

Love at the centre of PR with Palesa Madumo

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20 Oct 2021

According to Wikipedia, "Reputation management refers to the influencing and controlling or concealing of an individual's or group's reputation. Originally a public relations term, the growth of the internet and social media, led to growth of reputation management companies, made search results can make core part of an individual's or group's reputation."



Palesa Madumo, CEO of Vuma Reputation Management

Palesa Madumo, the CEO of Vuma Reputation Management, strongly disagrees with a major part of this definition. "A reputation cannot ever be truly controlled or concealed," she said. "Yes, it can be influenced, but at the heart of that is building trust with your stakeholders to achieve a specific, usually positive behavioural intention."

We spoke with her to find out more about the role of PR in business, and what it takes to be successful in PR work...

How would you describe your organisation?

Vuma Reputation Management is a reputation and brand management company that provides public relations, training, stakeholder management and crisis and communication services as part of a holistic approach to reputation management.

Some of our services include content and strategy development, media relations, digital intelligence, crisis preparedness, simulation and management and brand development.

How did you find yourself in the PR industry?

I am a trained journalist, however, the entrepreneurial bug bit as soon as I graduated, and I started a youth-owned, female-owned and led company called Short Left Advertising with two other graduates. After four years in operation, we called it quits to 'live a little', as we were still quite young. What that meant for me was travelling to and living in London for two years. It was there that my interest in PR began in my role as a consultant for Brand South Africa UK. My journey in this industry has come full circle in the traditional sense of a career - in my current role as owner and chief executive at Vuma Reputation Management - but it's also only the beginning of the next phase of my life.

What role does PR play in advertising awards and Integrated Marketing categories?

This strange division between PR and advertising doesn't always serve the creative industry as a whole, particularly on the African continent, where so much more unity is required for growth and transformation to happen. Yes, the services are different and serve different purposes, one is paid for, one is earned, however, pulling in different directions too much of the time prevents that natural collaboration that exists between the two disciplines from happening and what should be a natural role by each, in each.

The one thing that is important to remember, is that awards measure excellence therefore, it shouldn't matter whether that is in advertising or PR, it is excellence that should always be rewarded.

■ ***Does PR contribute and promote advertising agency rankings and brand reputation?***

This is an interesting thought, and my first instinct would be to say yes. Often, both disciplines service the same clients or brands, meaning one piece of work from one discipline could attract the attention of the same audience and influence how a brand is perceived, contributing to consumer and overall stakeholder loyalty, confidence, and trust. Both disciplines benefit from this exercise being successful, therefore to an extent, both may influence each other's industry rankings.

■ ***In the world of business, how can PR be used effectively to influence and ensure that purpose-driven and society building brand stories reach the right audiences?***

There are three things that I think need the world of PR needs right now:

A focus on community: Every piece of information has various touchpoints, regardless of the audience it's intended for. And even when the intended recipient is reached, they usually form part of a bigger community – the buying power of children in households is a good example of this.

A spotlight on love: Love has a way of creating real impact. We know this from a personal perspective, but we tend to ignore it in business. If there is one thing Covid-19 has taught me is to focus on self-love, love for others and love for what I do, whatever it may be. A brand story driven by love means greater attention to detail, the deliberate lack of assumption and meaningful communication crafted with a bigger purpose in mind.

A wellness narrative: I have started mentioning wellness in most of my communication with my team and my clients. I've discovered that it helps to dispel the stigma sometimes associated with issues such as mental illness for example. It tends to relax the room and provide a platform for honest engagement. In my view, wellness, particularly now with Covid trauma, is such an important part of what we do within a stressful industry such as ours. This contributes to better brand stories and a holistic bigger picture for teams and the brands the service.

■ ***What qualities or qualifications would you recommend for aspirant newcomers to the industry?***

We added a line under role requirements in our job specs that says: "University of Life - If you've spent your life thus far on a positive hustle that speaks directly to this job spec, then you go ahead and throw your hat in... oh and, much respect!" This is something that I am personally very passionate about living in an unequal society such as South Africa. I believe

there are geniuses walking amongst us that simply lack access and are therefore unable to participate in formal workspaces and importantly, earn a living from it.

So, I would say there are three things required from aspirant industry newcomers:

PR bread and butter: A firm interest in reading and writing is what I like to call PR bread and butter. Both those interests will benefit and position anyone for growth in PR and reputation management.

Connecting the dots: The bread and butter leads to better information gathering, understanding and daily exposure to industry trends that are always useful in connecting the dots when developing strategy – a core function of reputation management.

Passion: Again, this attribute of love goes a long way in easing the stress of what can be a very taxing and fast-paced environment such as ours. When one is driven by much more than just earning a salary, it's better for everyone.

■ ***Could you share any future trends or predictions for the PR industry?***

Wellness and mental health: This is not only an important matter for individuals, but a critical function for leadership within the industry as we move towards a post-Covid-19 era. Aside from the death toll, the pandemic has triggered significant emotional, physical, and economic problems being coined Post-Covid Stress Disorder by doctors. This is going to affect the output of teams and the communication campaigns they create. Dealing with it will require openness and a tailored approach to individuals, brands and campaigns as the entire global population will be affected in various ways.

Proactive reputation management: This should be the mantra of every business as we head into an even more complex communication landscape filled with over-consumption, disinformation, and disinformation about disinformation. Working towards your brand's positive reputation will require an inwardly facing strategy that if done correctly, and proactively, will ensure a positive behavioural intention from your stakeholders. This is not an overnight exercise, but one that when done consistently, will provide opportunity and prosperity.

More to consume: I always say we are already living in the future. This simply means that communicators are going to have to work even harder to keep up with and make the correct recommendations on audience consumption as we will begin to see even more platforms appear as the world becomes even smaller because of the internet. An important aspect of this is that we will need to create more genuine experiences for at-home audiences, something that even post-Covid is here to stay.

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