

## **Speaking Truth to Power: Time For Comms Pros to Step up their Game**

*Priyanka Pugaokar – Corporate Communications Manager – Rashi Peripherals Limited*

A few months ago, one of the prominent airline companies garnered negative press over serious lapses in its customer service. Earlier, an Edutech company faced criticism for signing a multi-million celebrity endorsement deal hours after laying off thousands of employees. These are a few incidences of reputational damage due to flawed business moves. PR and Marketing are the crucial aspects of reputation management. Companies spend extensive budgets on publicity campaigns and brand endorsements. However, marketing expenditure does not always translate into goodwill, consumer loyalty and growth, especially when the core offering fails to charm end users.

I had an opportunity to be part of a thought-provoking conversation around Reputation and ‘Speaking Truth to Power’ at the annual general meeting of the Public Relations Consultants Association of India (PRCAI). Keynote speaker Dr. Sanjaya Baru - Writer, Policy Analyst and Economist, shared an interesting take on how comms/PR teams can look at their roles beyond publicity and crisis management and highlight real business concerns that impact an organization’s reputation. Reputation cannot be built in isolation. It encompasses product/service quality, consumer experience, ethical business practices, employee-centric policies, environmental responsibility and community empowerment. Communications (comms) professionals understand the complex landscape of reputation management. Hence, they can play an instrumental role in creating a mechanism to offer honest feedback to the leadership. I connected with communications experts to understand their perspectives on the changing dynamics of reputation management and comms beyond conventional PR.

### **The Expanded Scope of Comms**

While most companies measure PR efforts on the yardsticks of news coverage, there is a need to look at the larger canvas. The objective of comms is not to influence sales revenue but to create a pitch to assist the company in striking meaningful deals and winning more consumers. Communication experts should remain focused on their objectives and the value proposition they offer. *“Today, media visibility is just one aspect of the broader responsibility of corporate branding and reputation management. PR and communications roles increasingly align with the company’s purpose and business priorities, ensuring their efforts have a measurable impact. By demonstrating how strategic communications can drive business outcomes, PR leaders can broaden the scope of their influence and integrate their work more deeply into the overall business strategy”, says Nandini Chatterjee - Former Chief Marketing & Communications Officer at PwC India.*



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(Image: LinkedIn profile)

## **Changing Dynamics of Reputation**

Companies often focus on marketing and overlook poor product performance and consumer experience. They also ignore opinions of their stakeholders like employees, suppliers, dealers, investors, and customers. Stakeholder communication, especially internal comms is one of the crucial strategies leaders can leverage to understand the sentiments of their vital stakeholders. Employee advocacy and stakeholders engagement can help in building brand reputation. *“When employees are well engaged and speak positively about the organization, their credibility significantly enhances the company’s reputation. Evolved organizations understand the power of internal engagement and prioritize cultivating a positive workplace culture. They invest in employee development, recognize and reward contributions, and maintain transparent communication. By fostering a sense of belonging and pride among their staff, these organizations ensure that their employees naturally become advocates, promoting a strong, positive image to external audiences. This approach not only boosts morale and retention but also solidifies the company’s reputation in the market”, says Ms Chatterjee.*

## **Comms in Boardroom Discussions**

Traditionally, boardrooms have leaned towards finance and sales & marketing experts. However, there is a growing recognition of diverse viewpoints in strategic discussions, and boards have started to include marketing and communications professionals. Comms teams can offer a great value add to boardroom discussions. They understand the market dynamics, technological innovations, changing customer preferences and competition landscape. The key is to have a proactive approach from comms/PR teams and open-minded management that encourages creativity and innovation. *“While there could be perception issues and historical precedents of viewing communications more as a tactical function and a cost centre, communications professionals also have to work harder to break the barriers. They need to build trust and demonstrate their ability to think strategically, willingness to establish ROI, and proactively seek opportunities to contribute. Communications professionals need to use data and insights effectively and collaborate with cross-functional teams to amplify their voice within the organisation”, says Radha Radhakrishnan, Fractional Communications Officer.*

## **Speaking Truth to Power**

While the scope of the comms function is expanding, the primary role of comms is to offer consultancy/advice and not make decisions. In such a scenario, how much autonomy do comms teams have in speaking truth to power and influencing business decisions? According to Ms Radhakrishnan, autonomy depends upon several factors such as the organisational context, the communications professional or the agency's credibility and trustworthiness etc. *“Complete*

*autonomy is elusive in most organisations. Using data, focusing on solutions, and constructive messaging help build trust and communicate effectively with leadership. When the leadership understands how crucial communication is in building or shaping their company's reputation, they begin to look at the function holistically. To get there, comms professionals have to make the function agile, ROI-focused and inclusive by integrating it with other functions”, says Ms Radhakrishnan.*



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*(Image: LinkedIn profile)*

Thanks to social media, we can openly share our experiences, call out brands for poor performance and influence opinions around the brand image. Gone are the days when companies would push their narratives over concerns of end users. Brand owners understand the significance of a consumer-centric approach and want to listen to ideas which can impact business positively. Ms Chatterjee believes leaders are usually open to hearing suggestions from team members if they see value-added being provided in terms of business impact. Therefore, if the communications team demonstrates their value in business and growth strategy discussions, they will be heard. *“By contributing meaningful insights and aligning their efforts with the company's strategic goals, the communications team can significantly influence business decisions and drive organizational growth”, says Ms Chatterjee.*

## **The Way Forward**

The understanding of corporate reputation is constantly evolving. Comms teams have started to get the recognition they deserve within the company. However, they need to step up their game with innovative and integrated PR campaigns, data analytics and technology and a solution-oriented approach to increase their influence within the company and its stakeholders.

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## **About Author**



Priyanka Pugaokar is a communications professional with expertise in internal and external communication, IPO PR and crisis communications. She holds over ten years of combined experience in communications and business journalism. She is currently associated with Rashi Peripherals Limited as Corporate Communications Manager and leads several strategic projects. She is an alumna of School of COmmunications and REputation (SCoRE).

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