

The challenges of public relations in china assignment

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Global businesses are paying attention to developments in China, and there is a great opportunity for the fledgling public relations industry, which is barely 20 years old. As in any rapidly-evolving sector, there are also challenges as new practices meet tradition. Since the industry is so young, media relations is still the core of most public relations work in China. The average age of PR consultants is 25-27, sometimes making it difficult to operate on a peer-to-peer level with Coos, and therefore to conduct high-level corporate and crisis management campaigns.

Weber Sandwich is looking to create more of a balance between consumer media relations campaigns and corporate communications, however, and wings are changing as senior consultants are brought in to agencies from the more mature Asian markets, such as Singapore and Taiwan. Training junior consultants is also key to helping the market mature. Clients still approach agencies first for help with media relations, but are increasingly stepping up their activity to include Marco's and events, and then corporate communications.

The Chinese offices of global corporations are much bigger buyers of communications expertise than local companies, who tend to rely on their own personal relationships with journalists, forged through gifts and entertaining. Nevertheless, consultants who are growing up with the industry are becoming experts in balancing creative campaigns with a deep understanding of the unique media environment. In recent years the Chinese media has had more flexibility and editorial control, but the regulation of media outlets by the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) can still be a challenge.

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It is important to keep in mind that the government has tight control over all media outlets, and media are required to cover important government events. As a result, media relations campaigns need to take the timing of news releases into account to ensure announcements do not clash with major national events. Issues which are still considered sensitive by the government also need to be handled carefully, and it's considered good practice for clients to underscore their commitment to contributing to the local economy and community, and acknowledging local partners.

A recent example of successful media relations in China is the campaign conducted by Weber Sandwiche for a consortium of companies. The government had announced changes to the postal system and had issued a notice "suggesting" that this topic should not be covered in the media. The changes would potentially have a negative effect on the international companies in the consortium, so Weber Sandwiche carefully identified journalists and media outlets with a reputation for being more outspoken, and who understood the industry, and conducted one-to-one briefings with them.

This careful approach resulted in dozens of cuttings, all supporting the desired message. The story was also picked up by major Chinese news websites and portals - including the Communist Party mouthpiece, the People's Daily - ensuring the consortium's voice was heard despite the media challenges. One of the most common questions about media relations in China is whether public relations professionals pay to secure media coverage.

This question stems from clients paying journalists a “ transportation allowance”: a small stipend to cover the cost of attending a one-on-one interview or media event. Paying journalists – a practice Weber Sandwich condemns – is common, as journalists in China are poorly paid and publications often don’t reimburse their journalists’ transportation costs. But it doesn’t buy media coverage: it’s true that the transportation allowance is required if you want a journalist to attend an event, but this payment certainly does not guarantee that the client’s news will be covered.

Even if the publication does decide to write a story, there is no guarantee that coverage will be timely. News in China generally has a long shelf life, and can be published any, anywhere from immediately to one month after the event. As in all markets across the world, the public relations industry in China relies heavily on public relations practitioners’ relationships with journalists. The concept of “ Guiana” – good connections – is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and its influence is everywhere.

Until recently, relationships with journalists have depended on “ Guiana” rather than having a good story to tell, and as a result, clients are still more focused on how many journalists attend an event rather than the resulting coverage. It is one of the roles of global consultancies such as Weber Sandwich to educate clients that quality of coverage is more important than quantity of journalists, and that an attendance of 30 journalists, 80% of whom write about the company, is better than 100 journalists, only 5% of whom cover the event.

Enticing a journalist to attend a media conference is also quite different to other markets. There are so many press briefings in China that consultants are required to get creative with the “ trimmings” and in some cases assign themes so that it is over and above the standard. What might be insider a normal press conference in one market is quite different to what is required in China. The concept of targeting media according to the target audience of the company is also very new to Chinese companies, who have used a scattergun approach to media relations in the past.

But there is increasing competition in the Chinese media, and journalists are now becoming more Western in their approach to finding good stories. The transportation fee system is therefore likely to die out in the future. It is easy to make the mistake of viewing mainland China as a single market, hen in reality the mainland comprises 31 provinces and autonomous regions across a vast territory, each with its own economic characteristics, development levels and culture.

As a result, the focus and approach of public relations activities must be tailored to local interests. Another challenge in China is that there are still misconceptions as to what PR is all about. Public relations is synonymous with organizing events and entertainment and there is much to be done to change the image of the industry so the brightest university students see PR as a serious career.

This tarts with agencies such as Weber Sandwich taking every opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of PR through partnerships with the top Chinese universities and underlying our work with the Chinese government

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on the Shanghai Expo and the Olympic bid. Public relations in China can be an enormous challenge because of geography as well as the media, but with all the exciting developments in business and culture, the future is assured for this young industry. David Lieu, managing director, Weber Sandwiche in Beijing and Diane Wwww, managing director, Weber Sandwiche in Shanghai.