

MEDIA AND ADVERTISING

Brushing up its image

The public relations (PR) industry is working to improve the quality of what it offers, as it expects spending on this aspect of marketing to increase.

Inzalo Communications executive director Bridget von Holdt says there's an effort to reduce "fly-by-night" operations.

In a joint initiative with the Council for Communication Management, the Public Relations Institute of SA (Prisa) is encouraging its members to register for a professional certificate similar to the accounting profession's chartered accountant certification.

Prisa has 900 member agencies, many of which are small operations with a maximum of five employees. A large number of agencies, however, are unregistered and the industry has no influence over their conduct.

"It might not happen this year, but the process is in place," Von Holdt says. "It's quite a big task, as we have to register skills for each individual member."

The International Public Relations Association is also developing its consultancy management standards, similar to the engineering profession's International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) standards, but Von Holdt says clients should always look for local standards.

"Unfortunately we don't have very accurate information on the industry," she says. "The barriers to entry into PR are zero." But the industry is working to change that, she says.

Though business management teaches that PR is one of the seven core management areas, it has long been considered a peripheral activity. The fact that it is not well measured or researched serves to confirm this.

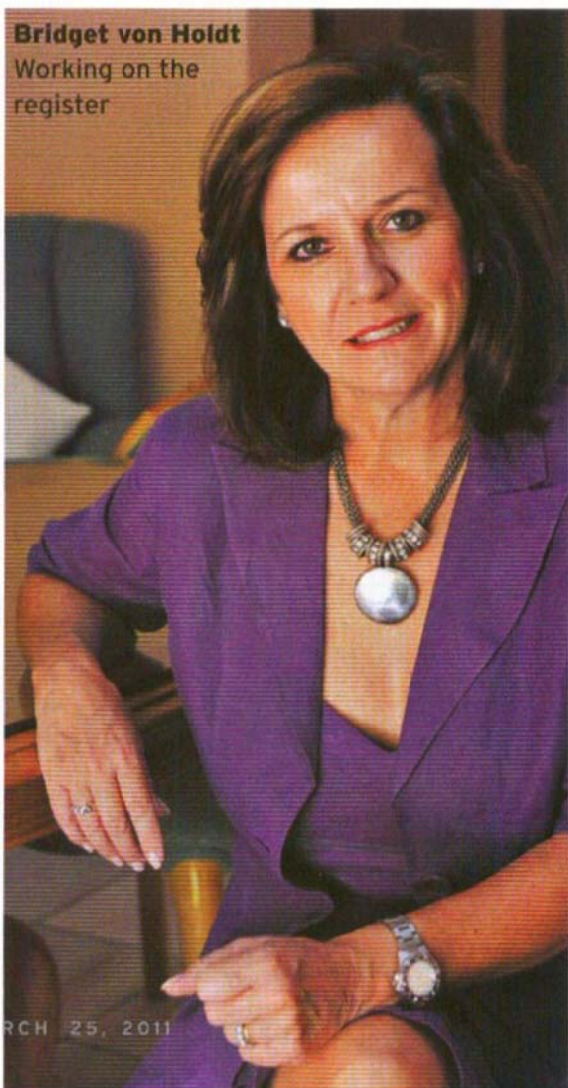
Von Holdt, organiser of the PR industry's 2011 Prism Awards taking place this week, says PR is growing faster than advertising. Companies are being forced to pay closer attention to public perceptions in a cynical post-recession world.

But the problem in SA is that PR is often seen as a spin doctor function dedicated to hiding facts rather than fostering communication.

Prisa's top 20 agencies make up 50% of the market, with about R330m in annual turnover. This doesn't take into account unregistered or in-house corporate practitioners.

Grant Henry, MD of the multinational corporate communications agency Financial Dynamics, says the company's scope is not ideally suited to entering the Prism awards. "We do high-level advisory work rather than campaigns for products. Rather than having the most media coverage we measure ourselves on how effectively we are able to communicate a client's message."

Bridget von Holdt
Working on the register



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Jacques de Beer, partner at PR agency College Hill, says while Prisa is a good organisation it does not represent all facets of public relations in SA. "Areas such as investor relations and financial PR are still a niche, and there are only a handful of players in this space," he says.

In developed markets, the investor relations function is well developed, but in SA it is often consolidated into the marketing department.

And the lack of a uniform measurement tool leaves corporate clients unsure about the value of public relations.

Ogilvy PR MD Joanna Oosthuizen says clients are demanding more measurement of interventions. "We use media monitoring services such as Media Tenor and Monitoring SA," she says. "In our own system we count the number of news clippings compared to advertising. Our pricing is measured according to negative, neutral or positive coverage."

While Ogilvy uses news clippings, Financial Dynamics measures the accuracy of the message as portrayed in the media, and College Hill uses an online survey to measure the perception of the company following a particular intervention.

It's still hard to tell whether clients are getting their money's worth.

Von Holdt says the creativity of SA's PR industry is world class but it will take some time to develop a scientific framework that measures its actual value to its clients.

Zweli Mokgata