BIZCOMMUNITY

Yes, white labelling works in PR

By Khuthalani Khumalo

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A white label product, by definition, is a product or service produced by one company (the producer) that other companies (the marketers) rebrand to make it appear as if they had made it. In the South African context, retailers have been doing this for many years - we are all familiar with Pick 'n Pay's No Name brands. In the communications sector, the concept of white labelling is not new either - more commonly referred to as 'freelancing'.

Since starting my business a little over a year ago, I have realised that many companies operating in the communications sector are looking for white label public relations services. The fact that the lines between the different service offerings in the very broad industry of communications have become so blurred has something to do with this. We all offer an integrated service, and are more willing to take a brief for a service we don’t have the expertise to offer, with white labelling as our solution to the challenge. White labelling is by no means illegal, yet, as with all things, there is room for refinement of the processes associated with this.

It’s about relationships

First things first, white labelling is a classic ‘throw money at the problem’ scenario, and one of the biggest challenges associated with it is that so much of what we do in this industry, is based on our relationships. These relationships take months, if not years to build, and require the human element of a warm body to tend to their needs. These relationships are as delicate as a spider’s web. Yet, oh, what a tangled web we weave, when the relationships around a white labelled service are not tightly managed.

There are three relationships to be aware of:

1. The relationship between the producer (in this instance, the freelancer or agency who actually has to do the work) and the marketer (the agency who puts their name on the work)
2. The relationship between the marketer and the client
3. The relationship between the producer and the client, should they ever get to meet

The trust factor

One cannot talk about relationships without mentioning trust. The client must trust that the marketer can deliver on the brief. The marketer must trust that the producer knows what they claim to know, and can actually deliver on the services required. And the producer must trust the marketer to pay him/her as agreed, for the services rendered. Trust should be at the forefront of engagement around this form of working relationship.

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Contracts and outcomes

When deciding who to work with, our mothers may have told us to ‘go with your gut’ in making character assessments; and although there is merit in this, I would suggest dotting your ‘i’s and crossing your ‘t’s regarding the producers capabilities, and the marketers’ and client’s payment history. It can never be just about a hand-shake and a smile. There need to be contracts in place, with a clear scope of work and expected outcomes. This keeps all parties true to themselves and each other along the road of rolling out the work.

Perceptions

In order for the marketer to give the impression of a larger team, he/she must create the perception of this. This can be done in any number of ways. The marketer may insist that you work from his/her office. This would include using a white label email address. You may be given a business card (if you are to engage with client).

Conversely, the marketer may also choose to keep you (as the producer) out of the client’s line of vision. This may seem humbling for the producer. What could be even more humbling is engaging with the client, but with a title which is far junior to your actual capabilities. This will be a problem to a producer who is looking to gain momentum on their own company or brand and is therefore resistant to being kept behind closed doors – almost like a secret lover.

Cracks in the system

If the relationship between the producer and the marketer is intact, the client need never know that there has been any white labelling. However, it is when either the producer struggles with the work expectation; or the marketer is unable to meet the payment deadlines agreed on, (either based on the client’s set-backs, or a generally dishonest disposition on the part of the marketer) that cracks start to show in the process. If a producer becomes greedy and tries to muscle in on the marketer’s client – this too can be cause for significant anguish.

Again, this boils down to a water-tight contract and the trust factor.

With a better understanding and a greater appreciation for the roles of a white labelling relationship, a producer may be more willing to conform to the 'rules of engagement'. Either that, or walk away right from the start if they believe this arrangement would not suit their objectives.

Similarly, when the marketer is not clear from the get-go on what their rules of engagement are and does not set clear outcome expectations, this does limit the producer's ability and willingness to continue to provide the necessary service, leaving the marketer up the creek without a paddle, mid-campaign. A written brief at the start of a project (as an addendum to the contract) could be the saving grace for the marketer.

Some pessimists believe the industry is shrinking, but I believe that there is enough work for everyone to get a piece of the pie.

The question is, will the piece be branded with your name, or will it be white labelled? (There is no shame in either piece).

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Khuthalani is a communications strategist, voice over artist, freelancer, proof reader, self-proclaimed CANVA-guru.

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