

Never let a good crisis go to waste

 By [Cindy Preller](#)

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Covid-19 brought a storm of surprising business conditions in South Africa - not only for the local media, but for public relations practitioners as well.



Photo by [Markus Winkler](#) on [Unsplash](#).

The traditional role between two important pillars of public relations - crisis management and corporate social responsibility - sometimes could be perceived as unrelated, yet it forms a critical link between how a company is perceived when a crisis occurs. Building up a reputable image with meaningful corporate social responsibility work, could cushion many companies from reputational damage once an unforeseen crisis occurs.



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Victor Mberiane, APR 27 Mar 2020



However, the link between these two pillars of public relations becomes even more critical when considering the corporate social investment work companies embark on during times of national or global crises. Being entrenched in the communities where companies retail their products or services, means that the brands move to touch the very heart of their consumers. This creates trust and brand loyalty to outlast minor crises.

Brands assisted communities during lockdown

While many South African companies embarked on unique campaigns during hard lockdown and the subsequent levels of Covid-19 in South Africa, some went to creative and extraordinary measures to assist communities affected by the invisible novel virus.

Uitenhage-based vehicle manufacturer Volkswagen Group South Africa got a mention by President Cyril Ramaphosa during his [Lockdown Level 3 Speech](#) in May for the company's efforts in building a field hospital of over 4000 beds, in an unused factory.



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Similarly, another PE-based automotive manufacturer, Isuzu Motors South Africa, assisted the Eastern Cape's health care system with logistical support by making their logistics centre available for the storage of essential medical equipment, revamping hospital wards and providing humanitarian aid.

While these automotive giants were more covert in their partnerships formed with what under normal conditions would be considered competitive brands to fight Covid-19, the country's fast-food giants were less subtle about the business unusual environment in which they found themselves.

In April some of South Africa's best known and loved fast-food brands joined forces to "provide meals to communities in which access to food is a major challenge." Nando's, McDonald's and KFC worked with Joint Aid Management (JAM) to feed South Africans affected by the Covid-19 pandemic during Level 5 of the national lockdown.



Fast food chains feed the hungry as they gradually reopen restaurants

1 May 2020



While many companies across the globe made vehicles, PPE, food parcels and sanitisers available, the creative role companies in South Africa took on during the Covid-19 crisis showed a sense of, dare I say ubuntu. Even the most cynical amongst us would admit this overused phrase 'business unusual' was not just a tick box exercise by companies to fulfil their corporate social responsibility targets for the year. Many initiatives showed genuine care for the wellbeing of others – whether it was multi-national alcoholic beverage manufacturers providing alcohol for hand sanitisers or the local R5-store giving away home-made sanitiser.

Building an invisible golden thread of brand loyalty and trust

This talks to the heart of effective public relations – arguably all pillars of the practice of corporate communications, but certainly when it comes to the pillars of corporate social responsibility and crisis management. Consumers, communities and the public, in general, appreciate genuine efforts at communicating during times of difficulty. Whether it is trying to save face after a corruption debacle, or just supporting the local community during a pandemic, public relations practitioners need to be transparent, honest, and genuine in their communication campaigns.

Admittedly, it may be easier to communicate during a crisis such as Covid-19, than a man-made crisis where the company is at fault. However, we are acutely aware that the economy has nose-dived with huge losses in growth across the board for

most industries. Therefore, it could be a knee-jerk reaction to hold onto marketing spend or public relations budgets – to freeze or redirect these to line items that may or may not soften the blow to the bottom line.

Yet, it is indeed during times of crises where brands build this invisible golden thread of brand loyalty and trust, by doing good when it matters most.



Communications in a time of crisis

Sandra Gordon 18 Mar 2020



Even in the case of the hard-hit media industry, it could be a simple decision to make your product available for free that could not only play an educational role but also make a lot of public relations sense.

Arena Holdings during the initial 21-day lockdown period made any news that could combat the spread of the virus, available for free online.

Riaan Wolmarans, managing editor for Digital at Arena Holdings, said South Africans relied heavily on digital platforms for breaking news and updates on the national coronavirus situation. "Because we understand the essential role of the media during this critical period, all our reporting on Covid-19 is free to read. We want to ensure that despite the lockdown, our readers are still kept informed with credible, accurate news via our online platforms."

Public relations practitioners should fight for their share of the budget

Notwithstanding the thrashing print media has been experiencing partly because of rapid digitalisation, and the final nail in the coffin being the effects of Covid-19 on the consumption of print products, online media consumption has [spiked dramatically](#) during the crisis. News companies globally report a massive spike in online news consumption during Covid-19 with some doubling or tripling in demand vs. the averages of 2015-2020.



How Covid-19 has impacted print media [news and social media analysis]

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These online media platforms are still good places to make brands known – whether it is with paid-for content or organic news about the brand. As we rebuild the economy, public relations practitioners should fight for their share of the budget in Marketing and CSI spend. And then comes the best part: to use it creatively for the good of the community around them. As Winston Churchill said, "never let a good crisis go to waste".

ABOUT CINDY PRELLER

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