

Host

PRCAI has been around for a very, very long time. Only thing is, we started probably seeing it a lot more visible on platforms that matter, like the social media and other places in 2020. And 2020, was also an unusual year for all of us. I mean, for people across the world. So I just wanted to understand is it that, you know, PRCAI certainly felt the need to step up in 2020. What exactly changed last year?

Atul Sharma

Okay, so I feel that, you know, an association is, it's a, it's a collective wisdom of its members. And, you know, when last year when the pandemic hit us, I think it was a true test of our character, you know, it wasn't adversity. And I think one of the things that I'm really happy about is that, in tough times, we came together like never before. We collaborated, we came together as a team, we shared learnings, we, we were there for each other, we solve each other's problems. And I think, like you rightly put in the in the process somewhere, we also ended up solving industry issues, lending a voice to the narrative. Because before that, I think we've been there. But, you know, we've been, we've gone around doing things in a very coordinated and in a very, very streamlined fashion. But this time around, I think we looked inwards, we were more inclusive, we tried to find answers of what were the problems that were plaguing us. And I think that is what, what changed the game, if you asked me.

Host

And what were some of the initiatives you took last year? Because you said, you know, there were many things that, you know, you had to quickly do right, and you had to support the industry, per se, and all its members so what were some of the key initiatives?

Atul Sharma

True so some of the things that we really, ascertain and I would say, one thing, which we realized is that, you know, if we are able to leverage technology, to do things, the usual way, it'll always work. So right, from learning to collaboration to mentoring to solving larger industry issues, I think all of it was done virtually. But I think the beauty of it was that nothing came to a halt. So, one of the things I think the important things, which we've always done as an industry forum is that we've spent considerable time in Learning Initiative. So whether it was webinars, whether it was podcasts, on, you know, pertinent industry issues like we, we run the PRCAI engage series, we run master classes, we run HR webinars, and we found actually the frequency of it actually went up rather than going down. And we and the, I think the good part was that we were also able to find time from people who found it easy to get onto a zoom call rather than you know, coming to us and meet us in person. So, whether it was people like Kiran Majumdar Shaw, and you know, the how communication is impacting her business, or Vikram Chandra, talking about the impact of fake news, or Ashok Malik was a policy advisor in the Ministry of External Affairs he talking about, you know, how the government is looking at communication or Seema Mustafa, who is the president of Editors Guild, she giving us a completely, you know, perspective from the media side. I think the fact was that, you know, we found counsel from diverse issues. So I think the learning piece was something which we, which really, we progressed pretty well and considering people had to just log into a machine that worked very well. The second piece, which we realized that you know, in these prolonged lockdowns, people were becoming isolated in their personal bubbles. And there was fatigue also, which was setting in. So we created two programs. We created a talk to a friend program wherein people from the industry volunteered their time to talk to, their colleagues who were much junior and who they could help solve problems. We also created a talk to a coach program because we felt I think, and I think I can safely say this, that coaching helped me a lot in my personal career. And we felt that if we can give access to people at Junior levels to a coach that will really, really

change the way, you know, they can seek counsel and cope with the lockdown. Even, you know, addressing some of the tough topics like mental health issues, which were considered very taboo before that. And I think last but not the least, you know, the spirit of celebration and achievement, it I think, we were in two minds whether, you know, we have this annual partnership with SABRE, when we celebrate our work, we have we, we celebrate achievers. And, you know, we weren't very sure the kind of response that we'll get from the industry. But, you know, we were surprised we were taken back because people, you know, came to the forum in huge numbers, and I think, celebrated the work, you know, and their achievements. So I'm hoping 2021 will be a notch higher than what we've done in 2020. But I think those are the things that we accomplished in this tough year.

Host

Yeah, that's true. Because you know, you seem to have built a lot of momentum, you seem to have created a platform now. So what can people expect from PRCAI In 2021? So what are some of the initiatives that you would want to continue or you would want to look at starting?

Atul Sharma

So I, I think one of the things which we heard from our members was that we, we did a lot of things in 2020. But members wanted to make sure that we have a very clear charter, before we set out for 2021. So as you would be aware, you know, we were we had our elections in the month of November, and there was a new managing committee which was formed. And as a part of that, what we did, the first thing that we did was we went back to our members, we spoke to each one of them, we heard their views on what is it that they wanted us to do in the coming year, and basis that we have a charter chalked out in very for clear priorities that we have set for ourselves. So, one is obviously how do we make sure that we raise the bar on our talent. So that's one piece wherein we are going to focus our energy. The second piece is, you know, and we often debate and talk about this, we need PR for PR, you know, how do we build that trust for the industry, in the industry and beyond the industry. So that's the second piece on which we are going to focus our energies. And the third piece is about, you know, building the leadership of this industry, for people within the industry, as well as for our clients as well as for, you know, when we're talking to the corporate world and the government, how do we do that? And the last priority is about this entire inclusive piece, how do we make sure that we are looking for inclusion beyond services beyond markets beyond India and how do we do better on that? So those are the four priorities, which we are going to spend our time on. And, you know, time permitting, I can definitely take you through each one of them in great detail, but this is what I think gives you a broad view of what we are looking to accomplish in 2021.

Host

Yeah, it does and it looks very promising, you know, one of the things that typically any association that one looks at right, I mean, there are these perceptions that get built, which is that at one level that most of these associations serve the larger organizations and not so much the smaller and medium level organizations. With our industry as in the PR industry, there is also another perception that gets built, which is that these associations and industry bodies are more tuned towards those, foreign institutions or organizations that are in India and not so much serving the Indian organizations or institutions. So, how do you deal with both perceptions?

Atul Sharma

So I'll try to solve, you know, answer the first one, which is more about the fact that, you know, the small and medium versus the large and the very large. So I think, today, the way I look at it, we have a

member base of our close to 50 members. And, you know, we have a good mix of small, medium and large. And the way I look at it is we have customized solutions and guidance for all, there is no one size fits all policy. And I'm very happy to share that if I look at today, the you know, the way our member base is split so I can, you know, say that out of the total number of firms which are close to 50, there's only 25% of them, which are MNC's, and the rest are Indian firms. So that's, I think, a big big reaffirmation of the fact that Indian firms see value in what PRCAI is trying to do, even when I look at, you know, the large versus the medium versus the small, I do agree that there are a large number of firms, which firm have a big base of ours. the ratio is close to 40-60, 60 being the smaller firms. So I think the fact is that we are working towards making sure that the smaller firms see value. And I think in all of this, you know, our purpose and our mission for PRCAI is be very clear, which is to make PRCAI Industry body, which is completely focused on making the whole industry professional, ethical and prosperous. I think that's the way I look at it. And I'm sure we will be able to solve that problem. But I think also on your story around, you know, the question around MNC versus Indian, I think, I think I don't completely agree with that. I'll tell you why because I think we have now a lot of success stories you look at, you know, you look at the industry around you, you have Indian companies like Ad Factor Value 360, Spag, PR pundits, which have, you know, somewhere demolish the myth that there are only, you know, MNCs who have, possibly best practices and who have access to global mandates. I think that piece is definitely addressed, I think and there's another way in which you will see coming from regional PR firms, you know, we look at Fusion, you look at Quick, you look at Simulations, you know, there are enough and more regional PR players who will definitely be able to change the way we are looking at the Indian PR sector. So, I think on that note, I definitely feel that the homegrown firms have, didn't have that advantage initially, but I think today, they have adopted work ethics policies that are at par with the international firms. And as far as PRCAI is concerned, I think we are very much focused on making sure that each of our member firms succeeds in line with our vision to be known as an industry body, which is India's largest and most influential PR professional body. And that is what we are completely focused on.

Host

When you're looking at an inclusion dimension, from a communication standpoint, if one leg is PR the other leg is corp, corp comm, right? And corporate communication professionals' sort of feel that this is not a place for them and this is basically for PR industry, professionals. So are you looking at, in any way being more inclusive to include more of Corporate communication fraternity?

Atul Sharma

So, I wouldn't shy away from the fact that, what you're saying that is, is true, we did till now, we definitely have been focused on PR firms. But today, you know, especially in 2021, I can share with you that we have now over, close to 10 corporate communication veterans who are now a part of PRCAI, and they've taken this task upon themselves that, how is it that we can make PRCAI relevant for corporate communication professionals, how is it that we can create a strong benefit centric proposition for the corporate communication fraternity to be a part of PRCAI? So definitely, that question what you pose to us, we posed to ourselves a couple of months back, and we are already working on it. So you will definitely see changing that in 2021. And we will definitely be focusing on the corporate communication fraternity to do more things, which, which are of direct consequence to their world.

Host

We should also fundamentally look at whether it should be PRCAI, or it should be PRCCAI. you know, what I mean? Because the name itself probably connotes to many people, that it's limited to PR as public relations industry.

Atul Sharma

Sure

Host

Yeah. No, the other thing, also, when it comes to PR industry is that, you know, people, there is a lot of, you know, diversity related problems in the sense that there are many women who join the industry very early, but somewhere down the line, as they progress along, they very few make it to the top. And at the top, the, the ratio is still skewed in that sense, right? So is it something that is they're on your radar, and on your agenda?

Atul Sharma

If I compare ourselves to the rest of the world, I think, whether you look at the corporate world, whether you look at the government sector, everybody's trying to diversify their workforce, whereas we are a workforce, which, which comprises already of two third, you know, two thirds of the workforce is women. So, we definitely are certainly leading the way. So, I think, one, I definitely feel that rather than, you know, beating down ourselves on this point, we should be, actually first be able to tell a story that how women, women have built this fraternity, this industry, and, how is it that we can position that share our learnings with the larger ecosystem, and which, I'm hoping that it will only help women in other sectors. I also agree to the fact that, while at a leadership level, there are leaders across you know, if you look at MNC, firms, like Genesis, Archetype, or Practice for that matter, or Indian firms like Valley 360, Media Mantras, SPAG, Commune, PR Pundits, I think these are led by women, and it's a fairly, I think, a good representation of the way, you know, women are represented in this industry. But I do agree with the fact that I think there is definitely a lot of work that we can do with like-minded, you know, associations like GWPR, or like with FICCI woman to make sure that, you know, women are not only seen, you know, across the mid and the junior man's of the entire PR fraternity but also at a senior level. But that said and done, I think, if you look at, if you ask me, I think we see a fair representation of women in higher ranks. My two, closest, I would say, in my senior team, out of a, size strength of five people, for our women. So I think somewhere down the line, you know, it is definitely a strong woman's world in this part of the sector, and I am sure it will only improve from here on.

Host

Yeah, I mean, you know, it's, it would be good to see, like, what you mentioned, it is true that it's the women who make this industry, but it would also be good, if it is the women who lead the industry, you know, what I mean? And many of the agencies that you did mention, I mean, out of that, quite a few of them are also people who are like, founder, CEOs or founder leaders in that sense of when whether it is PR Pundit, whether it is Practice, right, I mean these are extraordinary women no doubt who you know, build up their experience and started this organization, it would be good to see a lot more professional PR organizations and communication organizations being led by women and thenif PRCAI is able to contribute to that in in some manner. That would be, that would be something that is a significant contribution to the industry, I feel.

Atul Sharma

No, definitely I completely agree with you, I think I can personally correlate to this story. I'm married to a communication professional who was a part of the industry. And after we had our second son, she moved on to the corporate side, because I think the kind of support that she was looking on the agency side, maybe she didn't get, I definitely feel I think, especially women, when, when they are adopting motherhood, I think we need to support them better, we need to make sure that we are able to bring them back even stronger into the main fold. And as they grow along, make sure that there is an equal chance for a woman as well as man in the in the leadership circle. So yeah, I I am completely on the same page. Like I said, a large base of our industry is women, a large part of my colleagues who I work with on an ongoing basis are women, so totally and completely agree with that proposition.

Host

Yeah. So that brings me to the last question Atul, which is on, what I'm which is in a way extension of what we are talking about, which is that, how can PRCAI, enrich professional development, bring in more networking opportunities for people, not just for one particular agenda, but in general what are some of the, you know, networking, professional development, mentoring coaching focus PRCAI has?

Atul Sharma

So, I would say there are from a professional development perspective, like I said, one of our key imperatives for this year has been, how do we make sure that we can nurture talent, and somewhere down the line, I think, our industry is a people intensive industry, though, I think we are at a cusp, where technology and people are becoming a potent combination. But still, I think we are one of those industries, wherein it still is going to be always about the people. So one win definitely from a professional development perspective need, and we are looking at something like an accreditation program for PR professionals, which will qualify them to practice and upskill. We are intending it to create this on the lines of a global standard, which is developed by IABC.

Host-Yeah, I was just about to ask this

Atul Sharma

And in that four levels, yes. So, it will be aimed at four levels, basis, one's experience, and we will be prescribing the syllabus. And I'm hoping you know, what, that unlike a profession, which is legal, or medicine, wherein, you have to make sure that as you grow in your profession, you have to invest in learning, this will create the culture of learning, it will raise the overall standards. And I think, in the long run, somewhere, comply with our mission statement, which is it will make us more professional, it does make us more ethical, it will, it will make us more prosperous. So I think that is one change, you will definitely see in this year, wherein we definitely will raise the bar for the industry and we have wholehearted support from our member base to do that. That's, I think, on the professional development, front, which should be a good change. I think on the network opportunities, I can say that as long as I think 2020 we are able to bring back normalcy into our lives, and we can meet people and can create those opportunities. I think there are global bodies like Eco, PRCA, GWPR, which are now working closely with us. And we definitely feel that there is a lot more opportunities that we can create for professionals in the industry. And I think somewhere down the line Radha, you'll also see that in the past few years, I would say specifically in the last decade, I think we've come across with forums wherein we are celebrating our work more, there are more awards, there are different, opportunities like 30 under 30, 40 under 40, I remember distinctly You know, when I started out my career, there wasn't even a single award entry which you could be a part of, and that completely, you know, is bringing this community together. We are proud of our work we are a profession with a badge of honor. We don't try to you know, we don't try to confuse people or we are not at the stage wherein we find it

difficult telling our parents what is the kind of work that we do and I think that is where I think we are making a true difference to the way we are shaping this industry. And I hope we will be able to continue with that fervour in the future as well.

Host

Thanks, Atul that was very interesting to know about what PRCAI intends to do, and all the best to you and your team members.

Atul Sharma

Completely agree, rather. And on that note, I think Thank you so much. I think there are forums like yours, wherein we can spread the message.

Thank you so much.