

VIVEK LAW'S VIEWS ON PR & JOURNALISM
- THE LOVE HATE RELATIONSHIP -

Growth of consumerism is changing the dynamics for both journalists and corporations....

The dynamics are changing and the situation will get tougher for both journalists and corporations. While business journalism has generally remained focussed on what corporations are doing, the bigger floodgate that will open is the consumer interface. Today the Indian consumer is far more militant than ever before. A recent consumer court verdict was given in favour of a customer who bought a Coke in a Nirula's restaurant and then sued them for charging a rate slightly higher than the MRP.

Organisation must minimise complaints and handle them deftly...

Customer complaints will multiply with the increase in the number of credit cards and cars sold. The manner in which they are dealt with will ensure whether the media gets to hear of them or not. CNBC ran a series on credit card complaints where consumers wrote in on complaints about billing problems that dealt not with large figures...but with figures ranging between Rs. 400/- to Rs. 1,000/-. The consumers were very agitated stating that they were being cheated out of their life's savings. The complaints went on to say that only CNBC could help them recover their dues, how they'd made numerous calls to the bank but not got any response to their complaints.

CNBC called one of the biggest banks and requested their participation on the consumer grievance redressal show, "Awaaz". The Bank agreed at first, but very nearly pulled out, as they believed that the show would be negative for the Bank.

A consumer from Gurgaon had sent in a complaint over billing problems relating to Rs 400/-. He had sent 22 e-mails to the Bank, copies of which were sent to the channel requesting them to take the necessary action. Speaking to an extremely agitated customer when the show began, the representative from the Bank apologised, admitting that the Bank had erred and said that the money would be refunded. The aggrieved caller in turn mindful that the Bank had sent a senior representative was pacified and thanked him for coming on the show and resolving the problem by actually talking to him.

Customer endorsements are priceless ...

An organisation can spend lakhs of rupees in advertisements or take as many journalists out for a drink, but the kind of impact that the Gurgaon customer's statement on national television gave the Bank is of more value than getting 20 articles across publications stating the customer-centric practices of the organisation.

CNBC receives about 50 consumer grievance e-mails almost everyday from across the country, even from the smallest of towns. It is important that organisations learn to deal with these quickly to save the reputation of the organisation.

Consumer grievance is emerging as a popular genre ...

Very few Indian company share an E-mail ID for complaints in their marketing literature with customers. At the end of the day, CNBC just forwards these complaints to the respective organisations and asks them to resolve the issue. "Awaaz" is one of the most watched shows on CNBC and as consumerism grows so too will grievances.

Corporate communication and PR professionals need to give this message to their organisations - 'Resolve the Problem'. Put in place certain systems for consumer redressal. Media will not let go of the complaints that reach them and hence it is better to tackle it rather than sleep over it. The journalist merely wants a prompt response from the organisation say a response within 2-3 days.

Urgent need to put systems in place for consumer redressal and proactively respond to them.

The time has come when journalists expect more than just a reaction from PR and corporate communication professionals. Journalists want to be taken through the issues, to receive in-depth and not superficial information. Journalists appreciate more than a reactive sense of PR. In the case of a query on customer grievance from the media, the first instinct of PR is to ask whether the story can be withheld! This mindset has to be changed. PR and corporate communication professionals wield tremendous power because they mould public opinions hence they must first begin by convincing their own management to understand the need to proactively respond to all situations.

At the same time, the media fraternity is aware that there are some among their ilk that do not sufficiently research the industry or subject that they report on. It is for editors to train new entrants in the Fourth Estate. But even the communications professionals can help the correspondent on a particular beat by providing in-depth information on the company, the way it works, the particular product... Both the media and the communications professional need to work towards building the knowledge resource.

Journalism is changing...so too is PR, but the change needs to go much further for a comfortable working relationship to develop between the two.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Misreporting by print & electronic media...what damage control can PR do?

Vivek replied that misreporting was bad journalism and one that could not be justified. However, the organisation should take steps by sending a fax or letter to the senior most person at the TV channel or publication stating how facts have been misreported.

How to ascertain a genuine consumer complaint?

Vivek Law replied that CNBC received several complaints every day. He agreed that some of the complaints were not genuine. When a complaint was received, the first step taken is to send it to the company, which does its own background research before taking any action. In 98 per cent cases, companies admit that they are wrong. If

the channel realises that the complaint is fraudulent, then it is dropped. For e.g. CNBC was doing a series on recovery agents after the RBI guidelines were issued to stem the harassment of credit card users. The channel was sensitive to the fact that there were wilful defaulters and hence was very careful with the complaints they were getting.

A couple from Bangalore wrote in to the channel saying that they were being harassed and abused by a particular bank. CNBC wrote to the bank asking them for their side of the story. In the meanwhile the show was being shot and the episode was to go on air in a day. The bank called up CNBC saying that the wife had called the bank to say that there was some matrimonial discord between the couple and that her husband had run up a big bill on the credit card, which she had to pay up!! CNBC called up the lady in question, confirmed what the bank had told them and promptly dropped the episode.

CNBC will also not air cases, which are in Consumer Court since it is *sub judice and* hence the company will not talk about it.

*Comments on PR
successes.....*

The National Stock Exchange is far ahead of the Bombay Stock Exchange in every way. However, it is the BSE that is always in the news. Vivek attributed it to Mr MG Damani who through effective use of PR successfully managed the media and got the BSE in the news all the time. Each time the markets hit a certain number, teams of business channels would land up outside Dalal Street instead of going to the NSE Building at Bandra-Kurla.

The second example is of Dewang Mehta. What Nasscom is today is solely due to the huge PR exercise conducted by Dewang Mehta. These two men made radical changes through sheer communication, demonstrating the impact of PR.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Vivek Law, Editor, Consumer Affairs, CNBC TV18, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Mumbai on November 30, 2005)