

Customer service remains the pillar of your PR strategy

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The role of public relations in an organisation remains an important aspect of its growth owing to the economic climate and technological developments we have witnessed. We have witnessed the profession grow over the years as companies seek to protect their public image and manage perceptions with minimal damage. Fancy terms often used over the years include crisis communication, reputation management, corporate social responsibility, brand image and other words in a bid to reassure internal and external stakeholders.

While organisations have employed the services of public relations agencies to work on magic on their public image, they have often neglected the number one factor determining brand image. Customer service remains the pillar of any organisation's public relations strategy and PR agencies will find it difficult to reverse the consequences of bad customer service. An organisation could render the services of Edelman, FleishmanHillard or any other reputable PR company yet its failure to deal with challenges in its core business will not yield good results.

The overshadowing importance of customer service

During my tenure as a social media intern in 2013, I had the opportunity to contribute towards a client's social media strategy where we dealt with return on investment (ROI). We scratched our heads and came up with good ideas, which ultimately resulted in us overlapping the boundaries of social media upon realising that one of the biggest challenges stemmed from customer service. No amount of work from a PR agency could fix this challenge, which required the organisation getting its hands dirty, by fixing issues in its customer service department.

If your customer service is not on point then you are in for a rocky ride as your PR team will spend a lot of time putting out fires. A company could appoint a charismatic spokesperson like Mmusi Maimane supported by a team from the best PR agency in the world yet it will fail to obtain a substantial return on investment in that exercise if its front-end employees are inadequately trained to deal with customers or the products and services it offers have shortcomings.

The Eskom disaster

Companies need to invest a lot of time and resources in ensuring their number one asset (employees) are adequately trained and become its number one PR arsenal as they interact with customers on a daily basis. We have all been victims of bad service and have vowed not to use a certain product.

A great case study comes in the form of our beloved Eskom that has good spokespeople in the form of Khulu Phasiwe and Andrew Etzinger. These two gentlemen inspire a lot of confidence as they communicate the entity's course of action with

their calm personality despite the fact that they are tired of defending the indefensible. Despite the power utility spending millions on their PR machinery, people have lost confidence in the company and all of this stems from customer service. Rest assured that should a direct competitor enter the market Eskom would witness a mass migration as people leave the state owned power utility.

Measuring public relations is a complex issue often highlighted in numerous publications yet rest assured that a large majority of a company's PR value is derived from the front desk operators and the products it provides or service it renders unlike AVEs as some PR agencies hoodwink their clients into believing. We have witnessed how dodgy customer service from Telkom has catapulted the mobile phone industry in South Africa as the telecoms giant struggles with adapting despite their mobile phone offering.

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