

## The last interview: A tribute to Chris Skinner

*A lot of professors give talks entitled "The last lecture". Maybe you have seen one. It has become a common exercise on college campuses. Professors are asked to consider their demise and to ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can't help but mull the same question: What wisdom would we import to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy? (Pausch, 2008:1).*

This article pays tribute to Chris Skinner who was a participant in my master's research entitled "Corporate communication strategy: aligning theory and practice amongst selected public relations practitioners in South Africa."

A man who needs no introduction to the South African public relations industry, Chris Skinner was known as a passionate leader and mentor who left indelible footprints as a lecturer and as the author of the highly influential 'Public Relations Handbook'. A fellow of the Institute for Public Relations and Communication Management Southern Africa (PRISA); an accredited public relations practitioner and a well respected communication specialist, Skinner had 40 years' experience in business and corporate affairs (LinkedIn, 2017). During his career he worked, amongst others, as a research associate at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and as a senior consultant with the East and Southern African Management Institute (ESAMI), and contributed significantly to public relations education, corporate social responsibility, conservation and crisis communication. In addition he served as Chairman of the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (Amanzimtoti) and president of the Amanzimtoti Rotary Club. Skinner died on June 9, 2016.

It was only after I learned of his death that I realised this might have been his last interview. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution he made to public relations, and share his comments on corporate communication strategy.

*Michelle Burger is an M Tech (Public Relations Management) graduate from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Her thesis is titled "Corporate communication strategy; aligning theory and practice amongst selected public relations practitioners in South Africa". Marian Pike is a senior lecturer in the department of applied design at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In response to the Google forms questionnaire on corporate communication which was sent to the PRISA database, Chris Skinner volunteered to participate in the interview phase of my public relations management master's research entitled "*Corporate communication strategy: aligning theory and practice amongst selected public relations practitioners in South Africa.*" On May 26, 2016, I phoned him and these are his responses in answer to my interview questions.

**Michelle Burger:** *Many companies use communication strategies to achieve different objectives; what has been the most common objective in your experience? And why?*

**Chris Skinner:** I've just done a crisis communication workshop in Namibia with seven different and interesting clients, which included big mining companies. They were a very diverse group and I was interested to find out what communication challenges they face and how important these are.

In fact, one of the companies is about to invest a couple of million rand into a strategy to improve their overall image and reputation locally. I'm wondering why they are doing that (at this time) because the company is about to conclude a health survey of their workers, who have been selected independently and worked in .... open cast mines for more than 20 years. I'm wondering what sort of health results will flow from this health survey. If it is fairly negative, you'll find that they'll put in a lot of resources into saying "*This is what we are doing, we accept what the results are; and we hope to compensate them rather than being taken to court*". This has been happening in the mining industry here in South Africa and particularly within the gold mining industry. In this type of situation, a court case will cost the company millions, if not billions, in terms of compensation. When companies get into this type of situation then they feel they really have to communicate to get their point of view across and explain what they're doing in order to remedy the situation.

**Michelle Burger:** *What was your most challenging and/or exciting and/or satisfying communication strategy and why?*

**Chris Skinner:** The last couple of weeks have been spent looking at some of the crises that companies have faced or will be facing in terms of a very different communication environment from even five years ago. Social media has broken through or slipped around the firewalls and companies are really having to think about what they communicate and what reactions their statements will elicit. We have done some exciting media workshops in Namibia as well, where we brought together consultants, corporates and journalists to work on stories.

I'm actively involved in the corporate social investment field with a major project – a resource centre in the middle of the largest chemical complex in South Africa. The centre invites 70 school parties, which consist of 3000 young black primary school children, for a morning of discussions and walks and the like. It's been very interesting to see the reaction of young black primary school children in an environment which they've never explored. They've explored it in the classroom,

but never actually seen and walked into wetlands and seen birds and found some indigenous trees. It's less hard core in terms of education as opposed to companies grappling with crisis situations.

**Michelle Burger:** *In your opinion, what is the effect of trust on corporate communication in general?*

**Chris Skinner:** We talk about image and reputation as far as the company is concerned, but essentially it's about building trust. As a company, my target audiences have got to trust me for who I am, what I stand for and what I say. Trust takes a lot of time and effort to develop. Also, it's not just reputation, it's a combination of factors. If one trusts the individual or the organisation, and what he or she stands for, then you'll be more loyal to the brand or using its service or identify with it.

Trust is absolutely critical, more so than reputation. Your reputation can go out of the window, and we've seen it particularly with politicians. How can our friend, Donald Trump, having said so many horrible things ranging from the environment to women, in another interview say "Actually, I didn't get it right, I've changed my mind". I couldn't trust this man because of what he's said. That's it. You might say he's built up a good reputation depending on what side you come from, but do you trust the man? Do you trust the organisation? Do you trust the products or services?

You can build a reputation, but ultimately that reputation develops into trust for the individual and the organisation. And that's critical and it takes time, and as fragile as the reputation is, it can literally be destroyed by what he or she says or what the organisation does or what information is communicated.

**Michelle Burger:** *Have you ever had to sell the need for a communication strategy to management and how did you pitch it; if not, how would you pitch it?*

**Chris Skinner:** It's been an uphill battle for years for many public relations practitioners, and it's reflected in the lack of inclusion in the top senior management board. The executive board consists of heads of different departments and business units and, unfortunately, public relations is not always invited. I think it may have changed in the last couple of years, largely because of social media and the impact this has had on communication in general. Individuals and companies have now had to communicate, whereas before they were shielded to some extent by the barriers or firewalls created. I think we have an opportunity as public relations practitioners to play an even more important role. I believe because of the new dispensation of transparency and the need to communicate, top management, as individuals, may be superb businessmen with regard to legal and financial backgrounds, but they're not very good at communication. They haven't seen the need to communicate, so they pass this down the line to someone else. They're being asked to comment and as a result they have to communicate. And now they are looking to people who can assist them and guide them and give them confidence in communication.

**Michelle Burger:** *In your experience as a public relations practitioner, to what extent does public relations theory influence the way in which you practice public relations? Do you consider the theory at all, or do you expand on what has worked for you before? Can you give me an example?*

**Chris Skinner:** Public relations practitioners should hopefully be aware of the developments in the profession, and the profession is guided by bodies like Institute for Public Relations and Communication Management Southern Africa (PRISA) and the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management (GA). I think that we're fortunate that people at the head of such industry bodies are really deeply committed and involved in the sphere and development and practice of the profession and understand the developments from a theory point of view. They're contributing to the body of knowledge by making speeches and writing articles. For example, Anne Gregory has been the chairman of the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) and she is a top academic. Anne travels the world on behalf of the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) and her thoughts and who she represents are well documented. I think we should all be aware of what the trends are in the profession. But many of us, I'm afraid, are simply not involved with a professional body, whether it be the Institute for Public Relations and Communication Management Southern Africa (PRISA) or any other body. Public relations practitioners are not reading and are not developing and they seem to be reacting rather than being proactive. We respond to what the client wants. I think we have to ask the question: 'Are public relations practitioners aware of the theory of our discipline, are they up to date on where it's going and what the changes are?' In our particular environment, a developing world in Southern Africa, I would say we are very much behind.

**Michelle Burger:** *In terms of corporate communication strategies, do you communicate a message to get a response or do you communicate to meet objectives? Which one works better for you and why?*

**Chris Skinner:** I would say that first you've got to have the objectives. If you're looking at the seven key stages of a public relations programme, you've got your SWOT analysis, the theme setting, you're formulating your objectives and you're looking at your target markets and so on. Even if you look at the basic structure of what we do, we have to discuss, after analysing the situation that we've been drawn into, what the objectives are. If we don't have any objectives, then there's no way that we can measure our performance. Then we're just simply doing activities. If there's no evaluation in the context of what the overall objectives were while doing a particular campaign, then clearly, there's no way to measure how successful you've been.

**Michelle Burger:** *To what extent does perception (which can play many roles) influence communication strategies? Can you give me an example?*

**Chris Skinner:** It's the public relations practitioner's job to narrow the gap between people's perceptions and the real situation and that's quite difficult to achieve at times. It depends on how serious and how complex the situation is. We are influenced by our perceptions; perceptions before

we come into contact with people and situations, and perceptions when we are directly involved with the same. The company in the mining industry that I'm currently working with provides an interesting example of perceptions. This company has undertaken to conduct a health survey and it's been interesting for me to note how the whole operation is geared toward target audiences' perceptions of uranium and how dangerous it is as a product, and what they think about nuclear. I have discussed with a couple of people whether they would like to assist me in terms of the consulting to do the scoping survey, and they said they won't touch it. It's because they don't feel comfortable with nuclear. If I was then inviting you as a consultant to work with me in terms of this company that I represent, knowing what they do, you might say that I'm not really interested in this. It's a perception of the product and the industry. That's an extreme in terms of perceptions. Now, when you go into this, you might find that it narrows the gap between perception and reality. The challenge for the consultant at the mining company is to narrow that gap and to still say, 'we can continue', 'we are still a major contributor to the economy of Namibia.' That's an interesting assignment because it does very much impact on what your perceptions are, what the people's perceptions are in that context of Namibia as it contributes 10% of the GDP.

**Michelle Burger:** *What are the most common steps in communication strategy implementation, and which do you consider to be the most important?*

**Chris Skinner:** For me, I need to know the situation, I need to get the facts, as I've just briefly described about the mining company in Namibia and uranium. I need to get a lot more background information and then clearly, in terms of drawing up that strategy, define the objectives of the company in this connection. It's absolutely crucial. Otherwise, all I'm doing is dispensing corporate social responsibility (CSR) for them, realising the impact that this may or may not have. It might be seen as glossing over things. So for me, right up front, after the initial SWOT analysis, I need to sit down and agree on objectives and from that flows everything else.

**Michelle Burger:** *How do you know if your communication strategy works? Can you give me an example of how you are able to measure it?*

**Chris Skinner:** It's very much a long-term exercise. I have managed to build, over a five year period, a centre that is quite unique in South Africa; which has a focus on conservation and specifically the education of young people and how to be aware of their environment and to look after it. The proposal that I put forward to the centre is rigorously monitored every month, especially in terms of funding. It's a large corporate social responsibility (CSI) initiative and I received nearly a million rand for the programme over a three year period. I've built this programme to a position where it's viable and it really makes a valuable contribution at primary school level.

It's a nice project because it's not so influenced, in a sense, by the commercial element, which very often is what people want. Clients call you in because they have a crisis and say "Help! What should we do? What should we say? How can we improve the situation we've gotten ourselves into?" So, in many cases, we, as public relations practitioners, are operating as communicators in crisis situations that are about to happen, have happened or are about to happen which the

company wants to extricate itself from. And that then forms the basic perceptions, and we need to look at how we can change those perceptions.

The environment, or conservation, is something that all of us should be concerned with. That, I think, is the breakdown of how we are measured. This CSI initiative is aimed at changing the attitude of young, black primary school children that love the environment. And let's face it, the situation that they find themselves in is pretty desperate. I've recently read in the newspaper, that as a result of the storms that we've had in Amanzimtoti, beaches have been cleaned in excess of 3500 bags filled with mostly plastic, which came from rivers where the communities are situated. It's going to take a combo of circumstances to change this attitude and educate them and to provide the services to get the community involved. Otherwise, the result will be another flood and another 5000 bags that are on the beach. It's all about communication. I'm very proud of this project. It's a unique project and we've managed to persuade people that it's important. From a measurement aspect, the measurement reports I fill in every month are critical, in which these questions are asked: "What are you doing? How successful has it been? What changes are you making? What are the challenges you are facing?"

I am very grateful for Skinner's contribution to my research.