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Whither Asian Public Relations?

By

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Session on

WHITHER ASIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS ?

Text of Presentation by

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WHITHER ASIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS ?

In our part of the world, many of us forget that Public Relations is not just a set of techniques, press stories, house journals, brochures and corporate advertising -- but a serious discipline of persuasion, and shaping of public consent by changing attitudes.

Gin and Tonic brigade or a professional discipline

Publicity managers, communications managers, public relations officers, however they are designated, are a much misunderstood and much maligned lot. They are caught between the brickbats of the public and the wrath of their chief executives.

The Media with whom we are in constant touch thinks we are a hindrance between them and the Management, ill-informed and unable to make decisions. (Needless to say they forget their own faults -- rushing to meet deadlines, poor depth of the business issues they cover, and the tendency to be unnecessarily scandalous).

Even professionals in business sadly do not have much of an image of our profession. For instance, the Chairman of the India Foundation for Public Relations, while speaking at a World PR Day celebrations in April at New Delhi, observed that Indian firms are lacking in PR skills. He said more than 75 percent of the chief executives in India do not know the exact meaning and significance of public relations. He regretted that the tendency among chief executives and other officials was to withhold information, which should change.

Of course PR cannot change what is "black" into "white", but on the positive side, I do not think that we are so bad. Earlier PR meant merely getting information into media without paying for it (except may be a gin & tonic for the journalist!) Today, PR is a sophisticated attempt to interact on issues with information and persuasion. We are in the age of public relations which is professional and result oriented.

Uptrend in Asia

PR, you will agree with me, as a profession and discipline is witnessing a metamorphosis. It has changed from being a fire fighting device to a long-term and planned activity at organisations. It is no longer a decorative and cosmetic activity, but a strategic top management function. It involves feedback, evaluation and accountability of its functions and activities just as in marketing, law and medicine. It concerns communication, education and understanding

among the employees of the organisation, media, and opinion leaders, and target audiences for whom it is directed. It concerns action, and acceptance of the action, by the target groups.

PR men, and women, today are far more professional in their qualifications, attitude and actions. They are advisors and counselors. They are well paid and looked after by organisations. They are expected to perform, for which they are adequately rewarded. They are in demand. In fact, there is shortage of good PR trained people.

Role of PR today

There is a paradigm shift in PR today. PR is no longer just "information dissemination," but in many ways a discipline to "market" the organisation. In other words to build "corporate equity."

The focus in marketing of products and services is shifting from being transactional to relationship marketing. Transactional marketing is geared to successful completion of one-time transaction, whereas relationship marketing is all about building on-going relationships. That is also what PR is all about -- building relationships at the corporate level with a variety of target groups, from employees to shareholders to customers to media to government to lay public. Why? Because all of them have a bearing on the health and long-term growth of the organisation.

Since the target audiences of an organisation today cover a wide spectrum, the conventional form of PR is not enough. We need a variety of activities and integrated communications to support them. All working in synergy. PR should be able to understand the political, business and social milieu in which it operates, or else it cannot be successful.

Therefore, the role of PR today is like that of a radar on impending problems and opportunities. An interpreter of change and environment. And that of a motivator and catalyst to make others better, communicators thereafter.

Good Public Relations

Good PR in today's context means that it is more of a management function, rather than just a communications function. Involved in framing corporate policies and then communicating them. It involves communicating with multiple audiences effectively, influencing opinion and attitudes, thus creating an environment favourable to the organisations interests, for survival and growth.

It's the Asian Era

Asia is one great melting pot of people, culture and business. With tremendous potential, opportunities and a vast playing field for public relations and PR professionals.

With its mass of people today it offers a huge market for products and services of international and global companies. As a result a host of multi-national companies are setting up operations in Asian countries. In South East Asia, in countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, among others this trend is now a little old. But in countries like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, where the economies of the countries are being liberalised and reforms being introduced action is just beginning to take place. MNCs are setting up operations, investing in joint ventures, and sourcing products, in a large number of industries and fields. This is further opening up new avenues and vistas for PR.

The day when Asia, from being lead by, will lead the West, is not very far away according to author and visionary John Naisbitt. Speaking on his latest book "Megatrends In Asia," in Bombay a few weeks ago, he said Asia is the emerging leader poised to lead in global affairs, which according to him will increasingly be dominated by economic rather than political considerations.

The recent South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), among seven member countries of SAARC, and the expectation of its evolving into South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), is the way to progress that Naisbitt was taking about. The bonds of freer trade and investment through SAPTA and SAFTA will bring the seven nations closer than ever before. That is the promise of regional integration. However, the political barriers to realising this objective appear considerable. Such differences must not be allowed to derail the operationalisation of SAPTA. Statesmanship (and PR) of the highest order will be required for this. SAPTA drives home the message that economic co-operation will prevail over political differences in South Asia.

Challenges for Asian PR

PR problems and opportunities in Asia concern largely with sustainable growth. First in respect of the broader issues of development such as environment, infrastructure, and quality and standard of living. Second in respect of organisations and their products and services, where besides quality and customer satisfaction, we today have to think global but act locally.

I do like to give you two examples. One as to what is happening in India, and another what is happening in Japan.

In India there is an effort to formation of a unified common market among the six northern States. At the initiative of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), Indian States of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jammu and Kashmir have now decided to form a Council of Northern States for Cooperation and regional Development -- CONCORD -- to abolish existing barriers to freer movement of goods among them. CONCORD which became operational from 1st May this year will rationalise sales tax barriers, abolish octroi, reduce cross border controls, harmonise power tariffs and adopt other self-regulatory schemes. Following CONCORD, other regional formations are now in the offing. Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are also thinking in terms of an economic zone of the western region. There is thus the distinct possibility of a unified domestic market if the regional formations ultimately merge together.

In Japan, as growth in the West flags, Tokyo is hitching its future to Asia -- and decrying past subservience to the US. The economic shift has been quietly under way for years, but now seems to be passing crucial cultural and political thresholds. The most extreme among them call for an alliance to oppose a US government that pressures Asians on everything from trade policy to human rights. Increasing influence in Asia now tempts Japan to pursue its own geopolitical goals in the region.

The freer flow of goods and services in Asia will thus encourage a more efficient pattern of industrialisation among countries which will favourably impact on the quality of life. This would in turn boost employment which will be the biggest incentive to catalyse the growing movement towards unified national and international markets.

PR trends today

I see some distinct trends taking place in six broad PR areas -- 1) PR agencies, 2) PR technology, 3) PR media, 4) Financial PR, 5) PR and Government, and 6) Corporate social responsibility.

PR Agencies

Our countries are witnessing industrialisation and with it business and industries are growing. Side by side with the opening up of economies and liberalisation more and more MNCs are entering the local markets. More and more organisations are feeling the need for good communications and image and therefore, either setting up their own in-house PR departments, or hiring PR agencies and consultancies.

As an outcome of this: a) ad agencies are setting up PR cells or establishing subsidiaries to handle PR for their existing clients, as well as for taking on new clients. b) Individual PR professionals are giving up PR jobs in client companies to branch out on their own and start their own consultancy firms. Both these moves are proving to be beneficial to all concerned.

Because of the available opportunities and potential for further growth, agencies and the new PR firms are tying-up with international PR organisations for better expertise and professionalism. In India for instance, we have IPAN, a division of J. Walter Thompson (India), is tied-up with Hill & Knowlton. Burston Marsteller has an Indian partner in an ex-advertising professional who run his own PR consultancy. There are a number of other smaller outfits who have tied-up or are tying up with European and American PR firms.

Another important reason for PR firms mushrooming in our countries is the need for PR in times of crises. Invariably companies in our changing and growing economies land themselves in some kind of trouble requiring crisis management. Tata Steel, the largest steel company in the private sector in India was going to be nationalised and to prevent this had to undertake an extensive PR exercise. Similarly, as you are aware Union Carbide, after Bhopal, had to lean heavily on top level professional PR, and how! Until the disaster they did not even have a senior PRO in the organisation. A couple of years back Levers in India had to face up to a year long strike and lock-out at their Bombay plant. Very recently, Dupont has run into rough weather with environmentalists when setting up their nylon tire cord plant in Goa with the Thapar Group from New Delhi. All of these major companies have had to resort to a high level of PR and PR campaigns. Crises, besides being a pain, also tend to shake up corporate foundations and result in their survival being at stake. PR invariably proves to be helpful in many ways.

With business growing, the agencies and consultancies in India are having global ambitions. A few of them in India are setting-up offices and operations in neighbouring countries, or offering help in PR to companies in these countries. We have Indian PR firms with links in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nigeria. This development is taking strong roots.

PR and technology

Technology, today, has left no business untouched. Even public relations. This is the age of cyberspace and cyberdom. A mere whisper in the boardroom of an organisation can become headline news in media all over the world in a matter of seconds. This is as a result of the computer and telecommunication technology at work.

When the devastating earthquake struck Latur, in the remote and unknown corner of Maharashtra in India, in just a matter of a day the small township was wired with the world. The tele-communications established directly between Latur and the rest of the world were indeed fantastic. You could communicate with Europe and USA from there far quicker and better than with Nagpur not very far away from Latur. These are the wonderful benefits of satellite communication.

Today, in India you find STD, ISD and FAX booths around every corner in the bigger cities. Even in villages and on highways. Five years ago none of these existed.

The benefits of cellular and mobile phones and E - Mail are either yet to reach out, or are just being felt in some of our countries. Yet some countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia are very advanced and way ahead with them. One can shortly also look forward to the impact of INTERNET, the super-information highway and multimedia technologies in some of our countries. As globalisation hastens the need for communication with the outside world in our countries, and the demand for instant access to all manner of information explodes, experts believe that INTERNET will gradually seep into corporate consciousness, just as computers did in the 80s.

Office automation is another area linked with PR which has witnessed tremendous change and growth. Office automation or a business process automation system today is no longer a luxury to be afforded by a handful of large corporations, but is a valuable tool which keeps managers, especially PR people, in touch with the market on the one hand and the target audiences on the other. This interaction is the key to keeping business tuned to the trends that will determine the business and PR strategies for tomorrow.

IBM is ready to launch its Think Pad notebook computer with a projector option. Avid Technology recently unveiled its Cam Cutter digital video camera which records broadcast quality images directly on to a 2.4 gigabyte disk that, unlike tape, can be reused thousands of times. We will wait and see the impact some of the new technologies will have on PR. In the process PR will certainly be more and more hi-tech!

PR media

The fate of technology and media in PR are interlinked. Development of one has a direct impact on the other. Television and satellite for instance. TV is a medium for information, news, education and entertainment. With satellite we get wider and in-depth coverage, through multi-faceted channels -- private channels and government channels. After the Gulf war, CNN laid the foundation for

satellite footprints all over the world. From Hongkong to India to Dubai in this part of the world. In India until 2 to 3 years we had just three channels. But with the hookup with satellite today we have 20 official channels, and the objective is to have about 40 channels in the next few years reaching the remotest corners of the country, and also some of our neighbouring countries.

One major adverse effect of all this, however, has been the decline of the cinema and radio media in some countries. Which earlier were prime media for communications. In India cinema has been more or less dead for the past few years with cable TV and satellite TV growing rapidly. Radio after having declined has had a revival because of the FM channels which have been recently introduced.

The technology factor has also resulted in innovations in the Press medium, which continues to be a key medium in our countries, especially for PR. The role of Press is changing. The negative and scandalous reporting in the garb of investigative journalism is being replaced with factual and faster flow of information and news. Press is giving readers better coverage and reading material. Special supplements and issues on industry and business are making the medium more responsible and useful for PR purposes. The electronic newspaper is not very far away in some of our countries.

The local language Press in our countries somehow has yet to develop more for business and PR. Today it is largely news oriented. A conscious and planned effort will have to be made to develop it further and make it more useful for PR. Language Press as such holds tremendous potential for PR -- especially for countries like India which are vast and with diverse culture, and it is just not possible for the English Press to reach the masses. Nor is it possible because of the low literacy rate. What with countries like India where in four major States like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh account for nearly 50 percent of total illiteracy in India.

Media is now treating PR as an ally. PR professionals with the support of journalists belonging to the print and electronic media must devote themselves to creatively develop and put across the right message through better quality programmes and positive writings -- especially stories on development.

Financial PR

In the process of the growth of business and industry in Asian countries raising capital from the public is taking on great importance -- a virtual boom for financing the future of corporations. Various methods and tools are being used for the purpose, from Share Issues to Mutual Funds to Euro Issues, or funding through international sources like International Finance Corporation (IFC).

Whatever be the means, the responsibility of relations current and potential investors, financial institutions, financial analysts and financial Press is left to PR. PR professionals need to understand this and gear up themselves with effective strategies.

When it comes to large corporate finance, government regulations and controls cannot be overlooked or ignored. The days when investors discussed stock markets as little more than casinos are over. One of the main reasons for this is that Asian markets are dominated by herd-like small and large punters who constantly buy and sell shares. And even the regions biggest markets can still behave like yo-yos. This is especially dramatic in Thailand and India. The terms and conditions and the law of the land has to be known by PR professionals and agencies. They have to be able to guide organisations for smooth and fruitful financial relations with shareholders, and investors, on the one hand, and the government, and other stakeholders on the other hand. PR has a vital role to play in this, particularly image building and communication of the right facts in the right form and in the right media.

PR and the government

Corporate PR with the government, and the governments PR with organisations and the general public, in every country is a basic and important need in the development of a country.

In Asian countries direct lobbying with the government has been a major activity. But in the present day context, lobbying is being replaced by PR. This trend is taking greater significance with Governments becoming more open and transparent in dealing with business, as well as the general public.

A case in point where PR with the government has failed and is causing immense difficulties is the Enron power project in India. The Rs. 280 million project at was to have been the biggest foreign investment in India. Though the construction has started on the 695 MW gas fired plant, a change in the State government, after the recent elections, has led to a review, plunging the project into a long period of uncertainty. The new government has opposed the deal on various counts, ranging from social and environmental aspects of the project to alleged bribes, the high cost of the project, the lack of transparency and the absence of competitive bidding. Hectic lobbying and PR exercises are on. Enron has even got the American Ambassador to meet government leaders. Till now there is no solution in sight. Enron has long war of attrition ahead.

Governments PR with its different publics is equally important -- more so in the issues of development like healthcare, education, infrastructure, etc. Most of our governments too are now making a conscious effort to professionalise their

dealings and PR. They keep the needs of people in mind when fixing policies. The goal is to achieve general prosperity and development. In Asian countries a number of issues succeed and some do not. The Compulsory Savings Deposit Scheme (CDS) of the Indian government some years back was on such effort which failed. The objective was to mobilise savings and get people to save. But the compulsion (the word "Compulsory" in the title) had its own negative impact and PR effect. The government had to withdraw the scheme after a few years.

Corporate social responsibility

No organisation or company operates in a vacuum or as an island. It is an integral part of the community. This makes organisations having to be socially conscious and responsible vitally important. Corporations must give back to the community something in return for all that they make from it. And in today's context good corporate citizenship is not a matter of charity and philanthropy alone, but a matter of sound business sense.

Corporate social responsibility also extends to employees within the company, customers, and industry. It involves relationships that I referred to in the beginning. It involves transparency and openness with stakeholders. In India the Tata Group is well known for its activities in all sorts of areas from rural development to environment protection to healthcare, and even safety and crisis management. One unique and well accepted project of one of their companies, Voltas Limited, is the "Lifeline Express" hospital on wheel. This is a train with a full fledged hospital, complete with doctors, operation theatre, and medical equipment and supplies, which goes to rural and interior areas where there are no hospitals and medical facilities for a variety of diseases like cataract, polio, mid-ear deafness -- all which can be alleviated with relatively simple surgery. It is indeed unique, and has received great accolades, including an International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Award at their World Congress last year..

Besides the concept of good corporate citizen as a value, there is the aspect of voluntary versus regulation by the government. We need to look at corporate social responsibility a voluntary investment. If we do not voluntarily care for employees, customers, suppliers, and the community, then if the government intervenes and controls corporate activities, we will have no one but ourselves to blame.

Within the concept of corporate social responsibility, we cannot ignore the environment -- in which the organisation operate and lives. As someone has said "If all the world were a garbage pile, and all the sea was slime, and all our trees in paper mills, where would we live in ten years time?"

Environment protection and concern for environment is today a major responsibility of organisations and its PR department. More so in some of our countries where pollution of air, water and our surroundings on land is rampant and there is hardly any effort to control or prevent it. It goes unabated till there is a disaster, whereafter the action begins. One of the companies in the Group I work for, NOCIL a petrochemical company, has made a number of contributions with their Health Safety & Environment (HSE) programme in areas of pollution control, environment protection, safety, afforestation and healthcare. The company has received a number of local and international awards for these activities over the past few years.

Future challenges

Some of today's trends in PR will hold new and greater challenges for it in the coming years.

I personally see ten which are certainly going to concern Asian PR and PR professionals, and tax their capabilities to the fullest extent. In India I see all of them to be looming large and challenging PR professionals to manage them effectively.

The list runs as follows:

1. Breakup of family business houses; 2. Mergers, acquisitions, and tie-ups; 3. Quality of products and services; 4. Consumerism; 5. Intellectual Property Rights; 6. PR in the Public Sector; 7. PR at Industry Associations level; 8. NGOs and PR; 9. Frauds and Scams; 10. Branding of personalities, and events; 11. PR education.

Breakup of family businesses

With industrialisation of economies and competitiveness in the marketplace organisations all over the world are professionalising. As a result, in our countries traditional family business houses which have become leading corporations with diverse business interests are now facing new challenges and are having to re-look at themselves internally and externally.

The first thing that is happening is that the centralised power centre is shifting. The one man empire -- Birla and TATA in India -- is giving way. Other younger and professionally qualified members of the family are coming in, taking up top positions, and running parts of the business. Following this, there arise disputes and ego clashes, with the result the families start falling apart and splitting

businesses among members and forming separate organisations and companies.

In all this, the youth are getting to be in the forefront of management. They are also depending more and more on professional managers from outside to manage the business. They are hiring expert management consultants to further guide them in business matters -- from restructuring of an organisation to bidding for prestigious contracts and projects.

This is a unique phenomenon taking place in our countries. Professional style of management is in. Transition may be difficult as it often involves change in culture, but it is generally proving to be beneficial to the organisation and the industry. In all this a PR person as a consultant -- internal or external -- has a delicate role to play. Especially when he is dealing with individuals and corporate culture at the same time. PR has to safeguard the interests of the organisation and help in retaining and maintaining images and synergies for the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders.

Mergers, takeovers and tie-ups

Mergers, acquisitions, and strategic alliances are another trend in the new business situation that prevails today in Asia. In fact, they pose unique communication challenges in which PR has a vital role to play.

This phenomenon is partly because of the MNC influx in our countries, partly because of the break-up of business groups, and largely because of the competitive situation arising out of industrialisation, improvement in living conditions and rise in expectations of people. In PR terms, therefore, in this case we have to think local and act globally even more.

In India we have seen some classic examples of mergers and takeovers and alliances. And all of them are well-known and can form good material for PR case-studies.

The first is concerned with the return of Coca-Cola into India. PARLE, the arch rival and competitor of Coke, and the one responsible for having thrown out of the country in the 70s, was bought over by Coca-Cola last year. Parle has sold its brand "Thums Up" and a part of its bottling plants to Coca-Cola Corporation for a very large sum of money. This has had its own impact with respect to PR with the government, industry, trade and even consumers.

The second concerns the sale of TOMCO, a Tata company, to Hindustan Lever its main competitor in the field of soaps and detergents. TOMCO had been a pioneer in soaps and toiletries market. It was not doing well of late. Hindustan

Lever has bought it and merged it with its soaps and detergents business. The PR challenges in this have been concerned with government and legal issues concerning the merger, and now the integration and restructuring of the company with the main Lever organisation. It has to do with people, systems, and culture.

The third example is of the strategic alliance between Proctor & Gamble, a multinational, and Godrej Soaps, an old Indian company. Godrej have joined hands with P&G and allowed them to take over the marketing of their brands of soaps and detergents on an all India bases. Godrej will now only manufacture them, while P&G will do the rest. This again has been a unique case for PR and communication. One without much of problems and negative PR as in the case of the Parle sell-out and the Hindustan Lever buy-out.

Quality -- products and services

Years ago the "Made in Japan" label on products meant "duplicate" or "cheap" to customers of goods made in Japan. Can we say that today for Japanese goods? Product or service quality today is as important in the performance of a company as any other factor -- especially in respect of image.

Products and services from some of our Asian countries, however, good quality they may be, still suffer from a poor image and considered to be substandard. Changing this image is a task for PR. The products must be good intrinsically and PR must help in getting them to be known and accepted as being good quality and backed by excellent service. This applies much more to the service industry and services from our countries. This factor is more and more vital in our progress in the local and global situation alike. Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, and Thailand are examples of countries which have been successful in this respect. Some of them would not be called "Asian Tigers" but for this fact.

Consumerism

Consumerism is one of the biggest challenges for organisations and PR people the world over. More so in Asia where on the one hand consumers are waking up to their rights and getting to be more and more demanding. And on the other hand consumerists and consumer protection organisations are getting to be more and more active and vocal in making demands on corporations on behalf of consumers and consumer groups.

Bajaj Auto, the leading manufacturer and exporter of Bajaj scooters in India recently at the instance of a Consumer Society had to replace a new scooter and

pay damages to the customer for not complying with the customers complaint on time.

Similarly, a middle class housewife fought a battle with an investment company when she discovered she had been sold fake share certificates. The police, on the basis of her complaints unearthed a racket in printing and circulating fake certificates. The housewife was able to get back her Rs. 70,000 due to her from the investment company.

These instances of grievance redressals are indeed new and welcomed. In the past they were not heard of, and the customer or consumer was generally the loser.

A good advertisement alone, therefore, is not enough today. We have to look at consumer interest far beyond the attributes of the products and services. We have to be careful about surrogate advertising, misleading claims, corporate ethics, handling consumer complaints and grievances, and a whole lot of such issues. PR has to reckon with a number of regulations and codes related to the operations of the organisation, marketing of products and services, and communication. The consumer protection act, copyright act, and other such legislation's are enforced through voluntary societies and organisations as well as legal channels.

It is indeed going to be a tough and challenging proposition for PR and PR professionals. Also, networking of PR and communication with consumer council and societies, as also government regulatory authorities is going to be more and more crucial as our organisations develop and aspire to be leading players in the domestic and international markets.

Intellectual Property Rights

IPR, i.e. Intellectual Property Rights is a worldwide issue which has ramifications and opportunities in respect of PR in a vast array of industries -- in particular pharmaceuticals, agro-chemicals and food products.

Some of the leading pharmaceutical companies in India are leading a major drive towards the implementation and enforcement of the IPR. Basic drugs of the MNCs and larger companies are frequently copied and introduced in the market at cheaper prices by relatively unknown and small sector companies. All they have to do is to change the process of manufacture, and thereby get out of the IPR situation. Therefore, what is needed today is a patent on drugs which covers the manufacturing process and marketing.

Talking of brand names, under the IPR, the Indian high court has last month granted an injunction against the use of the trade mark and name "Tiger Balm" by a company. World renowned Tiger Balm is marketed in India by Elder Health Care Lt., under license granted to it by Haw Per Brothers International Ltd. of Singapore. The name was illegally being used the other company. The judgment also restrains others from using the symbol of a leaping tiger or any other mark deceptively similar.

PR in the Public Sector

Public Sector companies are usually monoliths in Asian countries. Like elephants and dinosaurs they are slow to change. Today, however, a lot of changes are taking place in Asian public sector companies. Monopolies are breaking down and there are efforts to privatise public sector units. The public sector companies dilemma is that while they continue to be dominant players, the private sector companies have overtaken them in all aspects. So privatisation seems the only solution?

In India the near break up of the Indian Airlines monopoly is a good example. Earlier no private airlines were allowed into the Indian skies by the government. A few years ago the skies were opened up to one private airline. With it came three or four others. The rest is history. Private airlines are giving Indian Airlines tough competition. So much so, now the government is blocking the entry of SIA-Tata airline to protect Indian Airline. One has to wait and see the PR strategies of the two airlines, and who emerges winner. Again very recently, the building of airports has been opened up to the private sector by the government. We will have to see what impact this will have,

Privatisation is expected to trim the fat, bring about restructuring, and make public sector units market oriented. As a result of all this the perceptions towards PR in the public sector are changing. Positive PR of the professional kind associated with image building, corporate social responsibility, and customer service is being given more attention and undertaken more vigorously. The message in this is clear -- individuals and companies do not matter, market forces do.

Industry Associations

The functioning and operations of industry associations is an area where PR is making important contributions. In future this the role of PR will be greater still with newer issues cropping up for associations to tackle on behalf of their member companies -- some positive and growth oriented, others negative and sensitive.

In India there are a number of pertinent areas in which PR at the association level has contributed a lot. For instance:

1. Just a few months ago newsprint prices had sky rocketed as a result of import duties levied by the government on imported newsprint. This resulted in serious erosion of profitability of newspaper groups in India. Therefore, the Indian Newspaper Society (INS), the official association, took up the issue and launched a PR campaign directed to the opinion leaders. The campaign was effective in quickly getting the government to reduce the duties and rationalising newsprint prices.

2. Similarly in the 1995 budget in April, the Indian Finance Minister had levied a 2% TDS (Tax Deduction At source) which would have crippled adversely the advertising agencies business, where the net profitability ranged only about 5% to 6%. The issue was taken up with the government by the Advertising Agencies Association, and after some lobbying and PR, the government has reduced the TDS to 1%, and only on specific types of income.

PR for Associations involves varied target groups from member organisations to users and to government to public opinion leaders . This makes the task much more difficult, and the challenges much greater.

NGOs and PR

Dealing with NGOs is a growing challenge for PR and PR people. NGOs are getting to be more and more in number, and more and more powerful in their respective fields. They can be useful allies or foes depending on the situation (issue) and how you handle them. Today, there are a large number of instances where NGOs with their programmes have made a lasting impact in achieving their objectives -- political, social and business related issues.

Medha Patkar, in India, is the name of a leading lady environmentalist and a one-woman NGO. For the last few years, she along with others, has been fighting to stall the building of a major dam on the Narmada River. The dam it is said was ecologically dangerous and will displace thousands of tribals and villagers in the area. No amount of PR and persuasion has worked on her and her supporters. The battle is on and she is now contemplating on forming a political front of like minded people and organisation under the banner of her "Narmada Bachao Andolan" (meaning Save Narmada Movement).

Corporations have to interact with NGOs in various areas. Especially when it comes to social issues and those linked with environment and ecology. Many of the NGOs today network with each other, making handling and convincing them tougher and complicated. Maintaining good relationship with NGOs by

organisations will go a long way in the present and in the future -- just as it is in the case of journalists and media.

Frauds and scams

Harshad Mehta, Russi Mody, Ratan Tata, Rajan Pillai are now internationally known names of Indian professionals and industrialists. Harshad Mehta for his multi-million scam in the stock market, Russi Mody and Ratan Tata for their bloody boardroom battle in the chaste House of Tata, and Rajan Pillai for his recent alleged financial irregularities in his companies in Singapore. These are big issues in which PR gets to be involved. At the same time there are many smaller such issues which do not get hyped in media which PR has to tackle and contribute.

One time highly flamboyant Harshad Mehta went to jail. Today he is free, and back into business. But he maintains a very low profile -- away from media. Russi Mody was thrown out of the Tatas. Ratan Tata has consolidated his position in the Tata empire. Russi Mody has come back into the corporate world with a vengeance as Chairman of Air India and Indian Airlines. Air India was once a Tata company! And he is always in the news. Rajan Pillai is on the run from Singapore. He had gone underground for sometime. His PR is behind the scenes, but it cannot holdback media from writing all kinds of stories.

Corporations and PR people are also involved wars of another kind we witnessed in India a few months back -- that between ITC Limited the giant Indian tobacco corporation and its parent British American Tobacco Company on the issue of more equity and control in the Indian company. When it concerns these two issues there is invariably a potential battle brewing between the owners and the professionals in the organisation. BAT wanted a 51% stake in ITC. The Indian management resisted this, and turned it into a "India versus colonial Britain" issue! Whatever be the reality, it had a very damaging impact on the image of both ITC and BAT. It was bad PR. No one has emerged winner. The battle is still going on silently. Matured and strong PR within the company could have played major role in preventing it to blow up to the proportions it did.

In such matters, PR's role is no doubt very delicate. Difficult and thankless. The line between professionalism and success in management of the issue and the damage that it causes is very thin. But often PR remains a spectator, and just follows instructions. We should try and stop the war if possible, and not let it aggravate further. Professionally and firmly without fear of anyone.

PR education

Despite the relative long history of its practice, PR is still new as an occupation and profession in many Asian countries. PR is accepted and acknowledged as a discipline, that is necessary and needed in business today. But there are very few recognised institutes which offer PR degrees, like those for MBA and also for Advertising in some cases. Even books by local professionals -- Asian professionals -- are only a handful. Rest are all by Western authors and on Western business situations. Among these the ones by Sam Black and Frank Jefkins are standard.

Institutes, courses, and books in the local country context must be published if PR is to develop further. The orientation should be on local case-studies -- both successes and failures. PR professionals must also take upon themselves to write on PR -- particularly their own experiences. They must also get into lecturing and teaching to share their knowledge and experiences with new entrants and fellow professionals. This must be an on-going process.

In-house training in PR at organisations is yet another way, and must be enhanced. It should also include non-PR management people to get them to learn and appreciate the role and benefits of planned PR in the organisation. This will greatly help develop PR sensitivities and also have a positive effect on the quality of PR and the stature of the PR people.

Institutions and educators need to support PR education in their scheme of things other disciplines. There needs to be linkages between the universities and industry; and relations between practitioners and educators. Preparing PR professionals for the 21st century.

Vision for 2000 AD

Many see Asian countries as prominent entrants in the global competitive arena. This substantially will depend on the vision of industrial leaders and economic administrators.

Do we as PR professionals have a vision of our own? We need to introspect into this aspect, and develop one. Our contributions in corporations can be very valuable. We need to work further and make our contributions visible and felt.

In doing this we need to master the art of arranging truth, so that people like us. Truth can be bitter. We need not fear this, and continue our endeavors to innovate PR strategies. Innovation in PR must lead to change by winning confidence and persuading our target groups to act.

Among the various PR opportunities for PR professionals, one area in which a proper focus and vision can contribute greatly is violence, in the name of religion, politics, or whatever. In our countries this seems to be getting out of hand. We need to do something effective and long-term.

When Bombay city witnessed riots on two simultaneous occasions, and these were followed by a series of 15 bomb blasts in different parts of the city, in a matter of an hour, one of our PR and Ad agencies produced an excellent multi-media PR campaign on how the city had returned back to normal. The theme of the campaign was "Salaam Bombay" (meaning a salute to Bombay) and it first showed how the people Bombay had suffered, and then how they showed resilience and grit to overcome the damage done -- both materially and psychologically. The campaign was awarded the best PR campaign award by the Public Relations Society of India .

Future of Asian PR

In sum, PR's future lies in what we can do with PR. We need to be world class in our thinking, strategies and in our systems -- like data banks and networking. We need to develop ourselves and the PR profession into a positive power centre in our organisations. One which provides correct information and a strategic direction to the organisation in all its communications with its stakeholders.

We need to remember and imbibe in ourselves the fact that in Corporate Olympics there are only winners and losers: there is no place for spectators. As PR professionals we must not be spectators, but contributors to achieving our corporate goals constantly.

Finally, I would like to end on the note that PR must be for the good and benefit of many people and towards their happiness and well being. Like medicine is for health, Law for justice, PR is for harmony.

Let there be harmony everywhere, through you me, and us. Then we can claim PR has come of age. And we can try and make this public with a sense of pride.

Sushil Bahl

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