

ARINDAM SEN GUPTA'S VIEWS ON MAKING THE MEDIA WORK FOR YOU

The importance of 'knowledge' for purposeful interaction with media...

The larger aim of 'Making the Media Work for You' is how you can make the system work for you. It pre-supposes a fundamental point and that is knowledge. It is only when you know about media – a newspaper, a television company - as well as know about your business that you are able to have a purposeful interaction between the two.

Understanding the media...

In order to understand media, let us begin with The Economic Times (ET). It is the market leader and is among the top three financial papers in the world. Over the last two months, on weekdays, ET sold 4 lakh copies which is six times the nearest competitor and three times all financial dailies in the country put together. ET has a huge reach and hence influence. The growth of ET has been spectacular – 300 per cent – since the economy opened up in the early 90s. ET has taken full advantage of this, has shown a great interest in the corporate sector and firmly believes in liberalisation and reforms. This is one of the cornerstones of ET editorial policy.

As far as influence is concerned, an ORG Marg survey reveals that 95 per cent of CEOs and Chairmen and 90 per cent of senior managers, i.e. from General Managers upwards, read The Economic Times. Clearly the publication occupies the mind space of corporate India in a big way and hence that is a very good reason for building and maintaining a purposeful relationship with it. This does not imply just with The Economic Times, but with the media at large. Similarly, the publication because of its reach and influence is one of the most important drivers of the stock market and hence another good reason for purposeful interaction with it.

Practical aspects...

Before focussing on the practical aspects of a newspaper in order to understand the dynamics and hence appreciate the compulsions under which the media works, let us consider the other side of 'knowledge' – and that is knowing about your own company. Very often, communications managers and public relations practitioners, for various reasons, do not know enough about their own companies. This is more often than not communicated to the media. It may not be that they are trying to fob off the media, rather that they have insufficient knowledge that makes them say, "sorry we do not know" or "it's not true." Knowledge about your own company, being up-front with news and being able to communicate is very important. Any attempt to mislead leaves a bad after taste and gives the journalist sufficient reason to develop an unhealthy interest in the company. If, for example, you are in merger talks and unable to share information with the media until you have notified the stock exchanges or SEBI, then it is

preferable to say that “you would not like to react to market speculation” rather than make a positive attempt to mislead.

What The Economic Times stands for...

The publication positions itself, as any other business would do through a series of choices that it consciously makes. ET believes in change and today has a definite bias in favour of the private sector as against the public sector, which definitely was not the case ten years ago. The headlines no longer reflect the zillion numbers of the Planning Commission – in fact, those have now been relegated to some inside page. This is because at some stage the editorial team realised that information such as this does not mean much to our day-to-day living.

The paper goes further in favouring profit making companies among the private sector companies. Another bias that ET has is towards public limited companies rather than private limited companies. This is due to investor interest in the former. Within this, there is a further bias for products of a company that are closer to customers. For example, FMCGs more than commodity companies, pharma more than steel makers. The Economic Times seeks to make the paper change. There was a time when the paper covered art quite extensively – dedicating a page daily called ‘Artscape’ because the editorial team believed that there was a market for it. Since there was no scientific way to cover this market, ET decided to do away with it.

The edit policy of the paper – the editorial page – flows from this overall understanding of the skews of the paper. In addition, ETs editorial policy is in favour of :

- economic liberalisation
- free market
- corporate transparency
- good corporate governance
- government being actively involved in certain social sectors and infrastructure

Errors and corrections...

.

There is hardly any error in ET that goes unchallenged, largely because of its senior corporate leadership. It is important therefore that the ET gets its facts overwhelmingly correct each time and also in order to ensure that the next day’s paper is not a list of erratas. If there is a genuine error, the paper never shies away from correcting it. ET has also carried corrections on the front page.

Mechanics of the paper...

A newspaper is a highly perishable product. The only thing sacrosanct about it is the deadline that has to be met every night, come what may. Reporters come back with the news after all others have gone home. The government announces its policy decisions only in the evening. Until 1998, even the Budget was presented at 5 p.m.!

The morning begins with the *editorial meeting* where the edit team takes note of the newspapers of the day and decides on the topics on which the editorials will be based. This is followed by the *news meeting* at which reporting department heads are present. Here they analyse the contents of the day's papers and anticipate the events of the day. Finally there is the *pagination meeting* with the advertising department which wants more space for advertisements. Frankly, they are the ones who bring in the money!! A ballpark figure of 60:40 in terms of edit: advertisement is the general accepted norm.

There are two streams of a newspaper. Apart from the Production Team, which is called the 'Desk' there is a 'Reporting Team'. The Desk is directly responsible for deadlines since it has to release the edition at a given time and every page has to meet its deadline. If the reporter has listed a story, he or she has to meet the deadline.

***How to make
a paper work
for you...***

How would corporations seek to make the paper work for them? Here it is important to appreciate and to realise what news is. News I believe is something, which makes a difference – something that is a (significant) development on a current status. Journalists are trained for seeking what they call the 'news peg' – that new development on which he or she then hangs the entire report or story. The journalists on the desk are trained to search for that newspeg and give the headline on it. If you appreciate what news is, then you would probably know how to pitch for whatever you seek to communicate from your company to the newspaper. You wouldn't get terribly upset if your chairman's contribution to the Kargil Fund hasn't found place in the newspaper. It is equally your job to tell the chairman that this is not what newspapers are all about.

Many public relations practitioners of public sector companies get terribly nervous that the Chairman is unhappy about certain things, for example, about their contribution to the Kargil fund not getting a mention on the first page. It is not the job of newspapers to make chairmen happy – the job is to communicate certain developments, which are true. If the Editor is convinced that it is not true, then a correction will be carried in the paper.

***Avoiding
'bad press'...***

An issue that is of concern to corporate communicators is how to avoid 'bad press'. Bad press is what gives us in the media 'excitement' – it may be bad for you but it is good for us. Talking about success stories is easy, but the real challenge in public relations lies in the ability to handle adverse situations. Consider the recent problem faced by Coca-Cola in Europe and the stand taken by their top management not to talk about it. The CEO was finally forced to make a statement in the face of mounting publicity. This is

a good example of how not to handle the media and an equally good one of bad public relations.

Good PR and Bad PR....

An Indian example of a company that practices good PR is Reliance. When I began my journalistic career, Reliance was equated with corporate abuse and had a negative image. Those were the days when Indian Express and Gurusurthy would carry out powerful campaigns against Reliance. There were also a number of government actions that tied the company down. It was very difficult for the company to fob off the media or to say that nothing was happening.

The people at Reliance are not necessarily lobbyist, but because it is a hugely successful company, there is a lot of journalistic interest in the company. The credo with Reliance is not to say no, but to endeavour to provide information on any query regarding the company, be it a market-related one or on a new project. As a result Reliance is regarded well by the press. What should be stressed here is that all corporate communicators should be up-front in their interaction with the media, rather than seeking to influence it through extraneous measures.

Perceptions of media...

IMA PR conducted a study to assess the common issues and problems faced by the media in sourcing information from corporations. The channel used can either be direct or through corporate communicators or PR companies. The journalists contacted for this study were asked about typical obstacles that they faced as well as some common attitudes of corporations in sharing information with the media. Some of the critical views that came across from the media were:

- *media is viewed with a great deal of scepticism*: Direct access to senior management and information on any issue is possible only if there is a relationship. What this boils down to is "I trust the reporter and so I'll give it to him". If they haven't met the reporter, then they ask for a familiarisation meeting at their office. For an industry report, a reporter is unlikely to come across to the office, which is probably an hour away just to file a quote or two.

This process of stonewalling is best illustrated by the point that corporate communicators or public relations practitioners call only when there is good news. The moment there is bad news, they build walls around themselves with statements like "no one is available for comments", "he's travelling", etc. Hardly any proactive measures are taken. There are very few examples across our industries where bad news is being managed accurately.

- *they take too long in reacting to information*
- *they lack transparency*
- *corporate communicators are always trying to push across a story*

- *they inundate us with press releases*

Corporate perception of the media...

Let us look at the corporate point of view. The following points emerge from the forms that were filled in at the beginning of the session:

- *erroneous reporting*
- *personal rapport with journalists works*
- *lack of homework, research, depth*
- *tendency to sensationalise*
- *they demand access to only the person at the top*
- *media's obsession with financial information only*

QUESTION & ANSWER

Elaborate on the fact that nothing irks a paper more than to retract a statement

Mr Sen Gupta replied, "there is a certain journalistic ego involved and therefore the hesitancy to say that you're sorry. This is something that we're trying to change. Only recently, the ET carried a correction on the front page regarding an interview given by Sunil Mittal of Bharti Telecom. Mittal had not written or asked for a corrigendum. On reading the interview and the headline, we realised that the headline was not only wrong but was saying exactly the opposite of what Mittal was seeking to express. This was a lesson for the sub-editor and for the reporter who had committed the mistake.

Let us take a look at the psyche of a journalist. Generally speaking, journalism is not a profession that is as well paid as many other professions are. The compensation package of a journalist comes in various forms and a very important component of that being ego gratification. Seeing their names in print and interacting with people whom they consider powerful and at times mistaking themselves to be as powerful does just this. These are fallibilities of journalists. In case there is a problem with the newspaper – with the headlines or a sensational twist to a report, what one should do is to get back to the editor. However, journalists by and large do not conjure things and this is something I must reiterate".

Comment on the relationship between journalists and the people they interview

My main training was in politics. In political reporting, we believe in developing a relationship of trust with the politician who shares quite a lot of information with us. In India, we are entirely dependent on a relationship of trust where people take you into confidence and say certain things. I respect this confidence especially when the politician tells me something but requests me not to write about it because it would be premature to do so. My advice to the corporate sector is to build a similar relationship with financial journalists.

Can you elaborate further on:: recording of

The person going to being interviewed is perfectly justified in denying an interview (especially a long one), if it is not proposed to be recorded. The journalist, who says that he can remember the entire interview, especially an hour-long one,

*interviews
corrections
'off the
record'*

is not doing the right thing. On the other hand, there are certain interactions, say a 10-minute interview with a CEO at a CII or a FICCI meeting that simply cannot be recorded. But, any formal across-the-table interview must be recorded and we at ET insist on it.

Talking of corrections – there is a designated space for it. Normally corrections go on the editorial page where the letters are. At times we carry it on Page 1. To make a point, although Mittal's story was not carried on Page 1, we carried the correction on Page 1. It was as much to make an internal point in our newspaper as to readers that we are open to corrections.

At times we stand by our story, but there are other occasions such as the one two years ago when Rathikant Basu, Urmila Gupta and Vimla Bhalla from Doordarshan were in the process of joining STAR. We carried a report on this and they came down on us like a ton of bricks denying the report and saying that they were employees of the Government. Yes, we did carry their letters but we did not say that we stand by the story. We however said that we would be following their progress with great interest. Lo and behold, within a month they did join STAR. At times, the journalist or the reporter is quite convinced that there is something more to a story than what was given in the denial.

Coming to the third point - I believe that there is something called 'off the record'. This as I have understood is something that a person wants to give as information but does not want it to be attributed to him. The person who gives this information does not want to be quoted and I feel that this should be respected. However, because there are journalists and journalists, there will be degrees of maturity and it is for you also to judge each individual and interact accordingly.

*Training and
appraisal of
journalists*

At one point of time, journalism was a profession that was so poorly paid that people who couldn't become schoolteachers became journalists! However like all other professions, this has evolved and today, a much better cadre of people join this profession. Salaries are better to begin with and it looks brighter as a career option. There is also some glamour attached to the profession.

As far as appraisal goes, someone with the ability to sniff out news coupled with the capacity to present it accurately rates very high in our appraisal system. We have of late been stressing on training and here I would like to make a distinction between corporate and political reporting in India. I do not know of many corporate reporters who understand how to read a balance sheet – it should be one of the primary tools. We are carrying out workshops in-house to amend this and hopefully the impact will be felt a few years from now.

What kinds of checks and balances exist within the system?

If a mistake has been committed regarding a company, at least for the next three or four stories on that company, we go through it with a fine toothcomb.

Comment on the challenges being faced by media on the immense changes taking place within corporations

It is a very tough world we live in and change is taking place at a frantic pace. Unless the journalist has an aptitude for learning, and reads and follows developments, it is going to be very difficult. A point that I would like to stress on is that all corporate communicators should put in an extra effort to help, guide and inform journalists by giving them that supplementary input about their organisation. I for example have been helped in this way on numerous occasions.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Arindam Sen Gupta, Editor (Delhi), The Economic Times, at PR Pundit's workshop – Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)