

The missing link between PR and criminal theory

By [Hayley van der Woude](#)

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The [broken windows theory](#), the brainchild of James Q Wilson and George Kelling, holds that an anti-social environment encourages further, more serious criminal behaviour. So, petty crimes and minor evidence of crime - like litter, graffiti and vandalised buildings (the eponymous broken windows) - are the gateway drugs to other more serious crimes.



Image source: [123RF.com](#)

Therefore, the theory goes, if you focus on cleaning up the streets of minor crimes, petty criminals won't end up committing harder crimes, and you'll create an environment that's less conducive to breaking the law.

But isn't this a marketing website? Why am I reading about criminal theory?

Without a doubt, bigger-picture thinking is a crucial element of good PR. Your PR company should have a wide lens perspective on your business in order to do you any justice. But just as important is making sure that there are no broken windows to trip that strategy up. This means also getting the basics right – without which any PR that you do ends up being hollow and lacking the voice and values that ensure your company's messaging resonates with its audience.



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Allowing broken window-type splinters to take root will lead to much bigger problems further down the line. Something as simple as a poorly written article seeded by your PR company could be the gateway to fundamental issues in their strategic understanding of your business.

So how do you build the foundation on which the hey-sheewow ideas can rest? How do you make sure that you don't go out there with a big, spicy campaign, only to have it fall flat? How can PR move the needle on a day-to-day basis for your business?

Your PR company needs to juggle the impressive strategy with the minor details that are often overlooked – from the broken windows you might not think you need to repair to the more serious stuff that is glaring and obvious.



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What does that mean on a practical level?

- **Planning:** when appointing a new PR firm, you'll be hit with a range of buzzwords that don't mean much until you see them translate into practice. What you really want is a breakdown of exactly what they'll be doing each week and what you'll get for your investment. This roadmap will be your first clue of any broken windows. Various firms will have different names for this document, but it's important to make sure it reflects a crystal clear understanding of your messaging, objectives and the individual narratives you want to pursue.
- **Budget:** it's all well and good conceptualising a brilliant campaign, but if your business doesn't have the budget to execute it, those hours of strategy are wasted. Several of IP's new clients this year said they had first gone to agency x but the ideas were so blue-sky as to be unusable. You need an agency that can deliver a creative campaign, even if you have a limited budget – and that knows what basic questions to ask ahead of any work being done.
- **Crossing t's and dotting i's:** any PR company will tell you that they create quality content and leverage the news agenda, but the devil's in the details. As a business, your customers will be reading about you online thanks to the digital real estate your PR company has claimed for you and the last thing you want is for them to spot errors in copy. Always ask potential PR companies for writing samples relevant to your industry because dirty copy is a sure-fire sign of further editorial crimes to come.
- **Voice and tone:** all the strategy in the world won't save you if the voice and tone of your campaign is off. Just ask Clover whose recent blue-bottle explanation left consumers baffled because there was zero brand fit. Your company's voice needs to come through clearly in PR, advertising and on social media. At Irvine Partners, we find ourselves covering topics from design trends for luxury train accommodation in the Kruger National Park to the pitfalls of not using zinc in galvanising, or the struggles of public transport commuters worldwide. Key to this is having a diversity of writers so you have specialist areas, and ensuring that they're adaptable enough to capture any brand's voice.
- **Knowing your business like you do:** ultimately, the PR firm that creates the most compelling content and campaigns for your business is the one that knows it inside out. When we know what makes your business tick, we know how you make money and how to help you make more money. PR companies must take the time to continually research their client, their competitors and best practice locally and internationally within that sector. Death by meetings is a thing, but regular catch-ups with your PR company means they're always on the pulse and able to leverage the news agenda quickly and effectively. Be wary of PR firms that aren't keen to chat regularly – those are the first pebbles that

end up cracking windows.

In deciding on the PR company that's right for you, and in measuring their results, it may well be useful to take a broken-windows view of things. It's those who get the basics right and understand the drivers of your business who'll be able to execute the most creative and effective campaigns. Plus, consistent quality and strategic work on a daily basis is the best way to make a real and lasting impact. Find an agency that understands why you can't afford any broken windows, or all the creative strategy in the world won't save you.

ABOUT HAYLEY VAN DER WOUDE

Hayley is the Managing Director for Irvine Partners -- a full-service public relations firm with offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Lagos and London.
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