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media releases

Taking Control of Your Media Image

Companies that want to ensure the strongest returns from their reputation management investments need to understand how the media agenda impacts on the way that publications and broadcasters cover their stories.

That's the word from Mandy de Waal, founding partner at Idea Engineers. She says that there is a fundamental disconnect between the agendas of the media and of the companies it covers, and that the responsibility for closing that gap falls squarely on the shoulders of businesses and their public relations experts.

Says De Waal: "It's important to remember that news is what editors and journalists think it is, not necessarily what companies, public relations consultants or even the public think it should be. That does not, however, discount the ability of influential CEOs, business thinkers and recognised thought leaders to shape the agenda of the media to some extent."

Idea Engineers, Axius Publishing (publishers of Convergence magazine) and Media Tenor have joined forces to launch the first annual Media Image Survey, the first comprehensive study of the media coverage that JSE-listed companies attract. De Waal says that 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.

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. Companies and their public relations specialists can influence the media agenda to varying degrees, but they can't completely control it.

Corporate governance, for example, is at the top of the media agenda following global and local international scandals such as Enron and MGX, and there is little that companies can do to change that.

However, companies can influence how the media reports on their corporate governance and ethics by providing credible information to journalists and keeping an open channel of communication. Likewise, poor financial results will always make the news, but good communications can help put them into context and control the damage they do to a company's brand.

CEOs and marketing professionals need to learn how to think like journalists and editors to reap the best rewards from their investments into managing their media reputations. They need to understand what a news story is and what angles the media are looking for before they will have the ability to influence the media agenda.



Founded by:



Companies need to engage PR to build credibility and trust through strategic programmes that enhance reputation over time, by reporting on a wide range of issues, says De Waal.

They also 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), innovation, human resources (HR) and gender.

"Stakeholders - including media, employees, customers and investors, are placing increasing emphasis on factors other than financial performance and product quality in determining a company's image. Increasingly, issues such as ethics and corporate citizenship are moving onto the media agenda," says De Waal.

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.

One of the most critical points companies need to attend to if they want to have more control over their media image is to win as much "share of voice" as possible in coverage of their company. In other words, they need to work towards having media reports quote official company spokespeople more heavily than third parties such as analysts, industry organisations, anonymous disgruntled employees or competitors, says De Waal.

"Good journalists will generally canvass views from as many sources as possible to craft a balanced and credible report. This is not necessarily a bad thing, by the way," says De Waal. "Often, an endorsement from an analyst can give a company's image a boost, but there is also the risk that he or she may deliver messages that do not dovetail with the ones the company itself would like to put out into the market."

Companies can win more share of voice by making sure that articulate senior spokespeople are always available for comment and by ensuring that spokespeople who interface with the media understand what journalists want and provide it in the form of quotable sound bites, facts and figures, information that ties into the media agenda and so on.

It's also important to remember that the media isn't an amorphous mass - the agendas of the trade & technical, business, broadcast, town/country and mainstream press may differ markedly across a host of issues.

Town and country media may be more interested in social responsibility investment stories that affect the geographical areas they cover than mainstream daily newspapers, while trade and technical publications may be more awed by an innovative product or technology than financial media, for example. Companies need to tailor their messages to the media they are trying to reach.

Media reputation management programmes need to be managed, monitored and, if necessary adapted, to produce the best results. Companies need to constantly examine how much editorial coverage they are receiving, how much share of voice they own in reports about their business and the tone (positive or negative) of media coverage, says De Waal.

"Companies that blame the news media for creating or contributing to their problems are deceiving themselves. Proactive media relations programmes, although hard work and fraught with risk, can help turn the

media into an ally and help companies reach their key audiences (customers, business partners, investors, employees) with consistent and positive information," concludes De Waal.