

South Africa's most media-savvy business leaders

 By [Chris Moerdyk](#)

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It is astounding how many captains of industry in South Africa shy away from the media instead of realising the enormous benefits of creating direct personal relationships.

One of the biggest advantages of having a personal relationship with an editor or journalist is that nothing involving your company will get published behind your back simply because when a journalist has a personal relationship with a CEO there is very little chance that contact won't take place immediately.

My own experience in the corporate sector proved time and again that potential crises were nipped in the bud simply because editors and journalists whom I knew personally, and to whom I had a permanently open door, contacted me right from the start to find out what was happening.

I am not suggesting by any means that this relationship should involve backhanders, corruption or bribery - all I am saying is that when two people actually know each other personally, communication is not only easily started but can take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Involvement with the media is not just about PR and press releases, corporate lunches or press conferences.

Those are just scraping the surface. In fact, the concept of the press release is pretty much redundant.

There have been some CEO's who have been really good at dealing with the media. Probably the best of all was Michael Jordaan when he was CEO of FNB. He used modern technology to keep in touch with journalists and was instantly available when he was needed.

Frankly, the impact on share prices of crises and poor communication is reason alone for CEO's to urgently look at their crisis communication strategies. Because right now the majority of companies in South Africa work on the basis that nothing can ever go wrong and when it does, they spend the first week running around like headless chickens trying to think of something to save the situation.

It is such an easy thing to develop a process whereby the CEO can become available to meet the media without taking a huge amount of time and energy.

And to be quite frank, the time it takes to develop this relationship is a lot more productive and valuable than a lot of those time-wasting conferences and workshops CEO's attend in the belief that they are motivating their staff.

The problem is most of them are scared. Because they feel they might be out of their depth. Dealing within the media was not something they learnt about when getting their university degrees or MBA's.

It's something they tend only to find out about when they get into the top jobs.

A lot depends on how they are introduced to the concept of good media relations. I have found that it takes me less than an hour to get any CEO who is prepared to meet with me, to see the benefit and the complete lack of risk in getting to know the media.

Remember, when journalists want to speak to somebody in the company about something important, it is not the PRO or an "official spokesman" they want - it's the boss. Anything less is a compromise and tantamount to getting fobbed off.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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