

PRIYA PAUL'S VIEWS ON IMAGE MAKEOVERS

The Park Hotel story...

With three hotels in different cities and the label of a family owned business, it was essential to redefine and reposition the hotels, and stand up as a larger chain, to be able to survive. In 1990, when the hotel industry was considered to be fairly unorganised and nascent, I had a dream of shaping a creative and an interesting space for everyone to enjoy. Park Hotel was the first to rebuild its properties and reposition them as individual properties. The idea was to showcase the hotels as a collection of luxury '**Boutique**' hotels.

We were driven by our vision of differentiation and innovation to create '*Boutique*' hotels - trendy, fashionable, speciality shops or businesses, focusing on design and an intimate customer experience.

Innovation...

The idea of creating a '*Boutique*' hotel, small and design focused, was a challenge in itself. The hotels created fun and entertainment spaces within their premises, catering to the mid-twenty urban middle class. The focus was to come up with innovative ways of physical product development and design, adventurous room designs and interesting food & beverage concepts. With a very good physical product in place, the challenge was to make it available to the consumers through the right communication channel. The role of public relations served a dual purpose, to communicate with both internal and external public. It was clear that unless internal processes were in place with the backing of a strong team, it would be difficult to communicate with the external world.

The most cost effective way to communicate the desired image of a product is to create a noise around it through interactions with the national and the local media on a regular basis. Marketing tools such as advertising, direct mailers and internal newsletters supported this.

Events...

The '*mantra*' was innovation, to do something new and exciting for others to sit up and take notice. The focus was on gaining publicity through attention grabbing events. To name a few -

- Fashion shows to showcase the designs of young, upcoming designers.
- Theme events at Someplace Else, the discotheque.
- International food festivals such as the Mauritian food festival with Sega dancers; Indonesian food festival or any other unusual event.

Creating branded events such as Going Public at The Park, Cinema at The Park, Theatre at The Park, on an annual or on a quarterly basis. The idea behind Going Public at The Park was to invite celebrities from all walks of life, like Jairam Ramesh, Kiran Bedi and Maneka Gandhi, on a no cost basis to them, to view the premises and to familiarise them with the hotel.

Media support was solicited for all the events in all the three cities through national FAM's. The journalists were very supportive, giving rave food reviews. The General Managers of the hotels and the Chefs of all the restaurants were prominently profiled. Product silhouettes through industry stories on nightlife at The Park; destination pieces on all the three hotels especially Vishakhapatnam, were mooted. PR efforts in this case were aimed at promoting the city as a tourist destination.

PR was supported by advertisements in the national, local dailies and magazines. Very graphic and contemporary imaging was used to make the advertisement stand out and get noticed.

Direct contact programs were initiated through -

- Quarterly newsletters with brief and fun content
- Loyalty Programs
- E-mails and letters to forge better relationships
- Dramatic invitations to add the element of drama and fun

Effectiveness of the communication strategy ...

An innovative public relations exercise and thought provoking advertising has helped Park Hotel in projecting and developing a right image in the most direct and cost effective way. Most importantly, perception is equal to reality, as is evident from the fact that today, Park Hotels are viewed as **'hotels with a point of view'**. Park Hotels, now five in number, in Bangalore, Chennai, New Delhi, Kolkata and Vishakhapatnam, put forward a professional and a well recognised change, projecting the right image.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

B2B segment – what has Park Hotel done for its travel agents ...

Local travel operators are much more aware of the new changes happening and what people want. The hotel always works closely with them, incorporating their suggestions in the development of the product. If your product is good and people appreciate it, they are willing to pay for it. The Indian consumer is not a price sensitive consumer, but a very price value sensitive consumer.

How has Park Hotel

ARR is largely a function of supply and demand. PR certainly helped the Park hotels in positioning themselves and also

evaluated the change in terms of ARR and change of profile of its guests? grow financially, making it possible to expand from properties in three cities earlier to five cities.

Leveraging the CEO, to what extent? CEO's should be leveraged largely to project only the overall image of the company and should not be used to promote small events and individual brands.

Comments from participants regarding the transition of image in their own organisations ... *Hutch:* In May 2002, Sterling Cellular, with products like Essar Cell phone and Speed, launched the Hutch brand in the three Southern circles as a singular brand for both pre and post paid. People thought that Hutchison was completely a new company. Earlier Essar Cell phone faced the problem of shouldering the image of a downmarket product. But when Hutch was launched it was perceived as an international brand. This image has further been perpetuated through the kind of services and products Hutch offered and the kind of events it was associated with.

Zerox: Is still seen as a photocopier company. But now the focus is to move towards the image of a solutions & services providing company. There is a concerted effort to reposition the company and to move up the value chain.

American Express: AmEx has two legal entities and four other companies and each company has a different CEO. So to avoid confusion, all media queries are directed to the public affairs and communication department (PA & C). They are the single points of contact for the media and they forward the same to the concerned CEO's. No one is allowed to share his or her mobile numbers with the media. The PA & C team is very aggressive in getting the queries answered for the media in record time. In this way they have been able to win the confidence of the journalists.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Priya Paul, President, Park Hotels, India, at PR Pundit's Seventh PR Workshop held in New Delhi on December 10, 2002)