
COMMUNICATING IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

The imminent arrival of a single market of 323 million souls post-1992, the changes in the Eastern bloc, financial deregulation, increased international competition and changing global issues all demand that the public relations industry acts to help management interpret and respond to broader communication needs. Cultural, regulatory, financial media and government relations all vary from one country to the next and public relations practice has to adapt to these local needs and conditions. Thus - think global, act local - is the approach adopted by many companies and organisations in planning communication strategy.

International public relations used to be a specialised branch of the craft. Increasingly, national public relations are becoming a part of the bigger international PR scene. Today fewer organisations have a totally domestic perspective - even when they are not operating outside their own national borders. This is because the issues concerning people often have relevance around the world. There is a closing gap in the standards of operation between the industrialised nations and third world countries. The result of all this 'internationalisation' of issues is that these have a greater impact - even on domestic operations. If asbestos is a health hazard in United States, then it is not likely to be acceptable for long in India. If PCBs are killing marine life in the North Sea then who is going to tolerate them in the South Pacific.

But communications is very domestic, so even national organisations have to look carefully at the international scene as it could have a major impact upon the way they work and their acceptability to the key publics upon whom they depend for success.

However there are many organisations that are international in their operations. It has been observed by these organisations that communications in extremely local and very personal. While some transcontinental messages may be acceptable, most of those that affect people's lives need to be presented to them from a very short range, in a language and style that they can accept and with an opportunity to debate, challenge and endorse.

An organisation when reaching out to international audience must keep in mind the following:

- Who are the key audiences the organisation depends upon for success
- What are their perceptions
- To what extent do they understand and support the organisation
- Where are there gaps in the communication matrix
- What improvements need to be made

The World is Huge

It must always be remembered that the world represents numbers, variety and complexity almost beyond imagination. It is so easy for one's thoughts to be governed by a subconscious perception of the world, which

reflects that part in which one lives. Constant vigilance is required and it is an advantage to have work colleagues from all over the globe as a reminder of one's own insularity.

The Corporate Aspect

One of the oft voiced and often heard truisms is that the structure and character of public relations department should and does not reflect the culture and style of the corporation. If this were so on a national level, then how much more so it would seem to be in the case on an international plane. Perhaps this is because just as the television lens magnifies the nature of its subject, so the very size of the corporate canvas presents to the independent observer, distanced from the scene, a truer vision of the complete picture.

Corporate Identity

Any organisation operating internationally has to decide how it wants to be seen in each market in which it concludes its business. The monolithic approach has particular appeal to consumer goods manufacturers. This consideration applies with particular force where recognition of corporate name and linkage to the product range may assist acceptance by the investment company.

There may however be clear advantages in being seen as a member of the local community rather than as an alien invader. In banking it is rare to find a successful retail banking operation which trades with a foreign name. The banks would keep the name of the bank they acquired to exploit domestic potential. The only way for a foreign bank to be profitable in Germany is for it to submerge its own national identity and appear to be a German bank.

Public Relations Response to International Business-to-Business

In the business -to-business sector, a great variety of work is now carried out internationally - from defining and communicating issues and concepts to straight product marketing support work. Corporate communicators have responded to the challenge in a variety of ways. Organisations have used a range of approaches: setting up their own offices in key locations, acquiring 'local' PR companies and networking - either informally or through a structured organisation such as PRX International, WORLDCOM or Pinnacle.

There are few global companies and brands in the B to B marketing and global public relations strategies are rare, but they can be vital. When Infopress launched ICI's imaging and business graphics operation - ICI Imagedate, a strategy was developed which included targeting business partners in Japan and end users in United States and Europe. With different jobs to do in different countries, the PR exercise entailed country-specific approaches and this is true of every successful 'global strategy'.

But it needs to be kept in mind that organisations, which are well known in some parts of the world, are not necessarily high profile in others. Samsung, Korea's largest company and among the top 20 largest companies in the world is much better known in Australia than in UK and public relations need to take account of this. In addition companies may position their brands differently according to local market conditions in an established marketplace.

The Sponsorship Contribution

Sponsorship is an international calling card, which can be used effectively within global communications and promotional mix.

Benefits to this are

- The company appears to be international. It is a statement of its 'global nature'.
- Sports, music and even environmental sponsorships rarely need translation. They transcend normal language barriers and are enjoyed equally by all those involved, no matter what nationality
- It is the organisation's event and is an excellent opportunity to promote its brand
- It gives the organisation something which matches or enhances its profile and via which contact can be made with its various publics

Whitbread & Co plc celebrated 250 years in 1992 and has been one of the UKs most ardent sponsors of sport, literary awards and occasionally music and art. Its international sponsorship began with the Royal Naval Sailing Association's World Yacht Race. Now one of the world's biggest sporting events 'The Whitbread' or Le Whitbread needs no other explanation. It is right on target with a prime objective for a major sponsorship - the name is the title.

Whitbread is the guardian of the event and though over the years many other organisations have joined in as sponsors, the name still holds. The various developing aspects of the Whitbread business - fast food groups, quality hotels and country clubs - is in line with its racing image.

Apart from being the brand behind the event, this has also enabled the company in getting global recognition given the vast popularity of the sport across the world.

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