

TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN' IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS AND PR

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Corporate Communications – an overview

An organisation or rather a corporate is a business entity and communication, naturally, plays a critical role in its functioning. Communication has its various facets when it is made in the corporate parlance. When a company is communicating its financial results such as topline or bottomline it is called financial communication, when it is talking to its internal stakeholders it is internal communication, similarly, when it is for its external stakeholders such as promoters or clients it is external, and when it is talking to media it is public relations or PR. The overarching umbrella remains corporate communications. So anything that a corporate wishes to communicate to a target audience is corporate communication.

Every society, every civilisation, every race, devised their own way to communicate to its people about its achievements, about their divine right to lead, as well as their claims of religious authority of the king to lead the people. A few examples of early propaganda are a clay tablet found in ancient Iraq promoting more advanced agricultural techniques or the pyramids, obelisks and statues by Babylonian, Egyptian and Persian leaders.

Ancient Greece had a special affinity for advocacy as a tool with “sophists”. Julius Caesar wrote the first campaign biography promoting his military successes. In medieval Europe, craftsmen organized into guilds that managed their collective reputation. In England, Lord Chancellors acted as mediators between rulers and subjects.

Congregatio de Propaganda ("congregation for propagating the faith"), created by Pope Gregory XV, was used to train missionaries. It was only during the World War II that the term propaganda got associated with negative connotation.

Communication and PR has since come a long way and propaganda only changed form and shape. The longest stint being of newspapers as the most potent medium of propaganda.

Cut to today, things have changed with the advent of a new monster – social media.

Corporate Communication and PR in the age of social media

The whole story about dissemination of information to the right people with a strategic objective can thus be broadly divided into two phases: Pre-social media and Post-Social Media.

Social media has changed the game of communication as a whole – be it for corporate communications or for media communication. Earlier it was limited to newspapers and a handful of editors as to what can possibly be communicated to readers at large. So if we want to talk about a success story of a brand, we need to convince the editor of the same and only then, we will be able to reach our audience.

Gone are those days.

Every citizen with a smartphone is a journalist, an editor today. With the advent of the social media platforms you have a new set of influencers. Today, Bloggers and social commentators on Twitter have become more powerful and impactful than the high and mighty newspapers. So the conventional route of corporate communications and PR in cajoling a journalist or an editor on the impact of story and reach the desired clients has become a passé.

While conventional media still plays an important role, unconventional media has started playing a very critical role in corporate communications and PR.

For a communicator it is critical to respect this change, adapt and formulate the best strategy with the right mix for maximum impact.

Let me elaborate with two crisis situations, where in one it was a complete corporate communications and PR failure because they refused to accept the new age of communications, the other was a tremendous success.

Crisis 1

I should have flown with someone else, or gone by car, 'cause United breaks guitars

Musician Dave Carroll said his guitar was broken while in United Airlines' custody. He arrived at his destination to discover that his \$3,500 Taylor guitar was severely damaged. After harassment from the United Airlines, he wrote the song "United Breaks Guitars".

The YouTube video was posted on July 6, 2009. It amassed 150,000 views within one day, prompting United Airlines to contact Carroll saying it hoped to right the wrong. The video garnered over half a million hits by July 9, 5 million by mid-August 2009, 10 million by February 2011, and 15 million by August 2015. And besides ruining the reputation of United Airlines as most-unfriendly and careless airline and becoming famous, Dave got guitars, with best compliments from the Taylors.

Crisis 2

On 28 December 2014, AirAsia Indonesia Flight QZ8501 was scheduled for an international passenger flight from Indonesia to Singapore using an Airbus A320-216. The aircraft then stalled and crashed into the Java Sea, killing all 155 passengers and seven crew on board.

Analysis of corporate communications and PR efforts

Gone are the days when companies used to get at least a day to frame their crisis strategy, prepare a party line and call for press conference. The rise of social media channels have become so powerful that today a crisis, once generated, needs to be addresses immediately.

It is also critical that if the crisis is generating in a particular media, it needs to be addressed in the same media. Otherwise, by the time you will get ready to address the same in the conventional way it would have snowballed into a bigger crisis.

While in Crisis 1, United Airlines completely ignored the crisis initially as they failed to understand the power of social media. When they woke up, it was too late and Dave had already ruined the reputation with 15 million viewers.

All of this just with a song, using social media as a tool.

This is a classic example where the PR mechanism completely failed to manage the crisis.

The ideal PR approach would have been to first identify that such a crisis is brewing. This is a classic example where there is no mechanism in place to listen to the noise about your organisation in social media. It is only through this mechanism that a crisis can be averted.

The corporate communicator should have picked up the noise and reached out to Dave within the first 24 hours. They instead did not pay any heed to it. A crisis that could have been averted snowballed to reach 15 million viewers.

The old mechanisms will never work. No matter how much you control conventional media, social media is a free bird which can ruin your reputation, even musically.

In the Crisis 2, the deft communication and PR handling converted the crisis into a reputation building event. It's the then CEO Tony Fernandes thought it was his duty to start directly responding to tweets of aggrieved near and dear one of the passengers. He kept responding directly to all the concerns of the passengers' family and friends. He never checked syntax or spelling, but he ensured that these messages conveyed his empathy towards their loss.

Tony realised the power of social media and never gave any conventional response to the crisis, which could have included radio silence and "no comments".

He used a crisis to expose the human face of Air Asia. It suddenly became a carrier that cares.

Managing Media in Digital Era – editors and influencers

For any communicator or PR professional or custodian, the biggest challenge is to marry the objective of the story with the need of the media. So, packaging of the news plays a critical role as far as news dissemination is concerned.

Never try to persuade media with anything except their need and how their target readers or audience will take interest in a certain piece of news.

It is important to earn the respect of the media. That will only come if you are brutally honest and have complete trust in the story you are selling to the media. If the story suggests that a

brand keeps its promises, you need to first believe that it does, much before you go out to sell it to media.

Remember, the media – editors and influencers -- will only take your news if it is news-worthy and not because your client or boss will be unhappy. So, be very sure on the reasons why you want a certain editor or influencer or blogger to carry your story.

Another very important trait needed for a communicator or PR person to gain respect of media is that you need to know your story well. In case the media has queries, you need to be able to answer them. If you do not have domain expertise or in-depth knowledge of the story as well as its background then you will never earn the respect.

So for handling media you need to know the story and you need to know the right audience.

Conclusion – a note on the relationship with media

While it is true that the advent of social media has made this aspect of corporate communication manifold complicated, the basic tenants of managing media still remains the same. The real skill of the corporate communicator lies in the following:

1. **Believe in your story:** The communicator needs to be convinced about the *raison d'être*. You have to be convinced that the story is important for the readers or viewers and thus needs to be out there for your target audience for which the relevant media – social or conventional -- is the conduit. This confidence shows in the communication and thus helps the editors as well as influencers be sure about carrying your story.
2. **Package the content well:** As you are now catering to varied media with the same story, packing the story based on the relevance of the media becomes critical. For example, even while dealing with social media your news needs to be suitable for LinkedIn or Twitter or Facebook or YouTube or Instagram or Snapchat. The format of the content makes all the difference. In the conventional set up, the format will differ for a news agency vis-à-vis a magazine.
3. **Know who you are targeting and select the medium accordingly:** Selection of media makes all the difference if you want your content to reach the right audience. For example, if you are talking to the youth, especially female, then visual media has a higher conversion rate compared with only written content so choose Instagram or Snapchat

against Twitter. On the other hand if you are targeting government decision makers, nothing works more than good old newspapers. So while the variation in media has made things complicated, it has also helped us reach the target audience in a much better way.

4. **Know your media mix:** Depending on the need of the communication you have to decide the mix of conventional and digital media that you will like to choose. This mix is totally dependent on the objective of the communication and the target that it wishes to reach. A good communicator never abandons the old but is able to understand and harness the strength of each media to the advantage of the organisation.
5. Always think from the perspective of media stakeholders: Be it for influencers, vloggers, bloggers or editors, a good communicator is able to think from their perspective as in how the story will benefit their readers or viewers or followers. This works like magic for the gatekeeper and makes it easier for him or her to carry your news. However, always remember not to overstep and remember they know best what their audience wants.

Keeping these aspects in mind a good corporate communicator will be able to successfully sail through this digital age.