



REDEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

PUBLIC RELATIONS REPORT

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Published: Mar 20, 2007

Public Relations (PR) or corporate communications enables an organisation to manage and integrate communications internally and externally using a wide range of management strategies, and by tapping on a variety of specialist disciplines within the profession.



The successful Xbox 360 launch by Edelman PR

PR isn't a one-way street and it cannot operate in a silo. Instead, it is a vital part of an organisation's marketing arsenal. Cindy Payne, managing director, Asia Pacific Connections says, "In our experience, when clients integrate their public relations activities with other marketing vehicles under one campaign umbrella, objectives are more aligned and messaging more consistent - maximising influence over customer spend and driving bottom line results.

PR is often misunderstood to be publicity, and is there only for the purpose of generating media attention. Some even refer to PR as a 'marcom song and dance'. PR is actually an umbrella term for a range of communication activities including community relations, customer relations, consumer affairs, promotions, employee relations, international relations, issues and crisis management, media relations, publicity, shareholder relations, investor relations, analyst relations, and speech writing. Some of these functions overlap, but is often distinguished, relative to the type of stakeholders being addressed by an organisation and business objectives it seeks to achieve.

At Yahoo, global communications efforts include overseeing functions such as media relations, policy communications, internal communications, product promotion and corporate reputation management. The company's chief communications officer, Jill Nash, who reports to CEO Terry Semel, is the top communications advisor to the executive team and guides the global relations team. In local markets, managing directors or country directors are also heavily involved in the development process and execution of PR strategy. "Yahoo has a centralised PR structure in SEAsia, that helps ensure reliable and consistent communications from corporate headquarters to the various stakeholders we communicate with on a daily basis", Jason Coates, communications manager, Yahoo SE Asia says.

With Nokia, its various corporate communications teams are responsible for all communication activities in their respective geographical areas with close management interaction in line with the company's principles and guidelines. "Communications is one of the key pillars that drives Nokia's leadership. Nokia communicates the right messages to its stakeholders to build and maintain strong relationships between press members, analysts, investors and employees", Wong Ai Fong, communications director, Asia Pacific, Nokia says.

"Different target audiences have different needs, and the corporate communications function plays a strategic role in identifying messages specific to each audience." This, she adds must be seamlessly delivered and at Nokia, corporate communication function heads work closely with senior management to achieve a strategic balance for external and internal audiences.

One sure way to upset PR practitioners is referring to them as 'spin doctors'. The term gained momentum in the 1990s in some media circles, painting an image of modern day practitioners like that of propagandists of another era who focused solely on promoting a particular doctrine or point of view, almost at any cost. In reality, the word 'spin' in connection to modern day PR is simply about putting information in either a positive or negative light, depending on the side of the issue the presenter is representing. Truth be told, there's nothing sinister or devious about it.

When Edwin Yeo, general manager of Strategic Public Relations Group joined the PR industry after spending 10 years as a journalist with The New Paper, some journalists described it as "moving over to the dark side". "PR is considered to by the media as the 'dark side' because many have the impression that it is an obstacle to prevent them from finding out the whole truth about the news". He says, "They often have issues dealing with the concept that PR professionals are hired to manage the media."

David Chin, associate director for technology practice, Hill & Knowlton Singapore, who previously headed CMP Business Media's publications after a period as editor of Network Computing within the Group, says for some who have transitioned from media to PR, "Losing the press status and 'respect' that comes with it is a noticeable change." What helps to smooth the migration for an experienced press person is the domain knowledge, communication skills and industry contacts, all of which are essential in PR. "I would say that the skills required to be a good PR person are a lot wider and not easy to define. On the whole, the job is more demanding than editorial. PR is more real world," Chin says.

The irony of the negative perception PR practitioners and the profession seems to attract lies in the fact that most conduct themselves with a high level of professionalism and integrity. Although not all practitioners here are members of the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (IPRS), which has detailed an industry Code of Ethics for its members, many practitioners abide by a 'code' firmly grounded in honesty and putting the interest of the profession and organization they work for as a priority.

"As communications professionals we all know that perception always lags reality. We tell this to clients everyday. I suggest we start taking our own medicine. Stop talking about what we aren't and use language that addresses what we are and want to be", Kathy O'Brien, managing director, Redshoe Communications and vice-president, IPRS says.

Nokia's Wong says the company's communications culture is based on openness, trust and credibility, ensuring timely and effective messages are delivered with a positive and transparent attitude, through clear and jargon-free language.

She adds, "It is through this culture that we maintain our credibility in creating and driving Nokia's image to reinforce thought and market leadership with the media and internal audiences to upkeep our corporate reputation, market leadership and brand image."

PR people often have a tough job to do, balancing the objectives of the organisation against stakeholder issues, concerns and sometimes, negative publicity. At the same time, they cannot negate the greater good or the welfare of the community where the organisation operates. These collectively, create different perceptions of the organisation, its practices, and management with significant impact on its brand and reputation amongst different target audiences including, media, the government, customers, partners, supporters and the public at large.

The fiasco created by the former management and board of the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) is a great example. Any botch up by management, especially one with a high profile like this organisation is bound to face major backlash. In this instance, back padding and hiding from their mismanagement of the charity eventually led to the dismantling of the previous management team, a drop in donor support, a significant drop in public trust in the NKF and other welfare organisations which in the end, undid much of the goodwill the establishment had built up over many years.

Some PR practitioners say they have a 'dirty job', particularly in times of crisis where they are often called upon for damage control to 'clean up the mess', turnaround negative perceptions and rebuild corporate reputation by re-instilling trust amongst key stakeholders. An organisation's PR team or agency, together with senior management often have to manage multiple issues at the frontline, sometimes complex and difficult, whilst having to maintain their composure and assertiveness to clearly communicate the company's messages and concurrently addressing concerns and feedback on critical issues.

In stressful situations, thinking clearly can be the hardest task. "Good crisis communications training puts executives through difficult situations over and over again, so they gain muscle memory and even years later can suddenly shift into action", O'Brien says, adding, "Muscle memory is that instinct that kicks in because you've done it enough times before and you know just how to do it."

Muscle memory is definitely an important skill for specialists of financial PR and investor relations (IR) as well as company spokespersons who must be well versed with exchange disclosure compliance guidelines and regulations. Practitioners in this field, work with or within local or foreign listed companies which have a variety of statutory disclosure and governance obligations to adhere to, including the need for "timely and fair disclosure, in order to protect the interests of investors who have placed their trust and money in these firms", Terrence Foo, managing director, Gavin Anderson & Company Singapore says.

In addition, listed entities are bound by internal and external controls not to deviate from financials or other material information released publicly so as not to breach statutory regulations. Spokespersons, including financial and investor relations practitioners need to have technical competence of securities law and regulations, which is all the more challenging if the company is dual listed in different markets such as SingTel on the SGX (Singapore) and ASX (Australia).

The company has to comply with two sets of listing rules, corporate governance and disclosure requirements. Where one exchange has more onerous requirements, SingTel would then have to comply with the more stringent requirements. Releases are also published on the company's website and disseminated to the media, including wire services. Timing considerations are critical, due to time differences between Singapore and Sydney, where the Optus headquarters is based. News releases and other related financial documents are filed with the exchanges at 6.30am Singapore time, and media briefings held at 8.30am here which would be either 10.30am or 11.30am Sydney time depending on daylight savings. Unlike SGX listed companies who conduct media briefings at market close after 5.00pm here, this is not possible for SingTel as it would be night time in Australia.

Besides the challenges encountered by SingTel, Foo points out, "Internet issues also factor in IR strategies, involving complex topics such as mergers and acquisition propositions, where investor chat rooms or the "blogosphere" can undermine the market for a public company's shares through the fostering of ill-informed or erroneous claims or arguments".

Compared to five years ago, PR practitioners now have to operate in a more strategic role compared to before. More employers expect PR practitioners to be business minded and commercially savvy, since many are faced with diverse issues to manage, according to Karen Kwan, director, Hudson Singapore. "Those who demonstrate business leadership before PR leadership eventually sit at the table of management, and who truly have a strategic influence

and impact on the business," she says.

To do their jobs well, PR practitioners must also be armed with the right experience and skill sets. Kwan says, "Universally, whether agency or in-house and regardless of seniority, all PR professionals must have strong fundamentals in written and spoken English as well as critical thinking skills".

Bhavani Krishnasamy, president, IPRS says, "Public Relations qualifications are important, especially for those without experience. PR professionals can have a degree in a different field, but they may still need an educational foundation like a certificate or diploma."

"Good PR people have three qualities, resourcefulness, mental agility and a love of language. You can toss them into any industry with any academic background, and they'll ask intelligent questions, do their own research and embrace the issues quickly", O'Brien says, who also lectures in the IPRS diploma programme.

Agency and in-house practitioners realise the value training, enhancing skill sets and keeping up with best practices within the profession. The IPRS for example conducts a variety of workshops, talks, courses, selected resources and networking sessions for practitioners and those seeking a career in PR. These are extended to members as well as non-members.

For several years, the Institute has also been pushing for PR practitioners to become accredited. The IPRS Accreditation Scheme is recognition for professionals who have demonstrated strategic thinking, broad knowledge and experience in the field, exhibited high standards of professionalism, commitment to the profession and code of ethics.

Krishnasamy who heads IPRS concedes it is a challenging task, "Most PR practitioners agree that the scheme is good but do not make an effort to apply for accreditation. We are therefore helping interested parties as much as possible with their applications." She also highlighted efforts by the Institute to lift the profile and standards of the profession by speaking with human resources people within organisations to recognise accreditation when hiring PR personnel.

Kwan of Hudson observes work experience and track record to be the most important first-cut criteria and a shift to hiring only candidates who are IPRS accredited is unlikely.

Several agencies like Hill and Knowlton have hired former journalists without formal training in PR. When asked what strengths these individuals bring to the agency, Jimmy Tay, chief executive, Hill and Knowlton, SE Asia says, "They have all the right newsroom instincts - they can read the mind of editors and journalists, they know what makes news, they are resourceful with contacts and the use of information, and they are wordsmiths with the ingrained ability to deliver accurate and original work to deadline".

Malcolm Borthwick, editor Asia Business Report, BBC World says, "It's crucial that PR consultants know their clients inside out and can field questions about the company. So a consultant who cannot field tough questions about their client, or does not respond to emails and phone calls quickly enough is a barrier." He further stresses the need for PR people to know the programme and target their ideas specifically as opposed to 'spamming' editors and producers with press release.

The view is also shared by Eileen Yu, regional news editor, ZDNet Asia and Allan Soon, senior producer, CNBC Asia. There appears to be a consensus amongst the press that news pitching by PR practitioners, are often haphazard, with many not having an in-depth knowledge of how the newsroom works. In addition, when PR people do not demonstrate a good understanding of the industry or business, this dilutes the quality of the pitch and calls in question the PR practitioner's credibility and judgment.

PR professionals are expected and required to have an expert understanding of the workings of various media, including new media and emerging technologies which further impact on how they do their jobs. Today, as lines between traditional and new media become blurred, driven by changes in how people and businesses consume news, search for information, communicate and cross share information online, PR practitioners are faced with new challenges in the way they monitor, track and engage different groups of stakeholders.

New media is a reality now as media as stakeholders leverage the web to talk about a brand, products and services or expressing their opinions on anything which interests or matters to them anywhere, anytime.

The web, including blogs, personal websites, forums and message boards is a force to be reckoned with as it has given consumers a voice that cannot be ignored, according to OCBC Bank's head of group communications, Koh Ching Ching.

She says, "We monitor blogs to better understand what are the issues and comments that people are saying about us. We have to sift out the ones that are critical for us to act upon immediately, as some posts might be an indication of a latent issue that is brewing."

She adds, "As consumers tend to trust what other consumers are saying, it is important for PR practitioners to take into account what is being said about your brand. We believe it is important to embrace the web as part of the PR strategy; and having a reliable reporting and analysis system for the brand across the web is a vital first step."

Every second of every day, a new blog is being published, a new piece of breaking news being uploaded or a new photo or video clip could be posted online. And oh, by the way, it could be something about your client or company. So, if an agency or in-house PR practitioner is still stuck in the dark ages cutting out newspaper or magazine clippings or waiting for the broadcaster to send them the CD of an interview completed with the company's CEO without checking out what's being talked about online, chances are - someone's talking behind your back!

This is particularly the case for major brands like Apple, Microsoft, Yahoo, Sony or Nike. Today,

user generated content (UGC) has a strong word of mouth and viral impact. It cuts across borders since sites like Blogger.com, MySpace, YouTube or Wikis can be accessed from any part of the world by a company's varied stakeholders - employees, investors, partners, customers, government officials, media and analysts.

John Kerr, director, SE Asia, Edelman PR says, "Today, technology frees people to programme their own content - they decide what information they want to trust in the format they prefer. The craft of effective communications today requires us to intimately understand people's trusted sources and channels of information, but more importantly, the rules of engagement that are relevant to the individual or community."

By now, most PR practitioners may be familiar with Wikipedia, but many perhaps, are not aware of a site called, TheNewPR/Wiki, started in May 2004, by Constantin Basturea, director, New Media Strategies of Converseon in New York. This Wiki, is a repository of relevant information about how the PR practice is changing, a collaborative tool for PR professionals and people interested in the practice of PR and an open space where anyone can ask questions, post ideas, or start a project. The good thing about this site is, anyone can participate and contribute. It contains links, thread and blogs to varied topics, many professionals will find useful since it covers areas of practice or topics less prevalent here. In addition, practitioners in Singapore can also offer their insights and experience in this part of the world or exchange knowledge or share comments with other contributors to the site.

Senior PR practitioners stress the need for PR people to be one step ahead of everyone else in terms of awareness of news regardless of whether it is related to their industry or clients, current affairs and society's concerns. Being at the pulse is important so that clients and bosses can benefit from the acute awareness and insights of practitioners.

More importantly, PR is a function which a growing number of companies value strategically, not only when the company hits or snag or faces a crunch but in the day to day running of the business as well as in business planning. Some issues are ticking time bombs for an organisation, even political figures and governments. Management therefore needs to recognise the importance of PR's contribution in the planning process as well as instances where critical issues need to be proactively managed to prevent a haphazard knee jerk reaction, which may have dire consequences.

-Jacqueline Yeo

Box Out:

The new paradigm in content dissemination, information sharing, stakeholder engagement and monitoring

Besides traditional methods of distributing and sharing information, communicating with various stakeholders or monitoring news, companies should expand their options to include:

- 1) Social Media News Release (SMNR) - the next-generation news release combining traditional and emerging forms of communications such as Webcasts, Podcasts, RSS feeds, MP3 files or videos.
- 2) Wikis - Like Wikipedia to add or edit company and product information or collaborate with others in the community.
- 3) Press and corporate blogs by journalists, management and employees plus comments to these blogs
- 4) Blogs / Vlogs / Images / Videos / Podcast mentions and pickups on YouTube, Blogger.com, Technorati, MySpace, Google Video, Yahoo! Video or Podzinger.
- 5) Use RSS and news aggregation sites like newsgator.com, digg.com, newsisfree.com to aggregate and assimilate all in and outgoing content such as news, blog comments, podcasts or videos.
- 6) Search term volume and rankings.
- 7) Press Room site traffic and user profiles.
- 8) News mentioned in online media sites like Google, Yahoo! or MSN.

Box Out:

Career Path
Bhavani Krishnasamy
Director, Corporate Communications - MICA
President, Institute of Public Relations Singapore

1. First job ever?

Managing the finance section of a government department.

2. First job in Public Relations?

A media relations position in the Ministry of Information and Culture.

3. Why did you choose a career in Public Relations?

I wanted an exciting career. I enjoyed organising events and got great satisfaction when the event was successful.

4. Best job you've ever worked in and why?

When I was Head of PR in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The Government was pushing regionalisation for our businesses. Economic co-operation with ASEAN and China was extensive. It provided me an opportunity to handle the media in foreign countries and good exposure to intercultural communications.

5. Challenges of your current role as President of IPRS?

The greatest challenge is encouraging more PR practitioners to apply for accreditation which will raise standards of professionalism and contribute to Singapore's position as a PR hub.

6. Most satisfying moment in your role?

The last few PRISM Awards ceremonies. There was very good support from PR professionals and agencies.

7. Best career advice you've ever been given?

Always give your honest opinion to senior management. Outline the pros and cons of any strategy and make a recommendation, which you think is best to tackle the issue.

8. How do you wind down?

Watching a good movie on the big screen -- a movie that generates good discussion over a meal.