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Public Relations in Asia

Abstract: *The demand for public relations services globally has gone high during the last decade. This has come about primarily due to the increase in competition for foreign markets among multinational corporations. Practitioners as well as theorists of PR are required or rather forced, because it's not a matter of choice, to be global communicators, governed by a whole new set of personal and professional rules. The nature of its rapidly growing economies results in huge opportunities for businesses but also great challenges. Asian region has its own unique approach to practicing public relations. The aim of this article is to identify the core cultural elements that have the effect on public relations practices.*
Key words: *Asia, Public Relations, China, India, PR*

Introduction

Public relations is more important than it used to be, because there is a perception that the world today is more media-driven than it used to be. The new meaning of public relations is a product of a new age. Information travel so fast than within seconds a press release originating in New York is read by thousands of people on their computer, mobile or PDA screens in China, Mexico, Norway, Poland etc.PR is experiencing a dramatic paradigm shift. Shift caused by mainstream Internet acceptance. Google, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter have outgrown the vision of Marshall McLuhan's (McLuhan, 1965) global village and with it unprecedented expectations of public relations practitioners to service a new, intercultural, worldwide audience (Fitzgerald, Spagnolia, 1999). Monocultural approach is no longer valid. Practitioners as well as theorists are required or rather forced, because it's not a matter of choice, to be global communicators, governed by a whole new set of personal and professional rules to accommodate this new role (Kemper, 1998).

Public relations

Public relations play an important role in the world of international business. From a corporate standpoint, PR can help companies to develop positive images for their businesses. From a marketing perspective, public relations play an important role as part of the marketing strategy. PR help to position the company's product or brand and build brand equity.

The formal practice of "public relations" dates to the early 20th century. In the relatively brief period leading up to today, public relations has been defined in many different ways, the definition often evolving alongside public relations' changing roles and technological advances. The earliest definitions emphasized press agentry and publicity, while more modern definitions incorporate the concepts of "engagement" and "relationship building."

Public relations has developed very rapidly in recent years, partly because management of various commercial and non-commercial organizations have discovered a need for public relations activities. There has also been a considerable increase in the means by which public relations messages can be conveyed.

In 2011/12, PRSA led an international effort to modernize the definition of public relations and replace a definition adopted in 1982. PRSA initiated a crowdsourcing campaign and public vote that produced the following definition: **"Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics."** This definition focuses on the basic concept of public relations — as a communication process, one that is strategic in nature and emphasizing "mutually beneficial relationships." [1]

As a management function, public relations also encompasses the following[2]:

– Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.
– Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.
– Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing; financial; fund raising; employee, community or government relations; and other programs.

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[1]   http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/publicrelationsdefined/ 30.07.2012
[2]   http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/publicrelationsdefined/ 30.07.2012

– Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy. Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities — in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above.

Public relations across cultures

The debate on whether public relations can be practiced in similar ways in different countries was started three decades ago. (Illman, 1980; Ovaitt, 1988; Botan, 1992;).

Those so called "ethnocentric perspective scholars" have argued that public relations practices should be no different from their own culture (Illman, 1980). "Cultural relativist perspective" scholars have argued that public relations practice should be different in every society (Botan; Huang, 1997).

There were also "the middle way" scholars. Vercic, J. Grunig, and L. Grunig (Vercic, Grunig, Grunig 1996) argued for an approach between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. They proposed a normative model of global public relations that contains generic principles and specific applications. However, there is a visible lack of truly comparative and international public relations research.

Several international studies indicate that there are various public relations models around the world. (Grunig et al., 1995, Huang, 2000, Jo and Kim, 2004, Park, 2002, Rhee, 2002, Sriramesh, 1992). However, an important question - why certain public relation practices are more common in certain countries still remains. (Jo and Kim, 2004). There is also aqn important question concering organizational cultures which are effected by national cultures [Sułkowski 2002].

Since 1985 a team of six researchers (IABC Research Foundation) led by J. E. Grunig (1992) has conducted research on the characteristics of excellent public relations departments and heir work to make their organizations more effective. After surveying more than 300 organizations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, the IABC team identified the characteristics of excellent public relations and corporate communications departments.

In 1992, C. Botan (Botan, 1992) pointed out that the tremendous growth of PR was concentrated mainly in the US. A PR matrix developed by him involved four factors:
– level of national development
– primary clients
– legal-political context
– history of the practice.

Nevertheless, one can ask - can a truly global approach be developed with the same generic principles used in different countries?

Based on the excellence study, Vercic et al. (Vercic et al., 1996) proposed a global public relations theory. The group of researchers consolidated the excellence characteristics into 10 generic principles and identified 6 specific contextual variables that should be taken into account in global public relations (Rhee, 2002).

"The generic principles are as follows:

1. *Public relations is involved in strategic management.*
2. *Public relations is empowered by the dominant coalition or by a direct reporting relationship to senior management.*
3. *The public relations function is an integrated one.*
4. *Public relations is a management function separate from other functions.*
5. *The public relations unit is headed by a manager rather than a technician.*
6. *The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is used.*
7. Asymmetrical system of internal communication is used.
8. Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical public relations.
9. Diversity is embodied in all roles.
10.An organizational context exists for excellence." (L. Grunig et al., 1998, pp. 337–339).

Asia

Asia's time has come. For centuries, this vast, complex and diverse continent has been forced to play catch up with the Western world. However, the emergence of China and India as fast-growing economies is the biggest shift in geopolitical power since the US replaced Europe's imperial powers as the world's dominant trading block. While India and China are Asia's driving force, the continent also boasts some of the most technologically advanced territories on the planet. Long time ago, Japan graduated to the economic and innovation elite. But now it has been joined by, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. At the same time Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam are all experiencing economic growth and advances in infrastructure.

Asia is a dynamic place and home to some of the richest as well as the poorest people in the world. The nature of its rapidly growing economies results in huge opportunities for businesses but also great challenges.

Both in geographical size and in population Asia is the largest continent. It is probably the most complex region as well. Asian countries such as China and India have emerged as significant markets for multinational corporations. This process of international trade in Asia continues to expand The creation of these new markets will continue to demand an increase in the level of public relations activity in the continent. (Sariramesh, PR Encyclopedia, 2005).

Globalization has opened up the economies of a dozen or so Asian countries, resulting in a significant inflow of multinational corporations into the region.

A concomitant result has been the entry of leading multinational public relations agencies into Asia, resulting in an infusion of Western perspectives of public relations practice. Some observers have rightly commented that this development has led to an increase in the level of professionalism among public relations practitioners in the continent. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that there has been no corresponding flow of information out of Asia that could help in the development of effective strategies for conducting public relations globally. It is reasonable to believe that a continent as rich as Asia, with its long heritage, has something useful to offer the public relations industry and pedagogy [http://www.icpr.ir/The%204th%20International%20Conference%20on%20Public%20Relations.pdf].

Values and cultural elements in Asia

Paying attention to different cultural elements and defining new and sensitive cultural methods as a principle is completely necessary and without considering these elements, the activities of PR companies in this area will definitely result in failure.

It is believed that the effective public relations in Asia just like other areas, is not about stereotype communications or trading communications. It is about creating and managing relationships between the organisation and each of its key publics. Effective communications, verbal and non-verbal, are vital. But so too are PR strategies that understand the implications of corporate behavior.

Communication must be framed within the context of an informed understanding of the cultural, religious, social and ethnic context of each country or even community or public. The fact that a message worked well in Asian market A, does not guarantee that it will work equally well in Asian market B.

Shareholder Influence

In a Western region of Asia such as Australia, dominant stakeholders are often external shareholders. In India and China, community and family networks influence business structure. Board of management is forever mindful of the family and government network, usually at the expense of minor investors (Kimber & Lipton, 2005). This identifies the clear disparity of power and presence of inequality in the Asian region, in comparison to the West [Gupta, Chandni, Bartlett, Jennifer, 2007].

Trade unions

Employees in Western regions are often represented by independent trade unions and associations. However, in many Asian countries, employees are closely aligned business owners or a caste community. Trade unions are easily

influenced via loyalty to the company (Kimber & Lipton, 2005). In Japan, for example, employees are not encouraged to voice their rights. They are expected to work hard and sacrifice all else for the company good. Demise (2005) believes that this has led to Karoshi – death by overwork.. Demise (2005) mentioned that new corporate governance was introduced in 2003, but resistance to the new regulations is still relatively high across the sector [Gupta, Chandni, Bartlett, Jennifer, 2007].

Personal Influence in Business

In the Western regions, there is a clear distinction between personal and business relationships, but in most Asian countries, the relationships are quite often blurred (So & Walker, 2005). In Western regions, family relations are often hidden during business negotiations to avoid conflict of interest, in Asian regions, any perceivable relationship with the other party is identified and emphasised (Reynolds & Valentine, 2004).

Table 1: Summary of regional business practices

Region	Stakeholder influence	Workplace environment	Personal influence	Spiritual influences
Asian	Company's family members – top priority	Little power to trade unions	Use of *Guanxi* and *Mianzi* in China	Corporate relationship between individual and astrologer – India
		Tall pyramid style organisational structures		
		Close relationships between employer and employee	Business and personal relationships blurred	
		Karoshi (death by overwork) - Japan		
Western	Equal opportunity to all stakeholders	Trade unions have power and influence	Distinct difference between personal and business relationships	Protestant work ethic
		Flatter organisational structures		

Source: Gupta, Chandni and Bartlett, Jennifer L. (2007) *Guanxi, astrology and symmetry: Asian business and its impact on public relations practice*. Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 8(1).

Spiritual Influence in Business

There are many factors in the Asian region that are quite abstract to the West. In the West, the protestant work ethic has dominated the practice of business activities since the 1970s. It is more apparent in cultures where people have a high need for achievement, individuality and in some cases high power distance as well (Furnham et. al., 1993). However, in Asian countries such as India, astrology plays a key role within the community, including business (Tsuruoka, 1993) [Gupta, Chandni, Bartlett, Jennifer, 2007].

Conclusions

With the growth of international business, PR have become more complex. Public relations functions therefore become far more challenging. In addition to the usual professional skills, PR practitioners should expand their knowledge of world cultures, languages, customs, ways of conducting business [Chmielecki 2011, pp. 229-240]. Culture needs to be more clearly understood in the public relations context. It will help to understand why some of the models from the Western region become impractical for non-Western practitioners.

Asian region has its own unique approach to practicing public relations. Cultural aspects have a major impact on the business practices, which in turn impact the public relations profession. Culture's strong influence on business practices, has an effect on public relations practices.

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