

SUHEL SETH'S VIEWS ON "THE ART OF COLUMN DROP"

The session aims at providing the PR fraternity an insight into how a very key segment of opinion makers – the 'columnists' identify subjects for their writings; what piques their interest and what does not. If appropriately engaged, the columnists can help create the right noise levels on a particular issue, enabling the desired change that PR practitioners or reputation managers set out to achieve.

Opinions are based on rational, logical thought processes

Opinions formed by columnists, as expressed in their columns, are about topical incidents and issues. Columnists arrive at their opinions in a rational and logical manner. Therefore a PR professional needs to keep in mind that a columnist needs to be influenced more on the strength of logic and rationale than on the strength of the contingency that the professional would wish to perform.

Columnists help in creating impressions, which then influence the readers. For instance, restaurant popularities can climb up or down basis what Sourish Bhattacharya, Editor, HT City (city supplement of Hindustan Times) writes. The point to note is that it is not the column where one is written about but who is reading the columnist. Thus thorough research and homework is a must for PR professionals to make an intelligent and discerning observation about who is reading which particular columnist and then approaching them with appropriate subjects.

Adopt the right approach...

In the mechanics of PR, it is essential to note that the medium will never invariably be the message, though often the message can become the medium. The oft-repeated mistake by PR professionals is that they assume that all readers follow columnists. It would be wrong to assume that since Suhel Seth writes for Hindustan Times, Indian Express or occasional columns for The Economic Times, everyone is reading him. Similarly a lot of people may not be watching Barkha Dutt, Karan Thapar or Prabhu Chawla on TV. Just because one is part of the medium, does not mean one's message is being sharply read, viewed or considered.

The approach that PR professionals need to adopt is to first understand the specialisation of a particular columnist. And this can only emerge when PR professionals don a 'strategic hat'. It has been observed that the cardinal sin of PR people is that they pitch without knowing the interest areas of the columnist. It might be diametrically opposite to what he or she focuses on. So the first thing a PR professionals must do is research the specific column and columnist to determine what, in particular, makes sense to pitch (most newspaper websites have a columnist section and a good archive of past columns that can be very helpful in figuring out what people write about).

Part of working with columnists, means finding out what views and opinions they have on the issue one is pitching. It is a very interactive process, where one has to get acquainted with their thoughts and one cannot do that overnight. Equally a relationship does not need a long time to develop either. Then it is easier to

pitch an angle that will get the columnist interested. For instance, as a marketing consultant, Suhel would prefer stories on 'marketing firsts'. For instance, if PR professionals were to approach him with a peg that their client or organisation has introduced a helpline for cancer – this would never sell as a 'marketing first' pitch. This story idea will perhaps be bundled with 'philanthropy' initiatives undertaken by corporations. It is this tactical approach that a PR practitioner needs to employ when briefing the columnist. This is just as critical as what is being said.

*Columnists
keep their eyes
and ears open...*

Further, dealing with columnists is like dealing with fire because one never knows where they might swing and one never knows what they might say despite meeting you. We often wonder, how and why a columnist makes pot shots at a particular known figure.

Sometimes inane incidences catch the fancy of a columnist, arising from a funny or a bizarre personal experience... An instance of how Suhel decided to write a column was based on his own experience during the India Pakistan Cricket series in March this year. He was staying at the same hotel in Lahore as the Minister for Information & Broadcasting, Ravi Shankar Prasad. One morning when the minister entered the executive lounge in bathroom slippers and *paan* in his mouth, he commented on how it had been such a dramatic victory for India over Pakistan in the cricket match the previous day and that the Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee had an innate sixth sense in predicting the win. Suhel was penning his column for Hindustan Times at that time. He insisted upon enquiring what Suhel was doing and made the comment on Mr Vajpayee's innate sixth sense once again. As a result, Suhel included a mention of Mr Prasad in the article as a 'complete *chamcha*'. Now if Mr Prasad had not walked in and made the comment repeatedly, he would not have figured in the article.

*Consumer is
the King...*

Pen is indeed mightier than the sword! As opinion makers, and somewhat social guardians of the society, most columnists write what is in favour of the larger audience – the public at large. For example, there was a lot of noise over the tactics a particular telecom operator had deployed with respect to the WLL vs CDMA issue in the country. On one hand there was Reliance and on the other there were all the large cellular operators. While intending to draw the attention of Suhel to this issue, a concerned person casually shared the issue of Reliance coming in and sweeping the whole market. It perked Suhel's interest and he questioned this person on whether the decision would benefit the end consumer. As the reply was in affirmative; Suhel promptly indicated to the person his stand that the cellular operators lobbying against WLL did not stand an iota of chance.

*Content reigns
supreme ...*

The tenuous relationship between media and PR professionals becomes strained when the latter are stuck with clients who demand "media coverage". Many an organisation employs PR with the sole aim of measuring *per column inches* of mentions as the yardstick of their successful PR initiative, irrespective of the content. An apt comparison would be with the ongoing politics and politicians. Some organizations treat PR in what one may say 'Amar Singh' kind of approach – '*charcha, parcha and kharcha*' – that is it does not matter what people write or say or view about

you as long as they talk about you. However, the point to keep in mind is that it is not the *column inches* that indicate success of one's PR programme but the content, the impact of the coverage, which even though if restricted in numbers, brings out the key messages. Suhel believes it is the role of the PR practitioner to clearly educate senior management and all concerned in the organisation to consider the larger picture and assess if the right messages are being conveyed.

Make your pointget the key messages right

The intention of all columnists is to be able to influence some level of opinion making even if only to a small degree. It is the power of influencing opinions and the impact of that residual opinion that is sought after when one writes columns. So when a PR professional briefs a columnist, they should keep in mind the resultant effect on the reader after having read the column - whether the aim is to be viewed as a marketing organisation or a corporate philanthropist; an organisation that believes in consumer sensitivity or an organisation that believes in being a nationalist?

Most PR professionals when asked this question are unable to assimilate in one or two sentences on what is that one key message that they would like to see emerge out of the writing; most lack the skill to be able to convey the right key messages to a journalist or a columnist.

Mantra for success...

PR practitioners need to follow three golden rules to master the art of 'column drop':

- Get under the skin of the columnist and not under the skin of the column
- Get under the skin of the publication's reader and not under the skin of the circulation
- Get under the skin of the client or organisation to define one lasting objective that one wishes to be carried through consistently not in one column but in successive columns, not only in English but language publications, not only in print but also holistically across all media.

This will enable all PR practitioners to accomplish their tasks very successfully and emerge the 'MF Hussain' of PR!

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?

Suhel Seth replied that he thought that the Medianet idea is a fine idea. In the past, PR agencies and the journalists rather than the company were making a lot of money. Deals were struck to get 'suitable' coverage, and there have been several instances when journalists and photographers have taken money to put a particular person on the front page of Delhi Times, someone who did not deem fit to be there. The Times of India has just legitimised the entire process. Suhel compared this process to the Voluntary Disclosure Scheme offered by the Income Tax. He said that the manner in which the Medianet deal is communicated is incorrect. The publication is not being honest with its reader by either mentioning Medianet in small typeface or not including it altogether. Ethically, the publication should mention that it is an

advertorial. He also criticised the advertorial feature called 'Impact' run by India Today, which is misleading to the readers. One cannot allow sacred editorial space to be misconstrued. On the issue of editorial ethics, he quoted an example of an Asian Paints campaign started Calcutta many years ago, called *Sharad Samman*. The company took a full-page advertisement in The Telegraph for this campaign. To Aveek Sarkar's (the Editor) credit, he stipulated that the text could not be in The Telegraph typeface and that the advertisement copy should clearly state on the top of the page that it is an advertising feature.

On the issue of whether PR professionals should succumb to advertorial deals, Suhel replied that the decision depended on the desperation levels. There are alternatives to the Medianet route and it is silly to tread this path when one has a good product or service. He urged the PR industry to fight this together.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Suhel Seth, Ceo Equus and Columnist, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Delhi on March 23, 2004)