organisation, journalist and editor, is flawless: written by an experienced writer, subbed by a sub-editor and passed by an editor. By editor, I mean someone who has experience working in a media newsroom, be it a magazine, newspaper, online, television or radio station. Not just by an account manager who may be great at client strategy, but not understand the nuances of the fast-changing media world today.

And by experience, I don't mean the ubiquitous three to five years, as stated in 99% of job ads - 10-20 years is real experience, let's not sugar-coat it to save money on salaries. Someone who has had proper on the job training – there is nothing that can replace that gut feel when something is wrong or just doesn't flow properly.

I have had press releases cross my desk that could have destroyed the career of the client, or cost them business, because of how they were quoted. I have had press releases with so many errors in them, that I could have got the PRO fired if I had sent it to the client with my corrections attached.

But experienced journalists and editors don't do that. We fix your mistakes, reshape press releases, use them as stepping stones to exclusive interviews or content, and build on the relationships. However, newsrooms are getting more youthful and less experienced as media owners downsize and prioritise digital deadlines and journalists that can tweet, write, interview, shoot video, take pictures, create podcasts, etc, - on every single story.

There is no longer any time to fix anyone else's mistakes. The news cycle has speeded up to the extent that we are all running, all of the time. It is easier to just hit the delete button.

Mentorship

Sadly, most PR agencies are lagging behind. It is obvious many still don't understand the 24-hour news cycle, and have no idea how to prep trusted journalists with content in advance to ensure the best coverage for both the media organisation and the PRO's client. Or even how to maintain media networks.

It works both ways of course, many young journalists have no idea how to build networks to source breaking news and build trust, as there are few mentors left in newsrooms; I'm told that the inexperience of many media people frustrates my PR friends; and it is harder to build relationships with journalists and editors as beats and specialisation are more rare and staff turnover is high. I worked for newspapers for several years at the start of my career and was mentored by brilliant senior journalists before I was given the responsibility of my first 'beat' as a municipal reporter on a leading daily newspaper. But that was the 1990s. It happens less today.

For the last 20 years I've worked in business-to-business publishing, where most magazines only have an editor, a salesperson and a layout artist, so many PROs have become an extension of my news gathering operation in the absence of staff: setting up interviews, sourcing quality visuals, and providing background material, alerting me to breaking news, helping me on deadline. I've had many successful collaborations over the years for great exclusives. Online media is no different. The days of the 100-strong newsroom is gone – this is a global trend.

Which means that there is an opportunity for the public relations industry to step in, by being more professional with how they create, produce and distribute their content. How they come up with content projects or pitch news angles – not just spin – to the media.

Content marketing is an evil we all have to live with to bring in revenue as 'run-of-paper' advertising budgets are squeezed. But the content does not have to be self-promotional rubbish. It can be great thought leadership, exclusive content, fed by access to key clients. Sometimes your job is just to set up the right journalist with the right industry leader.

And get senior journalists and editors in to train your staff; hire them – so many good media people have been retrenched in recent years, but don't turn them into PROs, they're content specialists; and be more accountable to your clients – they pay you to produce professional work and manage their reputations and those of their brands.

With digital agencies and advertising agencies 'owning' the social media domain and content marketing, the days of the independent public relations agency are numbered – unless they do what they have always done best: nurture those media relationships and access to exclusive content and key brands. That's something the digital and advertising agencies haven't got right yet.

This is a small window of opportunity for the public relations industry to hold on to their territory. They need to own storytelling. And who writes better stories under pressure, to deadline, than journalists?

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