



# Is there a PR manager in the house?

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There are those who ascribe to the adage that there is no such thing as negative publicity. But perhaps better than negative publicity is 'free publicity', otherwise known as PR. How well do companies in the Middle East understand Public Relations and how can they make use of its full potential for their business?

The value of public relations (PR) is a concept that sometimes eludes some business leaders in the Middle East region. PR is in some cases associated solely with advertising, or perceived to be an exercise in networking alone or a simple meet and greet. Even the job of a PR manager is sometimes taken to be the same as that of a Public Relations Officer (PRO) whose main responsibility is to secure visas for employees within companies.

What PR is actually about is perception and reputation management. In the words of Lord Bell of Belgravia - the communications strategist behind Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's election campaigns - "Perceptions are real. If you're playing to win they have to be favorable. Your ability to persuade people to listen to you, understand what you're saying and support you will determine whether you win or lose."

At its core, PR revolves around this universal truth: people act based upon their perception of facts. By managing, controlling, or influencing people's perceptions, public relations professionals hope to initiate a sequence of behaviors that will lead to the achievement of an organization's objectives. When those in public relations successfully create, change, or reinforce opinion through persuasion, their primary objective is accomplished.

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#### **PR and ROI**

In western countries, PR is referred to as 'free publicity' because press coverage that is generated about companies on a yearly basis is worth millions of dollars in advertising space. The Return on Investment (ROI) that PR provides is, accordingly, quite significant.

As a highly cost-efficient and effective communications tool, PR helps to promote companies through news articles that go deep into the essence of brands and communicating their positive attributes, without them having to pay for advertising space.

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#### **PR, over-exposure and valuable content**

While taking into account the return on investment that PR provides, two very important aspects that business executives in the Middle East should take into account when adopting a PR plan are the issues of over-exposure and valuable content. When companies send too many press releases to the media, stakeholders and the general public are led to 'boredom' as a result of reading too many news announcements. It is also essential for all press releases to include valuable content that is deemed newsworthy by journalists who are always eager to report stories that appeal to their readers.

Accordingly, executives within the Middle East should tackle PR from a strategic point of view and assess each story and its newsworthiness before it is dispatched to the media.

#### **PR and crisis management**

PR is also a tool that is utilized to deal with major crises. During the post-real estate boom era in the United Arab Emirates, many executives of property companies faced charges of fraud and embezzlement. Public relations practitioners worked round the clock to come up with strategies aiming to keep the companies they represent afloat.

The corporations that suffered the most were publically-traded companies. Negative publicity about such companies pushed their share price downward due to the perception that was shaped by the business community through the media. However, many survived thanks to the right public relations approach, which upholds the simple tenet to always be truthful to the media about matters that are considered 'public knowledge.'

One example pertains to a real estate firm in the Middle East whose entire leadership team was changed. Confidence in the company's management was lost as a result and the PR team had to devise a strategic plan to counter the crisis. The company's newly appointed Chief Executive Officer was truthful to the media, acknowledging to all journalists that there was a change in management whilst also communicating the fact that the company had ambitious plans for the future. This strategy gave many clients who had been fearful of losing their investments, confidence about the company's strong business fundamentals.

#### Conclusion

Today, the Middle East lags behind the West in its understanding of public relations. However, numerous business executives are starting to realize the added value of PR with respect to providing exposure at a minimal cost and being a highly-valuable tool in countering a crisis. It is a fact, however, that businesses in the region still have a long way to go before reaching a deep understanding of PR and how the practice can add value to their business.

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