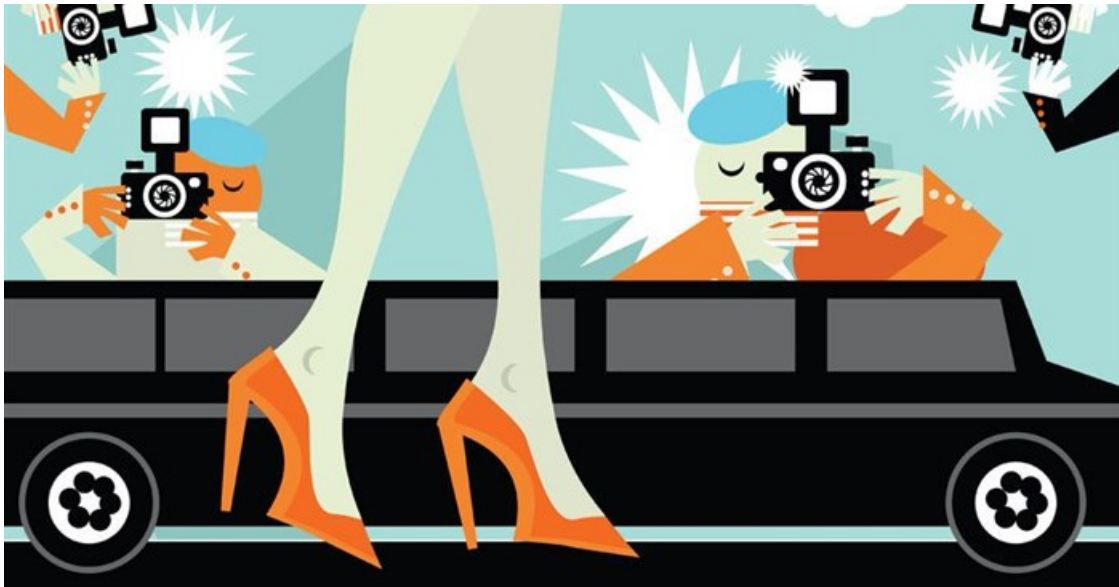


The misconceptions about public relations and how to spot a good PR practitioner

By  Jennilee Peremore

23 May 2018

"Public relations (PR) is all glitz and glamour," said no PR practitioner (PRP) ever who is worth their salt. I've been working in the PR industry since 2009 and to date I still hear this common misconception.



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The scary part is these misconceptions are often expressed by senior managers, including those who work in marketing who should have a better understanding of PR.

Many young PRPs or young graduates sadly fall into the trap of mimicking this glamorous visage of the industry and are disappointed when they find out that it's nothing like the picture portrayed on TV or like the ideas shared by their peers who are unschooled in the profession.

Business owners or marketing and communications managers tend to fall into this trap and base their hiring decisions for PR agencies and young PR recruits on this mythical image of PR.

Public relations holds many potential strategic benefits for companies and therefore hiring the right PRP from the start is critical.

Below I share five of the common misconceptions of PR and the qualities you should look for when looking to hire a PR employee or agency:

1. PR is a glamorous profession

PR is not high heels, suits, cocktail dresses and selfies with celebrities. Public relations is hard work. Yes, PRPs will meet and greet with celebrities and people of influence, but it's hardly party-time to a worthy PRP. A good PRP is always on the move, and even when attending glamorous events in evening wear, you can be sure that two hours before the event they were dressed in overalls, or jeans and sneakers running around to make sure that the show is ready to go live.

During any event a PRP is always on the alert to make sure that everything is running smoothly; checking that the media has all the information they need and have been introduced to the relevant sources, that the programme is running on-time, that the technicians are comfortable with the running order of the programme, that the emcee is updated with any changes on the guest list or speakers on the programme, while finally making sure that all the guests are happy.

Then, and only then if there is any time, they might get to take a picture with the celebrities of the evening. However, this picture is usually one that was taken by an insistent friend, guest or colleague at the party, because the PRP was saving their remaining battery for work-related calls and messages. In the evening, after the event, while they are crawling into bed (half-dead) they'll get the photo via WhatsApp and post it on social media, and then people will think this PRP is living it up with the rich and famous. But nope, we know better.

2. You need to be an extrovert to be a good PRP

Being an extrovert in the PR industry can certainly be a great benefit, seeing that the core function of the industry is to connect and develop relationships. However, being an extrovert only benefits a PRP if they can also deliver on the multi-dimensional work required from a PRP.

At the end of the day, the proof is in the pudding so regardless of how many great conversations you've had with journalists and how many jokes you cracked with editors, if you produce stories that are not publishable then no one is going to enjoy working with you.

You need to add value where and when it matters, and that means producing work that adds value – a story that makes sense, is well-written and suits the target audience of the publication. Trust, respect and exceptional work ethic are indispensable qualities and when practiced consistently authentic relationships are developed that can last a lifetime, regardless of whether you're an extrovert or introvert.

You don't need to be an extrovert to be a good PRP, but you do need to work ethically and professionally always. Look beneath the surface – a good PRP produces the desired results and the results are all that matter at the end of the day.

3. A good PRP is connected

Yes and no. Yes, because a good PRP does have a solid list of contacts that they can call on for advice or support, and a media list. However, no PRP will have a contact in each industry that exists.

A good PRP can adapt themselves to any industry or geographical area. They may have lived all their life in a small town, but should they be hired to do work for a company based in Durban, for example, they will make it their job to research the city to the extent where they will know more about Durban than born and bred Durbanites.

The same goes for when they are hired to do work internationally, or for a different type of industry. If a PRO who has worked in retail is offered a job in an IT company, that PRP will learn and adapt to the IT industry and become an IT fundi in no time. A good PRP can build connections anywhere, anytime and in any situation regardless of their specific industry or geographical experience.

4. PRPs are spin doctors

I have never been a fan of the term spin doctor and I certainly don't consider myself to be one. The term has a negative connotation that can be interpreted as deceiving the public. Any good PRP, whether a member of Public Relations Institute of South Africa (Prisa) or not, adopts the Prisa's Code of Ethics which states, amongst other guidelines, that PRPs must deal fairly and honestly with clients, employers (past or present), colleagues, competitors and members of the public. A good PRP will decline any work that does not uphold the ethical standards of the profession, and they do not share or produce anything they do not believe to be true or correct.

5. PR is a nice-to-have

Not enough PRPs advocate the role of the profession, perhaps they are so engrossed in the work they do for clients that they forget about sharing the positive stories about the industry and their exceptional work. This is something that needs to change if the profession is going to fulfil a strategic role in more companies.

PR can make a valuable strategic impact in companies as PRPs are experts at understanding people. This is how PRPs identify the right communication platforms, craft the right message, and tailor and transform it into campaigns that can truly engage your audience.

The main function of the PRP is to continuously develop their understanding of people and how to best communicate with your audience. This is the PR industry's unique specialisation – people, and if you're dealing with people then you need PR.

Thus, PR is not a nice-to-have, it's a must-have.

The next time you're looking to hire a good PR practitioner or agency look beneath the surface, do your research and decide based on work ethic, not ill-conceived and popular notions of success.

ABOUT JENNILEE PEREMORE

Jennilee Peremore-Oliver is an award-winning media and communications professional, who started her career in 2009. In 2017 she founded the Communications Agency, Jenniemore (Pty) Ltd. She has worked with brands in the corporate, media and non-profit sectors.

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