

PR, you've changed...

By [Michelle Cavé](#), issued by [Brandfundi](#)

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Public relations has been the only profession I have known. I started back in 1999 when the company I worked for scheduled time daily for the team to queue with a floppy disc in hand to load all our emails onto the one computer that connected to a dial-up internet connection point. Granted, this was 22 years ago. Much has changed in the world, thankfully. And naturally, PR has evolved drastically, but even more so in the past six years - since I started my own [agency](#). Dare I say it; Covid has played a part. Duh! The pandemic has been the driver of so much change globally, and everyone is well aware of its impact, so I won't elaborate. But it's important to note that strategic communication and brand positioning is critical for survival and reputation management.

Before we even knew about Covid, the PR landscape had shifted, becoming a significantly more challenging job. In fact, in 2019, PR was named one of the top 10 most stressful jobs ranked amongst life-saving occupations globally, i.e. compared amongst police, doctors and firefighters. I know too many cynical people who would scoff at the thought of this. Still, this role faces relentless deadlines, often demanding and unrealistic clients, an ever-changing media environment and journalists who have a love-hate relationship with us PR-folk. It's humbling.

The competition is intense. PR is reportedly growing. The US Bureau of Labour Statistics indicated that PR is one of the country's fastest-growing fields, with employment rising.

Statistics in South Africa aren't so readily available, but it's evident in day-to-day exposure. In many instances, journalists are crossing over, and it's widely published that there are now an average of six PR officers (PROs) for every journalist. What's more, they're receiving an average of 500 press releases daily.

There are so many factors that result in an editorial pitch being picked up on and published. Interestingly, "media relations is thriving and remains at the heart of PR", according to Muck Rack's State of Journalism 2021 survey. That said, one of the biggest challenges for PROs is getting journalists to respond to email pitches. It has become acceptable amongst PROs and media to send one to two email follow-ups, but follow up with a phone call at your peril.

Newsrooms are shrinking. As a result, journalists are expected to cover more beats and deliver more stories more quickly than what was previously required. They are stretched so thin and are often vulnerable to anxiety, burnout, work trauma and resultant mental health issues. PROs and their respective clients (more importantly) need to respect this and work more collaboratively to become a reliable and credible source who deliver on time and make the journalists' lives easier. This also helps to build stronger relationships that lead to securing a spot as a regular source.

Developing relevant and newsworthy editorial angles that secure exposure within the pace of the news cycle is another major shift in PR. The 24/7 news cycle, which is influenced by social media, means that PROs must work harder to keep abreast of current affairs and social media conversations to identify and potentially leverage proactive opportunities. It's a



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full-time job consuming multiple media channels across various target audiences. Newsjacking is more commonplace these days. While it's opportunistic and can be incredibly effective, I caution brands and PROs not to be insensitive or irrelevant; this can destroy a brand reputation overnight.

PROs are being called out. There's no room for mistakes in this business. None. And if you happen to make one, your mistake will live on the internet, thanks to fed-up journalists. I don't know any other industry that suffers scrutiny to this degree – another reason it's so stressful. Muck Rack publishes tweets from journalists every month about the pitch fails they receive from PROs called: "This month in bad PR pitches".

Locally, Brendan Seery names and shames PROs with an Onion when they fail. It's a harsh reality. One of the most contentious issues is how PR success is measured. A few years ago, I [wrote](#) about the move away from AVEs (advertising value equivalents) – used to demonstrate value through the estimated cost of the press release coverage achieved. Globally, there's a shift to using [Barcelona Principles](#); a model based on smart objectives or key performance indicators (KPIs) and one that aims to benchmark PR campaign results worldwide. Muck Rack's survey indicates that "the average PR team has three core KPIs" that are aligned with marketing. The most popular internal metrics in PR include measuring traditional, social media, website, and productivity impact.



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Finally, the value of PR has improved and will continue to grow in importance over the next five years. The profession has earned respect as a cornerstone to growing brand equity. The industry works tirelessly to shape and shift stakeholder perceptions using data and research insights to craft persuasive stories to engage with key target audiences (*now that's PR-speak!*). This skillset and knowledge, coupled with the understanding and the ability to successfully implement marketing tactics, means that the PR discipline should probably be redefined to capture the convergence of these two specialities.

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