Industry Commentary

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In Asia, PR must move beyond media relations and look for other ways of influence

According to Lisa Dühring and Ansgar Zerfass (2015) by 2025, Asian companies will make up 45% of the Fortune 500 (McKinsey). International companies have already started to relocate their headquarters to Asia, including their corporate communications units. The majority of Asia’s communication industry and professionals are located in Hong Kong or in Singapore.

Public relations (PR) in Asia is primarily driven by multinational corporations promoting their products through marketing, advertising, events, and media relations focusing on consumer relations; and this is only slowly changing.

As such, media outreach and placement have long been considered the holy grail of the industry. Anyone who has worked in the PR in Asia is cognizant of that.

The first piece of coverage secured for a client and the rush of accomplishment and palpable sense of relief that came with it is memorable. But inherent in all of is the stress, fear, and uncertainty about identifying and securing the best outlet/s for clients. Clients have gone as far as to demand or insist on coverage and well-positioned placements in venerable media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and the like; thinking that ‘media hits’ like these will bestow the halo effect and make for spectacular impact and impressions to boardrooms, clients and even competition.

PR success in Asia was (and still is) mostly measured in terms of press coverage and mentions and quite stubbornly, advertising value equivalent.

These days, the role that traditional media play, whilst still important, is on significant decline what with the birth of new technologies, the fragmentation of the media, and the proliferation of message clutter in the marketplace.
Adjusting to today’s brave, new digital world

The challenge today for public relations to be influential is adjusting to the constant drum of news from social media and mobile (Marx, 2014). So that is the media too - in social media.

Instead, organizations and their brands must widen the net and maintain an always-on presence. This means using a combination of third-party validation, along with branded content and social. We can use/repurpose releases to promote branded content such as blog posts, webinars, infographics, white papers, and any other useful information.

We should also ask: Who can help spread the news? And who can actually drive actual buying decisions?

Quoting Heidi Sullivan, senior vice president of digital content at PR software company Cision, "There is no silver bullet today. Getting mentioned in a big daily newspaper doesn’t reach your entire audience."

At the same time that the role of public relations (in Asia, almost always equated with media relations) has morphed into a bigger job, and technology is helping to transform PR into something conveniently measurable.

No longer do companies have to rely solely on media placements as the only evidence of PR success; today armed with the right tools, they can understand the impact of PR on leads and ultimately sales. Yet many Asian companies in my experience would as soon measure their employees’ bathroom habits as they would their PR effectiveness.

So, Asian businesses need to remember this and move forward. Media coverage is not the sole outcome from PR toolboxes. Yes, we need to continue to send press releases to reporters, journalists and bloggers sympathetic to our causes. We can still diligently build and refresh our contact lists. However, the PR scope has broadened and it now does much more than just media outreach. Add the terms like ‘viral marketing’, ‘word-of-mouth buzz-marketing’ - and the confusion piles on.

Social media is here to stay, at least for the time being. Social media can generate as much brand awareness, increase reach and shape stories and aid in reputation management. Tracking social conversations in these media networks allows for instant response if and when a crisis may suddenly turn into a maelstrom of negativity.

While marketing departments may be able to handle crises, PR knowing and using brand/reputation guidelines may be best able to manage or mollify them, thus keeping a tight grip on its reputation. PR and the influence that it exerts is exponential. It is now about created or owned content. It is no longer just a media release or that press conference.

The release is still functionally important but audiences and the media now gravitate towards more visuals such as photographs, videos and infographics. The internet has made it much easier to proliferate these things. Creating new and additional content like these bring added benefits. They can be pitched alongside the traditional release, which makes it more appealing but more importantly, we too become the media owners and publishers of useful content. By doing so, we take back the control and position ourselves as thought leaders without having to be totally reliant on traditional media for coverage and publicity.
According to Pew Research Centre, USA, (2010), social media and the mainstream press clearly embrace different agendas. Blogs shared the same lead story with traditional media in just 13 of the 49 weeks studied. Twitter was even less likely to share the traditional media agenda – the lead story matched that of the mainstream press in just four weeks of the 29 weeks studied. On YouTube, the top stories overlapped with traditional media eight out of 49 weeks.

The stories that gain traction in social media do so quickly, often within hours of initial reports, and leave quickly as well. Just 5% of the top five stories on Twitter remained among the top stories the following week. This was true of 13% of the top stories on blogs and 9% on YouTube. In the mainstream press, on the other hand, fully 50% of the top five stories one week remained a top story a week later.

**Targeting influencers**

Media relations typically also target influencers. We attempt to garner celebrity endorsements and well-known media outlets in the name of credibility and popularity. Both are helpful and have proven to be so. But targeting "everyday" people or "average Joe" have also shown that publics resonate with them and follow them for commonplace insights, opinions and thoughts.

**The New Town Square**

In recent years, social media has made sharing of ideas and opinions more accessible for Singapore users (2015). While social media in Singapore has become a forum for fraught political discourse, it has also helped Singaporean citizens share support online, using it to raise awareness of important issues or unite when tragedy strikes.

Unsurprisingly, this has not gone unnoticed by brands. Media publications and even local political leaders always keep their fingers on the social media pulse for up-to-the-minute updates on breaking news and trends. For example, Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong uses Facebook and Instagram to cultivate personal connections with the community, and as a platform to provide the latest updates on national issues.

**PR is also measurement**

With the help of technology, PR can now get visibility into audience insights and interaction and focus time and energy on the initiatives that work.

Thanks to digital and social media, media relations moves a few notches higher. Storytelling by businesses will be hugely assisted by the ability to measure and evaluate.
The State of ‘SG 50cial’

Singapore was a hive of activity in 2015, with events like the recent SEA Games and upcoming F1 Grand Prix sparking conversations on social media. A more somber event—the passing of the nation’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, in March—also had a major social media footprint.

In pulling all those conversations together, the #SG50 hashtag was heavily leveraged by both brands and users to commemorate the yearlong celebration of the nation’s golden jubilee. Indeed, as of July, according to data from uberVu via Hootsuite, there was over 220,000 hashtag mentions on Twitter and Facebook, and over 274,000 posts on Instagram.

As such, it is imperative that we don't increasingly see traditional media relations as shrinking or increasingly as the elephant in the room. Rather we see that it still matters in a media landscape that is continuously broadening itself and making its presence felt more than ever before. PR does not equal media relations. Media relations is but a subset of PR.

About the author

Angelina Tu is a senior public relations practitioner and educator based in Singapore. She also has extensive media coaching and corporate training experience and has previously worked alongside with Kaplan, PSB Academy, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Institute of Business, NTUC Learning Hub to train corporate executives in email communications, crisis communications as well as business communications presentation and writing.
References


