

How can PR handle the emerging challenges?

Age, they say, is no guarantee of maturity. This perhaps is true of public relations in India. As one who has been closely involved with its evolution, this is a painful reality. It's been over a decade since the days when we had to first explain what 'public relations' was when we went to pitch for business. At that time, there were two kinds of companies in India – those that had heard about public relations and those that hadn't and couldn't care less.

The change around us is palpable. Today public relations is intrinsic to any marketing and communication strategy. It is central to brand and corporate reputation management programmes.

The value of public relations is also being recognized as essential to CEO reputation. In the last few years, far too many organizations and their CEOs have learned the hard way that reputation can be a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. The reputation alert has been sounded, and most organizations have realized that corporate reputation stands on the two legs of compliance and public relations.

So, from a peripheral nicety, public relations has become central to business. Be it a new company, an expansion plan, a brand launch, a merger, a new appointment or, of course, a crisis – the right public relations ensures you communicate it right.

From holding the torch, the world of public relations suddenly finds itself facing the limelight. Gone are the days when marketing meant advertising and when communication could be planned without professional public relations.

Are we in the industry prepared to handle this change? I'll take the fence here. Yes, we've come a long way, baby. For those of us, who have been screaming ourselves hoarse that public relations is far more than media relations and is core to a business plan, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

But are we there yet? Not quite. We have to still get to the next level. Just as the Indian market has been referred to as an 'emerging market' for too long, so has public relations in India been endlessly an 'emerging' industry. It is time for both India and public relations to move forward and be counted as having 'emerged'.

Let's take a look at some of the emerging challenges in India that are impacting the world of marketing and communication. Challenges that throw a new light on the role that public relations can play:

Making peace with the coexistence of global, glocal and local companies: Making sense of and making peace with the coexistence of all three kinds of organizations has demanded a hard look at the precise niche each wants to address. Positioning has become a fine art and mass communication in this kind of market needs specialized messaging for each target audience.

Emergence of the metropolitan consumer: A new breed of customer perhaps most visible in glitzy retail centres such as Gurgaon. Sometimes referred to as metrosexuals, this customer comes from a well-travelled segment of the public. They are aware of the available choices, both in India and abroad, are extremely demanding and discerning, and have triggered a chain of new research studies into their behaviour patterns, preferences, and of course communication needs.



The ballooning class of young and younger urban professionals: Confident young men and women in towns and cities, who have achieved early success in their professional lives, are prime targets for marketing professionals. They need a completely different communication strategy, be it in the workplace or the marketplace.

Emergence of a powerful e-community: The internet has brought in new dimensions to marketing. While this is still a small piece of the pie in India, it does comprise a very loyal community that cannot be ignored.

Growing vigilance of community activists: Unlike yesteryears, communication professionals can no longer afford to ignore community activists, who are increasingly taking centre stage on live issues these days. Witness the recent pesticide cola war waged by the Centre for Science and Environment. It is clear that this segment needs a distinct and honest outreach.

A new definition of corporate social responsibility: CSR is becoming a mainstream activity rather than charity and needs to be communicated as such. As it takes the shape of partnering local communities in sustainable development, it is also becoming core to business and marketing strategies.

The ever-widening reach of the media: The definition of 'news' in media has undergone a sea change in the past few years. This has created a whole new world of opportunity for marketing and communication professionals. However, this has also created completely new challenges on how to keep its probing tentacles satisfied with a flow of 'relevant' information.

The changing role of government: Governments around the world are waking up to using public relations as a means of 'communication' in areas where it impacts the public most – water, power, roads, bridges, ports, etc. – or when it propels change, by influencing people's understanding of important issues such as 'privatisation.'

Growing importance of disease management: While public relations is being used extensively for brand and corporate communications, there is a serious communication gap in sectors like disease management of polio, diabetes, cancer and AIDS. Internationally, governments and the development sector assign large budgets to help overcome the communications challenges posed by disease management. That, however, is yet to happen here.

The challenges noted above require a new understanding of the term 'public relations' and the communication challenges ahead. It needs maturity of the users as well as the industry to communicate the finer messages, either to complement or substitute the bazooka of advertising.

How has public relations prepared itself to deal with these challenges? It is a continuous journey. We have started out by broadening the focus of communication to address all stakeholders; by taking a 360 degree view of communication; by employing direct and indirect outreach customized to each and every stakeholder; by using innovative communication packages with or without the media...and we need to go on, looking beyond and demanding more from ourselves. It is this perspective that is separating the boys from the men - or even the girls from the women - in public relations.

These are exciting times for public relations in India. A time when international best practices can be tested on home ground, when theory can be applied in practice. A time when there is premium on core strategy implementation through public relations. There has always been a distance between us



and public relations practices in developed countries of the west such as the UK and the US. It is time to take advantage of emerging opportunities to try and bridge this gap.

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