

The new era of influence

 By [Joanna Oosthuizen](#)

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Public relations has changed and agencies that do not change with it may find themselves surviving only in text books...

Influence and content are likely to be the most important drivers of the next generation of public relations agencies. If agencies are going to survive well into the future, the reality is that influence is going to have to be approached very differently.

Agencies who understand influence, and can seamlessly create content that credibly places a clients' brand front and centre in the most critical conversations, are the ones who will survive and lead.



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Public relations has changed and agencies who do not evolve their models to consider the convergence of traditional and social media with that of data-driven news and content will find it difficult to be effective. For brands themselves, this is about how agencies are able to interpret reach and the relevance of influencers. It's about how they are able to craft content that is credible and engaging.

Brands need conversations, but conversations do not need brands. Bridging this gap is about understanding influence, and it's also about understanding what makes news relevant to an audience.

Identifying the right conversation with those brands we want to influence most, and then crafting this story with proof points that mean something to the relevant audience. But this is where agencies need to be evolving and focusing. This evolution needs to take place in terms of services, structure and skills. If we want to turn influence into advocacy, (the new holy grail

of PR), then we are going to have to drastically change how we operate and sell ourselves as an industry.

Our own agency has been on this journey. Globally, we have been gearing our work and network to deliver in this new era of influence. Locally, this has translated into significant investments in a fully integrated social media offering, data and analytics and in content generation and creative support.

Our task at hand is to find a new generation of PR professionals who fit this new mould. To a degree, this means that universities and tertiary institutions will need a fundamental shift in their approach. It also means that agencies as employers of choice will need to attract and retain talent that understands this movement and deliver on this agenda. Significant investment in training and development is necessary to harness a culture that is unafraid of challenging convention to be relevant.

So, while clients are increasingly demanding communication partners who understand their roles as corner office consultants and who can work with senior reputation managers to ensure business objectives are achieved through communications, the real value will come when these partners are able to challenge conventional briefs by understanding which conversations need to be influenced, who influences these conversations and what content will be credible and relevant.

A great example of well-produced and executed content at a specified target market is the recent [VisitBritain's Great China Naming](#) campaign, in which Ogilvy & Mather Beijing developed a campaign to increase tourism to the UK. The campaign cleverly asked the Chinese public to interact and come up with their own descriptive nicknames of well-known tourist attractions in the UK. With Chinese visitors are now expected to spend over £1bn across Britain by 2020; the campaign with its effective use of targeted content marketing was a huge success and also received two PR gold awards and one silver award at the 2015 Cannes Lion awards.

Creative campaigns like these are a challenge to existing agencies who will need to shelve current convention and replace it with smart ideas that drive conversation and influence. Connecting the dots on a public relations campaign involves high-level consumer insights and relevance to markets and audiences within context. This is crucially important because it helps us target audiences and listen to conversations, this drives insight and provides results.

In the world of online marketing, things move at an incredibly fast pace. It is up to agencies to keep up with what is relevant to our clients and their consumers. More than this, it is up to agencies to understand that the always-on, always-connected and always-mobile consumer will more than likely be influenced by peer target groups of their own choosing. These "influencers just like me" mean that relationships and maintenance of these partnerships are also vital for agencies of the future. Building trust, harvesting capability and delivering the most up-to-date sphere of influence is our single biggest priority.

ABOUT JOANNA OOSTHUIZEN

Joanna is MD of Ogilvy Public Relations South Africa (<http://ogilvy.co.za/about-us/ogilvy-pr/>). She started her career at Microsoft SA before going on to London, where she worked at Schroders Investment Management. In 2005 Joanna returned and joined Ogilvy PR SA as an account director in the agency's consumer team, later becoming consumer business director. Contact Joanna on tel +27 (0)11 709 9630, email joanna.oosthuizen@ogilvypr.co.za and follow @joopr24 on Twitter.

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