

Crossing Borders: How to Establish an International PR Program

Judy Phair, APR, Fellow PRSA, Jun 1, 2011 - Public Relations Tactics

Summary: International communications are becoming increasingly important in today's global marketplace. Judy Phair, APR, Fellow PRSA, and president of consulting firm PhairAdvantage, LLC, offers her advice on establishing a successful international PR program and working with clients abroad.

Full Text: A growing numbers of agencies, corporations, universities and nonprofits are discovering that investing in international public relations is both rewarding and critical to success in today's global marketplace.

The first step to launching an effective international PR program is recognizing what you don't know.

"The biggest mistake is to think you can just march in, deliver a full-blown campaign, and expect it to be effective," says Gary McKillips, director of communications and marketing, Georgia State University, who has worked on partnerships for his business school in South America, Egypt and Russia. "You have to spend time learning the culture, the people, their views." Then, he adds, "take baby steps before launching a massive campaign plan."

Rob McNeil, former media director for U.S.-based Conservation International and now senior media specialist, Center for Migration Policy and Society, University of Oxford, echoes the importance of cultural sensitivity.

"People don't want you to tell them what they should be doing, whether you are a conservation group, university or business," he says. "Don't assume you know what is best for them — learn from them first."

If you're just beginning to venture into the international market, then be ready for a time- and resource-intensive commitment. You may decide to hire a local agency to assist you, or you may be using existing resources. Either way, learn before you plan. Take the time upfront to determine:

- **Cultural and religious norms:** While traveling through India on a media tour with my organization's president and another executive (a native of India), we carefully reviewed the agency's briefing book before our interview with a female reporter for a major New Delhi daily.

Unfortunately, the book had overlooked a critical element. Our vice president reached out to shake the reporter's hand; she recoiled. He was embarrassed, and we feared that the interview was over. Fortunately, the reporter, a devout Muslim, was unfazed (later, she told us this was not an unusual experience). The interview proceeded and the resulting article was positive. The lesson that we learned: Always make sure that you have complete information about relevant cultural and religious factors.

- **Technological capabilities:** Does the region you're targeting have the bandwidth for an Internet-centered campaign? In parts of Africa, the easiest way to reach reporters is on their cell phones as power outages make Internet use difficult.

Similarly, a TV campaign will run into problems in many developing countries where many residents don't have electricity — but they do have battery-powered radios and cell phones. Many European countries, conversely, have more advanced high-speed technology than the United States.

- **Popular media platforms:** Newspapers and magazines are still a major source of information in many countries — including the United Kingdom, much of Europe, India, China and many parts of Africa and South America. Some countries have two major papers, one government-owned and one privately owned. Establish relationships with both.
- **The best social media mix:** Social media is hot around the world, but technology and cultural issues will guide which platforms will be most effective.

For example, young people in India are voracious Web users but they want India-specific content. Use a customized Indian landing page to drive traffic to your organization's main website. While Indian students are prolific Facebook users, India also has its own site, Orkut, which attracts younger audiences. Remember that even though the Web is open in India, it is highly restricted in other countries, such as China.

Reporters around the world

Reporters worldwide share differences and similarities. They all need a fast response, meaning you must be prepared to respond in real time. While working extensively with media in Europe, India and China during the past few years, I've learned that when a reporter in India needs a response by noon on Tuesday, I'd better respond by 2:30 a.m. on Monday (EST).

Reporters and editors know their audiences, and you need to know those audiences too. A media strategy for Johannesburg will not necessarily be effective in Monrovia. I learned firsthand that Hong Kong media are not interested in a worldwide survey's statistics relating to mainland China — they want Hong Kong data.

Any international story should be localized. McNeil recommends having representatives in the countries you are targeting so that you can match your pitches to cultural needs. As he notes, "You don't talk about rainforests to media in Brazil the same way you do in the U.S." Learn the style of reporting you should expect. McNeil describes British reporters as "more hard-nosed" than their American counterparts in getting to the bottom of an issue.

"Most American reporters will allow you to tell your story before jumping in with questions — British and European media begin grilling right away," he says. Indian reporters, particularly in major cities, don't waste time getting to the point, want statistics to back up the story, and will ask pointed and persistent questions to get what they want.

Make sure that you understand the reporters' work schedules in your target markets. In Egypt, the day generally begins at 10:30, and the major meal of the day is in the afternoon. Indian reporters in major cities generally work from noon to 9 p.m. Reporters in developing African countries rarely have offices, and so they don't have official office hours.

Finally, remember that public relations is all about relationships. The personal touch matters. Visit your target markets and, whenever possible, have representation on the ground. One executive with a multi-national agency based in Beijing cautions, "Image is important here — the media need to see you."

Working with agencies abroad

If you decide to hire an agency in the region that you are targeting, then here are a few things to

consider:

- Are a majority (or all) of staff members natives of the chosen country or region? If the country has multiple languages/dialects, then they should all be represented on the staff.
- Does the agency have locations and connections in different parts of the country? Make sure that you're familiar with the various regions and any cultural differences.
- Do you understand the country's legal structure? In some countries, there are both government and privately owned agencies. Indian law prohibits an agency from handling both public relations and advertising. You will need to hire two separate agencies for these functions.
- Are you working with a partner abroad? Recognize that the partner will have relationships with agencies on their own and that may dictate your choice. — J.P.

Judy Phair, APR, Fellow PRSA, is president of PhairAdvantage, LLC, a consulting firm providing global PR and marketing consulting services. She was PRSA's 2005 president and CEO. She received the Gold Anvil in 2010.

Public Relations Society of America © 2011

Product #: 6C-061105