PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES: A REVIEW TOWARDS THE PRACTICE AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Professional competencies are the qualifications practitioners need to execute those tasks. However, for decades, scholars and practitioners alike have argued ways to enhance the professionalism and prestige of public relations (PR). In general, this paper will discuss the contemporary professional competencies practiced by PR practitioners in some of the countries in Asia. Based on a literature review, the best competencies will be identified, in order to provide parameter for a developing professional competencies model that is consistent with the environment of PR practitioners in Malaysia.

Field of Research: professional competencies, PR practitioners, Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional competencies are the qualifications practitioners need to execute those tasks (Sha, 2011a; 2011b). A report of the Commission on PR Education in 1987 has identified the competencies that should be required by all PR majors. The competencies were: 1) Principles, practices, theory, emphasis on ethics; 2) Techniques: Writing, message dissemination, media networks; 3) Research for planning and evaluation; 4) PR strategy and implementation including case studies (Leuven, 1999).

Recently, Broom (2009) stated that PR practitioners need communication skills, knowledge of the media and management, problem-solving abilities, motivation, intellectual curiosity, solid writing skills, an understanding of one’s specific business or industry, ability to relate to people and deal with stress, and knowledge of current events.

For Tanloet and Tuamsuk (2011), in terms of organisational services, the core competency is defined as quality, knowledge, basic ability possessed by every individual in the organisation, and, it can be said to be a common characteristic of the organisational personnel and hence, the organisational culture.
However, with the development of technology and the changes of economic and social status, current PR practitioners need to reconsider the existing competencies, adding more competencies, and think about the other elements that can influence their competencies. Furthermore, attempts to measure and demonstrate professionalism have actually increased the demand for the explicit auditing and accounting of professional competences (Evetts, 2011).

Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to find out the professional competencies practise by PR practitioners in Asia. However, focus has been given to the countries with a very high human development category in the list of the Human Development Index issued by the United Nations Development Programme in 2011. Unemployment, inequality, and population growth are low in these countries and the citizens enjoy long life expectancy, a high educational level, high health expenditure, as well as high income and a high GDP per capita.

2. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES PRACTICE IN ASIA

To identify the professional competencies to be focused on, this current study used the list developed by the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB). In 2000, after rigorous qualitative and quantitative research, the UAB compiled a list of 10 knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that comprised those professional competencies deemed most necessary to execute the tasks (Sha, 2011a; 2011b). Based on this list, below is the explanation about the professional competencies which practice by PR practitioners in Asia.

2.1 Researching, Planning, Implementing & Evaluating Programmes Competency

Researching, planning, implementing and evaluating programmes is the professional competency that includes analytical skills, audience identification and communication, evaluation of programmes, financial management, planning ability, applied research, basic research, stakeholder management, strategic thinking, and methodology.

In Asia, an Israel professional PR firm starts planning an event several months before it occurs, and sometimes even earlier. In order to notify the general public about the event and attract it, the PR practitioner, in combination with regional and cultural reporters, publishes precursory articles and photographs in the newspapers. A seasoned PR firm utilises the benefits of preplanned photographs, which include the ability to organise the site, to coordinate the various participants, and thus save hours of labour for the photographers (Lahav & Avraham, 2008).

Meanwhile, the campaign to promote local Jewish products, Tozeret haAretz, was inspired by needs and ideology where competitions exist between cheap products and a demand for the protection of Jewish products. The Tozeret haAretz campaign used guards, press publicity, and the denunciation of uncooperative consumers by mobilising public opinion against them. Beyond conventional publicity, the campaign also followed earlier Zionist public relations in using the education system to deliver the message (Toledano, 2009).
2.2 Ethics and Law

Ethical behaviour, integrity, and knowledge of legal issues are under this competency. From previous studies, it can be seen where most of the PR practitioners in Asian countries have tendency in not applying legal method compare to Western countries.

For example, an interesting and significant finding in Korea is that practitioners who work in global PR firms have their own unique professionalism which has been formed based on diverse factors affecting their job roles. The researcher identifies their professionalism as “Confucianism-oriented professionalism” based on fidelity, loyalty, and Jeong, a uniquely Korean emotion (Jeong, 2009).

2.3 Communication Models and Theories

Communication models and theories competency include the application of communication models and an understanding of the barriers to communication.

Evidence showed that, in Japan, the organisation has a participative corporate culture that allows the PR director to work closely with the top management. Kao Corporation’s higher management does not interfere in the development of the message strategy and the PR department has the autonomy to decide the best solution for the communication problem. The idea of collaborative efforts between departments and the practice of being a socially responsible company suggest that Kao’s PR department uses a combination of communication models and Japanese management styles to project a good corporate citizen image (Muk, 2012).

In handling communication barriers, Public and Employee Relations (PER) employees in United Arab Emirates (UAE) noted the function of coordinating with local institutions and suggesting interactive workshops with local people, especially for new employees, who can meet local people, exchange information, and work with new groups. They also stated that foreigners always need special courses, such as ones in learning the Arabic language, local dialects, and local customs. All PER practitioners believe that activities are vital to the organisation (Al-Jenaibi, 2011).

2.4 Business Literacy

This professional competency includes business literacy, environmental scanning, industry knowledge, knowledge of current organisational issues, knowledge of business technology and trends, understanding of all levels of management, and usage of an organisation’s resources.

In Brunei, the trend in the applications of information technology (IT) continued to grow at a steady rate as technologies become more affordable and easy to use. The accessibility to the Internet and the World
Wide Web as enabler to reach out to a wider audience has further encouraged business sectors to continue invest in IT to sustain and enhance their business advantage (Yap, 2002). Moreover, when there is collaboration with other developed countries such as, Germany, which is willing to cooperate with Ministry of Industry and Primary Resources, Brunei, in renewable energy development (Corporate Communications, 2011).

Meanwhile, in Japan, Kao’s PR department uses newsletters on the Intranet, videos, e-mails and face to face meetings to communicate with its 5,000 plus employees in understanding of all levels of management. Kao’s management philosophy also insists that lifetime employment still has its advantage in establishing relationships with its staff during the current economic downturn in Japan. The staff educational programmes help keep employees’ morale up and raise their quality in servicing the customers (Muk, 2012).

2.5 Management Skills & Issues

Management skills and issues is the professional competency that include diversity, decision-making abilities, leadership skills, looking beyond prejudices/mind-set, organisational skills, problem-solving skills, sensitivity to cultural concerns, and team building.

In discussing about diversity, several interviewees in Bahrain talked positively about their experiences in PR and were confident that there would be equal opportunities for their promotion in the future. They were optimistic because a number of Bahraini public relations women had succeeded in achieving managerial roles in the field (Al-Saqer, 2008).

Meanwhile, in the UAE, all Public and Employee Relations (PER) practitioners agreed that they welcomed new employees from different cultures. In several organisations, mostly those with numerous PER members, they mentioned the existence of official training programmes and workshops for new employees from different cultures. Therefore, PER staff did feel that guiding, advising, and counselling new employees were all part of their specialty. For example, some PER staff felt it was their duty to meet new employees at the airport and offer them good accommodation (Al-Jenaibi, 2011).

Singaporean PR practitioners described examples of the need for intercultural competence in a professional context, but these examples tended to involve work with international campaigns or clients, or in the diverse workplace. A few acknowledged the impact of cultural diversity within Singapore on their professional practice, in terms of campaign development, with two participants describing local campaigns as “homogenous”. This finding is surprising but could stem from government policies and laws reinforcing the need for social harmony, sensitivity around race, and “mindfulness”, which, in the words of one participant, was “inculcated in Singapore’s youth” (Fitch, 2012).
However, despite Singapore’s organisations recognising the increasing importance of communication with practitioners playing an increasingly more prominent role in recent decades, this study found that the most senior in-house communicators interviewed lack the expertise, and the opportunity when knowledge is present, to play the managerial role. Their work thus lacks the potential to create and add value with desirable outcomes to organisations in the long run (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

2.6 Crisis Communication Management

Crisis communication management is the professional competency that includes the understanding of different phases of a crisis and risk management capabilities.

The current findings taken from Singapore, of the 21 PR agencies interviewed, 11 embarked on such tie-ups with freelancers or business collaborators as they were of the view that such joint efforts complemented the skills and expertise of their small in-house crisis teams. The other 10 either handled all the crisis work by themselves or for the multinational agencies. In the event that specialised crisis skills were needed, they would fly in their colleagues from other offices from their international network (Pang & Yeo, 2012).

However, when SARS started to break out in its neighbouring Guangdong province in November 2002, the Hong Kong government announced the establishment of an investigative team. Unfortunately, when being asked when the government could release the investigation results, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food of the Hong Kong government, Yeoh Eng-kiong, replied that it might take “a few days at the shortest or years” to come up with the answers. On 5 May, the day after the number of new infected cases had dropped to a one-digit unit, the government announced it was allocating USD64 million to fund related research. However, the measure was seen as vain talk because no concrete actions and timetable were suggested (Lee, 2009).

2.7 Media Relations

This professional competency includes media relations, news sensibility, understanding of the media, and understanding of the distribution system. However, study by Froehlich & Rudiger (2006) also indicate that journalists tend to use their power to alter PR messages when the communications from political players do not have a distinct focus and/or when the PR focuses were not among the mainstream aspects dominating the general political debate.

A commercial survey in the local media reported senior executives in Singapore to be the most paranoid in the world when it comes to negative publicity of their firms (Luo, 2009; cited in Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009). Being able to call upon practitioners anytime and vice versa is a way of being in control of
information released to the public so as to minimise negative publicity. This observation is further supported by the fact that all the practitioners unanimously reported that managing media was one of their most important activities (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

Significantly, media environmental specificity in Korea is one of the strongest contributors to Korean practitioners’ perceptions of their job roles. The Korean media environment reflects a mixed form of the characteristics of Confucianism and Korean media specificity. In Korean society, there are a plethora of media, and the media have tremendous power and influence over the public. Thus Korean public relations practitioners are sensitive to media response and their relationship with the media could be termed submissive. However, once they establish personal relationships with media personnel, based on loyalty and faith, such relationships also affect practitioners’ job roles (Jeong, 2009).

In Israel, PR research has demonstrated that close personal relationships between PR practitioners and journalists help the former to receive better access to the media both at times of crisis and on an everyday basis. This study too demonstrates that PR practitioners are not assessed only according to their everyday work routines, but also based upon the use of tactics such as forming give-and-take relationships with journalists and understanding how the national media work, enhancing the image of a client by linkage to an event related to another client, constructing the council head as an expert in some field in order to increase positive coverage, and the creative initiation of events and photographs. All of these tactics enable a professional PR practitioner to create and initiate news items promoting positive events and to limit the number of items perceived as negative (Lahav & Avraham, 2008).

2.8 Using Information Technology Efficiently

For this professional competency, it includes information management, knowledge of distribution channels, and technological literacy.

Despite the realities of the Digital Divide, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has created increased opportunities for social interaction among the citizens of the world, predominantly to those who live in urban areas. The level of technology available to PR practitioners and their publics, and the level of technological competence each possesses, directly affects the ability to utilise social media and other forms of virtual communication with stakeholders near and far (Sriramesh & Duhe, 2009).

The good news about online public relations in the UAE is that PR managers and practitioners think they should construct and upgrade the organisation’s web site. The majority of them think also that providing press releases, and a press releases archive, posting the companies publications and displaying the latest news and events and future activities of the organisation are all indispensable and essential elements of good media relations online. All the respondents think that the Internet has helped their organisation tremendously in promoting online relations with the news media (Kirat, 2007).
In Japan, PR practitioners focus on cementing good relationships with journalists who are members of the press club system (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008; Watson & Sallot, 2001; cited in Muk, 2012). The press club system is a networking channel for journalists to gain access to the business elites and governmental agencies. Each governmental agency has its own press club and only members are allowed to access its official information and resources (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008; cited in Muk, 2012). Major media, including newspapers, broadcasting companies and magazine publishers, are the press club system members (Muk, 2012).

2.9 History of and Current Issues in PR

This is the professional competency that includes knowledge of the field of PR. As mentioned by Sriramesh and Duhe (2009), today PR, is more effective, especially when working on a global scale, for clients, stakeholders, and the society at large, when practitioners take into account not only the economic, but also the social and political factors that influence relationship building with publics.

Furthermore, concerns have risen about the need for an increase in business, economics, and financial knowledge among practitioners, accompanied by the need to recognise the economic context in PR education (Lawniczak, 2009).

Lately, online PR has become a major medium that PR practitioners should use efficiently and rationally for effective PR. PR professionals should adopt and master the new technology because of the various services it provides for a transparent, democratic and effective communication to promote and develop strong relationships between the organisation and its publics (Kirat, 2007). However, in over two thirds of the companies in the UAE, the PR department does not design or maintain the company’s web site. This is a negative trend in online PR (Kirat, 2007).

Besides that, lack of knowledge has meant that the Hong Kong government’s crisis management during an outbreak of SARS was considered the worst among its other counterparts such as the Canadian, Macau and Singapore governments (Cheng, 2004; cited in Lee, 2009). For example, the director of the Government Information Service (GIS), who was supposedly the Chief Executive’s public relations advisor and representative, remained absent from the scene throughout the SARS crisis. With over 400 staff in the GIS office, there was not one single designated media spokesperson from the unit. The office had been doing little besides updating the daily figures of contracted medical staff every day through press releases (Lee, 2009).

2.10 Advanced Communication Skills

Consensus-building, consulting skills and negotiating skills are including in this professional competency.
Findings showed that agencies in Singapore hired PR consultants based on skills such as writing, speaking and ability to manage the media. For some, lack of direct experience was compensated for by in-house training. International agencies appeared to have an advantage over the local agencies by virtue of their access to expertise and knowledge from their international network (Pang & Yeo, 2012).

In Israel, communication campaigns contributed to major controversies over the economic development of the Jewish state, its different sectors, and its economic relations with the rest of the world. The Zionist leadership designed messages and campaigns to mobilise the Jewish people and the new settlers in Israel to build a nation. They had campaigns designed to prefer Jewish workers and Jewish products over Arab employees and imported products, and to connect the Jewish people to the land by promoting agriculture and settlement (Toledano, 2009).

In Brunei, lack of communication between parties involved has become one of the main factors for the delay in the execution of construction projects. There is no communication team overseeing all project team members throughout the life cycle of the project. The roles and responsibilities were not clearly identified and project teams were represented by different authorities or departments. There are no appropriate overall organisational structures and communication systems linking all project teams throughout the life of the project (Salleh, 2009).

3. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Competency is demonstrated in the ability to effectively manage the varying perceptions and expectations of others (Chong, 2011). Sha (2011b) found that the top professional competencies mastered by PR practitioners in the U.S. were the use of information technology and new media channels; management skills and issues; media relations; research, planning, implementation and evaluation of PR programmes; use of advanced communication skills, and incorporation of business literacy into PR duties.

However, the literature review showed that most of the PR practitioners in Asia have weaknesses in mastering the professional competencies which PR practitioners in U.S considered as important and needed in current situations, such as decision making and technology literacy.

Based on these situations, it is obvious that PR will always be dominated by North American scholars and practitioners. The U.S had more than 3,000 universities teaching PR, more than the rest of the world put together. The two U.S. based practitioner organisations, which are the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and the International Public Relations Association (IABC), each have more members than the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) (Vercic, van Ruler, Butschi & Flodin, 2001).
Therefore, this current study stresses the need to overcome the poor professional competencies among PR practitioners in Asia. In order to improve the quality of PR professional competencies, two things are important in our opinion: In the first place, a stronger cooperation between academicians and practitioners is needed. The beginnings have been seen in industrial training or internship, but surely these efforts should be increased. Secondly, PR practitioners should be more included in research activities. The willingness to cooperate in research projects can help the researcher to understand more about the current problem statement, research questions and also by providing sources for knowledge production.

References:


