

Changing Role of PR Professionals



By Millicent Danker

Globalisation, an increasingly complex marketplace and a heightened awareness of corporate governance have all combined to change the way public relations practitioners work.

PUBLIC relations encompasses a wide range of activities and, indeed, the term has come to mean different things to different people, even within the profession itself.

There are those who deal with board communication, concerned with matters of earnings, corporate disclosure and transparency, all of which fall under the purview of managing corporate reputation.

Then there are practitioners involved in promoting a product or service, or brand, who are considered to be in the business of marketing communication.

Others may be concerned with pressure groups and fending off intense media scrutiny, for whom issues or crisis management would be a constant challenge.

Still another group of practitioners focus on employee communication and building corporate culture.

So, PR practitioners do a host of things. They always have. But what are they doing now that's different from what they used to do before? Four overriding trends have begun to shape the way PR practitioners manage their communication, and they are as follows.

Trend No. 1: Globalisation

In our context, globalisation is important for its impact on the media, on corporate and CEO behaviour, investor decisions, language and imagery, accounting and financial reporting standards, and business ethics and principles.

If you manage communication for a public-listed company, your stakeholders are no longer necessarily domiciled in Malay-

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sia, but could include foreign investors and influencers such as rating agencies.

Your actions will no longer be reported solely in Malaysia, but are likely to find their way onto the global wire services and cross-border studios of CNN or CNBC, to be broadcast around the world.

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News is a 24-hour feed. When one market shuts down, another awakens. Reporting on markets is no longer an after-the-fact event, but more akin to live football commentary – a goal missed here, someone sent off the field there, a major upset here, a casualty there....

Breaking news has the potential of eroding business confidence in split seconds and can chip away at stock values and corporate reputations.

The people who appear on your television screens daily, those guests and commentators who speak of your business in two or three sound-bites, have an audience of millions of viewers at any one time.

So, there can be no doubt about the fact that globalisation has well and truly arrived. And we have to be alert to its various dramas and possibilities as they unfold.

Trend No. 2: A Noisy Marketplace

Today's marketplace brings to mind an Egyptian bazaar – a chaotic and noisy assault on the senses. Everyone talks all at once, everyone flaunts his displays, everyone clamours for your attention and time.

In such a jostling and crowded environment, how do you stand out from your competition? How do you even make yourself heard over the babble?

Given the level of complexity and competition in the market, one would be so

lucky to be charged with promoting a novel product or unique idea. It's not easy to find a client or a brand with a crystal-clear market niche.

Thus, we continually have to ask ourselves: What's different about our company and products? What stories can we tell that haven't been told before? How do we get the attention of the media or the customer? What is our message? How clear is it? How memorable are our actions? How can we be leaders, and not followers, in the pack?

Meanwhile, we have to become multi-media savvy, too, and make the right choices over which platform to use to deliver our messages – online or offline, mainstream or alternative, website or coffee-table book, English or vernacular.

Going one step further, there are also opportunities to communicate via 'alternative' platforms of music or the arts, the environment and even social causes. We can choose to work with celebrities or partner with governments. The array of tools at our disposal is, without exaggeration, mind-boggling.

Trend No. 3: Corporate Governance

Corporate governance did not begin with the Enron Affair, but had its defining moment with the Cadbury Report of 1986 in the United Kingdom. It took on new importance, however, after the unfolding of mega accounting scandals in the United States.

Today, corporate governance has come to imply reform in the way companies are managed, better business ethics and principles, greater transparency and disclosure, creation of shareholder value, concern for the rights of minority shareholders, principles-based global accounting standards, new board accountabilities, audit committees, better financial reporting, and corporate social responsibility.

There are huge communication implications. First, if you are a key communicator for a plc, you must ensure that a statement of corporate governance has been articulated and made available for all to read, including employees who need to understand and subscribe to its principles.

Second, you need a Communication Policy or Disclosure Policy to support your

image as a well-governed organisation. This policy has to advocate transparency, and address issues like:

- How often does your company communicate, and with whom?

- Does it practise a policy of equal access to information?

- How does it strengthen all the links in the corporate-reporting supply chain?

- Who are the key players in this chain? Who are the spokespersons? Are they trained to communicate?

- What is the frequency of corporate and financial communication?

- Does it benchmark against Malaysian and global standards?

Good PR practitioners have always championed the importance of building relationships with stakeholder groups in an ethical, sincere and honest manner with a view to mutually beneficial exchange and long-term commitment.

Trend No. 4: Ethics

All serious public relations practitioners embrace ethics in their practice. Ethics is so important, PR associations subscribe to it in their statement of principles. And public relations books often have a section dedicated to the subject.

Ours is a business of words, which are easy to manufacture. All we have to do, literally, is open our mouths or type on a keyboard. But, for our words to be credible, there must be honesty. People who listen to our words must believe and trust us.

Trust is a very fashionable word today, thanks to a number of high-profile corporate disasters. Yet it has always been in the vocabulary of public relations practitioners.

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long-term commitment.

There are two aspects of ethics for us to consider – personal and corporate. The British Institute of Public Relations sets out three key principles for the former, namely:

Integrity, where practitioners must be honest and responsible with regard to public interest; thorough with regard to accuracy of information before dissemination; and never knowingly mislead a client or a company about what can be competently delivered and achieved.

Competence, where practitioners are expected to ensure a skills base; be transparent and disclose to employers or clients any financial interest in a supplier being recommended or engaged; declare conflicts of interest as soon as they arise; and ensure that services provided are costed and accounted for in a manner that conforms to accepted business practice and ethics.

Confidentiality, with regard to safeguarding the confidence of clients and employers and being careful to avoid using such confidential and insider information to the disadvantage or prejudice of clients and employers, and self-advantage of any kind.

As for corporate ethics, there are many communities that advocate or drive ethical attributes. For example, there are investors who will not invest in a company that does not practise good ethics in management of the environment, or in sustainability, or in their product testing.

There are pressure groups that monitor the transparency of a company via a transparency index. There are minority shareholder watchdog groups – and we have our very own in Malaysia – which safeguard the rights of minority shareholders.

As Malaysia comes into its own as a fully-developed country, we as communicators of its government, companies, brands, institutions, celebrities and values must aspire to the highest standards of international best practice. Only then will our communication be taken seriously and trust earned. **mb**

This article is based on a presentation by the writer, who is CEO & principal consultant of Perception Management Sdn Bhd, at a recent Media Relations Conference organised by The Asia Business Forum