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Abstract

When I first moved to the UAE in 2006, I was most impressed when my husband started to talk about the number of PROs or public relations officers in his company. It was indeed a welcome surprise given my assumptions about public relations being relatively undeveloped. However, we soon learned that instead of being at the front edge of communications, these PROs, usually from the sub-continent and remarkably efficient at getting work visas and labor cards, were far from being part of the organization's stakeholder outreach - a tidy lesson that illustrated the challenges of terminology being used for different purposes but also a stark illustration of how public relations was (and in some cases still is) perceived in the Middle East.

Public Relations and Corporate Communications in the UAE

By Rebecca Hill | rebecca@rebeccahill.info

When I first moved to the UAE in 2006, I was most impressed when my husband started to talk about the number of PROs or public relations officers in his company. It was indeed a welcome surprise given my assumptions about public relations being relatively undeveloped. However, we soon learned that instead of being at the front edge of communications, these PROs, usually from the sub-continent and remarkably efficient at getting work visas and labor cards, were far from being part of the organization's stakeholder outreach - a tidy lesson that illustrated the challenges of terminology being used for different purposes but also a stark illustration of how public relations was (and in some cases still is) perceived in the Middle East.

A Market Overview

Communications practice in the UAE and the region runs the gamut from PRO visa assistance to highly sophisticated outreach aligned with an organization's corporate goals, and everything in between. Government agencies drive much of the PR work, but the growing private sector, education, NGOs, and a general influx of people have now meant that more and more open communications is being demanded and provided. The UAE, in particular Dubai, is one of the region's main hubs for PR and has a sizeable community, in-house, freelance, and agency. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia also have a developing capacity as do Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. Within the UAE, Dubai has provided much of the consultancy manpower to Abu Dhabi although this is changing with more agencies setting up shop in the capital as well as corporate teams resourcing up.

The growth in public relations can be measured by the number of PR agencies operating in the region. While the first PR agency (part of an international network) was set up more than 25 years ago, the major growth has been in the last 10 years (see table below). Market value is more difficult to gauge with estimates ranging from US\$ 500mn – 1bn, depending on what is included in the count: retainers, media monitoring fees, event management, print production, and so on.

PR Agencies in the Middle East 2006-2010 - From MediaSource data 2010

County	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Growth
Bahrain	10	11	15	15	18	80%
Egypt	9	10	13	14	11	22%
Iran	5	5	4	4	2	-60%
Iraq	1	1	1	1	0	-100%
Jordan	7	10	12	12	10	43%
Kuwait	8	7	7	8	10	25%
Lebanon	10	10	12	12	9	-10%
Oman	3	5	5	5	5	67%
Palestine	2	2	3	3	3	50%
Qatar	8	9	12	15	15	88%
Saudi Arabia	18	17	24	28	22	22%
Syria	1	2	3	3	3	200%
UAE	58	74	87	96	122	110%
Yemen	1	2	2	2	0	-100%
Total	141	165	200	218	230	63%

Unfortunately, there isn't much reliable data. There is no centralized directory of PR practitioners or even a distinct category for licensing a PR agency unless it is set up in a free trade zone. Membership of professional associations like the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) chapter of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) runs to the low hundreds – even though there must be at least 2-3000 people who carry out some form of PR in their professional role. Non profit trade associations are relatively new phenomena, although their value is slowly being recognized. Traditionally, PR spend had been subsumed into advertising budgets either by advertising agencies tacking on PR as part of their integrated services or where a media outlet has promised "free PR" if advertising is purchased. Although the situation is improving, there is still a correlation between coverage and advertising in particular with specialist magazines that rely on ad revenue to survive. Paying for coverage whether it's actual cash or incentives is as evident here as it is in the rest of the world although a number of media houses have clear policies on gift giving which helps set a standard.

Communications challenges

Defining PR: Like the rest of the world this region has struggled to come up with a standard approach to communications whether it's public relations, marketing communications, communications management, and so on. PR education varies from college to college and from academic to academic with textbooks usually sourced out of the US that have almost zero relevance in terms of the case studies cited.

MEPRA uses the definition of PR from the Institute for Public Relations – the sustained and continuous dialogue with one's publics. The version usually practised is limited to media relations with a local twist – usually there will be one media relations expert in every agency whose key role is to manage the press relationships, meaning only one conduit for information to the media.

Regular surveys by MediaSource and InsightMiddleEast (2007, 2009) point to the ineffectiveness of this approach as it precludes an understanding of the media by general practitioners who tend to have a poor news sense, scatter gun distribution, and an inability to present the media's side to the client.

The Stockholm Accords (<http://www.stockholmmaccords.org/accords-text>) - a framework for describing the role of today's communicator including governance, management, sustainability, internal communications, external communications and the management of the two – rarely evoke recognition among practitioners who are just starting to grapple with stakeholder management and employee engagement.

PR education and continual professional development: With an increase in the number of courses being offered by institutions, students have greater choice for their university degree. However, key for them is choosing something that bodes well for future jobs – and within the PR community most agency employers are not looking for a PR degree but the right attributes to start at the bottom of the ladder. Internships are increasing, most of them unpaid.

For practitioners seeking to continue their professional development, few options exist beyond some locally provided public courses which are usually priced above what an individual would be able to pay, and courses and diplomas offered overseas by such as bodies as the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations, International Association of Business Communicators, etc. MEPRA has made tentative steps in this area by putting on workshops and boot camps delivered by senior members. While these are priced at a fraction of the cost of the other courses, attendance has been relatively low even though agency employers say they want to train staff. The most cited reason is lack of time.

Institutional development is a long road: practitioners generally hold local academe in low esteem – although plenty of opportunities for greater collaboration abound. MEPRA held a practitioner – educator conference in January 2011 (“The Middle East’s first PR Conference” supported by Zayed University), as the starting point in fostering greater dialogue between the two groups. Student chapters are not yet a feature of university life, but MEPRA championed the first PR student day in November 2010 with a second scheduled for 2011. An intra university competition is scheduled for the next academic year, and a number of initiatives are underway to benchmark university courses.

Employment: The economic and development growth of the UAE and the GCC region, especially during the boom years, generated a huge influx of workers, both blue and white collar. During the last ten years, as shown by the number of agencies, employment in public relations was something of a catch-all – with a wide range of nationalities, skills, expectations and experience – all vying for positions in PR. For those that went in house, many ended up being adjuncts of advertising departments, sending out press releases or managing events that fed into the bubble. Inexperienced but market savvy staff moved every one or two years, jacking up their salaries each time with no reference checks.

Managers trying to hold on to staff, paying reasonable rather than inflated salaries and servicing clients with professionals who had some idea about what they were talking faced many challenges. But it was often the case that buyers didn’t know what they were buying, and the service providers had little incentive to play it straight often adding “bells and whistles” when they weren’t needed. A lack of respect developed between in-house and agency PR personnel, creating a “them” and “us” syndrome. MEPRA was originally founded in 2001 by PR agencies operating in the UAE, and it was only in 2009 when the Association moved to an individual based model that in-house practitioners were accepted on equal terms.

If the MiddleEast Insight surveys weren’t enough proof of how unprofessional some media relations activities were, the MEPRA survey conducted for its symposium Bridging the Communications Gap in 2009 also highlighted the lack of understanding between clients and agencies as well as a general lack of communications alignment with corporate strategy assuming there was one.

Complicating the employment picture is the Emiratization program where Emiratis are rightly given priority for positions, usually in the public sector. This policy is undermined by Emirati salaries, which are up to 3-4 times what an expatriate would earn for the same position, creating an unsustainable trend for local employment, and few Emiratis entering the private sector where salaries are generally lower.

Lack of credibility: A survey conducted with YouGov (April 2009) put trust and credibility of business and government below that of friends and family and the media – a trend not dissimilar to other global findings but a wake-up call for governments and corporations that they were not being taken seriously or believed.

This had a knock on effect for PR practitioners who were (and still are) rarely seen in a positive light and only for fluffy stories with little substance. The nadir came in September 2009 with the announcement of the Dubai World restructuring, which was seen as a huge PR failure, causing significant market turmoil globally. After weeks of reassuring statements from the Dubai government as to its financial health, a restructuring announcement was made late on a Thursday before a long weekend, with no one available to provide additional information. It was not the practice for journalists to have private numbers of key government figures.

That this action was taken with an experienced agency on retainer didn’t help PR’s reputation

although it's generally assumed that even if appropriate advice had been given, it was not accepted - a serious lack of judgement that has had some useful benefits.

There is light: "Never waste a good crisis" is a popular quote for politicians, and the same goes for public communications. The 2009 restructuring debacle was a useful lesson for any organization - not only those with domestic and international stakeholders - as it showed that an absence of communications was not only detrimental to an organization's reputation but costly too as banks increased lending costs for Dubai's projects and all but withdrew credit. It also highlighted how one size does not fit all as local stakeholders had different expectations and needs than expatriate and international audiences, with different consequences. It also demonstrated the need to build trust and respect with all stakeholders to act as a buffer in a time of crisis. Many expatriate residents would have been willing to stand up for Dubai if there had been a steady source of credible communications in the previous years. Having put in many years of hard work and investment, they were not ready to see the Emirate go up in smoke because of a lack in information.

The crisis clearly demonstrated the need for strong and clear leadership by someone who embraced the concept of transparency and openness and respected the people's right to know, especially on issues that had a direct impact on decision making. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, has by and large retained respect for the continuation of the Dubai vision and his calm authority. Although there is still room for improvement Dubai in 2011 is generally seen to be the most open and proactive of the seven Emirates comprising the UAE. As Prime Minister, Sheikh Mohammed has put in place a strong collaborative network of federal ministries where communications has been a core driver in sharing information and benchmarking performance.

In 2010 MEPRA conducted its second survey that tested whether communications had improved since the global financial crisis (Are we communicating effectively – MEPRA). Not surprisingly the majority of respondents felt communications had become more important and improved the effectiveness of government, business, and the media. However, compared to 2009 data a significant shift in the credibility and trust of information sources was evident with business improving and government falling. More people now trusted their employer than government, a reversal in roles with a definite uptick for business as a credible source of information. Government communications at both the federal and local level were deemed ineffective by more than 30% of the respondents.

There was also a drop in how friends and family were trusted as sources, although they remained the most trusted with media second, a repeat of 2009. Multinational businesses were deemed the best communicators (37%) followed by international media (35%). Local and regional government (8.2%), local media (6.9%), and business (3.1%) were graded significantly lower.

When gauging the nature of communications, the UAE is generally seen as slow, reactive, unclear, biased, limited, and unreliable although respectful. Over 78% felt that international media scrutiny had a positive impact on communications in terms of responsiveness, transparency, professionalism, and credibility. And in making a purchase decision, 70% of respondents said that a business' reputation was important.

In gauging senior management sentiment (government and business), there was a paradox: while the overwhelming view was that communications is important, it was still not widely endorsed in UAE organizations. When reviewing the previous 12 months, under half (47.7%) agreed that communications recommendations were important in the decision making and planning process while just over a third (39%) said communications had positively impacted

the public image of their company and among their employees. A similar level agreed that a communications plan had positively impacted their organization's effectiveness.

But the lasting impression was negative as a large majority felt that accuracy and transparency of communications had not improved; neither had the frequency or quality of communications, and few had seen an increase in communications budgets. Going forward the story was more positive with 78% of senior managers saying that communications budgets would either be increased or at least stay the same and fewer than 5% said there would be cuts.

Celebrating excellence

In spite of the challenging environment, some excellent work is being done. The MEPRA Awards, now into their third year, have peer reviewed dozens of campaigns for creativity, effectiveness, and results. In 2010 more than eight campaigns were from government agencies which demonstrated an appetite for in depth research, evaluation, and measurement. A summary of the 2010 submissions shows the following:

- 86 best practice submissions (61 in 2009)
- Nine team and individual nominations - Agency and Young Professional Communicator of the Year (compared to 12 individual nominations in 2009)
- 18 agencies submitted entries representing 59 companies, NGOs, and governments (compared with 16 and 44 in 2009).
- 13 agencies are MEPRA registered (compared with 11 in 2009)
- 11 in-house (corporate) teams submitted campaigns (compared with seven in 2009)
- Sectors of industry represented included automotive, banking, confectionary, consumer, environment, events, fashion, hospitality, industrial, professional services, publishing, sports, and tourism.
- Countries represented included Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE.

The MEPRA Awards have become the region's de facto PR recognition program, providing a credible platform for practitioners to submit their best work. And assuming similar growth for the 2011 Awards, the overall winner in the region is the PR profession.