Public Relations Measurement and Reporting Best Practices in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the Public Relations (PR) measurement and reporting best practices for Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes in Southeast Asia. Interviews were conducted with senior PR consultants and in-house communicators to identify these practices. The author found, through in-depth interviews that (at the time the interviews were conducted), the PR practitioners and the organizations they represent, did not use any specific measurement and reporting methodologies for Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes. The methodologies used to measure and report Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes were the same for other PR programmes. And despite the debate and criticism surrounding its use, the Advertising Value Equivalent remained the most popular measurement method.

Keywords: ***Corporate social responsibility, public relations measurement and reporting, Advertising Value Equivalent***

INTRODUCTION

Corporations used to be perceived as economic institutions. Now they are also viewed as social, cultural, and political institutions. This emerging view is the source of the growing demand for revised standards for business behaviour (Anshen 1980). Traditional cost and financial control systems have not been designed to illuminate most of the resource management issues associated with socially responsive policies and programs (Anshen 1980). Relatively little is known about how to measure the social cost throw-offs of social and cultural changes, how to measure the social gains related to social and cultural changes, and how to measure costs and benefits in almost every other area in which elements of society are pressing for business response. Without such knowledge, expressed in some kind of quantitative terms, however crude, businesses will be a long way from rationality in allocating resources to social programs and in appraising their contribution as quasi-revenues to compare with investment and expense. Private business will not be allowed to delay social responses until some appropriate quantitative measures can be developed (Anshen 1980).

Scholars have acknowledged this concern with a strong research agenda regarding whether and how CSR-related practices lead to specific economic, social and ecological performance outcomes (Wartick & Cochran 1985; Wood 1991; Tencati et al. 2004 cited in Apostolakou & Jackson 2009). Still, the measurement of CSR remains a rather elusive task. Researchers have yet to achieve a consensus regarding the validity of various measures (Mattingly & Berman 2006; Fryxell & Wang 1994; Waddock & Graves 1997; Tuzzolino & Armandi 1981 cited in Abbott & Monsen 1979). Several approaches have been used to measure CSR: evaluations by industry experts, the use of single-issue and multiple-issue indicators, and surveys of managers, each with their own limitations (Maignan & Ferrell 2000; Graafland et al. 2004 cited in Apostolakou & Jackson 2009).

Nonetheless, a growing demand exists among practitioners for ratings and metrics of corporate social responsibility. Stakeholders, such as NGOs and lobbying groups, have tried to develop metrics for compliance on particular issues. However, investors are also beginning to use CSR performance indicators (Marquez & Fombrun 2005 cited in Apostolakou & Jackson 2009). Almost all large and most medium-sized corporations now make annual appropriations for philanthropic, educational, artistic, and non-profit purposes (Anshen 1980).

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Relations

Pioneer public relations educator Rex Harlow once compiled about 500 definitions of public relations (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 1992). However, the evolution of the public relations and the numerous attempts to describe the practice lead to the following definition: "Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2000)."

Despite the varying definitions and terminologies, one thing is certain – that today's business environment is changing and the degree of uncertainly faced by most business enterprises are escalating. Modern organizations need to be externally oriented if they are to survive and be successful since problems quite often originate from a firm's inability to cope with changes emanating from the external environment (Andriole 1985).

Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) stress that PR must do more than build and maintain relationships with employees and neighbours, it must help businesses create an environment in which owners or investors are satisfied with the return on their invested capital. This increasingly important role that PR play is reflected in the CSR theories is discussed below.

Corporate Social Responsibility Theories

The Legitimacy Theory proclaims that the idea of a contract between society and business exists (Keinert 2008). This theory emphasises on how organizations are dependent on their environments, the expectations from the society that might be changing across time and how firms attempt to justify its existence in society by legitimising its activities—this is because organizations continually seek to ensure that they are perceived as operating within the norms of their respective societies and that their activities are perceived by societies as being 'legitimate' (Guthrie & Parker 1989; Lindblom 1994; Newson & Deegan 2002; Patten 1992).

Another crucial advancement in CSR theory is Freeman's stakeholder theory: He declares that not only the owners of a firm have a legitimate interest in and claims ("stakes") on the firm, but every individual or group that may affect or be affected by the company's activities has a *right* to be considered in the process of decision-making. Today, stakeholder relations management has become a crucial task when running a successful business, and managers of corporations are expected to not only consider the interests of the firm's owners, but to balance a multiplicity of competing, heterogeneous interests and needs (Burchell 2008).

Carroll's "Pyramid of Social Responsibilities", which categorised for the first time a company's diverse obligations helped to clarify the nature of businesses' responsibilities with regard to society at large. At the bottom of the pyramid lie the economic responsibilities of the firm to indicate that they constitute the very basis of corporate existence, followed by legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities (Carroll 2008).

The Agency Theory was employed in other CSR studies (Belkaoui & Karpik 1989; Gray Javad, Power, & Sinclair 2001; Gray, Kouhy, & Lavers 1995) to argue that the legitimacy and stakeholder theories are neither separate nor competing, but they are viewed as overlapping perspectives between the political economic assumptions stating that CSR information was voluntarily disclosed by firms as a means to reduce agency costs or future agency costs that could arise in the form of regulation (Gray et al. 2001).

The latest buzzword is the concept of Sustainable Global Development that increasingly intends on placing responsibility on private companies as a constituency became an ever more important driver of development (Keinert 2008). The UN Global Compact (UN Global Compact n.d.) and European Commission, which has published a Green Book in 2001 (EU's CSR Documents n.d.) clearly supports this shift in paradigm. Sustainability can be defined as the "capacity for continuance into the long-term future" (Tang & Porritt 2007). This concept was created out of the necessity of preserving the environment for future generations. At first addressed to governments, it was later addressed to private businesses to ensure stable long-term growth instead of short-term profit achievement, whatever the cost (Keinert 2008).

CSR Measurement and Reporting

Earlier studies on CSR were confined to defining the themes or dimensions relating to CSR (Keinert 2008; Schreck, 2009). These were followed by theoretical attempts to understand and rationalise CSR practices (Belkaoui & Karpik 1989; Burchell 2008; Carroll 2008; Keinert 2008; Lindblom 1994). These dimensions were later extended in empirical research relating to quantity and perceptions on CSR disclosure, characteristics of disclosure companies and reporting medium (Zeghal & Ahmed 1990; Matthews 1997; Carroll 1999; Gray et al. 2001) More recent studies focus on measurement as it has emerged as the critical link between performance and the principles of sustainability, and it facilitates continuous improvement (Epstein 2008; Watson & Noble 2005; Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, & Zerfass 2009).

Francisco Roman (2007 in (Herrera, Roman, Alarilla, de Jesus, & Uy 2012) pointed out that in the Philippines, "The evolution of CSR networks starts with the decade of donations when companies primarily provided financial assistance to NGOs and charitable institutions. The second phase is the decade of organizations when companies partnered with intermediaries or established their own foundation to undertake CSR. The third phase is the decade of citizenship when companies —incorporated end-users in the design and implementation of the CSR programs. The fourth phase is the decade of continuous improvement when companies internalized CSR programs in policy formulation. The current phase is the decade of engagement where corporation's CSR programs address the concerns of society in general." He added that although CSR is at varying levels of development in various Asian countries, CSR has generally followed a similar evolution; as such, studies on CSR are likely to be aligned to this evolution.

The subject of evaluating PR is related to how effective PR programmes have been in creating a conducive environment for business owners to operate and the measures of the returns of such programmes.

Patton (1982) in Watson and Noble (2005) defines the broad nature of evaluation as one that involves '… the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, personnel, and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs, personnel, or products are doing and affecting". James Blissland narrows the definition to "… the systematic assessment of a program and its results. It is a means for practitioners to offer accountability to clients and to themselves" (Wilcox et al. 1992).

Some definitions emphasize effectiveness, for example: "systematic measures of program effectiveness" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom 2000), "evaluation research is used to determine effectiveness" (Pavlik 1987), and "measure public relations effectiveness" (Lindenmann 1993). Others emphasize objectives: "we are talking about an orderly evaluation of progress in attaining the specific objectives of our public relations plan" (Cutlip et al. 2000). Evaluation as a social scientific practice can be traced back to attempts in the 1930s to evaluate Roosevelt's New Deal social programmes. Patton (1982 cited in Watson & Noble 2005) argues that the evaluation did not emerge as a "distinctive field of professional social scientific practice" until the late 1960s, about the same time as evaluation began to emerge as an issue in public relations.

In the 1980s and 1990s, communications practitioners left their practice to form companies offering media monitoring, measurement and evaluation services. Such companies are, among others, Media Monitors (Australia 1982) (Asia Media Monitors n.d.), KDPaine and Partners (USA, 1986) (KDPaine & Partners n.d.), and MediaBanc Sdn Bhd (Malaysia, 1997) (MediaBanc (M) Sdn Bhd, n.d.). It became a trend to contract with such specialized companies providing these services (Cutlip et al. 2000). It was also around this time that a Dephi study among UK practitioners and academics of research priorities was conducted by White and Blamphinin (1994). They found that the topic of evaluation was ranked at number one in the development of PR practice and research (Watson & Noble 2005).

Associations for establishing standards and methods of measurement and evaluation such as The Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation were formed under the auspices of the Institute for Public Relations in 1998 (Institute for Public Relations n.d.). The International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) (International Association For The Measurement and Evaluation of Communication, n.d.) was established in 1996 to provide a forum for information and knowledge-sharing and to introduce the best practice in all matters related to research and evaluation of media coverage and related communication issues (International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication n.d.).

In a study conducted by AMEC in 2009, it was found that external communicators use a variety of criteria to assess the effectiveness of their activities, including clippings, internal reviews, Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE), benchmarking, media evaluation tools, blog measures, dashboards, traditional opinion surveys, reputation index, focus groups, league tables, and others. Clipping is the most popular followed by internal reviews, AVEs, and benchmarking. However, there is no clear consensus as to which is the best evaluation and measurement tool (Wright et al. 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher chose the Interview method because this is a major technique for collecting factual information as well as opinions. It is a face-to-face interpersonal role situation in which the researcher asks respondents questions designed to elicit answers pertinent to the research (Naoum, 1998). The method allows the researcher to uncover in-depth information on current practices, which provides useful and meaningful insight. It allows respondents to elaborate on their opinions, values, motivations, recollections, experiences, and feelings about the best practices of PR measurement and reporting both within their company and in the industry, and to describe in detail the methodologies used. Since it is very likely that each company observe different PR measurement and reporting practices, this method allows for flexible questioning. The researcher is able to probe the various responses provided by the interviewees.

The research questions were:

- **RQ1**. What are the PR measurements and reporting best practices in Southeast Asia?
- **RQ2.** What are the measurement and reporting tools that are being used for cultural philanthropy?

The researcher spent a total of three months to complete the interviews. The interviewing process began in December 2005 and it was completed in February 2006. The researcher targeted a sample size of 10 senior PR consultants. From the population of PR practitioners, the researcher had stratified the sample by local (5) and international PR consultancies (5). The researcher approached 18 PR consultants and only nine senior PR consultants agreed to be interviewed. The sample now comprises practitioners from five local consultancies, four international PR consultancies. The rejection rate of 50% was encountered, which is within the acceptable drop-out sample of between 10% to 50% (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003). The nine consultancies are as follows: Rantau PR, Edelman, Perception Management, Arc Worldwide, Prestige Communications, WestCoast Communications, Bridges Strategic Communications, Fleishman Hillard, and Hill and Knowlton.

Since the interviews are conducted in person, the researcher approached PR practitioners working with local and international PR consultancies located within the Klang Valley. Only senior PR consultants were approached as they would be the most qualified candidates to provide useful and meaningful responses.

Local PR consultancies are companies wholly-owned and run by Malaysians. International PR consultancies are foreign-owned entities with offices across the globe, including Southeast Asia and Malaysia. Other than representing themselves, the international

PR consultancies located in the Klang Valley would also act as proxies for counterpart agencies located elsewhere in Southeast Asia. International consultancies have been existing and streamlined operations and practice guidelines, systems and processes, which are adhered to throughout the world. Since the author intends to find out only "what" the best practices are and not "how" it is implemented, it is therefore, not necessary to travel to each Southeast Asian country to research the different ways of implementation in the environments unique in each country.

FINDINGS

The researcher found that, with regards to Research Question 2 (What are the measurement and reporting tools that are being used for cultural philanthropy?), none of the interviewees used any specific measurement and reporting tools to measure Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes.

The findings below found answers to Research Question 1 (What are the PR measurements and reporting best practices in Southeast Asia?). Table 1 below reveals the definition of PR measurement as understood by senior PR consultants.

Table 1: PR Consultant's Definition of PR Measurement

PR Consultancy	Definition of PR Measurement
Consultant 1	Qualitative (content of articles) Quantitative (number of clippings, PR value)
Consultant 2	PR value
Consultant 3	Impact Objectives met Issues are properly managed and does not escalate to a crisis
Consultant 4	AVE Key messages Analysis of objectives and evaluation of results
Consultant 5	Publicity garnered - clippings, television and radio coverage Research and audits before and after on attitudes and perception, dipstick, and in-depth interviews
Consultant 6	Largely intangible Size of media clippings (column cm)
Consultant 7	A survey should be done quantitatively and qualitatively to find opinion of target and prior to campaign. 3 to 6 months later, find out if there is a change of opinion.
Consultant 8	Output - column cm. Outcomes - the degree of behaviour and perception change
Consultant 9	Depends on clients. Most in Malaysia measure media exposure and AVE Deliverables - fulfilment of deliverables Error-free - "did we get the best for the client?" How well it's written

The PR consultancies' definition of PR measurement is consistent with the item considered to be most important to their clients, which is media coverage.

Informants from three agencies (Rantau PR, Edelman and Arc Worldwide) define PR measurement as an "output"; meaning, PR measurement is seen mostly in terms of media coverage, either quantitatively or qualitatively. Quantitative measurements included calculating the value of news clippings (print, television and radio) in terms of advertising value equivalent and PR value. The quality of news clippings is measured qualitatively in terms of placement of the article, messages included, branding included, and so forth.

Other agencies define PR measurement as both "output" and "outcomes". "Outcomes" means that audits and research needs to be conducted before and after a project to identify behavioural and perception change in the target audience. These are done either in-house or outsourced to research companies in the case of bigger samples.

One informant, in addition to "output" and "outcomes" also define PR measurement in terms of their agency's overall performance. They look at fulfilment of deliverables, and the quality of service and commitment given throughout the project.

PR Consultancies' Media Measurement Methods

The researcher found that there is no one consistent way of measuring outputs or news clippings.

Print

Two agencies provide clients with AVE (Formula: column x cm x advertising value + colour surcharge). The interviewee admitted that this was not the best method, but it is the most generic. The interviewee from another agency said that he didn't use a PR multiplier because he is not able to find the justification for the multiplication.

Three agencies (Perception Management, Prestige Communications and WestCoast Communications) uses the PR multiplier of 3 in their measurement (Formula: column x cm x advertising value x 3 + colour surcharge) while one agency (Bridges Strategic Communications) uses the PR multiplier of 4 (Formula: column x cm x advertising value x 4 + colour surcharge).

Rantau PR and Hill and Knowlton use the highest PR multiplier, which is 5 (Formula: column x cm x advertising value x 5 + colour surcharge).

Edelman only provides message analysis stating that they had taken out PR value from the reports and have stopped pro-actively offering measurement of PR value. Perception Management and Hill and Knowlton are also discouraging the use of PR value and prefer to provide message analysis instead. Items mentioned in message analysis include headlines, picture carried, tone (positive, negative or neutral), comparison with competitors, exposure in top tier media or circulation of media, placement of articles and messages featured.

Electronic (Television and Radio)

Perception Management and WestCoast Communications measures electronic coverage by considering the duration of the broadcast, advertising value and a PR multiplier of 3 (Formula: broadcast duration x advertising value x 3). Bridges Strategic Communications uses the same formula but with a PR multiplier of 4 and consideration of the airtime belt (Formula: airtime belt x broadcast duration x advertising value x 4). Fleishman Hillard only considers the duration of broadcast and advertising value (Formula: broadcast duration x advertising value). The other PR consultancies do not measure electronic coverage.

DISCUSSION

Overall, all the PR consultants interviewed called for improvement in measurement and reporting methodologies, but they also acknowledge the many challenges to overcome in order to do so.

Several informants offered suggestions for improvements:

- According to Rantau PR, "Clients should look at qualitative measurements. We now do both qualitative and quantitative for clients."
- Edelman lamented that, "The industry has not evolved. We are still using AVE and it is not accurate. We need to conduct word-of-mouth marketing and generally, clients lack understanding that PR is a strategic tool, and not mere publicity. Sometimes the reach is to the niche and not to the 'public.'
- Prestige Communications said that, "Clients should stop asking for clippings/ coverage. They should focus more on research before and after campaigns. They must have a place for research."
- Arc Worldwide commented that, "PR is hard to measure. For example, how does one measure reputation? When developing a PR plan, we need more considerations to ensure consistency of key messages."

Some respondents highlighted that cost is a primary barrier:

- Perception Management said that, "Now we push perception audits to our clients as the main form of evaluation. However, because it is expensive, not many interested to invest."
- According to WestCoast Communications, "Clients should have better educated Brand Managers who are aware that PR is not free advertising. They need to understand how the media works. And most important, PR should be included in the overall business plan and not as last minute marketing support. PR should be budgeted for and not activated with leftover budget."
- For Bridges Strategic Communications, "There is a necessity to economise measurement of PR (for example, one focus group costs around RM7000). Someone has to make it cheaper to measure and develop other perspectives of measurement. How else can we look at outcomes? There must be an urgency to find different perspectives to increase the perception tagged to PR services. Also, the global economy has gone very volatile especially with terrorism. Most Multinational Corporations are very reluctant to spend on marketing and brand building; budgets go down year after year. Retainer values go down as well."
- Bridges also said that companies are more willing to pay for research if their investment in a campaign is huge. "Nestle pays RM200,000 to find out if their direct marketing campaign works because they spend RM3 million on direct marketing."
- To Fleishman Hillard, "PR measurement is very important. However, the cost is in USD and this is a huge barrier for companies in Malaysia. Since PR budgets are very small, companies are not willing to put more money to track outcomes."

- According to Hill and Knowlton, "We have not reached 'there' yet. PR measurement costs money and we are not willing to invest in research. We normally try to provide a budget for them to conduct an audit before they start and one year after, when the campaign ends (especially for ICT clients). Ours is more qualitative. There's more measurement now than last time (over the last 5 to 6 years) and there are more research companies out there."

CONCLUSION

The author found, through in-depth interviews that (at the time the interviews were conducted), the PR consultants, did not use any specific measurement and reporting methodologies for Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes in Southeast Asia. The methodologies used to measure and report Arts and Culture-related CSR programmes were the same for other PR programmes. And despite the debate and criticism surrounding its use, the Advertising Value Equivalent remained the most popular measurement method.

PR consultants have called for improvements in measurement and reporting methods and this should also address some of the budgetary concerns and management mindsets. The improvements should also factor in the quality of measurement while at the same time, be simple and time effective to implement.

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