

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: IN A STATE OF METAMORPHOSIS

by

Dr. Debjyoti Chanda

Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication & Videography
Raindra Bharati University, Kolkata-700050, West Bengal, India
E-mail: chanda_debjyoti@yahoo.co.in

Introduction

Corporate Communications has been defined as “a practice of developing, cultivating and maintaining a corporate identity or brand image. It involves a series of planned, interconnected activities to communicate and engage with internal employees and externally with partners, customers and other employers.” Corporate Communication Managers are “expected to perform well and use various communication roles and behaviours in different contexts of organisational performance.”

A corporate communication manager often is seen as an innovator and a broker who use persuasion and communication skills to steer development and innovation in the organisation. His role as a monitor and coordinator has also gained importance in this era of multitasking which ofcourse requires project management and supervision skills. However, it is easier said than done. Belasen mentions that, “Corporate communication executives and professionals operate under the burden of contradictory and often inconsistent expectations coming from diverse constituencies. Responding to these expectations is vital for building a strong identity and sustaining a credible organisational image (Belasen, A, 2008).” Moreover, Belasen has opined that today, “Communication is no longer the exclusive domain of the PR and Marketing Departments. Other functional areas within the organisation play an important role in decision making and implementation of policies that affect internal

and external stakeholders.” Keeping this in mind, it has been argued that a process of integration of ideas is necessary to enable theoreticians, researchers and practitioners work in tandem for fructification of ideas and their proper implementation.

A corporate communication chief who is a leader in his own right, therefore, has to synchronise a widely dispersed field while giving greater focus in addressing the diverse needs of concerned stakeholders. Apart from dealing with managerial, marketing, financial and organisational communication, he must continue to do the surveillance function by maintaining a close watch on the internal and external environment, trigger change when necessary and maintain stability when facing a turbulent situation.

The journey of corporate communication operationalised initially in a fragmented manner to the present day when it is integrating and coordinating the function as a whole thereby elevating its status as in the words of Cornilleson, “Providing desirable input into strategic decision making at the highest corporate level of the organisation.” Cornilleson further suggested the following three canons that would make the Corporate Communication function more flexible and useful to the organisation as a whole;

- Organisations should consolidate and centralise communication disciplines together into a single department to enable sharing of knowledge and skills and enhance the visibility of the communication function across the board.
- To ensure securing of strategic input of communication into corporate strategy, the placement of the Corporate Communication department within easy reach of senior managers who are part of the decision making team.
- In view of increasing size and complexity within organisations, a strategy may be developed to implement cross-functional communication mechanisms to ensure cross fertilisation of expertise thereby making implementation of synchronised communication function which are visible.

However, everybody is not agreeable to this suggestion of integration. Christensen, Morsing, Cheney have discussed the possibility of Corporate Communication to become “A managerial practice focussed on poliphony rather than unity.” They

argued, “The usual understanding of integration limits flexibility and employee involvement in corporate communication projects while explicitness in communication and clarity may be a hindrance in establishing consent among different audiences, strategic ambiguity allows for different ideas and identities within the confines of an organisational unit.”

In spite of such differences in perception, both in theory and practice, it has been agreed to by all practitioners today that Public Relations of which Corporate Communication is a sub-genre is “Strategic communication which is an ephemeral and wide ranging field, often misperceived, and because of lack of message control inherent in public relations it is difficult to master. The Public Relations function is prevalent and growing. It is a conduit, a facilitator and a manager of communication, conducting research, defining problems and creating meaning communicating among many groups in society.”

Explaining the close relationship between Management and Communication, Grunig and Hunt said that Corporate Communication is the management of communication between the organisation and its publics. Management is the body of knowledge on how best to coordinate the activities of an enterprise to achieve effectiveness. Communication is not only sending a message to a receiver but also understanding the messages of others through listening and dialogue.

Corporate Communication: Growing Stature as a Profession

The three basic ingredients for any field to be judged as a profession must include the following:

- Availability of a body of knowledge
- Existence of a code of ethics for ready reference
- A certification available for the practice

A profession with time gains expertise which enables it to establish a kind of monopoly in the concerned service whereby it can limit entry in that field and with

the passage of time gain social status and recognition. Various methods are also devised to test competence and ensure standardisation.

For long, in Corporate Communication the stress and focus has been on certain skills which therefore posed a low barrier for entry into the profession. Many can master the skills easily in enabling people from different fields enter the profession. It therefore become essential and imperative to ensure that a set of competencies be acquired to raise the barriers of entry for the professionals. Formal qualification and training and being member of professional bodies is part of the process. It is essential to understand that many corporate communication professionals function as technicians and do not participate in management decision making. Concerted efforts therefore must be made in all organisations to upgrade corporate communication from a peripheral to a central management discipline.

Corporate Communication: Specialist Areas

Corporate Communication wherever it is practiced today includes some specialist areas of activity viz. crisis and issues management, media relations, internal communication with employees and investor relations.

Media Relations – Media Relations continue to be the prime focus of corporate communication department because how an organisation is covered in the media generally has a strong influence on the corporate reputation of the organisation. Since media has an amplifying effect, it tends to highlight an issue and increase its positive or negative impact. Communication professionals use a number of tools and techniques to obtain media coverage. Media is also scanned and monitored to gain insight about the perception of the organisation in the media and through which the public as a whole. Press Release, Press Conference, Interviews are the usual tools for media relations apart from media monitoring and media research.

Crisis and Issues Management – It is often said that it is during the time of a crisis the true worth of a corporate communication department can be gauged. The chief executive officer and the head of corporate communication officer play a significant role in the diffusion of the crisis by preparing a contingency plan of action. A

continuous flow of information to the mass media in particular and the public in general is necessary to ensure that grapevine communication do not in any way aggravate the situation.

Issues on the other hand are 'latent' and 'active' which if not addressed in time can develop into a crisis. Regular scanning and monitoring the environment may help identify issues and strategies are developed to counter them.

Internal communication with employees – Employees are the backbone of any organisation. Mutually close rapport between employee and management enables smooth running of an organisation. However, it is often said that corporate communication division takes the employees for granted and do not address their issues in time or inform the management of the same. This in the long run may develop into a serious crisis and damage the credible image of the organisation. This may also hamper the recruitment of quality employees. It may also be remembered that during times of crisis aggravated from any external quarter, internal publics provide the necessary support to wade through the same.

Investor Relations – The floating money market needs to be properly wooed so that the organisation develops a credibility and trust that attract investors to it. The corporate communications division on a continuous basis maintain that liaison so that investor confidence remains upright and continuous flow of necessary funds is made available. The volatile money market is subject to continuous ebb and flow and the corporate communication division in conjunction with the finance department provided necessary input in maintaining investor relations.

Corporate Social Responsibility: This human touch is in focus

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an important segment in the hands of corporate communication specialists which is gaining wide prominence today. By using CSR judiciously and executing it in a planned manner, businesses can benefit society while boosting their own brand. Such CSR programmes tend to further some social good over and above what is required by law and in the interest of the organisation. CSR strategies make a positive impact on the environment over and

above the interests of the corporations' immediate stakeholders. Corporates benefit from CSR if they do not consider it a window dressing or legal compulsion but rather as a strategic input that lends a human touch to the company's activities.

Conclusion

Boston Red Sox had once jocularly remarked that nobody wants to hear about the labour pains, but everybody wants to see the baby. The comment is so apt about corporate communication. Management of all organisations expect detail coverage of their activities in the mass media. Often such expectation is not fulfilled with rapid transformation in social and economic sphere, unimaginable proliferation of mass media and the unregulated upsurge in social media, a 24X7 scrutiny on corporate affairs coupled with an environment of mistrust and disbelief. Thus corporate communication specialists have to wage a continuous battle in many fronts.

References:

- Belasen, A (2008). *The Theory and Practice of Corporate Communication*. Sage Publication, USA
- Canfield, B; Moore, H (1973). *Public Relations Principles, Cases and Problems*. Richard D. Irwin, USA
- Christensen, L; Morsing, M; Cheney, G (2008). *Corporate Communication, Convention, Complexity and Critique*. Sage Publications. USA. Pp 99-100
- Cornelissen, J (2008). *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Sage Publication, USA. Pp 120-123
- Cutlip, S; Center, A (1971). *Effective Public Relations*. Prentice-Hall, London, UK
- DeFleur, M; Everette, E; Mcquail, D (1981). *Understanding Mass Media*. Houston Miffin Company, USA
- <http://www.bizfluent.com/ab>
- http://www.saylordotorg.github.io/text_master-ing-public-relations/s03-what-is-public-relations.html
- Paneth, D (1983). *The Encyclopedia of American Journalism*. Facts on Files Publications, New York
- Vivian, John. *The Media of Mass Communication*. Allyn and Bacon, USA