



How Respectable is PR?

BY MILLICENT DANKER

THE PR profession has had its share of bashing, particularly from the media. Editors and journalists usually distrust us. Even last week, a senior editor challenged me with: Why are you in PR? All you people do is tell untruths.

Do we? Do we lie on behalf of our clients and our organisations? Is this the general perception of the media towards us?

If so, the industry must respond. We should have a dialogue with the media, organise one of those roundtables that we execute so brilliantly on behalf of our clients, for ourselves. We need to react because, clearly, the PR profession suffers from a negative perception. We should take the message out about what PR is, what it does, can and cannot do, to key media institutions.

For a start, I would say that there are PR practitioners and there are PR practitioners. Those of us who subscribe to the highest PR ethics or best practices would stand by our own personal and professional integrity.

The International Public Relations Association, first set up in 1955, adopted 10 years later its International Code of Ethics, also known as the Code of Athens. It has since been translated into some 20 languages and upheld by the 90 or so countries, including Malaysia, who are members of IPRA. Additionally, members uphold the IPRA Code of Conduct which prescribes personal and professional integrity; conduct towards clients and employers; conduct towards the public and the media; and conduct towards colleagues. Among the tenets of the Code, there are two worth mentioning here:

- A member shall not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information.
- A member shall at all times seek to give a faithful representation of the organisation which he/she serves.

More recently, IPRA has launched its Charter on Media Transparency which benchmarks what PR practitioners can expect when dealing with editorial providers. On solicitation, for example, the Charter clearly says: "There should be no suggestion by any journalist or member of staff of an editorial provider that editorial can be obtained in any way other than through editorial merit."

Let me try to put a perspective on the issue by refreshing our view of what PR is. On this, I prefer to borrow a quote from the British Institute of Public Relations whose definition reads:

"Public Relations is the planned and sus-

tained effort to build and maintain mutual understanding and goodwill between an organisation and its target publics."

Whenever I present this, I find myself focused on the operative words: planned vs. knee-jerk; sustained vs. ad-hoc; build & maintain vs. hit & run; mutual vs. one-way; understanding & goodwill vs. misunderstanding & suspicion. More than this, however, the definition suggests responsible relationship-building and two-way communication.

PR is credible and respectable. Indeed, practitioners must make it a challenge to ensure that business and industry develop a healthy respect for our role as communication counselors.

Back to my editor friend. I tried to defend the profession. I said we PR people do not lie, we do not tell untruths, we only help our clients and organisations present their side of the story. In nearly every situation, there are several perspectives. Reality is perceived through the eyes of an individual, with his or her emotional baggage, past experiences and intellectual landscape. Whenever there is communication, a perception is created. One thought is presented and a response is triggered. When one side tells a story, a particular emotion results. But there is always another side to that story, and when that side is told, the emotion or response may be altered.

Let me use an example: If a company is perceived to be unfair to its employees and to be practising poor governance, resulting in plant closures and layoffs, one cannot assume that the perception of the employees is the only reality. Other stakeholder groups may perceive the company differently, and who is to say one perception is superior to another? If customers believe the company to have been a responsible and ethical provider of goods and services, are we to disbelieve them? Are we to allow only one per-

ception to prevail? Is it not our duty and responsibility to allow others to express their opinions, be entitled to their perceptions?

What if the disgruntled employees took their 'story' or their perceptions to the media and created headlines across the nation? Can we afford to allow the company not to have its say? And if we do facilitate opportunities and platforms for the company to have its say, are we to be accused of telling untruths or fudging the truth?

PR practitioners work closely with the media. We are not fabricators of information; rather we facilitate information flow. We research facts and figures, we write articles with clarity, we try to present alternative viewpoints on a particular issue, product, service, attribute. Yes, we must be creative to find the right things to say, things that will help rational people understand an issue with greater clarity. Yes, we try to be persuasive in our communication because it is a noisy marketplace and our messages must shine. But who ever said being persuasive means being false?

Today, the Malaysian Government through the National Economic Action Council has taken out several full-page advertisements in the print media to tell its side of the story in the Singapore Water Dispute. This is a form of public relations. Is this spin? Even diehard critics will find that there is more to the 'truth' as told by the Singapore Government than meets the eye. If the NEAC had not risen to the challenge and presented its version, we run the risk of being perceived as a country that did not keep to its side of the bargain.

PR is credible and respectable. Indeed, practitioners must make it a challenge to ensure that business and industry develop a healthy respect for our role as communication counsellors. The media too, needs to be educated. Perhaps, in the past, PR practitioners fronted their clients as 'gatekeepers' of information. Today, we are facilitators of information. We help bridge the gap between institutions and their stakeholder groups, including the media.

Indeed, we plan and sustain PR campaigns, ever mindful of the fact that we build mutual understanding and goodwill wherever we go. ☺

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