

Media, business debate common ground

Accelerate Cape Town recently hosted a dinner between the editors of three leading Cape-based newspapers and a group of business leaders at Riboville Restaurant in Cape Town to explore ways of working together.

Tyrone August, editor of the *Cape Times*, Chris Whitfield, editor of the *Cape Argus*, and Francois Lotter, assistant editor of *Die Burger*, were joined by some of The Western Cape's senior business leaders. "In the difficult current climate, business and the media must find ways to work together in aggressively promoting the city-region, both locally and internationally", said Guy Lundy, CEO of Accelerate Cape Town.

It was generally felt that business should change the way they interact with newspapers and work on developing strong relationships, rather than merely relying on newspapers for media coverage when they want it. There is a need to develop trust, since companies sometimes fear what will be published about them.

Take lessons from politicians

The editors, however, stressed that what newspapers sell is their integrity. There was agreement that business should be far more innovative in their use of the media and could drive messages more effectively. The media reflects the messages that are being put out by leaders, and business can take some lessons from politicians in how to influence the process.

"Media and business must engage, engage, engage - it is a refreshing change to sit together with a group of business leaders rather than politicians. Together we must tackle the general apathy of the public," said Whitfield.

August described newspapers as a way of "getting the city to talk to itself". He believes they can be an effective tool for finding concrete solutions to difficult challenges, especially the prevailing social issues.

Greg Clarke, an international expert on city development, representing the Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development, said, "In a second city like Cape Town, the host community has to work harder to attract the type of talent it wants and to make skilled people feel at home. The media has an important role to play in this."

He also pointed out that newspapers can do more to promote the massive opportunity presented by the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and to ensure that visitors to the football tournament receive a good welcome from the media.

Role of media

Much of the meeting focused on the lack of a cohesive vision and focus for the future of Cape Town, and the role the media can play in helping generate that. Fay Kajee, director of British American Tobacco and Accelerate Cape Town

board member, commented: “Cape Town has an identity crisis; we need to decide what it is that we are, what we want to become and what we should be focusing on to get there.”

On the same thread, Andrew Boraine, CEO of Cape Town Partnership, said that “Cape Town is too apologetic for being different.”

“Cape Town can be an international centre of excellence in financial services, including becoming the financial services training centre for Africa,” said Sello Moloko, chairman of Alexander Forbes.

Kevin Aspoas of The Jupiter Drawing Room pointed to advertising as another industry on which Cape Town could focus.

Number of difficulties

The three dailies represented at the dinner are Cape Town institutions with long histories in the city. They are, however, faced with a number of difficulties, including the level of skills and retention in their industry. With the quality of journalism training being very uneven, newspapers are now doing much more of their own internal training. They also face the problem of losing skilled journalists to better-paid jobs in government and big business. Other difficulties they face include the proliferation of Internet news sites, the growth of tabloids, potential new media-unfriendly laws, aggressive responses from politicians to the freedom of the press, and the economic pressures of remaining profitable.

It was agreed that it was indeed important for the two groups to meet and debate issues of common interest more regularly. It was also agreed that the newspapers can support initiatives such as Accelerate Cape Town, which is a business-led organisation that aims to drive high, inclusive and sustainable growth in the Cape Town city-region.

“Our role is to facilitate discussion and provide the networking opportunity to ultimately mobilise different people towards achieving the goal of long-term growth and investment for Cape Town,” Lundy stated.

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