

PETER YORKE'S VIEWS ON ASSESSING PR MODELS

"The media is not the audience, it is merely a tool to reach the audience." One must therefore be very clear about the audience with whom the company is trying to communicate. Only then can opportunities in the media be leveraged effectively.

The i-flex PR model.....

12 years ago, when i-flex started its business, it adopted a thought leadership model. The whole Indian software industry at that time could have been defined as a clutch of body shoppers where earnings were US \$150 an hour. Indians who could code earned greater revenue for the company. i-flex differentiated itself from the industry by saying that it would develop an internationally acclaimed property. It developed a domain in the financial services and is now a leading financial services software provider in the industry.

Before 2002, the company was viewed as a small company. It was not prominent in terms of coverage. Therefore communication undertaken by i-flex included advertising in select markets and events for direct contact with the customer. It began slowly building the brand and eventually reached a stage when it automatically got ranked in business magazines as one of the top companies.

The PR approach in the long-term was to capture thought leadership or dominate the market in the space in which i-flex operated. Therefore, both short term and long term plans were devised.

The other choice that was exercised was to manage communications internally as far as possible with a large team rather than outsource. This experience led us to understand that the core business of the company was not public relations but was actually software development. Therefore not too many resources were invested internally but rather externally.

... has complete buy-in from the CEO

Another core decision was to keenly involve the management. A conscious decision was thus made that the CEO, employees of the company as well as the members of the PR agency are present together when the goals and objectives are being articulated.

An important aspect was to brainstorm and identify the key offerings of the company, what are their merits, what are the demerits and what is the competition – its strengths and weaknesses. This guided the key messages and development of the PR strategy. This messaging strategy was then pursued across all channels of communication.

The company's website was used extensively to highlight thought leadership. The website was also used as a tool to communicate to the market and media. A robust intranet system was built to gain the support of employees clearly in view of the vital role of internal communication in this whole process.

The thought leadership plank helped the company stand out distinctly in the industry...

The company initially introduced itself to the market with reference to its offerings and products and then started capturing market leadership. It later began expanding in the market and supplementing it with adequate information about its products and services and graduating that to a position of leadership. The company therefore saw, that the products it sold in the market, were becoming default standards.

The concentration was then on building thought leadership as a differentiating factor from the rest of the industry.

An agency needs to be fully integrated into the business process to work effectively...

The graduation was from an internal one person PR organisation to an agency. Once an agency is integrated with one's business and becomes a part of the business process, it can provide positive value to the company. When an agency performs regional services, it not only performs translation services, but also localisation services and guidance on nuances of the market. For an effective relationship, the company must define the role of the agency and in turn the agency should be aware of what the company expects of it and the results that it needs to show.

An important aspect for a company to look into is the range of activities performed by the agency. It is important to know whether an agency is well equipped to perform all the activities assigned to it. When one goes to the international media, it is important to know whether one is targeting general media, or specific trade media.

The model was shifted from being a long-term retainer model, to a project based, short-term model.

Another experiment is the provision of press information or thought leadership articles, to the media, delivered electronically, through the company's website. This has been more effective in the overseas markets rather than the local markets. It is important to go to the media with stories, giving them ideas, also giving the media some international exposure.

The approach for communications has shifted from being merely tactical to a more strategic view. A half-yearly review and a budget review are undertaken within the company. Reviews are carried out at two levels, one with the senior management and the other with sales and marketing, so as to align the entire communication plan with the sales plan.

Automation and technology by way of search engines and blogs are other key areas for an organisation's communication needs today. Blogs are a great tool to be used by people in the communications business, to understand what the market thinks about them, but if it is misused it can damage the interest of the company terribly. As a company, one's response to blogs should be free format and

conversational.

Correct messaging leads to successful communications...

The pre-conditions for success of the communication strategy is to first and foremost get the messaging correct, make sure that the management understands the PR activity and what value it contributes. One of the ways of showing it is to show returns. The key focus should always be the message and the fact that it is delivered time and again and whether the end audience is receiving the message.

The three main values across all communication channels must reflect *truth, honesty and reputation*. The media must be treated as colleagues and the company should give the same information to all the media during a crisis situation. It is then, that the media would appreciate your honesty and integrity.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Elaborate on how i-flex gathered information about customer satisfaction / media perception

Peter Yorke replied by saying that through the help of an agency it began with mapping the recall that the company had in the market as well as the targets that it had set to achieve.

He also mentioned that one could also get information about the media perception of a company through an informal dipstick study.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Peter Yorke, VP- Corporate Communications, i-flex Solutions Ltd., at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Mumbai on November 30, 2005)