

Demystifying Public Relations Myths

By Doris Lim

While public relations practitioners work towards conveying realistic images of causes or organizations, it is ironic that the profession has been stuck in an idealistic image. Till now, it is common for outsiders to register a blank look when ‘public relations’ is mentioned. To them, it’s all about press conferences, sugar-coating bad news to make it more palatable and, the de rigueur of PROs, being seen at elite social functions with the “visible” crowd.

I can see the PR person reading this shaking his/her head furiously. He or she must be thinking: “Gone with these glossed images of PROs! Our scope of work is beyond attending cocktails. Plus, we do not paraphrase bad news!” It looks like PR practitioners must put their skills into use now to patch up their reputation, as there’s so much to be done to debunk some of the myths of the profession.

Myth 1: Writing is for journalists only.

Some one once remarked to me: “I thought writing skills were only for those who want to become journalists.” If this is the attitude of the majority of the public, we in the PR business have to rectify this myth.

PR practitioners are communicators, and writing is one basic tool to aid communication. PR writing is much more diverse than just churning press releases. There are position papers to present for government public relations. Scripts have to be written for corporate videos, technical details simplified for public understanding, copy writing for brochures, speeches for the CEO at company functions, editing the legal conundrum for prospectuses, and a host of other writing assignments. If one does not consider writing as their forte, and resists any effort to improve on it, then it would be wise for them not to even consider a career in public relations. Contrary to popular opinion, PR is not mere events organizing only.

Generally, most people have this love-hate relationship towards writing. The common excuse of “I don’t know how to write” or “I hate writing” surfaces, but they omit the actual reason for their shortcomings: the hassle of research. A good writer does not conjure words from thin air. Instead, he/she dives into the piles of reference materials available to him/her and captures salient points to convey in his/her writing. Research is always tedious, but the results of a well-researched article will be apparent in its realistic but deft way of handling the topic.

Another important skill is for a PR practitioner to hone his/her writing according to the target audience. Easier said than done, as this requires an in depth analysis of writing styles suited to each intended audience. Basically, the practitioner writes for two audiences: the media and the audience of the media. For example, writing for websites would require crisp and concise language, capturing the reader's attention and fitting the most important points in short paragraphs for faster reading. For printed publications, the practitioner has to familiarize himself with the editorial styles adopted by the chosen publication, and tailor their written material to fit in.

Myth 2: All that PR hype!

Most of the time, people perceive public relations to be the same as publicity and equate that with 'hype' – blatant flaunting. Who's to blame for this misconception? The organisations who are hungry for media exposure or over-aggressive bombardment of material from PROs? At the end of the day, it is unfair to generalize all publicity efforts as 'hype' and discredit the work of PROs who do a respectable job at public disclosure within reasonable legal bounds.

Let's set the record straight: Public Relations is NOT a hype machine.

Organizations who seek publicity are looking for greater awareness among their target audience, and media blitzes are usually implemented along with other PR activities to create a presence in the marketplace. Every PR practitioner worth his salt knows that the most important thing in obtaining media coverage boils down to the content and newsworthiness of their material. Moral of the story: having contacts in the media will help in getting your story noticed, but there's no guarantee that it will appear in tomorrow's papers.

Organizations who are too eager to please often become the culprits of generating hype. Ascribing to the 'shot gun approach', they send their material to every media outlet hoping that there is a better chance of getting it published. What they overlooked was the "better chance" of annoying the editors who receive your irrelevant material and therefore reduce your masterpiece to mere hype.

Maintaining an objective stance and having a good grasp of the editorial slant on each media outlet would help a PRO determine where they should send the materials. Editors would appreciate the extra effort put in by the practitioner who understands his publication and does not send unrelated materials to him. Over time, the editor would come to regard the practitioner as a reliable source of information.

The solution - Creating professional recognition

In most organizations, management still categorizes public relations as under the marketing-HR function or is relegated to a technician role and not at the senior management level where PR would be most effective. The role of the PR counsel, who should be counseling the CEO on communication policies, is not fully entrenched in the Malaysian corporate scene. Many corporate savvy CEOs will realise the contributions and effectiveness of PR within the promotion matrix of the advertising, sales promotion and various communications tools.

But why hasn't the reality of PR practitioners as expert counsels for internal and external communication been fully embraced? One probable answer could be the lack of a recognized industry standard.

Currently, the only government endorsed PR legislation in the world is the Nigerian PR Act. Under the Act, it provides PR practitioners with a chartered status, making it mandatory for every practitioner to be registered under the Act. This in turn guarantees that registered individuals have qualified academic or experiential backgrounds to carry the title of a public relations officer. Other forms of recognition, such as accreditation, are found in the US (under the Public Relations Society of America or International Association of Business Communicators), Australia (Institute of Public Relations Australia), Singapore (Institute of Public Relations Singapore) etc.

The accreditation status is obtained after practitioners undergo a comprehensive examination covering communications concepts and theories, submitted reports on their practical experience, and attending an interview presided by the accreditation board. The objective of testing the eligibility of the applicant is more or less similar between each organization, but there might be slight variations on the steps towards achieving accreditation.

The difference between the chartered status and accreditation is that while the Act requires official registration, accreditation is largely voluntary on the part of the PR practitioner. While accreditation is not licensing, it identifies the accredited practitioner as possessing the ability to consistently deliver quality service, separating the bona fide practitioners from the wannabes and the charlatans.

One local association championing to seek recognition for the PR industry is the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM). The Institute asserts that it is timely for a charter for PR professionals to be instituted in tandem with other recognized professions such as accountants, doctors, engineers, lawyers and company secretaries.

All “communicators” and public relations professionals should unify their professional standing under the IPRM umbrella. Towards this end, the Institute is now working with the respective government ministries for a PR Act, signaling determined action to enhance the profession to achieve a more competitive global footing.

Ultimately, PR practitioners are responsible in upholding the integrity of their profession, and not let the stereotyping corrode the essence of PR. We should strive to debunk untrue myths about our work and aim for a complete turnaround in the public’s understanding of a PR practitioner. As Charles Koo, the founder of the Institute of Professional Public Relations in Hong Kong, once pointed out: “If we, as professional PR practitioners, are not going to do it ourselves, no one else will do it for us.”

This article is part of a series of PR articles by IPRM to demystify the many myths surrounding the public relations profession, and enlighten readers about the varied facets of the PRO’s job. IPRM welcomes feedback at matrixid@unifi.my , attention to Doris Lim, IPRM Accreditation Convenor.