

Is Asia an emerging PR market?

Asia has grabbed the attention of some of the world's largest, bluest of blue corporations* and has remained centre-stage despite collapsing economies, political instability, social unrest, nuclear fall out, child labour issues and a maze of barriers extending from cultural to legal hurdles.

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. It is another matter that hardly any of these companies have been able to repatriate profits so far. International stakeholders continue to watch their investments with some degree of concern. Will their cash registers suddenly start ringing and reward their risk(y) investments? Or will some hidden element emerge and destroy many a balance sheet for years to come? Or will the market grow slowly but surely and reward those *individuals* who had the foresight to believe and invest in Nostradogbert, consultant for The Future. This remains to be experienced by us in this lifetime for us to be able to offer further comment.

China and India are constantly being quoted as the largest emerging markets. The introduction to John Rohwer's book *Asia Rising* states that China has already begun to follow in its neighbours' footsteps, and India is poised to do the same: together these two giants, whose fate will sway that of all Asia, will be the engines that drive Asia's massive economic expansion into the twenty-first century.

Rohwer's observation "for western economies as a whole, and for huge numbers of western companies and their workers, the rise in Asia of the biggest middle class in history offers unprecedented moneymaking opportunities. Asia's relatively cheap but often well educated workforce continues to provide western, Japanese and better-off Asian firms with an attractive place to set up factories producing goods for sale in the rich world. But as the years go by, Asia increasingly offers something more tempting: the world's fastest growing – and often the biggest – markets for the rich world's own products and services" is already a reality today.

*(Such as General Motors, Ford Motor Co, General Electric, IBM, AT&T, Bank of America, Hewlett-Packard, Proctor & Gamble, Enron, Compaq, Lucent Technologies, Motorola, Intel to name a few)

Kim Woo-Choong in his famous book *Every Street is Paved with Gold* (published 1992) says that Opportunities Come from Adversity / Why Crisis is Good for You stated that "It is as foolish to be overly afraid of thorns as it is to swoon over roses". The roses came by way of huge injections of government credit specially wrapped for a well-planned chaebol in the making. The world swooned once the unforeseen thorns emerged. Undoubtedly, Chairman Kim is a man with remarkable drive and determination. The world watches while Korea reconstructs its economy and businesses to convert Adversity into Success.

And the Korean government has not been caught napping on the PR front. Something must be emerging as Asian PR News of September 27 announces "B-M buys Seoul PR firm Merit" and Communications Korea wins first ever PR advisory brief "Korean govt unit revamps PR policy" and a case study "Reversing Korean decline with global PR".

In all these emerging scenarios, there are informal public relations programmes that go on behind the scenes as well. For example, in India, a backroom boy of the Congress, Jairam Ramesh, educated at MIT and Carnegie, USA came back to join the Rajiv Gandhi government. Thereafter, JR anchored many well-known TV programmes and became a regular columnist. During this time he built special relationships with journalists and editors alike. While he was Special Adviser to the well-known Finance Minister Mr P Chidambaram, it is well-known that JR created the right environment for his Minister's policies to be announced thereby establishing Mr Chidambaram as one of the most able



Finance Ministers in the country thus far. And I am quite certain that there are many more shadow PRs or JRs in this world and not just in Asia.

All the big daddies in PR already exist in Asia – Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton, Edelman PR, Shandwick, Ogilvy PR, Porter Novelli, Fleischman Hillard, the list is endless and still growing. Who do they represent? Mostly the multinational companies who look at guarding their corporate reputation while undertaking local marketing programmes. There are also a large number of independent PR companies in each of the Asian countries who compete with the big-daddy PR companies, some have affiliations, others have equity participation and often some sell out to the larger companies in order to consolidate their position in the market.

At the recently held ICO conference in Lucerne, Switzerland all the big daddies spoke about managing global accounts (which, they agreed, mainly constitutes North America and Western Europe – Phew!); threat from other consulting firms (but they are our clients and therefore can't be competing with us); state of technology (we can soon send our thoughts via virtual satellite) and communications capital (now that sounds exciting – we can all hope to be over-quoted on Nasdaq, sell our PR.com and live on Beach Kaikokamkarnahai!).

Not surprisingly, no one spoke of Asia – from complex issues of reaching the millions in China and India, to simple issues like non-availability of basic PR education. I'm quite certain that the next ICO conference to be held in 2001 in USA will address such issues considering there was a 14-member delegation from Russia (i.e. outside the global zone of North America and Western Europe).

So while companies merge globally, countries in Asia will hopefully emerge as the markets to operate in/of the future, PR companies will grow exponentially and I will offer reverse consultancy on how to think local and act global.

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