



PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ASIA PACIFIC

*Communicating Effectively
Across Cultures*

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Preface

As the saying goes: “If you want to prepare a fresh omelet for breakfast, go out and buy a hen.” We could not find a book focusing on the realities of public relations in Asia Pacific, so we decided to write one.

As practitioners and educators in public relations for over 20 years, most of these located in the Asia Pacific region (including Hong Kong, China, Korea, and Australia), we recognized the need to collate our experience and provide an insider’s viewpoint on this dynamic industry. To that end, we intend this book to be useful for several audiences: for students of the subject, as they prepare for a career in public relations; for practitioners in the region, who will find this a useful resource to assist in professional development; and for executives who just want to learn more about the industry, given its growing importance in corporate practice.

This book provides key insights into the rapid expansion of public relations in the Asia Pacific region, based on the required theory and practice needed to communicate effectively with stakeholders across different cultures and geographies. In the past two decades, public relations has taken on a new importance. As the world has globalized, so have domestic Asia Pacific organizations, in both the public and private sector, entered wider markets or received foreign investment. This requires them to deal with a wide variety of audiences, including consumers, investors, government officials, pressure groups, competitors, and the media.

More than ever, the recent global economic downturn has highlighted the need to communicate positive organizational messages to these audiences and to their influencers, in order to gain acknowledgment for their achievements and to ensure competitive survival.

Each chapter of this book covers the essential concepts and skills of public relations across the core practices of the profession. These include public and government affairs, marketing communications, branding, media relations, healthcare, corporate and financial communications, issues and crisis

management, internal and change management, and corporate social responsibility. The application and impact of digital media is also used as a common unifying theme throughout, to mirror topical developments in the public relations profession.

Case studies and examples from Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam can be found in each chapter, bringing the strategic and tactical practices of public relations into sharp focus. In addition, we have sought the expert insights of experienced communication professionals working around the region.

We would like to thank the many public relations professionals who have contributed to the collective knowledge upon which this book is based. In addition, we thank everyone at John Wiley & Sons (Asia), in particular Nick Wallwork and Fiona Wong, who helped breathe life into this project, and Joel Balbin and his efficient editing team, who shepherded the book into publication.

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Public Relations in Asia Pacific

- An IT company is rebranding, following a takeover deal, and launching its new corporate logo in Singapore
- A new CEO of a multinational oil company based in Malaysia is giving an inaugural speech to the local chamber of commerce, including senior government officials
- A soft drinks manufacturer is relaunching an existing product with a new flavor for the Taiwanese market
- A charity for abandoned children in India is trying to raise funds to build a series of new children's homes across several cities
- A government department in Jakarta is responsible for health plans to educate young people about the dangers of taking drugs
- A power company in Japan plans to fund a series of wind farms as an alternative to traditional sources of energy
- A magnate in Macau donates billions of dollars to build a new private university
- A soy sauce manufacturer based in China is recalling its product from all supermarket shelves across Asia as government food and safety departments have found toxic deposits in bottles produced at its plant in Tianjin
- Compromising images of a music celebrity from Australia start to circulate the Internet while the tabloid media publish an exclusive story with a modified version of one of the photographs
- An anti-race demonstration in New Zealand gets out of hand with injuries both to protestors and police receiving global media coverage
- Architects in Hong Kong are lobbying the relevant government departments and developers to protect more green urban spaces in the center of the city

What should all of the key participants in these scenarios do? If they are to prosper in their respective industry sectors, they may choose a suitable public relations remedy. This could be anything: a launch event, a news release, a website, a repositioning campaign, a crisis plan, a corporate rebranding exercise, sponsorship of a community event, a competition, an open house event, a staff newsletter, a corporate video, a bylined article, or a meeting with government officials.

Most books on public relations (PR) as a professional practice kick off with a definition of the business itself, as a way of determining its scope and making the intangible appear tangible or the unknown knowable. Yet, defining PR is a bit like describing an elephant, as it comprises such a unique combination of characteristics that it, in fact, defies description. This usually leaves the readers scratching their heads in an attempt to visualize what PR is and how it works, yet marveling over such an elusive profession that appears to do everything for everyone under the banner of communication. Can it really do so much, for so many, with such a great reward in store for all of those who engage in its magical powers of influence?

You Can't Just "Spin" an Issue or Do a "PR Exercise"

For an industry whose mainstay is the management of communication, there are many common misperceptions about the practice of public relations. Too often, we hear a company's action or initiative described as "a PR exercise" or a company employing a "spin doctor" to perfect its corporate image. The term "spin" and the like are the bane of the PR profession and have been overused to the point of becoming quite meaningless. They are often used derogatively to imply that a company is maybe taking action which is either deceptive or even manipulative.

These terms are bandied about in the media, and are used regularly to describe the negative actions of organizations using whitewashing techniques to cover up the corporate scandals that PR companies are allegedly perpetrating on behalf of their clients, or to expose the techniques of "spin" employed by management teams in organizations failing to successfully communicate with their stakeholders.

So, let's put this misconception to rest forever.

A Chinese Fable

Chan Yu's wife had to go to the market in a hurry. Her son followed on her heels, crying.

"Listen to me," she coaxed her son. "Go on home now. When I return, I will prepare a pig for dinner." So the child stopped crying and returned to the house.

When his wife returned home, Chan Yu went to the pigsty to pick a pig for dinner. His wife hurried after him, saying, "Don't take my words seriously. I was just trying to persuade our son to do what I wanted."

Chan Yu quickly drew his wife aside. "We must keep our word, even to children," he said to his wife. "Children are like a blank sheet of paper. They learn everything from their parents and imitate what they see and hear from these role models. If you lie to your son now, he will learn that lying is acceptable. Once you lie to him and he finds out that you lied, he will never trust you again. This is not the right way to educate children."

And so he killed a pig for dinner.

Moral: Lying to anyone results in loss of trust and damaged long-term relationships.

Labeling a Profession

The only PR association with "spin," as such, is metaphorical. Doing PR is not unlike the circus act of plate spinning. By this, we mean that PR professionals are usually busy working on a number of communication-based activities underpinning a range of PR campaigns. These tasks have to keep their momentum and keep spinning as the campaigns progress, and at no point must they be allowed to fall on the ground only to shatter into broken promises. So, PR is a multi-leveled, multi-tasked communication profession entrusted with the continuous plate spinning activity of ensuring that the organization informs its stakeholders about its activities and their wider impact and significance.

While interviewing a senior public relations consultant recently, in the answer to the question, "How do you explain your job to those outside of the public relations field, including prospective clients?" she replied, "Public relations professionals dread that question. Generally, we're all too busy doing it to explain what it is that we are doing."

Public relations professionals also find specific explanations of what they do to be a challenge, as seen in the wide range of terms referring to public

Case Study

Hosting a fashion show using the longest catwalk in the world on the Great Wall of China, Beijing was a creative way of positioning Fendi (LVMH) as a luxury fashion brand leader and innovator both in China and on the global stage by generating wide media coverage.

The media outreach strategy, which was planned by Fleishmann Hillard, created the pre-event media buzz, set-up exclusive coverage by key media, and managed image distribution post-event.

To realize the integrated brand experience, 400 international guests were also invited to Beijing for a five-day visit around the catwalk event as a key part of the promotional strategy. The campaign was a year in the making, involving overall project planning and implementation, in addition to handling media management, hospitality arrangements, and transport logistics. Licenses and regulatory approvals had to be sanctioned from government and related agencies, while third parties were commissioned for sourcing and production aspects. Sponsorship was provided by the Swire Group, BMW, and the Grand Hyatt.

Fendi is the only luxury goods brand to date to have made its mark by launching a fashion show using the Great Wall as a fashion runway.

Source: Asia Pacific PR Awards 2008.

relations found in job advertisements and company brochures from communications planning to perception and ideas management. This trend is seen in a recent job advertisement for a globally-recognized public relations firm:

Our activities help organizations build intellectual capital. We help differentiate brands, improve customer loyalty, and motivate employees. We help win the support of key stakeholders by developing informed opinion about products, issues and corporate activities. And to safeguard those assets, no one's better at helping you prepare for, and resolve a crisis.

Public relations has been compared to “perception management”

The term “perception management” has been popular in the last two decades. But can you really expect to “manage perceptions” through public

relations? It misses the essential point—that public relations can generate understanding and potentially sway opinion and behavior, but cannot ever “manage” how people see and perceive reality either now or at some point in the future, as this is individually determined.

The simple fact is that no amount of communication will change a problem or an issue—you cannot “spin” a problem. The only way to do this is to take correct and ethical action and demonstrate this in full view. What public relations can do, however, is tell people about an organization’s positive actions and achievements. Advertising agency, McCann Erickson, said it well 80 years ago, when it coined its slogan, “Truth Well Told.” So, public relations, in reality, is all about an organization doing good things and getting the credit for it—when credit is due, of course. You cannot just talk the talk: it is not enough to say that you are an environmentally sustainable company—you have to demonstrate this with real proof and communicate this in real terms to your audience consistently and repeatedly using a range of communication channels.

Point of View

“We live in an age of discontinuities. Unprecedented political, economic and technological forces are creating a new world order and Asia Pacific—home to over half of the world’s population and most of its economic growth—is pivotal. This calls for greater cross-cultural understanding and global governance overarching an enlightened interdependent trade system.

The importance of public relations for Asia in this new multi-polar world cannot be understated. New forces are bypassing traditional intermediaries and conducting authentic unfiltered dialogue between people in companies, across countries and cultures, and amongst constituencies and communities of interests. This demands the continuous reinvention of public relations. PR must adapt to remain relevant in a conversational and interactive future.”

Bill Ryland, former Chairman, Asia Pacific and Vice Chairman, Global Development, Burson-Marsteller

Exploding the Myths of Public Relations

It is perhaps more efficient to begin with what public relations is not. PR has been much misrepresented as sinister propaganda, blurred with

advertising, and has even been equated with escort services employed for the purposes of entertaining clients. Below we present and explode some of the commonly held myths about public relations.

PR = Propaganda

To label public relations as propaganda in the *original* sense of the word is, in fact, quite accurate as it referred to the neutral promotion of a belief system or doctrine. The Western view of propaganda is, of course, a negative one. The same word in China, however, means almost the opposite and is viewed as simply another term for publicity or public relations.

Historically, the word became tainted with negative meaning as a way of labeling the sinister political agendas of 20th century wartime governments and the hidden commercial agendas of capitalist governments. The Oxford Dictionary defines propaganda as, “information that is often biased or misleading used to promote a political cause or point of view.”

So, propaganda in this sense came to refer to a one-way communication, conveyed from the organization to the public. And its use in the earlier part of the 20th century and by some of today’s non-democratic governments is clearly different from an ideal 21st century view of public relations.

We would contend that in politics and business, the practice of public relations is that of justifying (through communications; most powerfully media relations) practices and policies among all the constituencies affected by such. Far from being seen as an illegitimate feature of professional practice it is widely considered that politicians and businessmen who lack public relations skills are unfit for office. Though, often, we can have a closed mind to PR—if the message being promoted is something of which we approve, we call it public relations. If we disapprove of the message, then we call it propaganda.

However, unlike the propagandist, what companies say about themselves should match our experience of what they do. Using public relations activities as a tool of engagement, an organization tries to gain our attention as a way of enhancing our understanding of an issue so that we might respond more favorably to it. *Dialogue* is the buzzword of the early 21st century. So, while propaganda is simply one-way communication, public relations is focused on two-way or multi-level

dialogue. These days, PR welcomes and anticipates the possibility of a company being influenced and its actions altered in the course of on-going feedback from its publics.

PR = Publicity

Publicity is solely focused on gaining editorial coverage across a range of media channels—be it on TV, radio, in newspapers, or via blog sites—and by eliciting an instant reaction from activity in a public venue. Publicity is just one element of the public relations role and it is also a recognized component activity of the marketing mix. Clearly, PR now offers a much wider range of communication techniques in the bid to gain positive recognition on behalf of an organization.

PR = Same as advertising

While advertising and public relations are integral parts of the 360 degree marketing mix from the promotional perspective, they are separate disciplines; the key difference being the audience—advertising goes direct, while PR uses third parties, and, of course, advertising space is paid for by the organization, while PR coverage in the form of newspaper stories and interviews, for example, is not. This means that advertising is a controlled form of communication, as the sponsor pays for the space in which the advertising message is placed, and has control over the content of the message and the location and timing of the message release. In PR terms, the message is potentially uncontrolled in the sense that once the media release is sent out or the media interview is given, we cannot guarantee the outcome of the storyline or the story content. Yet, by using public relations approaches, an organization has an opportunity to influence how others view its activities for the better.

PR = Just one long lunch

If only. This is, of course, an old-fashioned view and not one likely to be shared by today's generation. Sure, when PR was synonymous with publicity, wining and dining the media or the client played an important part

of the job. Most practitioners would now regard lunch as an unnecessary intrusion into the working day unless it is a focused working session over a glass or two of water.

PR = The mouthpiece of corporate power

This critique suggests that PR fosters unequal power relations in society as it helps the powerful and wealthy impose their views on a naïve population, manipulating their mindsets. But public relations exists to foster mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its stakeholders in the public interest. Of course, most organizations exist to make a profit, but that does not mean that the competitive edge is won at the expense of ethical practices as public support is critical for the survival of all corporate entities, as many companies, including Enron and Andersen Consulting, have found to their cost.

Case Study

Since 2003, Australia has been plagued by the worse drought conditions since records began, forcing Australians to reconsider their water management strategies. In response to this critical environmental situation, BlueScope Steel devised a Corporate and Social Responsibility (CSR) campaign to help the community manage water resources more effectively, whilst positioning the organization as a conservation and water harvesting leader.

The purpose of the *Tank A Day Challenge* was to encourage community groups and stakeholders across Australia to assist in remedying the inherent water shortage crisis.

Targeting young stakeholders through primary schools' water conservation initiatives nationwide, BlueScope's campaign donated 200 rain-water tanks each with a 27,000 liter capacity—amounting to one tank for each school every day of the year.

The educational nature of the program was integrated through the primary school curriculum, whilst wider media outreach campaigns disseminated the message to local communities in which the schools were situated to reinforce the initiative.

Schools were asked to enter the competition by making an online registration at the campaign website and articulate why water was a valuable resource for their school. Also, after registration, students were required to answer questions about the water cycle and water conservation in an online

(Continued)

quiz. Winning places were awarded to schools based on the school principal's online submission and the number of students in the school who had filled in the quiz successfully.

The principal of the winning school as third party spokesperson was used at the campaign launch, emphasizing the positive outcomes of having rainwater tanks installed in primary schools and inspiring other schools to engage with the *Tank A Day* initiative.

As a way of adding credibility and audience reach for the campaign, a one-year media partnership was brokered with national breakfast TV program, *The Today Show*, whose hosts became ambassadors for the *Tank A Day* campaign covering weekly BlueScope branded announcements of winning schools that were supported by slots featuring these schools.

In anticipation of stakeholders questioning BlueScope's involvement in, and motivations for the program, meetings with Government ministers were scheduled and a grassroots local and regional media campaign initiated in the areas that successful primary schools were located.

Follow-up post campaign evaluative research indicated that over 25 percent of the population were aware of the Tank A Day Challenge and linked it to BlueScope's brand name. In addition, many schools across the country purchased water tanks from BlueScope and integrated water observation into awareness the school curriculum. As a follow up BlueScope are planning to extend the initiative across another year into 2009-10 with the promise of another 200 donations of water tanks to primary schools across Australia.

The *Tank A Day Challenge* was lauded by the Asia Pacific PR Awards judging panel for devising an original and relevant link between their organization and Australia's water shortage crisis and establishing itself as a leader in this regard.

The campaign was also considered to demonstrate an effective and sustainable approach to water conservation for the country as it created a new generation of environmental ambassadors in the form of school children—which promises a lasting environmental solution for Bluescope and Australia.

Source: Asia Pacific PR Awards 2008.

PR as a One-Stop Communication Shop

Over the past decade, PR has been seen as one of the most increasingly significant components of the promotional marketing mix, distinguishing

itself as good value, sustainable communication, in contrast to potentially expensive and one-way communication advertising.

The strategic integrated communication role assumed by PR beyond the more traditional media management role is now established as having a wider brief to fulfill. The wider value of PR is now to be found in alerting, creating, and managing trends, and influencing and impacting public opinion through finely tuned messages directed at a universe of stakeholders who are encouraged to engage in critical dialogue.

So, although a significant amount of time is devoted to tactical communications, increasingly, public relations managers operate at more strategic levels, directing research into stakeholder perceptions and counseling management about the implementation of communication campaigns or prompting them to prepare for crises or audit their ethical practices, which clearly represents a move away from old perceptions of a predominantly publicity-oriented profession. Not only has PR raised its head above the line and is no longer content to be the sidekick of above-the-line advertising, it has actually dispensed with the line altogether.

We can go further to suggest that within an organization and in its external relationships with stakeholders, every element of communication has a PR aspect. The competitive survival of all organizations now depends on communicating with stakeholders—getting the right messages across to the right audience at the right time in the most appropriate and meaningful way.

PR on the job: What do PR professionals do?

Two of the main roles for the public relations professional focus on the communication technician and the communication manager. The former highly-skilled role involves communications programs and activities such as writing media releases, editing newsletters, developing websites and generally is not involved in organizational decision-making. The second role of the public relations professional positions him as an integral part of the senior team which plans, manages, and facilitates the communications program, counsels management, and makes policy decisions as an intermediary between senior management and the workforce, organization and competitor, and organization and customer. In this sense, most public relations professionals play both manager and technician roles as part of their job.