Media relations practices in Thailand: Expatriates’ views on differences from the West

Pavel Slutskiy, Chulalongkorn University

Abstract

This paper examines the way media relations is practiced in Thailand, focusing on differences in how professionals work and how commonly held Thai practices deviate from the default standard of the West. The methodology involved a series of semi-structured in-depth expert interviews with expatriate professionals who work in PR in Thailand. They were asked to address the issues of media relations practices, media events management, online communication and social media, as well as relationships with clients.

Keywords: PR in Thailand, PR in South-East Asia, international public relations, media relations in Thailand, expert interviews
Introduction

Public relations in Thailand is a developed discipline with several thousand people actively practising the profession. Yet little information is generally available about this unique PR-location. Despite a large number of practitioners, there is no professional association or any other self-regulatory body in Thailand which would engage in self-reflection. Partly because of this, and partly because of the language barrier, not much information about the Thai PR-industry can be read. There are only a few general academic papers on public relations in Thailand (Ekachai, Komolsevin 1996; Chaidaroon 2008, Tantivejakul 2014), as well some works on PR-education and municipal PR (Ekachai 1994; Ekachai, Komolsevin 1998). The existing literature focuses primarily on theoretical observations (like roles, functions and communications models), the history of PR in Thailand, and some statistics (like the number of practitioners and their status), with very little information available on PR practices. As Watson (2014, p. viii) notes, “the scholarship of public relations has largely been driven by US perspectives with a limited level of research undertaken in the UK and Central Europe”. However, a recent expansion of publishing in public relations academic journals suggests that despite some Anglo-American influences, national PR practices often evolve from national cultural and communication practices with a “sideway glance at international practices” (Ibid).

This paper endeavours to examine the way PR is practised in Thailand, focusing in particular on peculiar differences in how media relations professionals work, and on how commonly held Thai media relations practices deviate from the default “western” standard. The paper focuses primarily on media relations, since the collected data indicated that media relations is the most common service that Thai PR agencies provide to clients. This is not to say that the term PR in Thailand is synonymous to media relations (in-house department do have a broader understanding of the concept of PR), however, when companies turn to PR agencies or consultancies to outsource certain services, the most common ones are media relations.

The methodological assumptions of this project are based on the idea that hypothetical deviations of Thai PR practices from the western standards (if such differences exist) are most evident to outside observers who have an outsider’s perspective. The most valuable source of information for acquiring this outsider’s perspective are expatriate professionals with past experience of working in the industry in the West, but who currently practice PR in Thailand. These expatriate practitioners possess the necessary knowledge needed for examining the phenomena in question.

It is hypothesized that media relations practices in Thailand may be strikingly different from the West. A test of this hypothesis will mean asking the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are the major differences between media relations practices in Thailand compared to the western practices? In particular, what are the differences in media reaction to PR initiatives, in the way media events are organised, in digital and social media communication practices.

**Research Question 2:** What are the major differences in relationships between PR agencies and their clients in Thailand, including the general challenges of working with Thai clients?
Methodologically this research is based on the results of a series of semi-structured in-depth expert interviews of about 60 minutes each. Six industry practitioners were interviewed, all of them occupy top-management positions in Bangkok-based PR agencies. Only agency practitioners were chosen to be included in the sample. No government, corporate in-house, or non-for-profit organisations employees were interviewed primarily because in Thailand the latter positions are usually occupied by Thai nationals, or at least no contacts of expatriates in such positions were available to the researcher.

Convenience sampling with an element of snowball techniques was utilised to recruit the following interviewees:

1. Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller (originally from Canada);
2. Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications (originally from UK);
3. Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR (originally from Belgium);
4. Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications (originally from UK);
5. Aaron Henry, 720 Connect (originally from USA);

The sample was constructed to include only expatriate practitioners. The interviewees gave their informed consent after the briefing about research process and data utilisation, including using their real names and professional affiliations.

Because so many of the research insights come from participants, their own words are primarily used throughout the paper. This approach also allows the author to refrain from value judgements, leaving this to participants.

The paper starts with the introduction; in the first section the interviewees share their general opinion about media relations in Thailand; in the second section they talk about local peculiarities in organising media events. Section three focuses on digital and social media communication. In the fourth section agency practitioners share their experience in client relations and client management.

**Thai media from PR-practitioners’ perspectives**

The overall consensus that seems to emerge from the interviews is that PR in Thailand is a much less rigorous discipline than it is in the West, and participants primarily attribute that to the overall level of journalism in the country. Respondents say that there is almost no culture of investigative journalism and a surprising lack of genuine interest in most of the topics from the media, unless it is a celebrity or a really big brand story. Purely intellectual topics are seldom covered by Thai journalists.

My experience with the journalists so far is that they do not adhere to what we usually refer to as the commonly held practices in the West. And by that I mean fact-checking, substantiating stories, doing real investigative journalism. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

Very minimal culture of doing in-depth research of topics (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)
Media relations practices in Thailand

There’s only a handful of journalists that are able to get into a topic and look into deeper meanings or look behind the story and investigate on their own footing… Journalists overwork, and they are overstressed, they just do not have the time to do really great job and that’s my frustration with them… (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

We were doing a conference with Microsoft. If you take this word - Microsoft - anywhere in the world, that alone would draw the crowd, but here what draws the crowd are the lucky draws with gifts. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

This shortage of genuine professional interest on the part of the media has led to a relationship between PR-practitioners and media professionals that emphasizes the bond between the two rather than content. The Thai practitioner-media relationship is much closer and less adversarial than in the West, with less scepticism exercised by the media. Content still drives coverage but overall, the media in Thailand seem to be much more open to all types of PR activities and they are less critical of it.

It is almost a friend and good buddy type of relationship. Very little tension. You tend do get more cooperation, higher numbers, higher turnout here. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Does it make it easier for a PR-practitioner? 100% yes! From a business stand point there’s virtually no friction between what you disseminate and what’s been printed. The tension between PR-people and journalists does not seem to exist. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

In the West you are valuable to journalists because you are their source. Here it is different… they will go for your story more on sympathy value than on real news value…they need to like you as a person. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

This last observation is supported by Hofstede’s theory. According to Hofstede’s typology, Thailand is a “feminine” culture, and as such it tends to place more value on interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 1980). And indeed all the interviewees confirmed that personal relationships in Thailand play a much more important role in media relations in Thailand than they do in the West. It is in fact extraordinarily different that so much of PR is based around personal media relationships and “making sure that these journalists are very happy”.
We also go bowling with them, etc. We do this because you have to have this close relationship with them. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

We need to have constant communication with media people…. talking to them online, on a regular basis, sending these funny stickers, sharing pictures with kittens, this is very necessary…It is a part of the job. The media here needs to be treated like celebrities, when you call them you have to be really cute and sweet, because some of them are very arrogant. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

The interviewees generally agree that the media in Thailand are also “extraordinarily spoilt” and have strong views of themselves as being very important. Editors and journalists are used to receiving gifts on a regular basis, receiving anniversary acknowledgements, being given “thank-you parties” at the end of the year and at the beginning of the year, or being given gifts that may include luxurious trips as a part of experiencing new products or services.

The PR-practice of media “meet-and-greet visits” is also unique and worthy of further description. All of the interviewees admitted that this is an essential part of media relations in Thailand:

Some clients, especially if it is a Thai lead from the client side, will ask to do a “media thank-you visit.” I can see a value in it in terms of media relationships, it is all about them. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

When we visit them, it’s a whole organisation - you rent a van, you prepare gift baskets and you go and visit all the media houses, visit the editors…And you make the baskets big enough so that the editor can share with the subeditors…They see what your client does and you gather goodwill. Here a lot is done on gathering goodwill. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

We would be doing a routing, hiring of a van, preparing all the hampers, loading the client and us into the van and then driving to those offices, visiting the editors, saying “thank you for the year, these are some of the things coming up next year, wanna make sure that you are aware of our next product etc”. Generally they will pose for a photo and often they will run this photo as a part of the social section of their publication… in December most of the teams are just going on media visits all day. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)
These practices would seem unusual in the West, not just because they smack of bribery and corruption, but also because Western media producers are too busy to spend so much time lavishing visitors with gifts. In Thailand, neither reputation nor inefficient use of time seem to be a serious concern. Squandering time and ethical misgivings are seldom considerations:

Never ever anyone rejected an expensive basket on ethical grounds... Of course, media are understaffed and overloaded, they are busy, so they won’t be happy if you interrupt their workflow for a visit to give them a voucher. But if you are La Mer, giving away beauty creams worth 2000, 3000 up to 10000 Baht each\(^1\), they welcome you open-handed... When we have a media thank-you party, sometimes we have lucky draws with prizes that go up to 100,000 Baht\(^2\), like 5-day trip to Kho Samui\(^3\), and each year companies have to outperform their competitors, and themselves. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

(Expensive gifts) came from that culture, it started out this way and there is no turning back because everyone is still afraid of what consequences there will be by not giving the media all these things. In most of the western countries you cannot give media outlets anything... whereas here it is just the exact opposite... No-one ever rejected a gift here. Ever. Although I think that to a certain extent in the past two or three years it has gotten slightly better... I think it reached some sort of peak a few years ago and it has calmed down since. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Once I was really surprised here when one of the clients wanted to give a nice gift to a journalist, but she declined it saying that it was not ethical. I think it is anything over 3000 Baht worth of a gift, the old journalists they will not accept it, because they are a part of the journalist association. But this is an exception. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

The media in Thailand are also used to being taken on trips regularly, not only as a part of a product experience, but for entertainment and as a relationship-building activity. Clients also ask agencies to organise weekend getaways where they take a group of media staff to a resort or another destination. During this time there are a lot of social elements with some information exchange (such as briefing or a new product trial). Most of these trips are within Thailand, although some companies take media on international trips. In this case, journalists prefer everything to be prearranged and organised as a package tour -- otherwise they might be disappointed with the experience.

---

1 From approx. USD 60 to USD 300.
2 100.000 Baht - approx. USD 3000.
3 Samui island, a popular seaside resort destination.
Wake them up in the morning, take them to the airport, put them on the plane. We try to have one of our people travel with them, mainly because most of them do not have that much travel experience, and of they do, it is managed. And we had one client in NY who refused to do anything, and we had media stranded in the Kennedy airport. We called there and got it sorted out. But their entire coverage about the major launch in New York was about how poorly they were treated. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Organising media events in Thailand

Media relations in Thailand also differ from what can be considered the default standard in the West. Interviewees agreed that Thailand is still a more traditional media market, in the sense that it is very much event based -- inviting journalists to events not only guarantees that up to two hundred of them may show up, but also that a great majority of them will write something about the experience. Interviewees say that even for a small product launch or a small event, most newspapers or magazines would send someone to cover a press-conference.

I think that this model has almost completely disappeared in the US for many years now... Events are really what drive a lot of the PR schedule, I think it is largely because it is such a concentrated media environment here, all the media are in Bangkok and the media landscape is still large. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

If you have a new product and have a press-conference, the media would turn up! If you try that in the West - no chance, they are not interested in going to a press-conference about a new product… (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

The way the media are invited and received at the events is also peculiar. Timing is extremely important - invitations would be usually emailed no earlier than three days before the event, otherwise media personnel may simply forget about the event. The participants all confirm that media events should be held either late in the morning or early afternoon - with the best times either from 11.00 to 12.30 or from 1.30 to 3 pm; this is primarily because Thai media do not start work early in the morning.

In other markets mornings are the best so that you can finish it, the media will go back to their desk, write their stories and will have it out by their deadline of 5 pm, but here they generally do not want to wake up and come to an event before 11 am. But we never start on time. Media are always late. We may say it starts at 1.30, we tell media 1.00, and we start at 2.00. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)
We’ve had one company saying their CEO will be available Sunday morning 7 o’clock only for media briefing. We said, hope he enjoys talking to an empty room. Making it convenient for the media is really important. Media here are very sensitive to the location. Most of them travel on BTS⁴, so having something within a one-minute walk from a BTS station is important... We had another client who brought in a British company to do a very stylish event, and it was about an hour long, and they said the trend in Britain is that media do not get to sit down... Not a good idea... After about 15 minutes almost half the media left. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Although media rarely refuse invitations to events, their attendance does not guarantee coverage. Because they go to several events every day, all newsmakers compete with each other not for the media attention, but for media space. This means that having a good story is still important. But what constitutes a story that media consider newsworthy is also different. Thai media agenda are largely focused on celebrities, who are paid to appear at the events. Most clients insist on the presence of celebrities because they believe it guarantees coverage. Some of the interviewees doubt this assertion but admit that they follow clients’ requests:

Another thing that’s different here from the West is the number of celebrities that we will use. We would have contracts with them, or we will just invite 10 or 20 of them for the key event just to be there. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Celebrities are involved in everything. And quite often I tell clients that they do not need to pay money to have a celebrity there for ten minutes, but they think they need a celebrity to attract the media... in this market there is a lot of clamour to have a celebrity involved. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

Regardless of what the announcement is, the feedback that we often get is “Yeah, but let’s hire a celebrity to draw the media”. Why does a celebrity has anything to do with this? But in the case when the clients are requesting particular lifestyle or entertainment media to be there, then (inviting a celebrity) is our only option. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

---

⁴ BTS (Bangkok Mass Transit System) - an elevated rapid transit system, commonly known as the Skytrain.
There is this necessity of sometimes having some hi-so\(^5\) or having celebrity guests or KOL’s… clients do not understand that their brand is not a big enough draw… We held a USAID event, but what made (media) people really excited was the celebrity who came…. Thank goodness most of them at least mentioned the event in the coverage - because we made sure they did. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

We worked with Crocs… and we had an event at Central World with one of the most popular people at that point at that time, and the next thing that we got was over 150 news copy, lots of buzz on social media… 70-80% didn’t mention the brand, but the photos all had the branding. And you have to be very clear about it with the client - it is great to have all this media here, but they are not going to talk about you. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

As noted, Thai PR-practitioners rely heavily on the traditional format of press-conferences. However, there are three key distinguishing features to the way they plan and conduct press-conferences. First, there is almost always an MC to lead the session. This is usually a model (called “pretty” in Thai). Second, events usually include celebrity appearances to offer some extra entertainment. Third, events in Thailand tend not allow the media to try the product so there is little direct experience for the media to write about. The usual schedule would include speeches, a talk-show with a celebrity, and then an offering of food. Then journalists take the press-kit and reprint it.

In the US, if they are going to come to an event, which is difficult for them to do anyway, then we need to make sure that they are getting some experience that they are not getting somewhere else. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Press-conferences for business and marketing are also often scripted. Like talk-shows with guests and a MC who functions like a TV host. In a pure business story it does not work this way, but in marketing it is all scripted, maybe with a few dancers. It is more like an entertainment programme. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

\(^5\) Hi-so - Thai word for “high society”, or upper class, usually aristocracy. These can be different from celebrities, who are not necessarily upper class, like starlets, for example.
Here content-driven PR is very difficult if you don’t add some glittery element to it. Everything here has to be a bit more creative, in a sense that it is more cartoonish, more colourful and fun. In the West they concentrate on things that are clear, here they would say that it’s boring. Unless it is fun, it does not work. Thai people like playing. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

The journalists who attend press-conferences and come to do interviews are of a very different sort compared to the West. They are generally young females who recently received their degrees. In many cases, they have little experience and this influences their behaviour at media events. Hence, most of them seem shy and not willing to engage with speakers.

You’ll see a lot of younger female media (staff) here whereas in the West it is sort of a crusty old man type, here it is a very different media profile… for the most part there will be two thirds who won’t say anything, won’t have any reaction. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

You will have a room of those young media (staff) not paying any attention, just looking at their iPhones, checking Facebook. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

I think they do not have that kind of respect that there is in the West. They make a lot of noise they think they do not need to be quiet. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

In the US the journalists who have gotten to the point of having the right to interview the CEO are at the senior editor level, they have worked their way up. Whereas in Thailand the senior editor has gotten the right to never leave their desks... So they are sending very junior staff, and sometimes for big events they will just send their student intern. And these young people are too shy, they will not ask questions. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

In fact being too shy to ask questions in a group or in public is a typical trait of Thai journalists. Because of being reticent to speak in front of other people, they would not ask any questions when the floor is open for the official Q&A session; instead they only ask their questions afterwards, when they have an opportunity for a one-on-one exchange with the speakers. The shyness is amplified by the language barrier if the speaker is a foreigner, in which case media staff will try to ignore the speaker and will address their question to the local executive who is more familiar and fluent in Thai.
(particularly with) lifestyle media... you don’t get a lot of challenging questions from them. They do not want to jump in. Partially it is shyness, they do not want to hold the microphone and speak... and of course with foreign speakers it is a language problem. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

When we have an event... and open a Q&A session, nobody asks questions. One or two maybe, a very shy hand in the air and they will ask a question. And many clients think that they are not interested, and they will push us as an agency to make them ask questions which we obviously can’t do. But as soon as this formal part of the arrangement finishes, all the media will congregate around the spokesperson in a scrum. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

We tell people - “If you have an English CEO and you ask if they have any questions and all you hear is the air-conditioning, do not worry, everything is fine.” It’s not that nobody likes them, it’s a language issue and they are actually waiting for after the event, where actually the real information exchange happens in a scrum. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

When it comes to the questions, they are not very literate, they do not ask a lot of good questions. It is more of a language problem and of a content problem... it is not because they are not interested in that business person, it is because they want to ask their question in Thai. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

I can predict virtually every question that’s gonna be asked (by journalists)... questions tend to be repetitive and sort of a lack of imagination at times... And it frustrates spokespeople as well, getting the same questions all the time. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

Not having any questions asked during a press-conference is a challenge that agencies deal with in different ways.

We actually organise two areas - one for the press-conference, a formal one, and a sort of a Q&A lounge, where the media can sit around with the executives... After it finishes they all check between each other (what the speaker said). So, the agency team gets involved in that as well, to make sure that they have the right figure. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)
We brief them to ask questions… We write these questions for each media house individually… but we put it very diplomatically, we say, just in case, these are some questions we have prepared for you… and they are very happy about it. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

We prepare the executives so that they know that the journalist will not have anything prepared, and they need to start by providing an overview and by giving a spiel… We also make sure that the MC will asks questions. The MC is a necessary figure… because people are not going to ask questions. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Post-event coverage is primarily based on press-releases because journalists usually do not ask many questions. The interviewees disagreed about how much editing journalists do to press releases. Some believe that journalists merely copy-paste releases without any changes; others believe that journalists do edit texts provided by agencies. Unfortunately, editing of press releases by journalists might introduce errors into the process.

The number one thing that shocks me is that media will simply reprint exactly what you give them. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

The media here take in a lot, particularly lifestyle media… Thai media are more prone to use the material you provide them, media people just don't have the time to go through a lot. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Here 80% of what you give the media they will accept… 80% will be directed by what you give them. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

Not everyone is gonna copy a release… often they will add some content or shape the content. No more than 10% do the cut and paste. It is not everybody at all. But they will use large portions of it for sure. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)
When you give the media a press-release, never give them a PDF, you need to give them a word document, something they can copy and paste... and I would much rather they copy and paste it. When they don’t do it usually it will come out with spelling mistakes, with grammar mistakes, etc... They do not check facts either, they usually do not, and this is what makes some clients really angry. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

Because media are not particularly good at getting the facts right, agencies have an extra challenge to ensure that mistakes are kept to the minimum in a culture where fact-check is not a common practice. It takes extra effort to move beyond disseminating a story to the media and actually make sure that they understand the content correctly.

I’ve never had a fact-check. Never... And they often make errors especially during translations from a foreign executive, make errors about numbers, so the numbers are always wrong. So we always tell (speakers): “If you are going to say numbers make it very clear and we will write it down and we will email it to the journalists afterwards”. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

We had another company open up a factory... and one thing that was supposed to be announced was the investment of 100 million USD. But a bunch of speakers jumped in, one said the investment was 100 million, and all of a sudden four executives (mentioned) different numbers. Every one of them got published... We try to tell our clients - narrow your messages and just say that. An be very-very simple. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller).

We were doing interviews at a technological conference for a ground-breaking product and we arranged five interviews. The result was none of them got published. And when I called the journalists up to find out why, they said “Oh, it’s in the queue" and then after three weeks nothing happened. But it was simply because they hadn’t understood the product, but did not want to admit it... Basically we had to send them a video to make them understand it. Afterwards all five were published. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR).

Digital PR and Social Media communication

As everywhere else in the world, in Thailand the readership of printed publications is continually shrinking. Although the country can still boast a large number of printed media, in the past few years they have started to lose readership, and the number of both newspapers and magazines has started to contract. This trend has been multiplied by the general notion that Thai people are not voracious readers. Nonetheless, since the
development of the Internet they have been consuming evermore online content, particularly video content.

In some ways Thailand is ahead of many other countries in the world in terms of adapting to social media. It is also a very mobile country. One of the interviewees, Jennifer Poulsson (Hill and Knowlton Strategies), in her interview called the trend a “leap frog” in technology -- people did not move in the traditional western pattern from desktops to laptops to mobile; rather in Thailand for many people the first access to the Internet was mobile access to social networks. Thailand is one of the largest Facebook markets in the world with Bangkok ranked on top, with the highest number of Facebook users in the world per capita, at 8.68 million in 2015. Facebook usage in Bangkok is also number one in the world in terms of the number of hours spent on Facebook. User activities on Facebook in Thailand are much higher than the global average. Besides the 30 million active users per month, 66% login on a daily basis. Out of the 30 million users, a huge chunk of the 28 million users are active on mobile devices. (Kemp, 2015). There is also a higher level of engagement in Thailand as compared to the West.

Although some companies still do not have digital budgets, the overall natural reaction of the PR industry was to shift in their budgets towards online communication and digital PR.

In some ways it is more advanced, but in other ways it is kind of several years behind in terms of how the industry has dealt with that. In the west PR agencies are not stand alone PR-agencies any more, they are very integrated in marketing and digital, and also more content production focused, creating content hubs etc, and it is only coming to Thailand. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Only some clients created budgets for this. We are going thorough this learning gap again, we have to persuade and educate clients that this is an important area for them to invest in.(Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

In terms of digital campaigns the industry has a lot of room to grow, I see very little of what we can call holistic campaigns. When you talk finding consumers online, or full integration. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

Although content engagement levels are very high, this is a different type of engagement, one that could be called “lazy” engagement, requiring more entertaining content that is more “gimmicky” and sensational.

It has to be snappy, it has to be fun for the Thai market…Video is starting to play a more important role. It is a new challenge…Thais consume a lot of video content. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)
Videos that are produced by brands are imminently longer and of a totally different type of content than we produce in the West. This sort of a mothers-caring, tear-jerking type, 8-minute long video that people here actually share. There is no agency in the West that would produce a viral video that long. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

One company launched a campaign, they wanted people to submit ideas: write a paragraph on social media for a contest as a part of CSR campaign. But Thai people don’t do a huge amount of reading, and there’s not a huge amount of writing as well… We could see that there was a lot of interest, but very few submissions. So instead of asking people to write, we would get their contacts, call them up, and then our staff would do the writing for them. We got several hundred like this… (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

Consumers want to engage in very simple things. If you want a video contest - no-one will create a video and submit it, they just will not, it is too much work for them. The most they will do is post a photo… The only difference is Pantip⁶, it is so influential as a bulletin board. For every product consumers will go and check reviews, and what the feedback is. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Another important local trend is the rise of bloggers who are becoming one of the driving forces of the PR industry in Thailand. Companies assign special budgets for them and organize separate events specifically for them. Most bloggers in Thailand are now migrating to Facebook from their own URL or other sub-platforms. Blogger relations have some local peculiarities which are worth noting. The most important is the fact that bloggers here are rarely willing to provide free coverage:

Here is a greater element of payed placement. There is a lot more of it here. In the West you have to earn your coverage. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

The trend that we find in here is for bloggers realising their value and now becoming a “cottage industry” here, getting cash payment. So there is a lot more aspirational bloggers who want that and to quit their jobs eat, drink and have fun for a career. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

---

⁶ Pantip.com - a popular Thai-language website and discussion forum. As of March 2016, Pantip.com was one of the top 10 websites in Thailand.
Everything is 100% pay per play here. 100%. There is no earned social content any more. I think maybe when blogger relationships first started there was, you could get bloggers come to an event, give them an experience and they would write about it, but now they realise how much money they can make. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

This attitude has an impact on the way blogger events are held. Seldom are bloggers invited in the same event as the media, with agencies separating blogger events from media events.

I think that traditional journalists think that bloggers look for payment, they know that bloggers have not been trained as journalists, they see them as inferior. The bloggers respond to that by being arrogant. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

We would not put traditional media and bloggers in the same room, because in Thailand it has gotten to this point where bloggers are celebrities, and celebrities are bloggers... And their schedules are also very different (from the media), bloggers often have full-time jobs and and they can't make it to a day media event. We'd have a media event in the morning or early afternoon, and a blogger session in the evening. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Another unique phenomenon in Thailand is the rise of online key opinion leaders and influencers.

There is a lot of responsiveness among Thai consumers to net idols, influencers. And this is very different from the West in terms of what is considered a celebrity here, it would not be considered celebs in the West. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

The landscape of who is famous in Thailand... is just dominated by hi-so. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Influencers (unlike bloggers, who create their own content) are very visual, it’s just a picture. They are more social media celebrities, they are about brand exposure to a lot of people. It is a very Asian phenomenon. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)
Working with online influencers poses two major challenges. First, they are not loyal to brands that they endorse and they have only a vague idea of what conflict of interest is. Second, the prices of working with them are going up, which all of the respondents find outrageous.

I don’t think that Thai celebrities have very clear strategies on how they manage themselves. They mix high and low end brands involved with them, and it does not match. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

The influencers are not loyal to brands, they do not feel that they should become brand ambassadors. A brand gives them some money, they post a picture with a product. Next week the competitor comes with money, and they do exactly the same. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

The issue is that a lot of these people work with so many brands. It is just one endorsement after another. And there is no such a thing as the concept of conflict of interest… And you pay for a post, it stays up for a few days and then they will take it down. They will tell you ahead of time that it will be up for five days. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

To get the celebrities to the even the price is going up and up and up. Ten years ago 5000 Baht was considered a good fee, today some will cost hundreds of thousands. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

You see the commercialisation of that, they see the opportunity and value, but some of what they charge now is way too much, we had someone charge 150000 Baht for one Instagram post, and she said she would do ten for 1.5 million7. This is just way out of control. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

Another peculiarity is that online influencers do not disclose their payed posts, and they do not see any ethical problem with doing so. Neither the bloggers nor their audiences find it necessary to identify payed posts as advertising, and not doing so does not result in any backlash from followers:

---

7 Over USD 40.000.
People know that KOLs are being paid, but their followers don’t really care. For them it is just like seeing a celebrity on a billboard. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Even if the Thai consumers can see right through this and know that whoever is getting paid to endorse the brand, they still will like it and they will still buy it. They are less sensitive to this full disclosure, they know that it’s happening and you don’t have to say it. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

The Relationship between PR-Agencies and Clients

The fourth block of questions that the participants were asked to discuss referred to the issues of client relationships and the overall challenges of working with Thai clients. The responses generally indicate that Thai customers do not have a clear understanding of what PR actually can do and this creates additional difficulties for agency practitioners.

There is a misunderstanding of PR that it is paid advertising, particularly from marketing people. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Some people don’t understand how PR supports their business... Marketing people often don’t know even the basic PR terms, they will say to me “Can you send out the PR?” “You mean a press-release?” “No, no, just a PR”. They just think that PR is buying space in newspapers, they don’t understand that it’s earned coverage... But actually in Thailand it (paided placement) does not happen quite as much as in the other countries in the region. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

Some clients do not understand the difference between advertorials and paid coverage and they keep asking for guarantees. I guess it is because for them everything is pay-per-play. They think you can just place things. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Most clients here do not understand what PR is, they have no clue. They confuse it with advertising, they confuse it with marketing... they do PR and suddenly they will increase their bottom-line, get all the sales. They have no clue what media value is. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

Due to their lack of understanding of the nature of PR, customers too often do not see the distinction between marketing, PR and advertising; hence pitching becomes partly an educational endeavour. It requires extra effort to set clients’ expectations correctly in
order to avoid disappointment. It is extremely important to find a common language with clients and to avoid the cognitive dissonance generated by unrealistic expectations. If clients’ expectations are adequate, then the chances of dissatisfaction are lower. (Slutsky, Ordeix, Rom 2015)

We need to explain what we can deliver, to set the expectations right. Sometimes clients want to increase their sales by 20%, and we have to explain them that as a PR-agency we cannot guarantee that. We can guarantee a certain media presence, a certain amount of clippings… etc. But we cannot guarantee sales. And people do not understand that unless you set the expectations right you may have conflicts afterwards,(Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

I had a Thai client… and in Thailand they are famous, and they have this inflated sense that they are famous everywhere. And they wanted from this campaign international coverage everywhere… And I failed to set their expectation that this will be impossible… and when the project rolled and they did not get the coverage they had expected they were extraordinarily upset. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

Another difference in client relations management is billing. Billing by the hour is essentially unheard of in Thailand.

For local based clients we bill by deliverable quotas. We have a retainer fee per month and how many deliverables you get based on that… There is a high level of over service here. Clients expect 200% for the 100% that they are paying for… In the US, PR executives are like lawyers billable by the hour for consultation. There I never over-service. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)

We have no time-keying system here. A lot of agencies in the West you have to be like a lawyer. We do not bill clients by the hour. Very few of our clients do hour billing, so we just set up a spread sheet, but 99 % is by deliverable. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

While working with Thai clients requires explaining what PR can and cannot do, working with international clients has its own challenge of explaining local realities. Working with multinational clients requires that agencies provide some cultural sensitivity counselling to speakers that help adopt global strategies to local circumstances. It starts with the imperative to generate the Thai language content for a population with approximately 30% English fluency.
Takes time to get used to the level of English. In the beginning they would ask me to be an MC and I would be using the words that no-one could probably understand. Inappropriate. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

Even the supposedly English-speaking media are not really conversing in English, so somebody coming from a top-newspaper, who is supposedly an English-speaking media can have a really hard time putting together a few sentences. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

There is a lot of frustration coming from dealing with people for whom English is the second language... You have to be realistic about it too. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

Overall, the practitioners who were interviewed for this project emphasised the importance of adapting to cultural realities of working in Thailand. They note (1) elements that are commonly observed by specialists in cross-cultural communication and (2) the need to adapt the messages in the local mentality of specific product categories.

You can't really just transplant global strategies here, you have to make them relevant. It could be a spokesperson using local Thai data to emphasise the point he is trying to make, having a Thai case with a Thai client, or a Thai subject that he can talk about or on their behalf. We work with the medical industry, so it’s usually just a Thai patient they are talking about. (Gareth Marshall, Spark Communications)

Things that will not work here: a brand or a company not very well known here has a senior executive coming and expect that everyone will know and come to see them... You need to try to bring context, do not talk about what you do in San-Diego or France, put it in a Thai context and so on. (Steve Vincent, Aziam Burson-Marsteller)

An example - a new car engine came out which is smaller than a traditional engine, but is the same power. But in Thai minds small meant bad, they could not get their head around the fact that it was just as powerful and they were not losing anything... So we had to change the campaign and also change the way we referred to the engine, to focus on the power, and remove the size completely. (Jennifer Poulsson, Hill and Knowlton Strategies)
We had a case with Ashley Madison... Thailand is known as a country where men are patently unfaithful... "Life is short, have an affair" - that was already a slogan that we had to translate a little bit differently... it had to have a wider appeal - like "Ashley Madison saving family values". Which is true, but we had to do a lot of rephrasing, and it worked. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

There are, of course the challenges of indirect communication (Hall 1987). Thailand is a country where most communication is context based and much is left unsaid, where saving face and "letting go" are extremely important:

You have to handle people with care. You could never have a real equal to equal discussion with most Thais... Cultivate humility and patience. Shouting will never get you anywhere in Thailand. Never ever. (Karin Lohitnavy, Midas PR)

You need to be culturally sensitive, adapt to Thai things. You can’t actually point out the error in their ways unless you are very gentle. For instance, you can’t tell people that they shouldn’t always come to work late. None of your staff will have any respect for you. They would think that you behaved badly. (Tom Athey, Star Digital Integrated Communications)

If you come to Bangkok you have to be completely prepared for the re-writing of the rules as we know them as westerners. People and their social dynamics are completely different. You don’t really engage in direct communication here. It is not a part of this culture. (Aaron Henry, 720 Connect)

Conclusion

It was hypothesized that commonly held practices of media relations in Thailand in many ways differ from what is considered to be generally accepted protocols and procedures in the West. The findings from the interviews support this hypothesis. Most of the observed differences are a consequence of what the interviewees referred to as local media culture and Thai journalists’ ethics. These factors combine a higher degree of tolerance towards paid placement and media corruption practices with a generally lower level of understanding of what public relations is and how it differs from advertising or marketing. Professionals who come from other countries to work in the Thai communication industry must learn and adopt to local circumstances. Understanding these circumstances may not only help them to feel more comfortable in a new professional environment but can also help to ensure that their professional strategies and tactics are responsive to local requirements.
References


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.