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The Practice and Effects of Corporate Media Relations in Chennai: Beyond just Denials and Evolving?

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Abstract

This study aims to research on the changing perception and importance attached to media relations by corporate houses and business journalists in India specifically Chennai - where traditionally media relations was never practiced professionally - where relations with the print or electronic media was limited to issuing denials and seeking distance (Sengupta, 2006), with the concept of a low-key profile. The study is based on in-depth interviews of communication managers of 13 organisations and 10 journalists from print and television media. The findings could provide insights for academicians and researchers on the change in media relations practice and its effects on media reporting in emerging IT hubs in India and other similar regions in the world.

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1. Introduction

The world appears to be in the midst of an information explosion. There is an increasing pressure on organisations especially corporate houses to manage the flow of information; they acutely feel the need to get their point across to stem speculation and at times even influence the media. If the channel of information is not open, corporate houses have come to realise, many news stories would break, unsavoury rumours would abound and investigative journalism would uncover the information that is normally not accessible. Since the corporate inputs

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enhance their space / time slots with credible and relevant information, journalists on the other hand, realise that interaction as a result of deliberate corporate attention tends to develop into a long time and solid relation. Organisational media relations have turned pro-active and no longer remain merely reactive. The growing perception among organisations is that if they were not transparent and straightforward, that gap could be filled by inaccurate reporting and misinformation especially in face of wider and stiff competition in progress and propaganda. It is here that media relations gains importance as a necessity especially at a time of business culture reengineering with more and more acquisitions and mergers.

No corporate house that wishes to project its image in the public can afford to ignore media or fail to cultivate it. A positive news piece in the media can enhance a company's good image and its goodwill. On the other hand media can destroy an institution, an industry or bring disrepute to a government if it so wills and if it is wrongly informed about facts. It is here that public relations through planned and efficient media relations have a vital role to play. A trained body of experts who can act as intermediaries between those who want to cultivate the public and draw their support, and the public itself that is so ill informed and apathetic. There is such vast activity in the corporate sector with so much of competition in progress and propaganda, that it requires specialised technique and craft to educate the public and create a good impression on them through the connecting chord of mass media. Any insight on the effective practice of media relations can enable organizations to maintain and nurture media contacts and better interactions, not only in India but in comparable regions across the world.

2. About the study

This study aims to research on the nature and importance of media relations in corporate houses in Chennai with inputs from corporate communication managers and/or public relations officers, and also from the journalists who are the other participant of this relationship.

2.1. Objective

To understand the true meaning of media relation and the extent of importance attached to it by the corporate houses and the journalist community in Chennai. The study aims at learning the true nature, style of practice and importance of media relations of the corporate houses in Chennai.

- Are media relations seen as inevitable and highly important for organisations?
- How much deliberate and elaborate efforts are put in place to develop and maintain media relations?
- Does its practice and style differ from organisation to organisation or from industry to industry?
- How much importance and value is attached by journalists to the practicing trends of media relations by organisations in Chennai?

2.2. Scope of the study

The study is undertaken to know the importance attached to media relations by corporate houses in Chennai, the reasons for its existence and the efforts put in place to achieve a liaison with the different media vehicles. A counter take on the same from the receivers of the practice of corporate media relations- the journalists is included in an effort to combine the inputs from both sides into a meaningful message on the practice and style of corporate media relations.

The study could mean a host of valuable data for media communicators on the take on public relations in Chennai by media professionals and to understand the existence, reasons and deliberations on the corporate side to achieve their ends by practicing media relations.

The choice of the corporate houses those including public sector, private sector, huge investment, high end goods, fast moving consumer goods or industrial product manufacturers, services oriented and large scale employee organisations attempts to contribute to a holistic view on the practice of media relations.

2.3. Method

The research has followed one-to-one in-depth interview method with the corporate communicators/public relations officers of companies and also with journalists in Chennai. The companies are those in the public sector and private sector including financial institutions, industrial manufacturers, engineering companies, information technology and FMCG goods producers. Journalists belonging to the financial press, mainlines, a regional channel and an English news channel have contributed to the study.

In-depth, qualitative interviews method has been followed to gather information for the research. An in-depth interview as an open-ended, discovery-oriented method has helped in describing both program processes and outcomes from the perspective of the target audience or key stakeholder. The goal of the interview has been to deeply explore the respondent's point of view, feelings and perspectives.

There are key characteristics that differentiate an in-depth, qualitative research interview from a regular interview that has particularly contributed to the study. Some of them that were used in this thesis work include:

- Open-ended Questions. Questions were so worded that respondents cannot simply answer yes or no, but must expound on the topic.
- Semi-structured Format. Although there were some pre-planned questions to ask during the interview, the researcher also allowed questions to flow naturally, based on information provided by the respondent. The researcher did not insist upon asking specific questions in a specific order. In fact, the flow of the conversation dictated the questions asked, as well as the order of the questions.
- Seek understanding and interpretation. The researcher tried to interpret what was said, as well as sought clarity and a deeper understanding from the respondents throughout the interview.
- Conversational. The researcher was conversational, but the role was primarily that of a listener. There were smooth transitions from one topic to the next.
- Recording responses. The responses were recorded, typically as written notes (i.e., field notes)
- Record observations. The researcher observed and recorded non-verbal behaviours and also the atmosphere within the company or office where the person works, on the field notes.

3. Review

Sooyoung Cho, assistant professor, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of South Carolina studied the types of power public relations practitioners believe they have in media relations in the health sector. The results suggest that those public relations practitioners working for non-profit organisations who have frequent contact with reporters develop close relationship with them who tended to avoid reporting conflict or controversial stories for fear of alienating the sources they relied on. It was further derived from the study that the health public relation professionals play a fair game in media relations. Practitioners tended to disagree that they exclude reporters from information, even when reporters do not treat their organizations well. Also it was seen that exerting coercive power would decrease the attraction of public relations that the practitioners were well aware of and they seem to take a more accommodating position towards the media rather than an advocating or coercive stance. However, they did sometimes target information to the reporters they are personally close to. It was concluded that media relation efforts are influential in getting national news coverage in scientific and health reporting.

4. Findings

4.1. Media relations – importance and nature

Media relations is considered very important by corporate houses and there is a planned and deliberate attempt at taking care of the media needs and fending their requirements and also churning out other strategies to get media interest on the company.

Media professionals are fully aware of the need for corporate houses to communicate to the masses through them. They also see corporate as a good source of news and generally respond to their communication.

The industry the company belongs to and the business interests certainly affect the way media relations is furthered. Often writing for the media is considered to be parallel in function to business objectives and plans. Media relations is seen a definitive element of corporate governance and controlled directly under the top officials in the majority of the companies.

Media relations is expected to help reveal and communicate the right corporate personality to the masses and always place the company in the right perspective. This expectation further divides down to establishing a good social image, image of a good employer, credibility and reputation among the various publics including investors, shareholders, customers, community at large etc.

Media relations is realised as one of the most important tasks of public relations especially in the media oriented public relations work style in India. On the other hand media has mixed reactions to corporate media releases. While some consider it useful and find it an important source of news, some others see it as a public relations material giving only the company's point of view with little matter or content. Majority of media professionals however realise qualifying terms about the company is to be expected and do not hold bad structuring or superfluous language as a deterrent to the story's selection provided there is relevant matter in it.

4.2. Writings styles of corporate

Media is seen as an intermediary audience that enables the company to communicate to a wide segment including their target public. While writing majority writes keeping in mind the final audience while a significant percentage (46%) feels it is necessary to write in a way that rouses the interest of the journalists for the information to filter down to the final audience. Most of the corporate houses write in a news style, while many use question and answer style too. The journalists on the other hand largely prefer news style (60%).

4.3. Strategies adopted

Many companies give adequate thought on how to leverage news appearing in the media to their benefit. While many believe in truth and factual communication to do the trick, further strategies are planned to entertain presence for a longer duration in the media. Providing personalised information to suit individual media vehicles, arranging for interaction with spokespersons, business and other announcements at strategic time periods etc help in achieving media coverage and also maintaining good relationship.

Developing personal relationships and winning the trust of journalists by revealing news off the record and taking them into confidence are other strategies adopted. The maximum that the companies expect out of maintaining media relations is being able to revert to adverse piece of news in equal media space at the same time as the original story.

The positioning of the company in accordance with the situation is also given much consideration, certainly differing in the thrust given to the company name in publicity events, community service programmes and crisis situations.

4.4. Media drives

News that interests their audience is what primarily drives media vehicles to select a piece of corporate story. Entertainment elements also have a reasonable influence over the selection. Trend based stories also gets precedence in selection. Media releases with a crisp and brief account, good referenced backgrounders with relevant facts and figures are largely preferred. A well-written release gives a good impression on the company. Video news releases and footages of remote plants and locations also create greater possibility for inclusion of a story in electronic media. Company websites with good background information and also current happenings presented in crisp bullet forms add to the ease of rendering a story. Personal contacts are considered useful for writing of stories especially for special pieces or adding extra information.

4.5. Perceptions

Majority of the media professionals feel that corporate houses in Chennai are orthodox in nature and reluctant to

part with information even on development and expansion matters. Corporate houses see them as receptive and professional but at the same time conservative and non-inquisitive when compared to other metro cities. Many companies revealed they do not engage in scientific studies on their target public but communicate to individual needs perceived through experience and instincts.

4.6. Reciprocal relationship

Though the journalists tend to attach credibility to media releases according to the general reputation and size of the company, sustaining approachable and cordial relationship through truthful and knowledgeable responses to their queries increases their trust in any company. Since the corporate inputs enhance their space with credible and relevant information, the interaction as a result of deliberate corporate attention tends to develop into long time and solid relation. This further helps in eliciting an equal response from the media community in terms of their interest in the company matters, willful adherence to embargoes and patience in crosschecking rumours or negative propaganda.

The media relation efforts help such companies be spokespersons for their industries invariably enhancing greater coverage and mentioning. Media in turn respect their requests for anonymity in case of sensitive information, and gives equal chance for a rebuttal at times of negative rub off, thus reciprocating in order to keep the relationship live.

5. Conclusion

The concept of media relations in reality is a large and influencing force that determines to a reasonable extent what the media covers. If a corporate maintains a truthful and open approach to media queries they achieve an advantage in being able to be proactive in their media plans and become active partners in a long-standing relationship.

Many corporate have realised the importance of maintaining a database of media coverage not only of their company's but in general, facts and events affecting their industry as well. This results in an overall understanding of the importance given to the industry, the share of coverage that the company is given and also helps identify areas of audience interest that is followed up the media vehicles. So through continuous interaction with the media and careful media tracking, a company can develop into a valuable source for media professionals with the cornucopia of knowledge that they possess on their industry and by giving relevant responses to changing factors that affect business functioning.

Individualising matter in tune with the requirements of each media vehicle comes only as a result of a long time interaction with them. Identifying opportunities for stories based on trend or interest and arranging for journalists to follow them up helps in turn the media professionals in their job of covering relevant news.

In public relations the objective is to achieve media coverage without paying for the space or time. The media endorsement of a company's name, brands or services has a huge credibility factor attached to it. That is how even a mere mention of the company in a quote from a high official on a matter affecting the whole industry is of value since it endorses the company as the voice of the industry. Pre-alerting the company in case of a negative piece of news likely to appear helps them in planning how to contain the situation and reacts effectively to ensure least damage to reputation and image. This is possible if the journalists have an approachable and trustful relationship with the company.

The study however could not explore fully aspects like the importance of internet medium, the use of company web sites as an information source on them and on the industry as well. The study has not explored the role of internet applications in practicing Media Relations including social media applications and corporate blogs. Many senior professionals of public relations revealed that external media vehicles are sometimes used to communicate to the internal public as well. Reassuring their employees at times of crisis, policy changes and expansion or cutting down processes is realised by communicating through the credible mass media vehicles. The extent to which media professionals realise this is less and also how far companies effectively utilise this option could be studied in future researches.

The importance of feedback from journalists on the company initiatives in maintaining media relations is to be explored further. Most companies do follow ups to ensure coverage of their events but are follow-ups exactly welcomed by media professionals and does it affect their perception of the company is also a good area to study.

Many companies revealed they do not engage in scientific studies on their target public but communicate to individual needs perceived through experience and instinct. How far image audits and attitude studies are helpful in communicating effectively, are worth a study.

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