

POONAM KAUL'S VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF PR IN BRAND BUILDING

Communication strategy at Microsoft...

Products are what the company makes and what the consumer buys are brands. The product is the deliverable and the intrinsic, symbolic attributes are what the brand is all about. Brands are very similar to human beings, they develop overtime, they reproduce and a strong relationship can be built with them.

Advertising is an essential tool of communication but from Microsoft's perspective, public relations has more credibility and unlike other communication tools is capable of undertaking crisis management. The critical elements that form a part of the communication strategy at Microsoft can be divided into:

Stable factors like company vision, values, product positioning, brand characteristic and dynamic factors like new products, tailor-made objects.

The use of PR in the launch of Windows 2000....

In recent years the launch of Windows 2000 was the most critical launch for Microsoft because this was the platform on which future products were to be based. There was no advertising support for the entire endeavour. There was a lot of negativity in the air owing to the Department of Justice case and Windows 2000 was perceived as an advanced version of the already existing product. The primary objective was to establish Windows as 'the' operating system of the enterprise.

Media strategy...

A couple of months before the launch, the company had the 'media offsite' programme which comprised of a group of key media (predominantly those who had a negative perception of the product) who were taken to Microsoft's headquarters where Windows 2000 was being developed, for an extensive on-site tour. Detailed presentations on the product and its technicalities were conducted and the group was exposed to various aspects of the product to create greater understanding.

Door-to-door programme...

Along with the 'media offsite' programme, the company undertook another unique programme called 'door-to-door'. Worldwide, all Microsoft executives working on Windows 2000 were sent a common mail inviting those interested in visiting India to write back. (Saying goes in Microsoft that 40% of the employees are Indians!) This initiative received tremendous response and a select group was chosen. In India they had extensive meetings with the press and this provided a forum for the media to clarify their doubts directly from on-the-job engineers rather than hearing about it from the company spokesperson.

Briefing sessions were organised with key opinion makers like newspaper editors and professors from technical institutes such as IIT's. A few days prior to the launch, curtain raiser meetings with the head of Windows 2000 were organised.

Initiatives to sustain media interest...

On the Microsoft site, a special corner for entertaining specific queries on Windows 2000, called the 'Windows 2000 pressroom' was uploaded. Here journalists could send their queries to be answered immediately. The result of all these initiatives was that Microsoft succeeded in maintaining a constant interest in Windows 2000 till it was actually launched

PR activities in the launch of Windows 2000...

At the actual launch abroad, Microsoft sent 2-3 journalists from India and a standard press conference was organised in India to announce the availability of the product. After the launch, stories were initiated in the media on various features of Windows 2000. Testimonial stories, opinion articles from product managers and educational briefings were organised to make the audience familiar with the product. All these activities were purely a part of PR and nobody at Microsoft actually felt the need for any advertising.

PR strategy for .net ...

The other crucial PR exercise undertaken by Microsoft was Bill Gates' visit to India. The trip was essentially a business visit and the talking point was .net – transcending the web. But this was a challenge because firstly, the .net vision was announced three months before, secondly, there was physically no product to showcase, and finally the product was to hit the market 2 years hence.

Microsoft devised a strategy according to which the hype started building up much before Bill Gates' actual visit. Initially a media alert was sent to the press announcing his visit, post which e-mail interviews were organised. To educate people on .net, a media briefing addressed by Microsoft India's Managing Director, positioned as an educational exercise was organised two days before the visit. The aim of this media briefing was to provide journalists with sufficient pertinent information on which they could base their questions at the actual media briefing with Bill Gates.

Select one-on-one interviews were organised for Bill Gates with key press like Star & Business World where he spoke extensively about .net.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Does PR become easier

Poonam Kaul agreed with this statement but said that while getting the press is usually not a problem, putting forth the

if the brand is famous? right kind of messages is the real challenge that corporate communicators are faced with.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Poonam Kaul, Marketing Communication Manager, Microsoft Corp (I) Pvt Ltd., at PR Pundit's workshop, held in New Delhi on November 2, 2000)