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Coming To Grips With The Media Agenda

Media agenda setting theory has a crucial role to play in a business arena where image and reputation have become more important for corporate success than ever before.

That's the word from Wadim Schreiner, managing director of Media Tenor. He says Media Tenor's approach to media analysis is underpinned by media agenda setting theory, a field of mass communications research that emerged from the US during the 1970s. This approach allows the company to objectively gauge the complex ways that the media agenda shapes public opinion.

Schreiner says that media agenda setting theory examines the extent to which the media forms and structures the topics that are discussed in the public domain as well as the opinions that the public holds about those topics. Empirical studies by Media Tenor and other research firms have clearly demonstrated that the media does play a critical role in determining what politicians, the public and businesspeople talk about. Media is by no means the only factor that shapes public opinion: there are countless others, such as conversations with family and acquaintances, personal experience, advertising and so on.

Schreiner says that understanding the agenda setting impact of the media entails looking at three elements: the social, economic and political reality; the media's agenda; and public perceptions. By developing a clear picture of each of these facets, one can begin to understand the impact the media agenda has on the public agenda. Take crime or unemployment statistics as an example. The media can paint a picture of rising crime or unemployment through the news items it focuses on. A media analyst can usually find hard data that reflects whether the numbers are climbing or not. If unemployment figures are down, yet the public believes them to be up and the media has focused heavily on unemployment, then the media has played a clear role in shaping public perceptions that unemployment is rising.

In the past, media agenda setting research focused heavily on political, macro-economic and social issues. However, researchers are now starting to pay more attention to media coverage of companies and CEOs, partly because of the importance of business in political issues such as the globalization of commerce.

Media Tenor, together with Idea Engineers and Axius Publishing (publisher of Convergence magazine), has launched the first annual Media Image Survey, the first comprehensive study of the media coverage that JSE-listed companies attract. This survey will help JSE-listed companies to understand exactly how well they are doing in shaping their media images.

The Media Image Survey will involve an annual announcement of the JSE listed companies that have achieved the most consistent, balanced editorial coverage in the media during the course of the calendar year. It will provide JSE-listed companies with the first reliable benchmark that they can use to compare their media image to their communications strategies and the performance of their competitors and peers. Importantly, it will also help companies to manage their media reputations according to the issues that dominate the media agenda.

Says Schreiner: "Companies can influence the media agenda to varying



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degrees, but they can't completely control it or move unwelcome issues off the agenda. But they can improve their corporate communications by structuring it around the factors that are on top of the media agenda and by keeping an open channel of communication about the issues that editors and journalists consider important. Additionally, companies have to ensure that enough volume is generated on them and that they feature above a certain awareness threshold."

The South African media agenda is influenced by a host of factors - the political and regulatory landscape, trends in international media coverage, the personal biases of journalists and editors, the opinions of community organisations or consumer advocacy groups, and feedback from readers, to name a few, says Schreiner. Companies need to understand what items are high on the media agenda, which in turn plays a large role in setting the public's agenda. In South Africa, these include issues such as corporate social investment (CSI), black economic empowerment (BEE), corporate governance, HIV/AIDS management, human resources (HR) and gender issues.

Getting the right message about these issues out to the media will enhance a company's image, while a lack of coverage about them or negative coverage may damage public perceptions of business. Managing corporate communications according to the media agenda is all about getting the information that the media and public regards as most important out into the open.