

## DISCOVERING THE DEPTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Growth, they say, is incomplete without the acquisition of knowledge about the shades and subtleties of evolution. The veracity of this lesson has been amply demonstrated by the course of the Indian public relations industry.

Times are a changing - once again - for the Indian public relations industry. Having gone through an initial burst of growth in numbers in the 1990's, the industry is now both growing and transforming at the same time.

The 1990s was a watershed phase for India, with the liberalization of economy and the entry of multi-nationals in to the country. Most importantly this phase brought about a sea change in the Indian business mind-set as it got exposed to global competition. After initial resistance and setbacks, Indian companies started to slowly transform themselves by initiating change which was totally unheard of in the protected economy – manpower rationalization, mergers & acquisitions, technology orientation, etc.

Simultaneously, the media also started realizing the potential of the economic transformation of India and increasingly became focused on business and economic reportage. The print media introduced new publications, editions, exclusive pages and supplements for business reportage. The electronic media, realizing the need for instant information, started niche business and news programmes to keep viewers abreast of financial results, stock markets, global events, etc.

The combination of these events led to the first 'renaissance' in the Indian public relations industry. It became more professional, developed a long-term strategic vision and got exposed to international best practices. However growth for the Indian public relations industry primarily came from helping clients with media relations – launching products through press conferences, organising interviews for visiting executives, managing the impact of merger and acquisition in the media, so on and so forth.

The new century is seeing the rise of India in the global business landscape. Information technology, outsourcing, auto ancillary, telecom and pharmaceuticals have become the new engines of growth for the Indian economy. Global companies can no longer ignore India, its growing and affluent middle class and the vast pool of English speaking talent. Take a look at the latest Fortune 500 companies and you will find that at least 170 of those companies are already present in India.

As these companies get firmly entrenched in India, they are demanding strategic counsel and execution from public relations firms, which goes beyond normal media relations tools. This is bringing about the rapid transformation of the Indian public relations industry.

Time for reincarnation! Today, a public relations professional has to truly act like a management consultant – be aware of the client's industry, able to provide strategic advice across the entire communication chain including external, internal, community, crisis, etc. Moreover, a public relations firm should be capable of providing integrated communication solutions covering events; direct communication such as newsletters and intranet; research; websites, etc. to its clients. Taking examples, BPO companies are looking at public relations firms to provide communication solutions, which help them attract and retain employees. FMCG companies are looking at public relations firms to provide strategic tools to reach out to the semi-literate/illiterate rural population for its products. NGOs want public relations to provide interesting solutions for raising awareness amongst rural women about contraception. Can these audiences be merely addressed through media? The answer is an emphatic 'No!'

Another interesting development that is going to drive the growth and transformation of the Indian public relations industry is the entrenchment of international public relations firms on our home turf. As more of their global clients establish presence in India, a number of international public relations firms (both independent as well as part of large communication groups) are establishing their presence in the country, either through strategic alliances, wholly owned operations or affiliations.



These companies are training the local man-power as well as clients to international best practices, industry benchmarks, innovative communication tools and most importantly business ethics.

There are now over 1000 public relations firms in India, a large number of them being 'single entrepreneur' organisations. However, as the industry starts to mature, public relations firms are looking at new means of driving growth, staying competitive and being able to add value to their clients. The new buzzword is specialization, which is happening at two levels.

One is purely at the industry level. We will see an increasing number of public relations firms specializing in niche industries such as Information Technology, Healthcare & Life sciences, Insurance, Media & Entertainment, to name a few. This trend, which is common in the West, has already started with public relations firms exclusively focused on to the information technology and telecom sectors.

The second specialization is going to be in the communication domain. Public relations firms will develop expertise and experience in strategic domains such as crisis communication, employee communication, public affairs, etc. These will then be manned by domain specialists who will work across geographies, across teams, across industries and across clients. These specialists will provide strategic counsel to the client servicing teams and clients in their respective domains thereby enlarging the revenue opportunity for their firm and deepening the relationship with the client.

There are still miles to cover before the Indian public relations industry can become truly world class. But the industry is on the right path today and is being increasingly recognized by clients, international bodies, media and employees for its contributions.

For those of us who have nurtured this industry since its infancy, this rapid growth and transformation of the Indian public relations industry is a truly unparalleled experience that is both exciting and humbling at the same time!

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