

Trust journalists to have a good approach to PR

By [Sam Spiller](#), issued by [Clockwork](#)

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South African media has taken several blows to the head in the last 24 months. In 2020, print media was rocked by [mass retrenchments at Media24 and Caxton](#), and just this year it was reported that [eNCA's staff was being subjected to "consolidation"](#). It's a word that every editor should fear because it usually ends with their workload being multiplied tenfold, with probably a smaller salary to boot (hell, consolidation already defines local media ownership - there are only a handful of big names left in town).



Online media consumption has taken on a form that becomes less and less compatible with the traditional news reporting ecosystem as time goes on. The line between 'journalist' and 'content creator' is thinner than ever, which is not at all a bad thing, but can result in media professionals feeling alienated by the industry. Reporting the news, or even producing quality work, becomes secondary to getting a high SEO score. Talent, especially writing talent, is squandered as outlets are forced by the powers that be and the audiences that read to take a more short-term focused and fundamentally compromising position.

Journalists are being hung out to dry, but there is no reason they cannot stay in their chosen business of media production. PR agencies are more than willing to welcome professionals who offer essential skills related to the creation and distribution of information to a targeted audience. The

working conditions may be just as stressful, but the coffee in the breakroom is better, and those agencies, though governed by a different set of corporate principles, are not subject to the institutional hardships being experienced by the fourth estate.

Creativity meets reliability

Now, this 20-something-year-old won't pretend he's blown this thing wide open. Journalists migrating to the promised land of advertising is nothing new. The first time I made headwind in this industry, I was introduced to a diverse network of PR contacts who had got their start on the opposite team. There was even a disconcerting trend wherein the representatives of South Africa's most prominent brands and state entities had previously frequented the *exact same* newsroom I was in.

But this lateral migration makes ideal sense. The structure of a typical news article, complete with facts, quotes, and an eye towards narrative fluidity, is not unlike that of press releases (or advertorials, which do their best to pass themselves off as news articles). Both news articles and press releases aim to inform the reader of something. Both can have a catchy headline. Both come accompanied with eye-catching visuals (as every release announcing a new electronic product should). What a journalist brings to the PR creative process is due diligence as well as the ability to conduct thorough research, ensure content marketing material reflects the facts, and do their best to identify what's newsworthy about the topic. When there's a journalist at the helm, thought leadership pieces emanate from a place of legitimate knowledge on the subject, with years of experience to back up the insight. The ideas are always trending; they're brought to the forefront thanks to a daily dose of content sourced from a variety of platforms and outlets. Journalists are taught to think critically. Match that with creativity and narrower sights, and you have a situation where content marketing can bring out the best in both quality and control.

Homepage or the junk folder?

An editor's inbox is a holding pen, surrounded by high, impenetrable walls that content marketing can only scale when it is

of the highest quality and relevance. This can't be stressed enough. Everyday, those inboxes receive hundreds of releases, think pieces, and newsletters, with only one or two receiving a reply or a straight-up ascension to a publication's website or magazine layout. With that in mind, a true measure of an agency's ability to deliver for clients is how regularly unpaid coverage can make the landing.

Simply put, journalists are more likely to know what they can get past the shrewd scrutiny of editors. They have first-hand knowledge of respective platforms not just in terms of their audience and content output, but also the facts and details that matter and would potentially be used in their entirety or included in other content to supplement or strengthen the core narrative.

Meanwhile, the online media landscape is undergoing minor reckonings. Last month, Google announced [changes to its search systems](#) that will impact what product reviews it displays, prioritising more in-depth content as opposed to simple summaries. This may be more consequential to publications than PR practitioners, but it all ends in a scenario where marketers have to be intuitive in how they create content for platforms, and what shape that content takes. Journalists offer legitimacy, passion, and insight. That, combined with an agency that understands client needs and distribution channels, makes for an excellent PR approach.

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Sam Spiller, tech copywriter.

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