

A lesson in cross-cultural communication

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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Communicating across cultures has become one of the most talked about subjects for global communication professionals as they continue to face the challenges associated with communicating with large, geographically spread audiences.

I was a speaker at the global 2016 World PR Forum summit, where I presented a paper covering key trends and insights into the communication landscape in South Africa and more broadly into Africa. The Forum's focus was on how companies have successfully managed to bridge the gap of cross-cultural communication and improve the global body of knowledge around this field. Speakers came from across the globe to share their experiences, studies, and best practice ideas with over 700 delegates from 30 countries – a truly international gathering.



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Among the speakers was Alex Malouf, vice-chair of the Middle East Public Relations Association in the United Arab Emirates, who presented a paper on how to understand culturally-aware communications. When tasked with ensuring effective outreach with a wide group of publics, especially culturally and linguistically diverse groups, one has to spend more time analysing their stakeholder environment and develop communications concepts that will support effective cultural communications.

Malouf spoke about the cultural immersion outreach projects he has been involved in, where marketers and communicators actually spent time in the communities they were engaging with and avoided a purely academic or third-party understanding of their audiences. The results spoke for themselves in terms of sales and reputation.

Making local relevant regionally

Janet Morgan's keynote around bridging the cultural gap was a highly practical presentation of her work with GSK, where they had to land critical messages to audiences in various parts of the world. She is now an independent consultant, and formerly director of global content strategy and planning for GlaxoSmithKline in the United Kingdom. In a global business, what can the central communications team do – and avoid – to help local businesses tell the same story while appealing to diverse regional audiences, local practices and cultural norms? This is a pertinent question, as companies have centralising many functions to mitigate the downward pressure on budgets.

Morgan's case studies of cross-cultural work shared the principles and practices of addressing these complexities in global activities. At the same time, global companies have the challenge of conveying a consistent message without being able to maintain a consistent approach or, in many instances, a look and feel. Often, mechanisms have to be different as well.

The second keynote was delivered by Paulo Soares, director of corporate communications for Vale S.A. in Brazil. They face the challenges in internal communication across cultures in a company that has a presence in multiple markets – from emerging to established, and from laboratory environment to mines. He noted the importance of internal publics as key opinion makers, with a large impact on the dissemination of information regarding a company.

With employees having the ability to contribute positively to the reputation of a company, it is even more important to find creative ways of engaging them. Soares spoke about systems they have put in place to leverage their line managers to help staff meet organisational expectations while respecting local cultures.

Factoring in customs and tradition

Finally, Dr Julie Lyn Hall, head of health at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies from Switzerland, presented an engaging case study about how they communicate across cultures in times of crisis. Given the role of the Red Cross, they have to continuously communicate across cultures and persuade people to abandon long-held beliefs, customs and traditions around illness, death and burial rituals to help control and stop the spread of Ebola in West Africa. In some areas, she says, up to 60 percent of new Ebola cases in the 2014–15 epidemic were linked to adherence to traditions that involve direct contact with highly contagious bodies.

Dr Hall demonstrated how communication across cultures has been a serious challenge, but also has saved lives by getting it right! There are many lessons companies can take out of that in terms of how passion, courage of conviction, and adaptability (not to mention the willingness to adopt and try new ways of doing things), can make a big difference.

South Africa was well represented at the 2016 World PR Forum, with two workshop speakers and three research stream presenters from some of our leading academic institutions.

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MCC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators' International Executive Board. He has 16 years' experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

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