

KANWALDEEP SINGH'S VIEWS ON PR & JOURNALISM
- THE LOVE HATE RELATIONSHIP -

Speed and competition are at play in the media....

In the last five years, the media scenario in India has evolved immensely. It has become bigger and more diverse. Five years ago, Aaj Tak was just getting off the ground and cable TV could barely reach all houses. There was no concept of live television. Media today is bigger and more diverse. Speed and competition are at play. A journalist today values his or her reputation tremendously.

Media respects PR professionals who knows their industry

In the key role of keeping 'good stories' in and keep the 'bad ones' out, PR professionals need to work on the critical factors of speed, interpretation of complex information, diversity and reputation.

Media values PR or corporate communication professionals whom they know and whom they can trust. They also value the professional who knows their industry.

Changes on both ends are fostering a partnership.....

As the number of its customers increase across India, companies will want greater and more diverse coverage to achieve the same impact. PR needs all kinds of media. Therefore, one needs to be more fair than selective. Every channel, every news agency, every print publication should be treated on par to put out news across the country.

The new reality is not just the PR professional trying to get the latest press release plugged into some newspaper; it also includes the television journalist on the quest for round-the-clock coverage and not hourly bulletins. Complex pieces of news, that need explaining, is pushing media and corporate communication / PR professionals into a partnership mode and creating the conditions that will foster partnership.

Swift campaign...

Let me share our experience of launching Swift - Maruti Udyog's latest entrant launched in May 2005. Planning started as early as mid-January 2005, when Maruti held an internal workshop to plan its introduction. The launch of the Swift was not perceived as another ordinary launch. All agreed that a conventional press conference would not do justice to the car. Corporate communications at Maruti felt that journalists needed more time to report on the different facets of the car.

In late February /early March 2005, Maruti rolled out the Swift. 180 journalists across the country got the opportunity to see and touch the Swift before reporting on the new entrant on Indian roads. In keeping with the importance accorded to the Swift, the Chief Designer of the Swift flew in from Japan and spent time with Indian auto journalists.

Maruti was concerned about the implications of releasing all the information on the Swift prior to its formal launch. The concerns were unfounded because the coverage kept coming in volumes.

On the actual launch date and even before the announcement of the price, Maruti already had 9,000 customer orders on record for the

Swift. The decision to allow journalists to see the product well before its launch had clearly paid dividends.

Campaigns help in securing meaningful coverage...

In order to secure meaningful coverage that supports business objectives, it's important to think campaigns. And for impactful campaigns, begin early; look at multiple dimensions and multiple media. There should be no compromise on anything.

Let me share another experience. In November 2004, Suzuki Motor Corp & Maruti agreed on new investments in India. The Maruti board in consultation with Suzuki decided on a new diesel engine plant.

Maruti was informed that the Chairman of Suzuki was to unveil a new variant of the Alto in Japan. At the event he would also disclose details of the investments being made in India. The only drawback to this was that the Maruti board in India was to meet in 10 days and then only could the formal announcement be made regarding the investment.

On day one, media was okay with the international news.

However, on day two, investors suddenly woke up to the fact that this was going to be a Suzuki company! Stock prices fell. The media got wind of it and reportage said that if this was positive news about investments, why had the stock price fallen? Media called up the investors who speculated that Suzuki was doing something on its own, that Maruti has been sidelined, it had no future, etc.

On day three, the newspapers reported that this was a bad investment.

On day four, media coverage stated that the Hon'ble Minister of Public Enterprises had conveyed his displeasure at the way Suzuki was conducting its affairs in Maruti Udyog Ltd. and that the Suzuki Chairman had been summoned to meet the Minister within a week.

In reality, Maruti was to have 70 per cent in the new company - it was to be a Maruti company!! However, the facts could not be disclosed because the Board meeting was yet to take place.

The best way to keeping out bad news is to share the truth....

The lesson learnt from this experience was that when things are not going the way it should, the best advice is to share information. Make it easy for the media. Once perceptions have been made it is very difficult to change it.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Misreporting by print & electronic media...what damage control can PR do?

Kanwaldeep added that it is not worthwhile to quarrel with the medium. A time will come when the media will have a thoroughly professional unit and that they were currently in a state of transition. Corporate communication professionals he added were not paragons of virtue either - the two have to learn to live with each other.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Kanwaldeep Singh, Deputy GM, Corporate Communications, Maruti Udyog, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Mumbai on November 30, 2005)