

Host

On air with me today is Charu Raizada, who comes with more than 20 years of experience in PR. She's an expert in Marcom Perception Management, Corporate Communications and Crisis communication.

Welcome Charu. And over to you.

Host

One common thread which binds all of us around the globe today is that wait for the COVID-19 vaccine. If 2020 belong to fmcg, and ecommerce companies, this last quarter and most of 2021 will turn all eyes towards pharma companies. Currently, over 100 studies are in different stages to find a vaccine for COVID-19. With more and more pharma companies trying to encash on this once in a lifetime moment, to ensure that this does not end up as just another case of breaking news. PR practitioners need to buckle up to take on a multitude of challenges, including public skepticism and distrust for the sector. Well, there certainly is a complex landscape, involving a full range of stakeholder groups, public affairs, government relations, b2b engagement, and, most importantly, consumer education. Convincing people to be immunized against the virus as a big challenge as the anti-vaccine sentiment is on the rise. A recent survey conducted in the United States found that the share of Americans interested in getting a vaccine immediately on release was dropping and dropping month and month from 69% in the previous month, to 58%. in October, it was shaking to see a high percentage of skepticism amongst healthcare workers as well for the vaccine.

Since consumers make decisions based on lot of inputs, our task as communicators demands from us robust educational and awareness programs. With the end objective of seeking endorsements from all stakeholders. We need to gain confidence from doctors and healthcare workers, we need to take an approach that rallies the people to science again, and respect science, a strategy needs to help break barriers to get support from the government and health agencies. This is possible only through insight and direction so the consumer can make a confident, comfortable decision. The ladder of faith cannot be built in a day. The problem does not end here Moderna, Pfizer, AstraZeneca and many more soon to be announced names clearly showed that the scientists have outdone themselves. But with so many vaccines that may be soon available, people will have a hard time deciding which one to get, and could end up choosing none. The paralysis of choice is a well-known phenomenon behavioral economics, challenging times as communicators as we rise to the challenge to bring about behavior change.

Host

I'm Charu Raizada. Keep listening to Mrigashira, a weekly podcast for PR communications professionals. While COVID has unquestionably taken the toll on the PR and communications industry. 2021 promises to be an year of unparalleled growth in the month gone by about 62% PR firms have experienced delayed or cancelled campaigns and a loss of earnings by 46%. But growth is expected in the coming months as more and more companies are paying increased attention to corporate purpose. While PR firms are ramping up successfully to address clients digital needs, clients too are more open towards using PR to lead non-traditional services. The forecast for 2021 indicates a gravitates towards social media community management, multimedia content creation and influencer marketing, no surprise is there. Growth is also expected to come from strategic counseling, corporate reputation and purpose and CSR. It is interesting to see an enhanced focus on research, insights and planning followed by analytics in terms of sectoral growth, IT and technology tops the charts closely followed by healthcare. And in India we already see PR firms working towards

making a mark and these two sectors. Other sectors which promised to bring in growth include financial and professional services, consumer products, public sector and food and beverage. The report also touches upon some pressing issues which we collectively as an industry need to address that of workforce diversity, gender pay gap and mental health. That's for me for the detailed report, download a copy from Icopr.com.

Host

She heads corporate communications, CSR and business operations for Puravankara, one of the well-known reality companies in South India. At Puravankara she takes pride in how she has made Corporate communication function on responsibility for revenue and profits. I'm in conversation with Minol Ajekar today. We discuss how corporate communication function can earn respectability, and the seat at the board.

Hi, Minol, welcome to the show, it's good to understand that you have been doing a lot of communication, which is result oriented, which is performance oriented, where you do to take a, you know, a kind of a responsibility for both top line and bottom line. So I just want to understand, you know, how did it all begin? And, and how were you able to demonstrate the communication function helps in increasing revenue and profitability consistently?

Minol

Radha, the question you asked me is really interesting, because many, many people have asked me this question, because you need a combination, and I have a unique role that I play in my organization, I actually worked solely in operations, because my background is of an analyst, but because I work directly with the executive team, a lot of the executive communication, especially Investor Relations, had got to do with me. So, I and also, I have an interest in writing. So when the corporate communication function was offered, to me, it was a delight. And, you know, to come to your question, I think the biggest thing is understanding the business, okay, no communication role, can be fulfilled without understanding the business and understanding things like bottom line, and revenue, the words you use really matter. So if, as a comms professional, you're able to add value to that in any way possible. While you know, you have been in the field for a long time, and you do know that these things are not sometimes the role communication plays or the metrics of measurement may not be as tangible, as you know, sales or finance which have these absolute numbers, you know, which you can go back to. Comms has what, traditionally the sound of voice or competition analysis, let me give you a small example, if you may, a real life one that actually happened with us, and that actually really ratified the position of communications across the company. We were launching a new product, and it was in a new market. So obviously, we, you know, we had the, we had a press launch, and we spoke about the product, our executive team was there, this was four or five, this was on Tuesday or Wednesday, if memory serves me, and the product was going live on a Saturday, we had, we had a full front page cover advertisement, you know, on Saturday, explaining the product, so on and so forth, introducing ourselves to the new market. All our contact details were at the bottom. Now, because it's a tier two city. The contents from the press conference that we had, the press release was a little delayed. So on page 12, or 13, on the business section, the newspaper had mentioned that, you know, this press conference had happened. And this product is coming to our markets, you will not believe Radha, while the front page had our contact details, my colleague in comms who had his number in the press release, got more calls than the actual number for sales.

So even though people were looking at the front page, by the time they came to the business section, and they saw that number, and I'm this is a true story, his phone rang so much, eventually, on a Saturday on a holiday he drove and he handed his phone's phone over to our sales colleague, and he said, you know, I'm getting all the sales calls here, please talk to them. So, that is, I believe that is the true power of communication. Because you heard this adage, and I love to use this a lot is people buy from people, you know, and Communications is probably one of the only functions that is going to be able to humanize an organization. When that when you speaking about your business, that function plays a much larger role. So, I think a lot of owners also probably is on people like me to really handhold the business and handhold management and, and constantly remind them that while maybe not fully tangible, the value that comms adds is great, is absolutely great. And obviously, from the example I gave you for me to measure the number of calls that came on comms press release versus the sales number was very easy, you know? And I said, there you go, this is why we need to talk about the business and the brand. And then everything else follows. I do believe comms is the umbrella under which many other things will fall under.

Host

Yeah, that's interesting. And in fact, that brings me to the next question on allied question, which is around measurement metrics and analytics, you know, how easy was it or how difficult was it to, you know, sort of introduce these at Puravankara and what kind of measures or metric measurements and metrics do you have?

Minol

Radha, but while we do while we do, trudge in the conventional metrics, which is one is, you know, share your voice, the opportunity to see, competition analysis, online reputation management, overall brand resonance, and over the past three to four years, I have also realized that a lot of analytic tools that have come out that is able to do this a little more effectively. But you know, with the advent of social media, and I think a large part of my role, and also a lot of comms leaders across the country, is social media, they actually are responsible for some of the leaders handles across social media platforms, what I have increasingly felt that active listening on these mediums is a very, very good metric for you to check, you know, the health of your brand.

Host

That's true

Minol

As a brand and as a comms professional, if I'm not able to mirror that, or emulate that I'm doing a disservice to the customer, or to the potential customer who wants to buy into my product. So, what I have found increasingly over the last two years, I mean, even a lot of millennials also what do they do they go to Instagram to check the photos, right of what anything they like. Correct. So active listening has increasingly been playing a large role in my everyday life, and are also my peers. A lot of conversations we have is about that. We're getting a lot of anecdotal market insights, through customers by social medium. There are some fantastic tools out there, you know, we use a few also, that gives us real time alerts.

Host

I guess some of these tools, and some of these measurements actually help you get a seat at the board, because now you will have more accountability and responsibility brought into the function.

But is that the only reason why we don't get heard so often, or we don't get the prominence that we should have ideally got? What's your take on that?

Minol

Radha, you know, I think one of the things is that, you know, there is still a large, like India, by and large globally might be we are probably trailing behind some of the best in countries in terms of what the role of communication is in the organization. I'm talking 2020 you know, as of now, you've been in the field for a long time maybe a decade ago, what was the perception of communications, and you know, the Allied role of public relations was that they're going to check grammar or they're going to pursue through all the communication or the emails that's coming from the MD's desk. And they will sort of remain in that sphere. And we will go to them in case we have a crisis. And we need that dealing with we will go to the communications team, because we need help there. That is traditionally been the perception, I believe, yeah, of work of comms and all the other allied stuff. I don't think it was ever thought that comms could be impacting the bottom line, or increasing profitability. At the end of the day for all organizations, sales is the profit center, right, rest of us all have other cost centres carry. So how are you going to change that perception? And I think I like I like to use the example of a Ashmita Sethi who's just, I think earlier this year, she was appointed, Managing Director of Pratt and Whitney, right. And Ashmita comes from 20 years of communication and public policy. And that really turned everything over its head, right? Because you, I mean, it's very encouraging for people like us also to think that here's a lady who's been a comm specialist and is now the managing director of one of the largest, you know, airline related companies that also technology, I think, I think what plays a larger role now is COVID Let's, let's use that as an example. It's been such an equalizer for everybody, right? Everybody is standing at the same square one as the other. There is no the starting line has been the same for everyone. And let's take the example of the various unlocks that happened Radha, you know, especially for a company like Puravankara, where we are existing in several cities across India, when the unlock guidelines came, they were at different times, or with different protocols. And every little piece of information had to be adhered to, right, because it's, it's a government's guidelines. And I realized that without communication team really playing a large role in steer leading the organization through this transformation and change, it would have not been possible, right?

Host

Correct. Absolutely,

Minol

It would have not been possible at all, not just for my company, but for all organizations across because, you know, what have we been doing since from May till now is we've been keeping an ear on the ground, and ensuring that every new piece of information that is there, gets assimilated, and also gets understood by everyone in the organization. So, I think for my peers or even for people are starting new in the sector right now. This is a great opportunity to for us to flex our muscles, you know, for us to show that it's not that we deserve a seat at the table. We should have a seat at the table because the organization needs us more now.

Host

Absolutely. Absolutely.

I have one last question to ask you Minol in terms of what will be that one message that you want to give to, you know, fellow professionals and colleagues in the ecosystem, in terms of how they can be more accountable and how they can be more prominent in their respective organizations?

Minol

Radha, okay, let me just tie this into the entire conversation that we've been having so far. One of the biggest I think hurdles that comms professionals face is to exhibit how are they impacting profitability for the organization, right. And then, I think one of the big things, there are a couple of messages here. So, bear with me. One of the big things is we need to really start understanding that as comms professionals, we are the brand custodians, reputation manager, we are the wall of reputation management, we are the first line of defence, or we are the first we are the first people that the customer or the external environment is going to come in touch with, you know, yes, yes. When, when people want to look into your brand or your company, they're googling you, right? So, when they're googling you, they're not looking at your advertisements, they're not looking at your marketing collaterals they are looking at who you are. People buy from people, that's why you know, I like to say that. So as comms professionals, what are we doing, we are interacting with people, right? We are telling them about our business, we are telling them about our product, we are exhibiting our company culture, we are celebrating when we win awards, we are we are telling people that it's the brand that you are buying into not just a product, it is a beginning of relationship. Right? So, it's listening and speaking, but listening first, I cannot stretch this enough, is listening first. So I think we all of us really need to step out of whatever traditional mindsets have been of communication, or even, public relation. It's still sometimes used as a dirty word, isn't it Radha say you know, things are a that was a PR stunt you know? Yeah. And I think we really need to step out of that mindset, because a PR stunt is just that it's duplicity. It's not reality, what we are doing is we are garnering, trying to garner public sentiment because if public sentiment is behind your brand, you succeed, if it's not, you fail, correct, absolutely.

So if people are buying from people, and in this day and age, you have to remember that you are the reputation manager of your organization. And that's where you should start all your thinking from, whether it's a communication campaign, whether you're doing some PR related activities, whether it's your media relationship, all of us need to start stepping out of this, stepping out of our boxes, and start redefining ourselves as brand custodians. And I think that's when we will win. Something that Bill Gates once said, in an interview many many years ago, he said that if he had he was down to his last dollar, he would spend it on public relations. Yes. So I think if we can all remember that, once again, thank you for having me Radha.

Host

That's a very nice message to end with that you know, we should strive to be brand custodians and not just, you know, people who carry message and message such

Thanks, Minol, thanks a lot for your time. It was good talking to you. Tune in next week for another episode of Mrigashira. Adios