

The power of design thinking in PR

By [Vikash Gajjar](#)

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Gone are the days where PR was relegated to being just a press office or simply working with influencers and responsible for getting the right people into the right room to swoon over the latest product or newest service offering.

To this end, there's been much talk about PR going through a paradigm shift – how the role of PR and what we do for our clients has changed. But if you break it down to its absolute essence, the job we do today remains the same as the job we did 50 years ago: to encourage a certain attitude or action.

It's the execution of that job that has gotten endlessly harder in a world where business expectations are higher, budgets are tighter, and audiences and stakeholders are disparate, tougher to reach and connect with through similar mediums. Indeed, it is the "how" that is changing, but the fundamentals of what we do remain exactly the same.



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At this point in time, it's become customary to give Covid-19 the cursory nod and hyperbolise how it upended so much of the world and the way in which industries operate. So, I'm not going to do that. Instead, what I will say is that for those of us in the communications industry, the last two years have been a valuable reminder that almost all problems, at their very simplest, are behavioural problems in disguise.

Building brands through reputations, setting agendas that motivate continual progressive impact, encouraging love and trust, and driving positive sentiment are all derivatives of a behaviour set or a change required thereof. As PR becomes more intentional in what challenges it needs to solve, the application of design thinking to drive behaviour change becomes increasingly meaningful, not just as a strategic tool, but in implementing strategy more laterally.

At its core, design thinking is understanding problems first before looking for solutions. In strategic communications, its application is two-fold. The first is a deliberate reframing of the problem from a communications challenge into a business objective.

In order for a business objective to be met, it relies on the enactment of a certain set of behaviours from those (a predefined audience or group of stakeholders) that affect that objective. The communications challenge, then, has the opportunity to become a design-led problem statement derived from the behavioural change required. The result is a clearly-defined communications job to be done, leading to tighter work that can deliver a greater impact.



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The second application, and perhaps more overt, is a call for empathy. Indeed, it's a case for human-centricity. Over the years, our industry has become fixated on categorising the kinds of comms work we do: B2B, corporate comms, B2S, B2B2C – the list is endless. But no matter what category the work happens to fall into, at its core, we are still communicating with other human beings.

Much of strategic comms revolves around persuasion – it is part art, part science. Understanding how we make decisions and the behaviours that influence our decisions are therefore integral to the work we do. This area of practice is known as behavioural science, and when properly harnessed, can enable PR practitioners to structure communications strategies and creative implementation in a way that is much more effective, and certainly more measurable.

As strategic communications become an integral part of the marketing ecosystem, the benchmark for the work we deliver increases. In a world that is constantly changing, a return to simplicity is a necessity, both in remembering why we do what we do, but also in finding the simplest, most effective way to do it. Easier said than done.

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