



WELCOME

TO THE RENAISSANCE OF JOURNALISTS IN PR...

BY KATRINA ANDREWS

If there is one phrase that encapsulates the Asian PR industry in 2017, it is the old adage that 'content is king'. Never before has the industry put so much emphasis on writing skills. Whereas in years gone by, the ability to write clearly and concisely was considered useful, today it is viewed as an essential attribute for any new recruit. Writing tests, even for the most senior positions, are now more common.

It is a phenomena not restricted to Asia. In March, while on a client roadshow throughout Switzerland, six out of ten global heads of communications told us that developing their content capability would be their number one priority this year.

The rise of the digital newsroom, which allows major corporations to tell their story their way to stakeholders, is feeding some of this demand. In the past, companies may have been quite

happy to fill their media centres with dry press releases and regulatory commentary, today they are looking to engage directly with interested parties, whether that is customers, employees or even potential recruits. They are keen to share stories from the shop floor or manufacturing plant that bring to life their business. But they also want content that can work across multiple platforms and in different formats, recognising that a short video may be more appealing than a lengthy article, say.

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We live in a world in which we devour content, whether that is a short film on YouTube or a funny meme on Twitter, and companies recognise that to cut through to their stakeholders they need to change the way they communicate. Consumers are increasingly ignoring advertising, with its monologue style. It is about a two-way conversation. And nowhere is that more true than in engaging with employees: after all, they don't come to work and digest news differently. It's about finding that tasty tidbit that lures them in and turning dry prose into sexy copy.

Are journalists a solution?

How are communications leaders addressing this challenge? For some, the answer is training employees in the art of writing or in recruiting people with different skill sets. Consequently, demand for journalists for in-house PR and communications roles has risen. This year alone, we have seen a 33 per cent rise in the number of positions for which candidates must have a background in journalism, especially financial.

In the past, many journalists were reluctant to make the move from hack to flack, believing that in some way it implied they were selling out. But the harsh economic realities of the publishing sector have changed that point of view. The decline of lucrative print advertising, the switch by readers from print to online (which requires less resource) and competition for news delivery from social media platforms, such as Facebook and Snapchat, has led to publishers slashing headcount.

For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics claims that the number of print journalists fell by 13 per cent

over the five years to 2011 to stand at just 5,510, but there have since been further redundancies at major publishers. And if the merger of Fairfax with New Zealand's NZME goes ahead, it seems inevitable that job cuts will follow. Perhaps it is not surprising that we currently have 86 journalists on our books, up 76 per cent on the past 12 months.

While the publishing sector is contracting, the public relations industry is expanding. In Australia, official figures suggest the numbers employed in PR have risen by more than 26 per cent over the past five years. Internally, the remit of the in-house team has also broadened. Regional heads of communication are being given more budget to employ speech writers or those able to research and create thought leadership positions. For example, financial services companies may produce worthy investor research but it is often incomprehensible to a wider audience. A good journalist will possess the ability to explain complex messages in layman's terms; after all, most are trained to write copy so that it can be understood by a ten year old.

The transition can be tricky

But it is not always a marriage made in heaven. Not all journalists have successfully managed the transition. Indeed, it was not that long ago that comms directors would hire journalists with the proviso that they had been 'broken in'; in other words, that they understood how to navigate corporate life, with all its bureaucracies and restrictions. Journalists are used to flat structures not silos, and levels of hierarchy, and can bridle at such restrictions.

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While journalists may work for major news organisations, their role is often, in effect, similar to a self-employed position. It is they who must root out their stories for that day, develop their own contacts and sell their output into a news editor - competing against colleagues for the available space. It can make them protective of their work, and also highly competitive: in their world, they are only as good as their last story! This is not an insurmountable problem, but it may mean that a period of adjustment is necessary as they realise that the 'competitive spirit' of the media newsroom is not appropriate.

A journalist's news sense may be at odds with the corporate message. What they view as a story may not be the message that the company is trying to portray. Not all former journalists can change that mindset. In some instances, this contrarian attitude can work in a company's favour. A journalist will spot the angles that their former colleagues will pursue, allowing teams to develop strategies to counteract any challenging questions. In a crisis or fast moving news story, such 'inside knowledge' of how a journalist thinks can prove invaluable.

These are not deal breakers, however, and many former journalists now successfully hold senior in-house positions. As Sunny Tucker, former Asia financial editor for the Financial

Times, who moved in-house as head of corporate communications at Nomura before taking up a partnership at London-based financial PR agency Maitland, says: 'The first year can be make or break. Working in corporate life requires an acceptance of hierarchy, consensus and toeing the corporate line on issues you might feel strongly about. But you have to accept the changed circumstances you have elected to make. On the plus side, you will learn important transferable skills, typically be better paid and have more structured hours.'

Ayesha de Kretser, head of corporate communications Asia Pacific at BNP Paribas, and a former reporter for Financial Review, adds: 'Good journalists can analyse and understand situations and pick up pertinent angles. When it comes to crisis management, no one can read the play better than a good reporter. Being used to dealing with deadline pressures and the ability to think on their feet sets them apart during times of crisis.' Arguably, this is also the skill set of a good communications leader.

Yet while demand currently exceeds the available talent pool, it seems inevitable that some journalists will be recruited into communications teams. But while they may be able to produce the content, as every communicator knows, the role is about so much more: and some ex-hacks may just not be able to hack it!



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