

## KANIKA DUTTA'S VIEWS ON "THE ART OF COLUMN DROP"

Kanika sought to provide an insight of how a columnist, who works with the publication views news.

*The Saas-Bahu saga...who is right and who is wrong...*

Media relations at its best extremely tricky and there is a dire need to bridge the gap that exists between PR professionals and the media and seek a meeting point between the two catalysts. While it is essential to understand what interests columnists and how to influence them, it is of paramount importance to understand that the placement of information in the print media in general, and not just by beat reporters but also other journalists who write in their own publications across various sections.

The basic tension arises from the fact that people from both sides of the equation – media and PR are dealing with different sets of customers. And these customers sometimes have conflicting interests. The corporate communications professional is serving the publicity needs of his client/ organisation, while the journalist, columnist or the editor is serving the need of his reader. And it is not necessary that the two will meet in perpetual harmony. Success lies in finding and treading the middle path and thus maintaining the balance.

The third element that complicates the equation is to do with advertising revenues, which is increasingly putting pressure on the relationship.

*Differentiate between a 'plant' and article of reader interest...*

Withstanding all that, it is noteworthy to understand whether deliberate attempts to influence the media make a difference? Much as any journalist would like to differ; the reality is that public relations with its functionality and all pervasive presence has become a much bigger industry now, especially in the last decade or so. As corporations and institutions have evolved, the interface between media and public relations has become more intense and there is a closer give and take than ever before. Today, as information choices proliferate and the competition within the media grows, the question is one of degree - how successful or unsuccessful is the strategy? One seeks to measure the success of influencing a columnist but first and foremost one should define the parameters of judging a successful 'column drop'. Is it a mere act of placing the information in a publication or an influential column that is considered a success; or is it whether and how readers will react to that information? As surprising as it may seem, most often than not PR practitioners consider only the former in order to accomplish their task successfully. Whereas any successful PR exercise entails both.

This brings forth the point on how does one judge what will work? To assess how readers will react, the simple solution is to put yourself in the readers' shoes and ask yourself would you as a reader like to read that particular information? Gauge yourself, between what is considered in a journalists' parlance, a 'plant' or what you think will be of genuine reader interest.

To cite an example, at the time of the Tata Finance controversy the Tata Group was unhappy with what it deemed was unfair media coverage. The company complained that the journalists had not given the Tata Board a chance to explain. Various calls were made to newspaper offices to point out this issue but nothing went beyond that. Eventually, the company decided to release full-page advertisements in leading dailies, explaining Tata Board's position on the controversy. This in itself generated a considerable amount of debate within newspaper offices whether it was the correct step to undertake by the company. The immediate reaction of any able journalist would be that it was a thinly disguised attempt by the company to provide their side of the story without the inconvenient intervention of journalists asking pointed questions. However, that was the whole aim of the exercise by the company, to put across its viewpoint in what it saw as a credible environment. An advertisement allowed the reader to make his or her own judgement. The point to note is that this may not always be the optimal solution. In ongoing controversies in particular, it is necessary to evaluate the decision to speak to a journalist or a columnist one-on-one and influence the course of the debate or address them more formally.

*Be open and transparent...*

According to senior, credible journalists, it always pays to be open and transparent. Put across your viewpoint without being defensive, in a clear and concise manner. It has been observed that in too many cases, either the companies shut out the media or refuse to meet anybody who does not see their viewpoint. Scribes say that this is most definitely a wrong strategy, a sure shot way to doomsday, as it suggests that there is something to hide.

The manner in which Coca-Cola India handled the issue of the defacing of rocks at the Rohtang Pass is a case of a well-handled issue. They admitted to an error, apologised but also pointed out that they had little control on their bottlers' actions. And made no attempt to woo any journalist. As a result, the issue died down quickly thereafter. In comparison, the handling of the pesticides issue was rather clumsy. Even though they did not try to influence any journalist but tried to influence the course of the debate.

These discussions would lead any thinking PR professional to ask what really works? To put it simply, any issue that touches readers and their interests will find ready acceptance. The old proverb that for journalists, bad news is good news holds true. To further elaborate, let us say for instance any news on the UTI US 64 imbroglio for instance is bound to get more traction than information on how well UTI fund managers perform! No matter who the journalist or the newspaper is, the former will most definitely find immediate acceptance.

*Pitching at its best...get under the skin of the columnist...*

It is crucial and sometimes inevitable that the approach is transparent and honest. Citing another example of transparency at it's best, Kanika mentioned that she was contacted by PR Pundit regarding an issue where a white goods manufacturer was selling products that were smaller and lighter than the specifications stated on the packaging and that the matter had landed at the consumer courts. She appreciated the fact that she was briefed

clearly by the agency, stating that it had a client with competitive interest in seeking getting something written on this issue. This was perceived as a legitimate pitch as it was in the best interest of the consumers. The approach was upfront and as a columnist I welcomed the independent research being shared before making a decision to write. Also, the columnist must not be asked to share what is being written, as some agencies tend to request. Another important highlight of the pitch was that PR Pundit practitioners' had taken care to do their homework and did not vaguely suggest that the columnist stick the story somewhere in the paper. The options were suggested rightfully after assessing where it would fit best, nonetheless, the decision to place it was left to the columnist.

Such approaches are so far and few in between that they are noticeable. In general, journalists opine that PR professionals are more particular about following the 'drop' technique where they throw in some random suggestions and hope they would stick somewhere, somehow.

*Think & understand before you speak....*

A successful PR pitch should entail a thorough research – to understand what kind of news will benefit a column and publication. For instance, a lifestyle section of an esteemed publication such as Business Standard will most definitely not be interested in writing about a local Beauty Parlour being opened in one part of the city whereas opening of an upscale, popular restaurant will most certainly find space and interest, keeping in mind the reader profile. Infact columnists are inundated with inane requests where PR professionals have approached them with story ideas targeting columns, supplements of rival publications!

*What piques the columnist?*

Like any other individual, columnists too react differently to how an idea is sold to them. Every journalist or columnist accords different treatment to the reams of press releases, which they are inundated with. Those releases with interesting catchy headlines will draw their attention than those with routine press release information. More often than not, releases are confined to the dustbin!

*Handy tips... from the horse's mouth...*

The key points to remember when pitching to either a leading marketing consultant contributing to multiple dailies or a senior journalist writing for select columns in their own publication:

- Make sure that what is being proposed is relevant to the column, section, publication and columnist being approached. It is sub optimal to approach a columnist with news of some scandal taking place in the Academy of Fine Arts, when the columnist focuses on the *economy*.
- Always put yourself in the shoes of the reader and undertake a credibility test
- Make pitch calls before 5 pm. Most journalists are chasing deadlines and have no time to apply their mind to what is being sold to them.
- Make the pitch calls short and sweet as brevity is not only the soul of wit but of any successful communication

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*What are your views on Medianet, where one pays and gets coverage? Should one pay and get the coverage or should one stay away from such deals?*

Kanika Dutta commented that PR professionals should advise their clients against such deals, as they are risky for their image in the long run. Especially for corporate clients it is a waste of time. One could still condone it for film stars and their ilk.

*Whenever a columnist from a newspaper travels for a junket to an event, and reports on it, should it not be mentioned in the article that the piece was a result of that?*

Kanika Dutta replied that all ethical journalists would deem it their duty to do so.

*Journalists often demand information from corporate communicators on the ground that the readers have a right to know. Then why do misdeeds by media houses or change in their management not get reported?*

Kanika Dutta replied that in general publications do not report on the media scene as they presume that the readers will not be interested in such news. If it were a publicly listed company where there is shareholder interest involved then a story would definitely be written on the issue. She quoted the example of how New York Times caught one of its Pulitzer Award winning journalist fudging facts in his reports and then carried a series of articles informing the readers about the investigation etc.

*(Excerpted from the presentation made by Kanika Dutta, Associate Editor, Business Standard, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Delhi on March 23, 2004)*