

Forget Twitter - Let's not run before we can walk

How can Middle East PR consultants be taken seriously as professional communicators when we can't even get the basics right? Until we do, says **Andrew Mackay**, a director of International Insights, part of the All About Brands plc group with offices in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the PR / media relationship will be as uneasy as it always has been.

It's all fine and dandy for Middle East PR consultants to impress their clients by trotting out their knowledge of the latest twittering this and blogging that but the Insight/MediaSource Middle East Journalists Survey 2009 should act as something of a cold shower on the consultancy world's complacency.

One of the survey's main conclusions is that much of the information we feed journalists is not always reliable, up-to-date or relevant. It's worth reading that again – not always reliable, up-to-date or relevant.

If this really is the case – and apparently it's the opinion of a statistically significant group of journalists – then many PR agencies are basically peddling inaccurate, out-of-date or irrelevant material on behalf of their clients and getting handsomely paid for it, no doubt.

First, let's understand how regional journalists like to get their news. They, the survey assures us, prefer to receive information in the form of on-the-record briefings, with press releases following a close second. That's right, press releases.

Believe it or not, journalists in the region are receiving and using more press releases now than in 2007. The survey's authors generously suggest that PR has now become an important part of the marketing mix, the implication being that the industry has now come of age and should be taken seriously.

The truth, however, is very different. The simple fact is that journalists have no choice other than to rely on press releases as a primary news source. Under time pressure, with too few resources, it's clear that the global economic slowdown has had a significant impact on the media landscape and the region's journalists have had to adapt quickly to its consequences.

Declining advertising revenues have led to redundancies (reported by 20 percent of the Arabic language media and 40 percent of the English language media) and, combined with recruitment freezes, have left editorial teams feeling battered and bruised. As if that wasn't enough, there has been a significant increase in the number of journalists reporting additional pressure from advertisers and owners.

A perfect backdrop, you would think, for us consultants to rush to the aid of our hard-press media compadres, seize the opportunity to fill the vacuum with some well-crafted news stories and score some significant exposure for our delighted clients?

But, and here are two more really telling statistics about the quality of PR agencies' output, those press releases are usually full of dross and poorly targeted. One construction magazine journalist, for example, quite reasonably questioned why he should be interested in a press release discussing the very latest spa treatments. Or another who queried the news value of a new carpet store opening in a shopping mall.

Worryingly, the survey reveals that the relationship between some agencies and media has become so bad that reporters are under instructions to delete or bin 'blacklisted' agency releases without even looking at them. Can clients really be happy paying for all this wasted effort?

But it's not just the fault of the PR agencies.

The media's apparent willingness to run non-news in turn feeds the PR machinery that generates it - often under pressure from clients - many of whom continue to use PR as an option for promoting a new product or service more cheaply than the advertising it demands.

Another message that emerges loud and clear from regional journalists is that PR consultants too frequently overlook their needs in favour of pressure from clients.

Key to a successful PR/client relationship is the consultant's ability to manage client expectations about the media, and to use his or her specialist knowledge with confidence in advising what is or is not possible.

But too few of us bother to make it our business to talk to journalists to find out what they really want. That is a failure of duty to them and to our clients. And isn't it just a little bit sad that we have to rely on third-party surveys for journalists to tell us what they really think of us.....?

They may never end up loving us, but their respect for us will surely grow if we start talking to them more and providing them with the quality and accuracy of information they clearly crave to make their lives just a little easier.

Isn't that what being a professional communicator should be all about?