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Pushing the learning curve of public relations in Asia

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Gregor Halff



Pushing the learning curve

By taking a page out of the MBA book, the PA and PR professions could develop by leaps and bounds in Asia

When cell-phone touts on Orchard Road and in Ratchaprasong say they're in "public relations", you know that the communication profession has a communication problem. It isn't that the standards have dropped to street level. Rather, there are no clear boundaries defining the profession in the first place.

From Singapore to Thailand, from Indonesia to Hong Kong, every industry association has written down what it wants communicators to be (managers), to do (handle all symbols and messages of an organisation) and to achieve (relationships and reputation). In practice, however, communicators are mainly judged on their messaging skills. They are not expected to change an organisation's course, just its symbols – and mostly proud of it too. This leads straight to the street: In an age obsessed with symbols and images, all professions have become better at messaging and are thus making public relations' core identity hollower by the year.

A recent survey (participants 107) by Singapore Management University asked communicators (with an average 12 years of PR-experience) in South East Asia what they do. In-house practitioners professed to be messengers: their most frequent activity ("at least three times a week") was keeping others informed about the media coverage of the organisation. Secondly, they consult – not decide – with their management about public relations issues. Equally telling were the activities that, though prompted, were missing among the frequent activities of in-house communicators: they are neither

catalysts of top-managerial decisions, nor policymakers. Messaging is highest on the list for agency consultants too, with editing of grammar and spelling as their most frequent task.

Being messengers, both in-house and agency communicators expect that social media will have the greatest impact on their work during the

"In an age obsessed with symbols and images, all professions have become better at messaging and are thus making the core identity of public relations hollower by the year"

next five years. Not surprisingly they seldom said to be accountable for the overall reputation of an organisation and revealed the profession's lack of standards: neither agencies nor in-house departments regularly work with a standardised planning process; agency consultants seldom even use polling, surveys or target group research in their daily work.

But communicators know how to grow from messenger to policymaker. Most want to enhance their skills, not just in social media and branding, but in management. Planning, finance, leadership, corporate social responsibility and crisis management were highest on their wish-list. The rewards are great. Senior talent is in huge demand, so communicators in top-jobs earn around 70 per cent more than mid-level practitioners (in Shanghai the incomes even jump by more than 150 per cent). However, with hardly any university courses

available for communication management, these rewards remain beyond reach for many South East Asian communicators. Instead, talent is imported from abroad or from neighbouring professions. Most managing directors of large agency networks are expatriates and many heads of corporate communication have a background in marketing, sales or journalism.

How can the communication profession raise its standards and become a management function? By taking a page out of the MBA-book. What was started by a few universities in the 1950s has become a universal model of management education with joint course requirements, best practices and internationally accepted standards. In a first step, many more South East Asian universities should be encouraged by the professional associations to offer courses in corporate communication.

More importantly, they need to coordinate their curriculum and codify its quality across the region and globe. Either IPRA or The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management would be a suitable coordinator, if only universities and national PR associations would let them. Ten years from now, the public relations profession should launch a joint degree in communication management as a universally standardised and credible brand.

Admittedly, getting there will need lots of further touting, so Orchard Road and Ratchaprasong may just be the right places to start. □

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