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PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

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Instead of communicating through the media, PR professionals now have to engage across the spectrum because “everybody now matters”

When a blackout hit the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans during Super Bowl XLVII in 2013, the social media team for cookie brand Oreo jumped straight into action. In what has become a classic example of social media’s power in modern public relations (PR), Oreo put together an image of its product with the tagline “You can still dunk in the dark” before power was restored after 34 minutes. The message got over 15,000 retweets during the game and lots of publicity after it, generating perhaps more brand value than a US\$3.8 million 30-second TV spot would have.

What is less well-known is that Oreo had a 15-strong team monitoring social media during the game. While it is impossible to recreate occurrences – not legally, anyway – such as the blackout, it is the commitment to investing in social media that had made possible the “dunk in the dark” moment. However, not all brands understand the importance of building an online presence.

“One of my biggest pains now is clients telling me: I want my CEO to be on TV,” reveals **Cheryl Ng**, Co-Founder of Singapore-based public relations firm CYAN Communications. “It doesn’t matter how much media I get them. They tell me: ‘I just want a full-page Straits Times article. I want Channel NewsAsia coverage. I don’t care about online. I need to justify to management what is the PR value of online coverage.’

“If I have good case studies, I’ll my clients: ‘This is what happens if you do it this way and not do it that way.’ A lot of times you do get pushback. Sometimes it’s not the direct PR person that’s

giving me the grief, it's CEO [of the client/brand] that's a lot older in age who's perhaps not so up to date. They are not marketing people, they are business people. They probably don't even have an Instagram account so all this social media thing is foreign to them."

While Ng clarifies that traditional media is still important, she elaborates: "If I realise the PR person is actually amendable to the new approach but it's the CEO that's old school, I'll try to help the PR person convince the client. Most of my clients see what I'm trying to do after they see results, but they are some who are dead set on the old ways. But they'll realise the big picture eventually."

PLEASING EVERYBODY

Whereas PR "used to be about writing press releases, content, editorials, getting senior executives to events" and "TV media, print media and radio media were your best friends as a PR practitioner because you really want your media coverage", the proliferation of social media has changed the game.

"All of a sudden, a simple girl in her room becomes really popular online and her thoughts matter," explains Ng, referring to beauty bloggers such as Huda Kattan (@hudabeauty, 15 Instagram million followers) and, on a smaller scale, Andrea Chong in Singapore (@dreachong, 259,000 Instagram followers). "You have Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and all sorts of social media platform. Throw in YouTube and Snapchat, and your celebrities aren't just Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt; your celebrity could be living two blocks from you.

"Your target audience or the number of people who can talk about your brand has all of a sudden increased. The thing is, how to reach out to them?"

Most brands typically look to engage online personalities or key opinion leaders (KOLs) with the biggest following – within budget, of course – as a spokesperson and pay them. Ng preaches against that approach.

"Whenever we do campaigns like that, I always tell my client: Never pay the KOL or the blogger no matter what," warns Ng. "Even if they have the budget, I tell them not to do so. When people find out, it won't look good. We're all cynical so when someone reviews a restaurant and says good things about it, you'd go: 'Of course you'd say so, you got a free meal out of it!'

"A lot of clients push for quantity: 'I want the blogger with most followers/likes/clicks etc. I would ask the client: 'What is your business objective?' I tell my clients when they want to use certain KOLs or publications, 'I rather you be more targeted, get the right conversions and attention than go mass just because a certain KOL has a big following online.' Also, there's the issue of brand safety: you might end up on the wrong platform, your brand might not be talked about in the right way."

She adds that brands "know that consumers are not stupid" and recognise a sponsored item when they see one. So how does a modern PR practitioner deliver what is being asked?

"Suddenly, we're not just talking to journalists and editors but also bloggers, event organisers, KOLs. And you get this situation where KOLs don't want to be put together with bloggers, and the media doesn't want to be in the same room as the KOLs and bloggers because they don't see the latter as genuine journalists.

"Basically, everybody now matters."

For the PR practitioner, is that not always so?