THE ROLE OF THE PUBLICIST IN
PERFORMING ARTS ORGANISATIONS
IN SOUTH AFRICA: 2010 - 2016

Fiona Gordon
Connecting Art and Audiences
Number of press releases issued per publicist

- The Famous Idea Trading Company: 886
- Copy Dog Editorial Enterprises CC: 553
- DVA PR: 458
- Bizzi Publicity: 456
- Christine Skinner: 407
- Gold Reef City: 323
- Sharlene Verheuvel: 311
- Joburg Theatre: 311
- WSOA - Wits School of Arts: 303
- Atascape: 300
- Lefra Productions: 295
- Market Theatre Foundation: 258
- Behind the Scenes Communications: 254
- Rhumbelow Theatre: 252
- Branford Arms Theatre: 234
Overall number of clients per publicity company: 2010 - 2016

- TFI: 55
- DIVA: 86
- Christine: 45
- Buz: 102
Number of clients per publicist per year: 2010 - 2016

- Buz: 44, 44, 35, 0, 2, 3, 0
- Christine: 7, 6, 11, 12, 22, 12, 10
- DIVA: 28, 27, 33, 28, 20, 13, 9
- TFI: 11, 17, 16, 13, 14, 11, 16

Legend:
- Light blue: Buz
- Light blue with darker stripe: Christine
- Medium blue: DIVA
- Dark blue: TFI
TDM’s Three Defining Periods

Growth – 1970s and 1980s
- External: Stability
- Internal: Enhancing managerial capabilities

Success – 1990s
- Increasing competition

Troubled Maturity – 2000s
- Turmoil
  - Declining sales (from 2006)
  - Cuts in touring grants (2008)
- Turmoil
  - Lack of artistic renewal (2005-09)

Source: Adapted from Johnson, Christensen and Kagermann (2008); Eyreing, Johnson and Nair (2011)
WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

“arts management is not just marketing to maximise ticket sales; it builds public interest on the basis of reputation and distinction within the relevant social space, a space that comprises not only actual and potential audiences (as ticket buyers), but also critics, experts, politicians, sponsors and patrons, and partners” (Bendixen 2000, 11).
NEWS, PREVIEWS, REVIEWS and THREATS TO ARTS COVERAGE
“It’s not the publicist’s job to sell tickets – there is often misunderstanding about this – it’s not about them getting about bums on seats, but almost single-handedly, they are responsible for enabling that process”.

- Galloway (2017)
SUM OF THE PARTS =

CHANGING BUSINESS MODELS
Product
Place
Promotion
Price
People
Process

effective stakeholder engagement through strategic leadership
As long as artists are making work, there will be a need for ways to connect them to their audiences.
HOW?:

• Planning and processes
• Effective engagement tactics
• Programming and Communications Strategy
As long as the public wants access to information, there will be a need for mechanisms of curating and distributing that information.
AMPLIFICATION OF MESSAGING:

• Quality Content
• Friends and Followers
• Audience Feedback Mechanisms
• Monitoring
What is the primary currency in the context of connecting the audience and the art?
INFLUENCERS
Eliciting positive reactions from the external world is a highly complex, long-term arts-management task far beyond mere advertising and public relations.

(Ellis and Mishra 2004, 11)
The intermediary role traditionally played by the publicist in channeling information from artists to the media is no longer of the significance that it once was, in that there are many more channels through which the public can and do get their information.
That does not necessarily mean that the role of the intermediary is negated, merely that it requires different skills, and a different approach.
While it is clear that relationships are currency in the context of connecting the audience and the art; the fundamental relationship in this context is perhaps then no longer the relationship between the publicist and the editor (or media), but rather the relationship between the programming process, and the arts promotions process. Again, this does not mean that the role of the publicist is no longer valid; but rather that the person directing communications (and therefore audience and stakeholder perceptions of and relationships with the organisation) should be positioned at a high strategic level inside arts organisations with scope to fully engage with programming from inception, using their expertise to contribute to the value chain through the leveraging of feedback mechanisms and audience engagement strategies; rather than at a more operational level, merely ‘implementing’ from outside of the organisations. While recognising that funding is a challenge, and not all organisations might be able to afford the services of someone in this position full time or even on a regular basis; this speaks not necessarily to an approach to employment or business models, but rather the necessity for an alternative framing of the role of the communications professional within the context of arts organisations in South Africa.