

The intersection of global challenges and PR evolution

By Michelle Cavé, issued by Brandfundi

31 Jan 2024

While navigating last year's convoluted global challenges, it's evident that the nexus between PR strategies and real-world issues is inextricable. With socio-economic struggles, geopolitical tensions, climate change, and health challenges dominating the discourse, the PR sector has seen significant shifts in its approach.



Comms and PR: Hyper-personalisation amidst economic uncertainty

The global cost-of-living crisis thrust economic anxieties into the blinding limelight. In response, brand strategies have leaned heavily into hyper-personalisation.

A local example is the Checkers Sixty60 Xtra Savings' 'Offers Just For You'. The app provides personalised offers based on products registered shoppers love to buy. The brand learns more about each shopper with every swipe of their Xtra Savings card to make their shopping experience truly personal and more affordable.

Social media strategies in an era of geopolitical tensions

The Ukraine-Russia war brought to the fore the role of misinformation and its global impact, emphasising the paramount importance of credible sources. Brands have thus shifted to a more educative role on social platforms, prioritising factual

accuracy over virality.

National Geographic exemplifies how brands can play a constructive role in this scenario. It uses immersive storytelling and photography to educate the public about different cultures and regions involved in geopolitical tensions. The brand partners with local experts and creates interactive content to foster empathy and understanding. Its YouTube channel also features documentaries exploring the human cost of geopolitical conflicts.

Crisis comms: Embracing sustainability narratives

Against the backdrop of mounting climate challenges, PR narratives have grown more environment-centric. Brands are not just addressing crises reactively but are weaving sustainable stories proactively into their brand ethos.

Lush Cosmetics is a prime example of this. Lush's focus on fresh, handmade, and ethically sourced products is a core part of its brand story. It consistently communicates its fight against animal testing and uses naked packaging to reduce waste.

Zeitgeist: Amplifying authentic voices in politics and healthcare

With political upheavals and health concerns at the forefront, 2023 saw a notable PR trend: the shift from brand voices to authentic, individual narratives. Instead of corporate statements, brands gave platforms to real voices – employees, activists, or affected individuals – adding a layer of authenticity and credibility to their communications.

For instance, First Rand's CEO, Alan Pullinger, recently strongly criticised the South African government for its open support for Russia while assessing the short- to medium-term prospects. *The Daily Maverick* quoted him saying: "This could have extremely negative consequences for the country, which benefits far more from trade with and investment from the USA, UK and Europe than from Russia. In addition, the South African banking sector, including our central bank, crucially relies on access to the US dollar and global clearing and settlement, a privilege that can be revoked at any time. FirstRand does not share the government's enthusiasm for Russia."

Purpose-driven PR and stakeholder capitalism

Brands no longer compete solely on product or price; they're evaluated on their values. The trend towards stakeholder capitalism means PR strategies have become more inclusive, addressing both shareholders and society. Transparent reporting, community engagement, and a genuine commitment to societal issues have become PR mainstays.

Airbnb's mission is to foster a global community where everyone can find their place, regardless of where they are. This vision permeates every aspect of the company, shaping everything from its website's layout to the essence of its marketing efforts. Airbnb's commitment to this objective has driven the development of a powerful brand and cultivated a devoted client base who embrace its dedication to inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

Technology and PR: Data analytics and predictive modelling

Beyond traditional PR tools, the sector has embraced sophisticated data analytics, artificial intelligence, and predictive modelling. These technological advances allow real-time audience sentiment analysis, predictive trend-spotting, and hyper-targeted communication strategies, ensuring brands remain agile in a volatile environment.

Spotify's annual Wrapped campaign serves as an illustration. The company generates personalised reports for individual users each year, showcasing their most-listened-to music, podcasts, and genres. However, in 2020, Spotify acknowledged the prevailing anxiety and uncertainty amid the global pandemic rather than solely concentrating on users' listening habits. The brand introduced humour and fun elements into its Wrapped reports, sharing phrases like "You devoted X minutes to breakup songs. We get it." or "You explored Y new artists this year. Not too shabby for a global crisis." This resonated with users who valued the brand's recognition of the situation and its attempt to infuse some positivity.

A new PR paradigm in a complex world

The 2023 PR landscape's responsiveness to global challenges signals a shift from traditional PR playbooks to dynamic, values-driven, and technologically advanced strategies.

In 2024, one thing will remain certain. In an era of disruption, PR professionals will hold the megaphone and the compass, guiding brands through uncharted territories with authenticity and foresight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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