

D K RAIKAR'S VIEWS ON BUSINESS VALUE OF REGIONAL MEDIA

...a newspaper is a business as any other today...

No doubt, the old ethos that newspapers are a mission and not a business proposition has lost its relevance in this day and age. As Samir Jain of The Times of India says, a newspaper is a product like a soap cake or toothpaste. But let me elaborate that a newspaper as a product changes everyday in its look and content. As a result of which all those connected with this product are unhappy. A reporter who writes the story is unhappy because he has done a rushed job, the sub-editor is unhappy because he doesn't get enough time to sub it or enough space to display the stories properly. If the edition is not released on time the works manager grumbles and the circulation manager is angry because the product is made available to him late. And finally the reader is also unhappy because the paper does not cover all that he wants.

...whose credibility and economic stability determine success...

Yet, it gets sold. However, it can sell more if it has credibility and economic stability. In the absence of one, the other is not enough. If the newspaper does not have credibility it cannot sell and therefore it cannot be economically viable. At the same time, more resources are also not enough as the product will not be acceptable to the reader for want of its credibility.

Some years back when TV journalism gained ground there was a belief that print media would not survive this increasing onslaught of electronic media. After some years down the line one thing is clear that is the permanence of print media. Television is a viewing medium and often detracts from the message. Print media, on the other hand can build public opinion and stimulate thought processes amongst its readers. It can also give you a message and a thought content to ponder upon.

Having enunciated the numerous benefits of print media, let us consider if "regional media adds value to business" and here again I must affirm that it does.

...a regional daily connects with the rural audience...

Let me begin by sharing with you some experiences that I have borrowed from daily existence. I come from a village in Kolhapur district. I left my village in 1962 in order to broaden my horizon. Since then I visit my village at least once a year to pay obeisance to my village goddess. Of the 36 years that I have spent with the Express group, I have worked for the Indian Express for 32 years in various capacities. For all these years, people in my village used to ask me what I do to earn my living and I used to tell them that I am a journalist and work for the Indian Express. They of course would not follow what I was saying. But during the last four years, since I have been with Lokasatta there has been an increased awareness of the kind of

work I do. This has only been possible as Lokasatta has distribution inroads into these rural markets.

...reaches out to the masses...

Another incident, occurred some 20 years ago, when one of my senior colleagues was going from Mumbai to Nagpur for the first time by a night train. When the train reached Jalgaon the next morning, my colleague wanted to buy a copy of the Indian Express. He asked a boy who was selling newspapers on the platform. "Express ayaa kya" The boy, asked Kounsa Express. My colleague replied, Indian Express. The boy was puzzled a bit and said "Mujje Nahi Malum. Kashi Express Subahhi Chala Gaya". But this was sometime ago. Now Indian Express is known not only in India but all over the world. This of course is not intended to downgrade the English media at all but to emphasise the fact that a regional daily has a much wider reach and deeper inroads.

...for language press journalists knowledge of English is essential...

From my experience I must point out that journalists working for language papers must have a more thorough knowledge of the English language than their counterparts in English journalism. Journalists working for English newspapers need not understand every word of a press release that received. They only make it a little more journalistic before using it in their papers. They may not even make perfunctory changes as the press release by and large is well written and can be safely used without editing. But this is not the case with language journalism. Each word of your release or a PTI or a UNI report has to be clearly understood and accurately translated, in the absence of which serious and sometimes humorous situations can arise.

Pre-independence, the Governor's band used to play at the bandstand of Girgaum Chowpatty. Those days the Governor, his wife and their children used to come in their horse carriage or Ghoda Gadi as we call it to listen to the band. During the months of May and June and September and December the Governor's house, which is now called Raj Bhavan, used to issue a daily communication, saying "weather permitting, the Governor's band will play today".

...for accurate translation...

One such press release was given for translation to a new reporter of Nava Kal, one of the oldest Marathi paper of Mumbai. The reporter literally translated the communication from the Governor's House and the report carried by the newspaper said "Vara Vahilyas, Rajyapalanacha Raja Vajel". 'Mausam Ne Chaha to Governor ka baja bolega.'" The concerned reporter became a laughing stock the next day.

The same reporter also created another humourous episode when he translated a score board of the cricket match that was being played in Mumbai. After giving the figures of runs scored by various batsmen, he was in a dilemma, as he could not understand the meaning of the extras. He merely translated that

as runs scored by others yet again causing ripples of laughter not only amongst his colleagues but readers as well.

These examples will prove that the regional newspapers have to put in considerable efforts to publish their editions. However, the advertisers have always metted out a step motherly treatment to the regional media. Notwithstanding the fact that the English newspapers are read only by 2 per cent of the population of our country, most of the premium advertisements go to English newspapers.

...the first English daily appears at 13th place among the top 50 in India ...

If you take top 50 dailies based on readership figures from all over India you will see that the first English Daily appears at rank of 13. You will also mark that in the total readership of these 50 dailies English readers account only for 13 per cent. Compared to that, regional dailies attract a huge 87 per cent of the readership.

...Marathi dailies lead the pack in Mumbai...

These facts undoubtedly prove that regional papers are very strong in numbers. Even in Metros like Mumbai the first English Newspaper is ranked at No. 3. The first two are Marathi Dailies, and yet the regional press does not get its due share of premium advertisements. How does one explain that?

As representatives of the regional media, we are constantly at loggerheads with the marketing department as they campaign more for English dailies of the group even when its language editions are doing better.

...first with scandals too...

One important point I would like to emphasise here. Most corruption scandals are first exposed by the regional media and then taken up by the English media. For example, Mumbai Sakal first exposed the Antulay's cement scandal. Similarly the recent Pune building scandal case was first exposed by Lokasatta and then followed up by other newspapers.

... send press notes in regional languages...

It would of course be of benefit to Public Relations professionals to send their press notes or communications in regional languages in order to achieve clarity of purpose. No doubt, English is the language of business. But PR personnel should not overlook the fact that a reader is more comfortable with his mother tongue.

...proximity of regional press to state governments...

Conventionally, regional press is closer to and more effective with the respective state governments than the national/English press. The regional press also plays a pivotal role in influencing public opinion on issues directly related to the region. Corporates have paid a heavy price in the past for neglecting regional media (e.g. Enron).

Lobbying is an important aspect of PR profession. Though it

means, "making an opinion", in India it is equated with "influencing authorities". The transparency should reflect in local media so that it can win the faith of the local people, e.g. Ispat group's acquisition of land for the mining project in Vidarbha invited the wrath of the people because a Marathi paper Lokasatta single-handedly launched a crusade. This happened entirely because the company never attempted to take the local media into confidence about its plans. Such projects then suffer indefinitely.

Regional press is known to have sources and contacts with the low end of society. Considering these are the people who form the major part of the market/consumers, the reporting of your business in regional press contributes effectively to building the company's image.

India is a country where economic reforms are still in its infancy. Those who would like to take advantage of the changing scenario and establish their businesses still have a long wait. It is also the corporate's responsibility along with the government to educate the masses about the reforms process. This is difficult as the people have lost their faith in the market economy owing to the much publicised securities scam, recession, a bankrupt government, liquidity crunch, etc. Again, these are the people who are in an economic transition stage but still are the lower middle class. It is only the regional/language press that can prevent them from being carried away by false propaganda.

...the media shares responsibility along with the government in educating masses.....

QUESTION & ANSWER

How is a regional newspaper structured?

A regional newspaper is structured not very different from an English paper. You have the Editor, Deputy Editor, Sub-Editor, Reporters and the copy desk.

Any reasons why Lokasatta gives limited space to business news?

We cover a lot of issues that are of interest to our readers. A substantial part of the newspaper is dedicated to political reporting of course largely related to state matters, then we look at social issues. So though covering business news is important to us, limited space does not allow us to expand our coverage.

Is the readership between a regional and an English daily vastly different?

Not really. In the case of most vernacular press it has been of interest for our marketing departments to note that on an average the reader of an English daily in the regional towns will also be reading one language daily. In the sense of buying power, the buying habits and purchasing power of the two readers is not very different.

Why should organisations advertise their messages

The first English daily in India is ranked at the number 13 in terms of reach. Even in Mumbai, the first English daily makes it to number 3. IRS surveys and the other studies prove that both the distribution and readership figures of regional press

through regional media?

are vast.

What efforts are on at Lokasatta to meet the changing communication needs?

Lokasatta is today being looked upon as the flagship of the Group. And efforts are constantly being made to not only improve the editorial content of the paper but also the appearance and on brand activities.

Journalists representing language press has been found to lack response & dynamism in dialogue. Comment

Maybe the vernacular press may not be as savvy in appearance as the English press, but please do not doubt their credibility and knowledge.

Does editorial normally go soft on advertisers?

The two departments operate independently in their functioning. Also no business can forget that the economic viability of a newspaper is of extreme importance.

Why is Indian media against entry of foreign media?

As they would not understand the Indian market and the needs of the Indian people. However let us wait and see.

Will mergers & acquisitions effecting other industry come to the media industry as well?

If that is the order of the day it is quite possible that it may pervade the business of journalism too.

Perceptions that most vernacular press is interested in issues relating to either political developments or grass root issues, has in a sense a deterred the public relations

Yes, that may be true. As we need to supply our readers with news that effects their daily life. These mentioned areas are areas of high interest. However, if your communication is pertinent and written in the local language chances of it being picked up is a lot more.

practitioners
Comment

(Excerpted from the presentation made by D K Raikar, Deputy Editor, Loksatta, at PR Pundit's workshop - The Contemporary Portfolio, held in Mumbai on March 17, 1999)