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The Crucial Role of Research in Multicultural & Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract

Research is recognized as an essential part of planning and evaluation in most areas of marketing and corporate communication, including advertising, direct marketing and, increasingly, public relations and corporate communication disciplines such as employee communication and community relations. Understanding of audience interests, awareness, perceptions and information needs is critical to strategic planning of communication campaigns. Secondly, identification and quantification of changes in awareness, perception and, ultimately, behaviour is necessary to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of communication (i.e. the outcomes or results).

Nowhere is research more important than in multicultural and cross-cultural communication. In international relations that began with human migrations and trade and reach new levels today with globalization, corporations, organizations and governments are increasingly seeking to create consistencies and shared values across divergent cultural groups. They seek to create consistencies and shared values in relation to products (eg. Coca-Cola, IBM, McDonalds), policies (eg. trade agreements), and in popular culture such as films, television programs and news media.

Social rules and shared values – that is, the culture of communities – affects organizations seeking to communicate multi-culturally and cross-culturally at two levels. First, the ‘home’ culture of the organization wishing to communicate shapes policies, plans and products that are produced. Second, the cultures of audiences inform and substantially shape their interpretation and use of information. Often, multicultural and cross-cultural communication is a case of ‘Chinese whispers’ on an international scale. What one says or shows is frequently not what others hear or see.

Studies cited in this paper show that culture is a vitally important factor in communication. Yet, companies and even governments attempt communication with little understanding of audiences which they wish to reach and with which they wish to build relationships and understanding.

This paper examines cultural considerations specifically in the field of public relations and corporate communication in the Asia Pacific region which is comprised of a diverse range of cultures and has been identified as the largest market in the world. Thus, it is increasingly a focal point of global communication campaigns.

Introduction

This paper discusses a key element of corporate and marketing communication across cultures which occurs both within countries with multicultural communities and increasingly internationally in today's era of globalization. That element, research, is vital at both the planning stage and for evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns – yet it is often not done with the result that much communication does not cross cultures. Conversely, carefully targeted research can unlock doors to effective communication inter-culturally and globally.

Multiculturalism – A Communication ‘Blind Spot’

Defining culture with all its myriad characteristics and manifestations is a considerable undertaking beyond the scope of this paper. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) listed 164 definitions of the term, adding that they found 300 other variations of these definitions. However, core characteristics of culture are noted as a basis for discussion. Tyler defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.¹ Kroeber and Kluckhohn, in their analysis, concluded that culture comprised “a set of attributes and products of human societies, and therewith of mankind, which are extrasomatic and transmissible by mechanisms other than biological heredity”.²

From this, Kaplan and Manners (1972) identified and explored the determinants of societal culture. They posed that four key factors shaped culture: the level of economic development which they referred to as ‘technoeconomics’; social structure and relationships such as family, feudal, caste and class stratifications; ideology including religious beliefs, philosophies and worldviews; and personality which they used to refer to traits of individuals in society such as child rearing practices, sexuality and gender roles.³

Hofstede (1980, 1991) advanced thinking about culture in texts highly relevant to public relations and its practice in Asia Pacific specifically. Hofstede identified five dimensions of social culture as:

- *Power distance* referring to the vertical stratification of a society where individuals are accorded different levels of importance and status. The caste system of India is one widely identified example of considerable ‘power distance’ that occurs in Asian cultures.
 - *Collectivism* referring to priority given to the group versus individual rights and freedoms;
 - *Masculinity/femininity* as it defines the roles of men and women in a society and their behaviour;
 - *Uncertainty avoidance* is the extent to which a society can tolerate and cope with uncertainty and ambiguity. Some societies have high levels of rituals and rites to provide unambiguous codes on how to live and behave, while high-context and highly educated cultures can tolerate and even demand greater flexibility and autonomy;
 - Fifthly, Hofstede identified *Confucian dynamism* (later renamed *long term orientation* to describe the characteristic of some cultures to foster virtues orientated to future rewards versus short-term gain which clearly owes its origin to Asia.
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Other scholars such as Kakar (1971) and Tayeb (1988) added *deference to authority* and *interpersonal trust* respectively as additional key dimensions of culture.

Examining these key dimensions and characteristics of culture in an Asia Pacific context even briefly leads to important conclusions that impact communication campaigns. 'Power distance' is greater in many developing Asian countries than it is in more egalitarian western states. As well as extreme examples such as the caste system of India, relations between Chinese merchants and local *bumiputra* such as Malay and Javanese people in Malaysia and Indonesia are other more subtle examples of the stratifications that exist and shape local societies. 'Collectivism' is a strong philosophy in most Asian countries compared to rampant individualism which characterizes post-modern western societies. Masculinity/femininity remains a key determinant of roles in many Asian countries. Some have not yet experienced 'women's movements' that have influenced western societies over the past 50 years and women remain in subservient roles, while others such as parts of Indonesia have traditional matriarchal structures or gender equality. Many Asian societies, even modern Asian societies such as Singapore, have high levels of 'uncertainty avoidance', preferring a regulated environment which westerners see as rigid and oppressive and something to be broken down. 'Confucian dynamism' (long-term orientation) was clearly identified with Asian societies in mind. Long-term orientation, as well as collectivism, underpinned the 'economic miracle' of the building of Singapore and shapes the family structure of many Asian companies where nepotism is seen as a virtue rather than an abuse as it is in the West. Additional to Hofstede's five dimensions of culture, deference to authority is worthy of particular note as this is a key characteristic of most Asian cultures. Even in modern day Indonesia and parts of Malaysia, younger sisters seek the permission of older unmarried sisters before they get married. Elders are respected and accorded status in society. And, because of the high levels of collectivism, strong family linkages and Confucian dynamism, interpersonal trust is often substantially higher in Asian societies compared with individualistic post-nuclear family Western societies.

In other words, in all of these seven potential dimensions of culture, Asian cultures remain markedly different to Western cultures. These differences are not the superficial customs and mores that are referred to in *Culture Shock* books which line management shelves in Asian airports, such not using your left hand in some countries like Indonesia and avoiding the number four because it sounds like death in Chinese. Culture fundamentally shapes worldviews and ways of thinking – and, therefore, is a crucial consideration in communication.

Culture was identified by Vercic, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1996) as one of five 'environmental variables' that form the basis of planning public relations in a country, the others being political ideology, the economic system, level of activism, and the media system.⁴ While more study of the impact of these variables needs to be done according to Sriramesh (2003), a number of studies have linked culture to public relations including those of Sriramesh and White (1992), Sriramesh (1992 and 1996), Sriramesh, J. Grunig and Dozier (1996) and Sriramesh and Takasaki (1999).

Communication practitioners often believe that through anecdotal information and life experience they have sufficient understanding of audiences for planning, and they often equally contend that they can confidently and accurately identify change and results without specific research. This is particularly the case in PR and corporate communication where use of research has lagged behind other disciplines, according to international studies cited.

However, in multicultural and cross-cultural communication, major cultural differences between those who wish to communicate messages and their audiences mean that relevant experiential knowledge is limited or not available to communicators and intuitive decisions located within a foreign culture can be misdirected.

Quantitative data, such as populations, demographic statistics and market sizing are only the rudimentary beginnings of understanding another culture. *Qualitative* information on audience attitudes, perceptions, language (not only spoken and written text but signs and symbols that denote meaning), religion, customs, mores and social and political systems are essential for effective communication.

Differences or variables within cultures is particularly important given the predominance of public relations theory and models of practice are Western, influenced by the largely American and European origin of public relations and, despite the much vaunted emergence of globalization, have not significantly adapted or changed to reflect diversity of cultures. For example, leading public relations texts such as Grunig & Hunt (1984); Cutlip, Center & Broom (1985); Crable and Vibbert (1986); Baskin & Oronoff (1988) and even new texts such as *The New Australian & New Zealand Public Relations Manual* (Tymson & Lazar, 2002) contain no chapter or section on multicultural or cross-cultural communication. Even in regions of the world renowned for their mix of cultures such as Africa with its diverse range of races and languages, *The Handbook of Public Relations* (Skinner & von Essen, 1982) lacks any specific discussion of cultural issues in communication.

Gold Paper No 13 produced in 2000 by the International Public Relations Association entitled *Challenges in Communication: State of the Art & Future Trends* similarly did not address multicultural and cross-cultural communication in its 14 chapters despite its title and the organization's international membership and focus. While IPRA has focused on this issue in other publications and forums, its absence from a text dealing with challenges in communication and future trends in the new millennium is informative.⁵

My own previous texts in Australia, New Zealand and Asia have been similarly criticized for western myopia and lack of focus on multicultural and cross-cultural issues in communication. New Zealand academic, Debashish Munshi, points out that *The New Zealand Handbook of Public Relations* (Peart & Macnamara, 1996) "makes no mention of issues of cultural diversity. Instead the book defines and describes the nature of public relations from one perspective: the perspective of the dominant managerial frame". Similarly, in a paper entitled 'Requisitioning Variety: Photographic Metaphors, Ethnocentric Lenses and the Divided Colours of Public Relations', Munshi cites *The New Australian and New Zealand Public Relations Manual* which "makes no reference to issues of multiculturalism" despite New Zealand having a substantial Maori, Pacific Islander and Asian population.⁶

In their paper, 'Against Grand Narratives: Localised Knowledges of Public Relations', Judy Motion and Shirley Leitch from the University of Waikato, support Munshi's view, pointing out that Maori people comprise around 10 per cent of the population of New Zealand and Maori and English are the two official languages. They go on to note that the lack of focus on and understanding of multicultural and cross-cultural communication is debilitating in many efforts to communicate. Motion and Leitch report: "The dearth of information on the localized knowledge required by practitioners before they can effectively engage in cross-cultural communication was highlighted during the recent campaigns surrounding a nationwide referendum on a proposed

compulsory superannuation scheme. As Wellington's leading daily newspaper, *The Dominion*, noted in its headline, 'More research needed on how to target Maori.'⁷

"Multiculturalism, as a concept, has been slow to emerge in public relations literature", Munshi concludes.⁸

He notes Stephen Banks' 1995 text, *Multicultural Public Relations*, which argues that public relations "is itself a cultural activity" and proposes that "cultural aspects of public relations communication indicate that intercultural communication theory must be sensitive to both interaction that creates and displays identities among cultural groups and communication as a culturally coded system of expressing identity". But Munshi argues that Banks continues to focus on public relations from dominant western management and cultural perspectives.⁹

"Despite the transition from the era of colonization to globalization, public relations has continued to be a part of the imperialist economic system," Munshi says.¹⁰

When they are not ignored, multicultural groups are often referred to in a tokenistic and exploitive way. Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1998) describe the emergence of "ethnic minorities" which "differ from the traditional mainstream citizenry in race, language, and customs" as a 'target audience' to be developed.¹¹ Clearly 'developed', in this context, implies changing and orientating ethnic minorities to the dominant culture.

Globalization, exercised largely through a western imperialistic approach, has drawn considerable criticism and, while some is dismissed as anti-capitalism campaigning of the radical left, charges of cultural insensitivity and communication ineffectiveness warrant attention in the public relations and corporate communication sector. Stuart Hall comments: "The old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject."¹²

Mass media, widely used in public relations and advertising campaigns, come in for special criticism. "The exponential growth in international media and the mediation of culture in general is seen to undermine these (local) vested identities or, in the words of Price (1995), the 'plethora of changing signals, floating, then raining from space, poses impressive problems of belonging, identification, nationalism and community'," media researchers, Newbold, et al (2002) argue.¹³ They add that terms such as 'Coca-colonization' and 'Americanization' are used to describe the one-way ethnocentric, culturally colonizing focus on much global communication.

Why is Multiculturalism an Important Concept?

Philosopher Francis Bacon said: "Men commonly think according to their inclinations, speak according to their learning and imbibed opinions, but generally act according to custom."

If, as Banks argues, public relations is a cultural activity, and it inarguably takes place within a cultural context as it targets a range of audiences and stakeholders within various societal segments, recognition and understanding of culture logically emerges as a vitally important element of planning and management.

A number of writers in Asia, Eastern Europe and other non-western cultures have been warning for some time of the dangers of ethnocentricity which is an underlying concept in globalization.

Ken Newton discusses the rapid economic development of Malaysia with its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC); the shining twin Petronas Towers that are the world's tallest buildings; plans to establish an IT centre to rival Silicon Valley; and other advancements. To mono-cultural and ethnocentric eyes, these developments and changes suggest Malaysia is an industrialized society little different today than western nations.¹⁴

However, Newton notes fundamental cultural differences that govern social, political and business practices and processes in Malaysia. He says: "The intricacies of the business and government network and the unwritten rules and protocols ... to follow an orderly but tortuously slow path to approval take time and infinite patience." He also warns that "the smile and the nods of approval ... are simply a time honoured courtesy" and do not mean what they often mean in other cultures. Furthermore, Newton describes another key attribute of many Asian cultures: "you can't do a great deal of work in Asia by remote control. Business thrives on direct contact."¹⁵

Newton's warns: "This is a culture, don't forget it, where hand delivery of important documents is virtually mandatory to government offices and indeed written communication in anything other than the official language, Bahasa, at senior government level is frowned upon. The concluding words of his paper express the dichotomy between modern business and culture vividly:

"... if you happen to be dealing with the Sultan, forget couriers, the post office and the telephone. You will send the Chairman of the Board to personally place the envelope on the silver salver at the front door of the palace. All this is happening in a society where the government has declared that it will become the first paperless administration in the world."¹⁶

Here are a few other anecdotal examples provided by practitioners showing how culture creates a unique communication environment in Asia:

- When a new computer system at the port of Johor Baru in Malaysia failed, resulting in huge backlogs of ships waiting to load or unload, the port authority addressed media criticisms by advising the media that continued public criticism of the port would only serve to drive trade to the nearby port of Singapore with which Johor struggles to compete. The media were advised that they should desist criticizing the port in the national interest. And most did, particularly when the call received government weight. The spirit of collectivism (putting the nation before individual issues or problems) and deference to authority endemic in Malaysian culture created the environment for a PR strategy that would never work in a western country. And, vice versa, western media and PR strategies would almost certainly have fallen flat in Malaysia in this case.
- Western PR approaches to advising a large Chinese company that it needed to communicate with its shareholders, build a brand image and introduce a customer loyalty program (Best Practice western marketing thinking) fell on deaf ears. And why not? The shareholders were all family or closely linked friends of the founders of the company which is common in Asia, particularly in Chinese business. Their customers, mostly high net worth individuals and other large businesses, were secured through long-standing personal contacts. Personal contacts, interpersonal trust and 'face' were powerful cultural forces at work and, in this instance, were more powerful than brand marketing strategies or customer loyalty programs.

The predominance of English as an international language has contributed to western ethnocentrism, according to Elisabeth Patz of the University of Canberra. Patz suggests that it is not simply that many nations speak English that lulls westerners into a false sense of security in

communication; language differences reflect fundamental codes that vary across cultures. She gives examples including the limited number of terms in English for personal relationships such as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘aunt’, ‘uncle’, and so on. Other languages distinguish between older and younger brothers and sisters, male and female cousins, aunts and uncles on the father’s and mother’s side, and a number of languages use familial terms for persons other than blood relations.¹⁷ In Indonesia, for example, the Bahasa word *ibu* meaning ‘mother’ is commonly used to address a woman of high status instead of the term for Ms or Madam. Mandarin and Vietnamese also employ relationship terms beyond their western meaning with important local significance. These are simple but illustrative examples of culture at work in the bedrock of communication – language.

Yungwook and Karadjov in two case studies of South Korea and Bulgaria propose that public relations theories can explain organizational cultures to some extent, but point out that organizational cultures are bound to the culture of the societies in which they operate.¹⁸

Sriramesh and White (1992) discussed how these societal cultures impacted on organizational cultures and concluded that both societal and organizational cultures interacted dynamically and affected communication and public relations activities within a society.¹⁹

A view that demonstrates the potential conflict between different cultures is that of Eley and Suny who warn: “Culture is more often not what people share, but what they chose to fight over.”²⁰ That peoples have gone to war over cultural issues is a sobering reminder of the importance of culture and the challenges it presents in communication.

How Can Organisations Understand and Adapt to Culture?

A key to organizations understanding different cultures in which they operate or seek to operate is addressing another blind spot in public relations – the use of research.

Research, in this context, is used as a broad term to describe both informal methods of gathering information such as feedback, discussions and consultation, as well as formal research. A further clarification is that research is often discussed in terms of ‘evaluation’ which is traditionally seen narrowly as an information gathering function performed at the end of an activity to measure results. In this analysis, the views of Paul Noble (1995), Noble and Watson (1999) and others that evaluation is, or should be, part of an ongoing process of gathering information for understanding existing attitudes, views and perceptions to assist in planning as well as assessing results of campaigns is applied.

Application of research in the corporate communication and public relations sector has been shown in extensive studies to be still in its infancy and, when conducted, quite rudimentary.

In the leading PR text *Managing Public Relations* (1984), James Grunig and Todd Hunt, commented: “The majority of practitioners ... still prefer to ‘fly by the seat of their pants’ and use intuition rather than intellectual procedures to solve public relations problems.”²¹

In *Public Relations – What Research Tell Us*, John Pavlik commented in 1987 that “measuring the effectiveness of PR has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail”.²²

A landmark 1988 study developed by Dr Walter Lindenmann of Ketchum Public Relations (*Ketchum Nationwide Survey on Public Relations Research, Measurement and Evaluation*)

surveyed 945 practitioners in the US and concluded that “most public relations research was casual and informal, rather than scientific and precise” and that “most public relations research today is done by individuals trained in public relations rather than by individuals trained as researchers”.²³

A survey of 311 members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia in Sydney and Melbourne and 50 public relations consultancies undertaken as part of an MA research thesis in 1992, found that only 13 per cent of in-house practitioners and only nine per cent of consultants regularly used objective research for planning or evaluation.²⁴

Tom Watson, as part of post-graduate study in the UK in 1992, found that 75 per cent of PR practitioners spent less than 5 per cent of their budget on objective evaluation. Watson found that while 76 per cent undertake some form of review, the two main methods used were monitoring (not evaluating) press clippings and “intuition and professional judgement”.²⁵

There is little evidence that the usage of research has increased significantly in public relations since. As shown in Figure 1, a study by the Public Relations Society of America of the tools used by practitioners in the previous two years for planning and measuring activities found the overwhelming majority (82 per cent) relied on press clippings and 50 per cent relied on ‘intuition’ and ‘gut feel’, with a quarter or less using objective research such as audience surveys or focus groups. Similar studies in the UK also show low use of objective research.

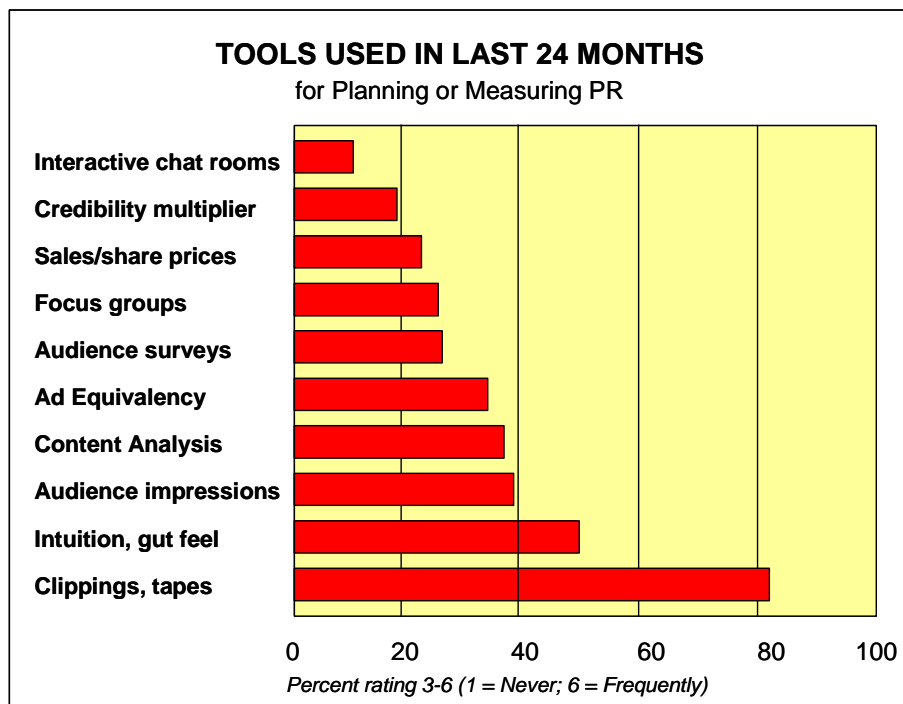


Figure 1. 2001 Media Relations Reality Check, survey of 4,200 members of Public Relations Society of America.

Why Public Relations Lacks Research

“Lack of budget” and “lack of time” are the two most commonly given reasons for research not being carried out in PR and corporate communication, according to studies conducted in the US and UK. However, other studies suggest that the cause goes deeper than that. A paper ‘Evaluation:

The Achilles Heel of the Public Relations Profession' published in *IPRA Review* argues that the root of the problem goes back to the very models of public relations practised.²⁶

James Grunig describes the four evolutionary models of public relations as, in order of development, Press Agency; Public Information; Two-Way Asymmetric; and Two-Way Symmetric.²⁷

The Press Agency model focused almost exclusively on generating media publicity and was, therefore, highly tactical and completely one way in nature. The Public Information model looks beyond publicity to publications, events and other communication activities, but is still focused on one-way dissemination of information to audiences. The views of audiences are seldom considered in either of these approaches; the overriding focus is on distributing information that the organization wants to distribute. Grunig proposed that public relations, to be effective communication, needs to involve two-way interaction, noting that achieving changes in attitudes and building understanding and relationships requires *dialogue* not monologue. He described a partial evolution of two-way communication as asymmetric (ie. unbalanced, with the organization still telling more than listening) and saw the ultimate expression of public relations as two-way symmetric communication where the organization and its audiences were in harmony. However, in 1984, Grunig estimated that more than two-thirds of public relations practice was Press Agency or Public Information, and there is no evidence that PR practice has changed substantially since.

Grunig further described the nature of Press Agency and Public Information models of public relations, and even Two-Way Asymmetric communication to some extent, as 'orientation' (or attempted orientation) of the audience to the organization. He argues, instead, for 'co-orientation' in which the organization and its publics meet in the middle through mutual listening, understanding and accommodation. But, according to Grunig and other studies, only a small percentage of communication programs follow a Two-Way Symmetric Co-orientation approach based on listening and adapting to audiences as well as presenting the organization's views and products.

Noble and Watson agree saying: "The dominant paradigm of practice is the equation of public relations with persuasion."²⁸

A study first published in 1992 and updated in 2002 reported: "Most practitioners have only a basic understanding of Otto Lerbinger's four basic types of PR research: environmental monitoring (or scanning), public relations audits, communications audits, and social audits. Many use the terms interchangeably and incorrectly and have little knowledge of survey design, questionnaire construction, sampling, or basic statistics and are, therefore, hamstrung in their ability to plan and manage research functions."²⁹

What Types of Research Can Aid Intercultural Communication?

A wide range of research methodologies are available and applicable to planning and evaluating multicultural and cross-cultural communication. Importantly, some informal methods can be low cost or no cost, and require little time. Furthermore, some formal research data may already be available.

The following is not an exhaustive list, but outlines 10 research methodologies and sources which can assist in understanding audiences applicable to multicultural and cross-cultural communication, with references tailored to Asia Pacific:

1. **Secondary data** (existing research) such as research published in professional or trade journals, on Web sites, or available by subscription such as Social Indicators Research. As well as drawing on the excellent resources of western data such as the Institute of Public Relations in the US (www.instituteforpr.com); the Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.com) the Institute of Public Relations in the UK (www.ipr.co.uk), the International Public Relations Association (www.ipra.org) lists PR organizations worldwide for local contact as well as considerable international PR information. The International Association of Business Communicators (www.iabc.com) is another international communication body which can point practitioners to relevant research and the IABC operates its own Research Foundation. Also, specific country Web sites such as that of the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (www.iprs.org.sg) provides contacts and publishes papers and research relevant to Asia and publications such as the *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* (Canberra University) regularly publishes professional and research papers of specific relevance to public relations in Asia;
 2. **Feedback** through meetings, informal discussions, staff suggestions and advice from local business partners is a vital element of planning and evaluation communication. A 'Golden Rule' in Asia, because of its high focus on interpersonal relations and formal channels is that you must have a local partner. Regular advice and feedback from a local distributor, business partner or even a friend found through an international communication body can provide a vital ingredient to planning PR and communication. Some Asian cultures have a system of 'go betweens' – mutually respected individuals who can mediate between an organization and key people in government or business and a specialist research strategy in Asia is often the use of effective 'go betweens'. These can be critical as formal meetings in Asia are often precisely that – formalities with little meaningful communication other than greetings and protocol. The real work and dialogue happens behind the scenes;
 3. **Advisory or Consultative Groups** which can be established at little or no cost and are an effective way to gain direct information and advice from audience representatives. Rather than proactively waiting for feedback, groups can be established to provide advice on local issues. Throughout Asia, customs of friendliness and hospitality ensure that asking individuals and groups to give you advice are well received. Formal titles for groups and convenors of such bodies are often an incentive. Most groups will be shy and polite, so you will have to listen attentively to reserved comments made;
 4. **Online 'chat rooms' and forums** can gain input instantly and at no cost, provided audiences are online and prepared to share their views openly and honestly. Developed Asian markets such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and parts of India have made major commitments to telecommunications including broadband technology and electronic communication with staff, country offices and branches is increasingly possible. But an environment of trust must be established in online forums and chat rooms and this takes time to develop. Single shot e-mails will be ineffective in gaining substantive or reliable information;
 5. **Interviews** (structured or unstructured) with key representatives of audiences can yield in-depth qualitative information on key issues, but need to be conducted in local languages even in English speaking countries and organizations;
 6. **Response mechanisms** such as interactive Web pages, toll-free phone lines or coupons and competitions can also be used with audiences such as staff, customers or channel partners and involve little or no cost;
 7. **Media content analysis** of local media, including foreign language media can provide invaluable insights into local issues, concerns, policies and viewpoints of communities (as these will be reflected in local media). Media analysis is available in all Asian media in all local languages as well as English from companies such as CARMA International and can
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- provide vital information about local issues and concerns, competitor activities and even foreshadowed government plans, rumours and speculation;
8. **Focus groups** which are structured discussions with small groups of representatives from target audiences can provide in-depth qualitative information about audience attitudes, concerns, fears, perceptions, etc and are useful with specific groups such as customers or potential customers;
 9. **Surveys** which can be conducted by hard copy questionnaires or as e-surveys either e-mailed to respondents or posted on a Web site are a traditional formal research method applicable in Asia. But local languages may need to be used – or even multiple languages – and the help of a professional research firm is advisable. Many of the major international research firms such as A.C. Nielson operate offices in Asia as well as local specialist research companies such as Asia Market Intelligence (AMI);
 10. **Ethnographic studies** which are widely used in anthropology and sociology employing unobtrusive observation of audiences in their environment can also be used for specialized research. Some form of ethnographic study, colloquially called ‘fly on the wall’ research, is advisable for all new visitors to Asia to learn local cultures.

Formal research methods require additional attention in Asia to address the high level of politeness which is seen as a virtue in most Asian societies. Asian audiences will not speak out the way western consumers and employees do and require polite methods of approach and coaxing to gain honest and detailed information, as well as highly receptive listening attuned to Asian culture and customs. As the *Culture Shock* books say, ‘yes does not mean yes’ in Asia. Incentives do work in most Asian markets, both money and fashionable prizes such as latest model mobile phones.

Other Steps to Improve Intercultural Communication

It should be noted that, in addition to informal and formal research, there are a number of other ways that multicultural and cross-cultural communication can be improved. These include involving a mix of relevant cultures in central management and listening to local management in international country offices. Too often, multinational corporations take a broad brush approach to countries and regions outside their home market, often referring simplistically and dismissively to multiple continents such as South America and Asia as ‘ROW’ – Rest of the World.

Training can also be a key element of enhancing multicultural and cross-cultural communication.

Conclusions

Public relations and corporate communication practitioners often feel that they cannot influence management to take a two-way symmetric approach to communication multi-culturally and cross-culturally. However, research provides communicators with objective data to support recommendations and planning activities.

A 1985 survey of Public Relations Society of America and International Association of Business Communicators members in the US and Canada showed that scanning research is positively associated with participation in management decision-making and membership of the dominant coalition”.³⁰

Also, as Pavlik reports: “in their 1979 and 1985 survey data from a panel of 208 PRSA members, Broom and Dozier (1986) found that increases in overall evaluation research activities were associated with increased participation in management decision-making”.³¹

Thus, by using research, communication practitioners can play a key role in their organizations and in building relationships with key multicultural and cross-cultural groups.

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Published in:

Macnamara J. (2004). Research for Multi-Cultural & Cross-Cultural Communication, *Journal of Communication Management*, London, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 322-334.

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