

## RAJ RISHI SINGHAL'S VIEWS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND PR

*What does media want and what are corporate perceptions...*

The media requires stories - basically information, openness, and an honest approach from corporates. The sincere hope among media is that corporates accept media and its role as a fact of life. It is here to stay and has to do its work and will be around for a while.

What do corporates think of media?

- ❑ Interfering – who is a reporter to ask me about my business, or how I am doing?
- ❑ Most companies think that the media is negative – can't write good things – only exist to write stories that reflect poorly on the organisation
- ❑ Media is a vehicle to be used for only getting publicity

*When media and corporates do not see eye-to-eye....*

- ❑ *Conflict, which is occasionally healthy*
- ❑ *Antagonism, which is not good, you end up suspecting motives*
- ❑ *Generally does more harm than good*

Very often media is asked whom we write wrong information for, and who reads all these stories. Our stance is that investors and consumers are the readers – they like to know how the company behind the product is doing. Secondly media reaches out to a whole range of people other than just investors, such as vendors, lenders, auditors, advertising agencies. It is to the benefit of corporates to be open and transparent with the media.

Like any other business the media too is under the threat of competition and news breaking out early. Eventually, people will only remember who broke the story. We too have deadlines and they are sacrosanct. We have had times when companies have kept us waiting, as they know that once deadlines are crossed the story cannot be filed. So more often than not, if a reporter has a confirmed story but the company is still keeping him waiting, then he will go ahead with his story.

*What is the role of media?*

Role Of Media

- ❑ Duty to provide information to its readers, who are investors/consumers
- ❑ Builders of public opinion

The Economic Times has had corporates who have provided insufficient information – for example, Ceat who only gave out their sales figures because of their bad results. The same information can however be retrieved from the BSE website.

For years, the publication has had problems with Tata Electric – the company never sends out its results. By late night the paper receives just a one liner.

Media needs to print corporate results in its entirety, we owe this information to our readers.

- Newspapers have a right to decide what they want, and don't want to print. We often hear the refrain – “You wrote about that company – why can't you write about us”? For example:
  - Announcement of a tie-up with a supplier – this may not be of any relevance to the publication and hence has no news value. When we refused to run the news, the PR professionals of the company spread rumours that The Economic Times was not printing stories on dotcoms due to internal restrictions
  - The Economic Times does not write about companies being registered everyday. Why then do corporates expect us to write about every dotcom opening up a shop. We hold a right to print what we want
- There are no hidden agendas, but when your news is not printed PR professionals tend to make conspiracy theories out of it
- We are also learning all the time, we do make mistakes – the pace of change is fast and we are sometimes also caught on the wrong foot

*What the media does not expect because 'truth will out'...*

**Lies that fly in the face** – The Economic Times published a story that Vama Motors was breaking its distribution agreement with Ford Motors. VAMA was outraged and served notice. The irony was that exactly 10 days later, both Ford and VAMA ran advertisements of their break-up in this publication itself.

**Lies that erode credibility** – it is a ground rule at The Economic Times to check with the company first while running a story and we wait for confirmation. We try and give them enough lead time. In the case of Grasim, the newspaper was doing a story on an acquisition. The company had been sent a questionnaire and several telephone calls were made, but company spokespersons denied this news. Two days later they announced the news of the merger. The company could have just said “No comments”, a lot of companies do that.

**Ridiculous lies** –when the Reliance Petroleum jetty in Jamnagar had problems, The Economic Times was the first one to contact them - the spokesperson denied that there was a cyclone in Gujarat!

**Lies can be caught** –The CEO of a global IT company was to

visit India and The Economic Times wanted an exclusive story. The company did not say no, rather they said that they would try. Two days before his arrival we received a note that the CEO did not have time for an interview. A week later, after the CEO had left India, Business Today came out with an exclusive story! To make matters worse, they said it was an e-mail interview – information within the media is just a telephone call away and Business Today confirmed media interface with the person.

**Stringing On** – The Economic Times was trying to do a story on Colgate’s comeback in the oral care market – how it had been on the losing end to Levers but now had successfully regained a large part of the market share. For over a year we met with Colgate, but eventually the story went to Business World.

**Dropping of names** – certain public relations professionals like to show that they are on good terms with prominent people at The Economic Times. This is to dissuade the publication from carrying a story which they feel will not benefit their organisation. It does not work – the story will come out anyway. Influence will not help.

**Be fair** – The Economic Times has a lead on a story for which we would like confirmation. The company asks us to wait and then gives it away to another publication. The next time around we will not go back to the same company as our trust has been eroded.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

*Decrease in quality of reporting, ethical standards and levels of honesty*

Raj Rishi Singhal disagreed with this point of view and said that skills in business reporting have increased. Today the trend is towards skills and we see a substantial increase in skills and competence and more importantly a higher level of honesty.

*(Excerpted from the presentation made by Raj Rishi Singhal, Resident Editor, The Economic Times, at PR Pundit’s workshop, held in Mumbai on June 14, 2001)*