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AI has a long way to go in terms of content creation: Nikhil Bharadwaj

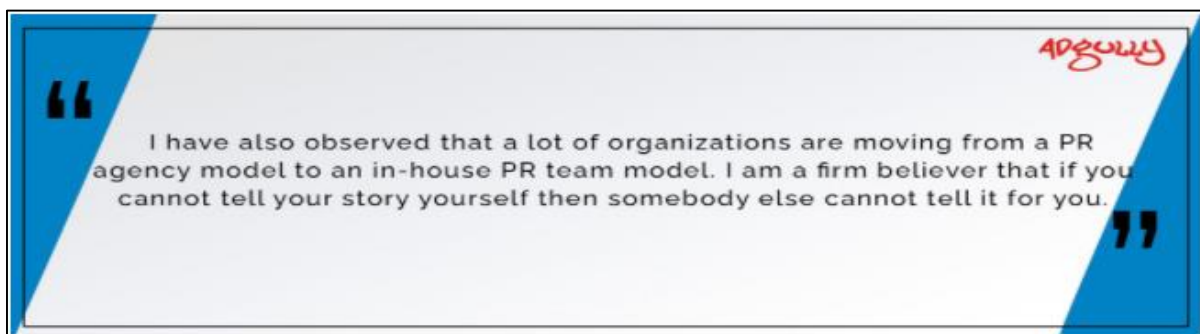


As part of our latest series on 'PR Conversation', we at Adgully are speaking to some of the industry leaders from both PR agencies and the corporate communications world about how PR as a business and communication tool has evolved and grown over the years. In the last 10 years, PR has taken a different dimension, especially after the entry of social media in a big way. While the PR business has grown, some of the challenges that the industry is facing

have also multiplied as clients are becoming more demanding and are expecting their consultants to be on their toes to manage their brand reputation, as news today travels fast and clients are expecting quick response and action in case of a crisis situation.

In conversation with Adgully, Nikhil Bharadwaj, Head – Corporate Communication, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, turns the spotlight on the changing face of PR, enhancing focus on digital media, adapting to the virtual environment due to the pandemic and much more.

How has PR evolved in the last 10 years? Going forward how will the industry shape up as the dynamics of the PR are changing with the acceleration of digital?



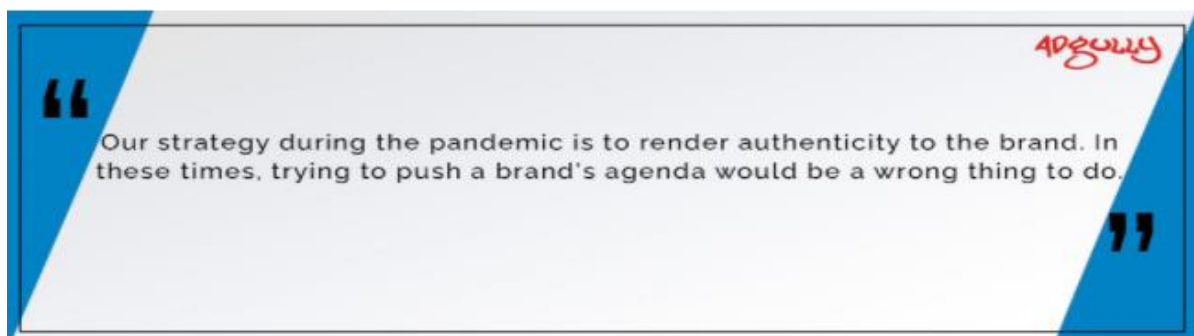
PR erstwhile has been more about offline and print media. Although digital media has been around for over 10 years, print still has been a primary form of PR for most organisations. However, the lockdown induced due to COVID-19 has accentuated that digital is the way forward. It's almost like we have been accelerated ahead in time and now digital has become like be all and end all of it. I firmly believe that print will make a comeback. In the era of fake/non-authentic news on the Internet, especially since most of it is open source, the authenticity of print media is still sacrosanct. Having said that, some of the large media houses are now moving online, looking at more active content creation there and building properties specifically catering to HR, BFSI, Marketing, etc., and I see this only expanding. In the era of

online interactions, I believe social media is going to play a major role. Considering its influence, I think the traditional media will require another tool in their shed which is social media, apart from print media and pure website/ app based presence.

I have also observed that a lot of organisations are moving from a PR agency model to an in-house PR team model. I am a firm believer that if you cannot tell your story yourself, then somebody else cannot tell it for you. This approach helps render authenticity to the content you share with the external stakeholders and also reduces the turn-around time for any media interaction. I can say this, because we follow this model at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance.

Additionally, I feel that the love-hate relationship between the PR fraternity and journalists which was there in the past is now changing. A symbiotic relationship has developed over a period time, where one now looks forward to inputs from another. This is not just from the perspective of stories, but also for understanding the industry, macro concepts or even certain niches specific to the industry which the journalist would not get from the Internet.

The Pandemic has disrupted everyone. In these times how have you redefined your PR objectives? Have you revisited your deliverables?



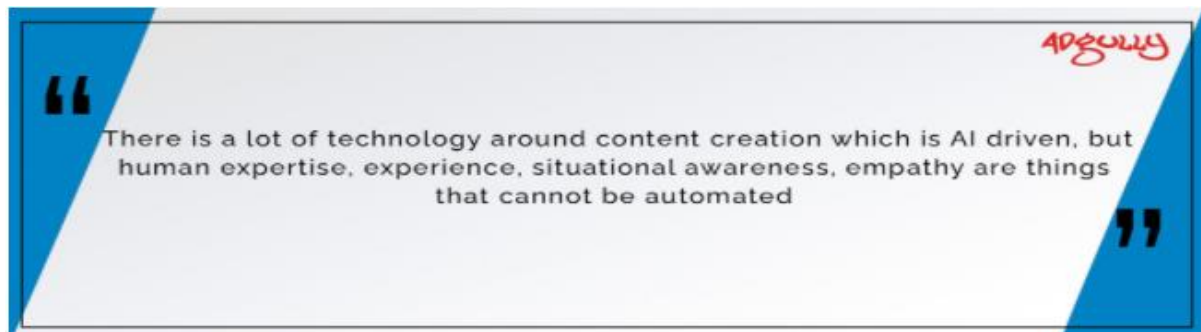
Pandemic has brought to the fore a lot of new media and hence, we have enhanced our focus on digital media. Usually offline content gets covered online too, but now publications are developing pure online platforms, especially in the BFSI space. We have always been monitoring it, but now we are actively analysing our performance there. Having said that, as the lockdown has eased up, the focus on print is very much strong. Online is here to stay and we are looking to grow it as a separate set going forward.

Our strategy during the pandemic is to render authenticity to the brand. In these times, trying to push brand's agenda would be a wrong thing to do. At the end of the day, at any given time a good brand strategy is about occupying mind space of the customer. If customer mindspace is occupied by the worries they have due to the pandemic, there is no point in creating a separate agenda which has no congruence with the current worry that is around. So, finding that congruence was critical. We being an insurance company, finding that congruence was reasonably doable with health insurance, because we knew that it was a tool that could solve the worries of health risks that people faced. Hence, we amplified our communication around health insurance, not talking about the product, but as a category along with its benefits.

Another facet of PR that we explored was in sync with social media. We leveraged it to conduct various webinars related to health & safety, and also did some product launches

through company's social media handles. Thus, creating an overall digital experience for all the stakeholders.

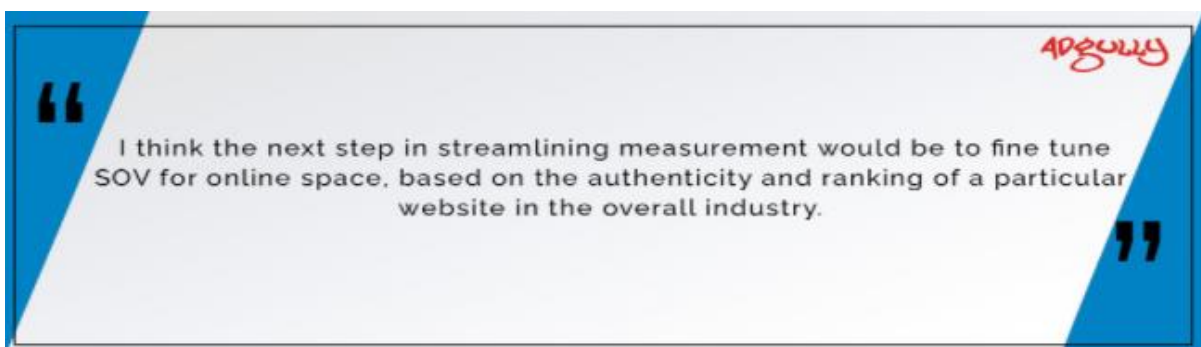
Today, artificial intelligence and data analytics are becoming very important in marketing and communication. How are you making use of this to help in your overall messaging and achieving your ROI?



Marketing wise we have always believed in maximising ROI, whether you look at digital marketing spends, or traditional ATL, BTL spends on the brand front. On the PR front, thanks to certain tracking and analysis agencies, with the help of data analytics we get an understanding of where we are when it comes to a particular region, publication, journalists, etc. It gives us an idea on hits and misses and we accordingly devise our PR strategy based on that data.

There is a lot of technology around content creation which is AI driven, but human expertise, experience, situational awareness, empathy are things that cannot be automated. Hence, AI has a long way to go in terms of content creation. Tracking agencies and PR agencies have started sharing news updates on WhatsApp, but they have their own algorithms, wherein AI is deployed on keyword basis, that crawls websites and shares relevant client related results.

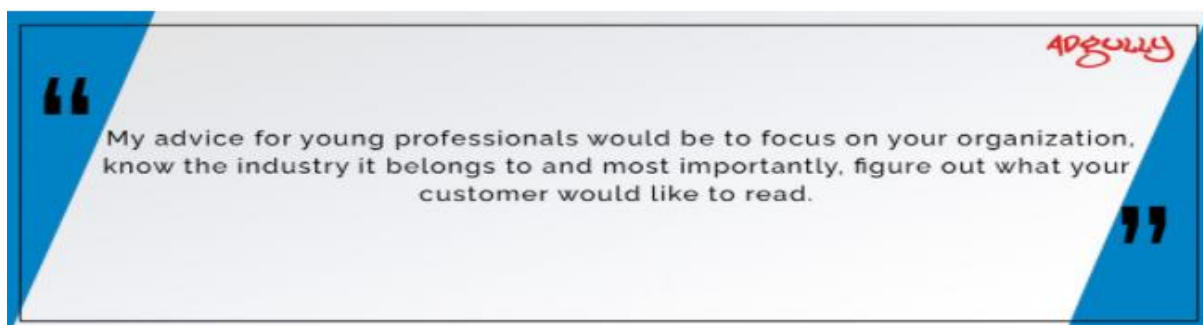
PR measurement and effectiveness of PR has always been a subject of debate. As a PR professional, what steps the PR industry should take to bring in uniformity so that everyone speaks one language when it comes to PR measurement?



PR measurement or any sort of dip stick is very industry specific. Each industry has its own dynamics. For instance, BFSI, E-commerce, FMCG, etc., have their specific niche media that covers the sector. In our case, business dailies, personal finance supplements have larger influence apart from Mainlines. The kind of media for content pitching will differ across industries. Since there is no uniformity in media, uniformity of measurement is a little tough. Having said that, even today Share of Voice (SOV) is something that's quite common across

the board in comparison with industry peers. However, I feel SOV in online space is still at a nascent stage. I think the next step in streamlining measurement would be to fine tune SOV for online space, based on the authenticity and ranking of a particular website in the overall industry. Today, it's based on certain websites that most insurers in our case identify and is calculated based on the length and the number of characters, which is not a great way. I feel it's better to be a part of a great website with lesser content, than a so-so website with a lot of content. At the end of the day, the popular the website is amongst your target audience, the better it is for your brand. I feel uniformity of measurement is possible within the industry, wherein all the PR agencies & tracking agencies have to come together and set the index. It is doable and a massive exercise, which as of now looks tough considering the priorities might be different.

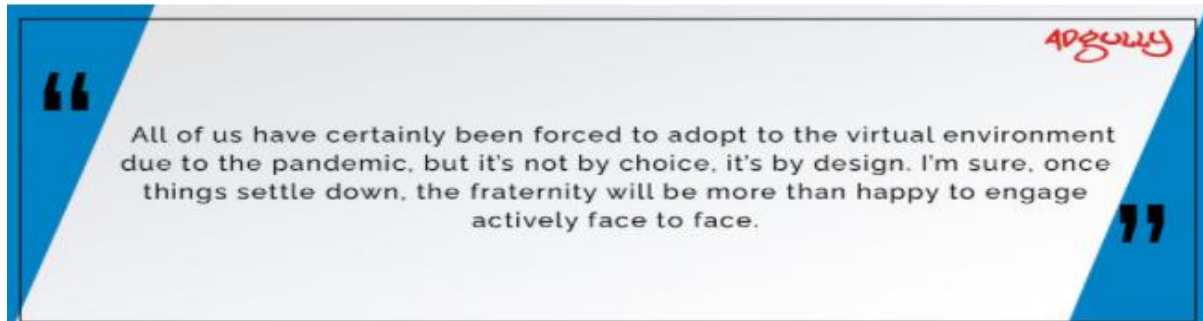
Getting the right skillset and training has always been a challenge in the PR profession. What is your view on the same and what would be the valuable tips that you would like to give to the budding young professionals?



I come from a sales background and have spent about 15 years in this industry. For me, PR was almost like an extension if not a level before sales. PR is a bit like prospecting in the sales process. You need to pitch your content, which is authentic in nature to a person who may or may not take your story. It is like calling a person who may or may not take your product. Hence, I feel that the budding PR Professionals should know that, at the end of the day, they are also sales professionals. Selling is not always about selling a product/ service, but it is also about selling an idea or a concept. It is also about how much authenticity you build over a period of time, what is your focus and how you interact with the media. Our focus as a brand has been more towards increasing the share of voice of the industry by sharing quality content that helps increase awareness amongst the customers. As the industry expands, so will our market share.

PR largely tends to ignore that it's a marketing function with a purpose to stimulate demand. It's not just about ranking No. 1 for media visibility, but to build awareness which will eventually lead to people buying your product. If you look at AIDA model, PR plays a crucial role in the first two steps of Awareness & Interest, which eventually pushes the customer further into the funnel. My advice for young professionals would be to focus on your organization, know the industry it belongs to and most importantly, figure out what your customer would like to read. Accordingly generate quality content, target geographies that are important for your company which in turn will lead to demand. Thus, making you a successful PR professional.

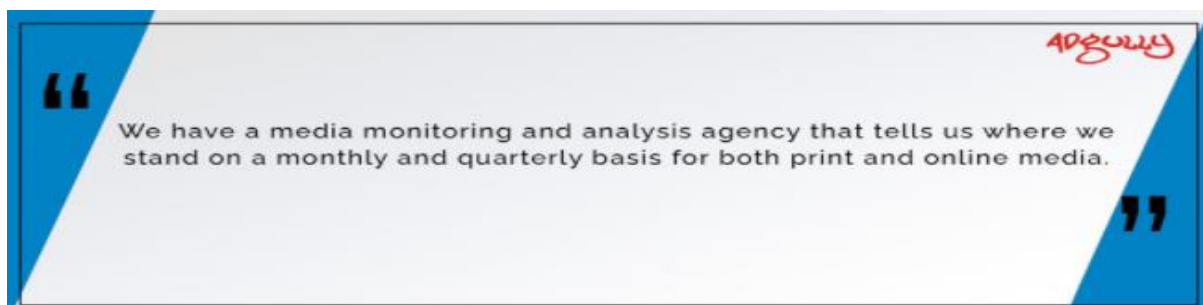
Do you feel the traditional role of interpersonal communication which was so critical to the profession has somehow been put to the back burner because of too much virtual engagement? How are you experiencing that, is it bringing down the efficiency and the final output?



I firmly believe that inter-personal communication is very much active in PR. Meeting with the relevant media, interacting with them and sharing ideas still plays a crucial role in this field. It's not just about putting out your ideas; but also listening and understanding perspectives of the journalists that helps us co-create content and co-exist in this environment. At the end of the day, it's important to understand the needs of your customer, that is, the journalist and keep engaging with them with relevant ideas. Hence, I don't think interpersonal skills will ever go out of PR, because it is the backbone of the field.

All of us have certainly been forced to adapt to the virtual environment due to the pandemic, but it's not by choice, it's by design. I'm sure, once things settle down, the fraternity will be more than happy to engage actively face to face. Having said that, the comfort level of engaging virtually has increased amongst journalists, which wasn't the case earlier. Journalists are now comfortable with engaging over calls (both audio & video), WhatsApp, emails, etc. which helps a lot in terms of speed. If you see the number of stories that have come up on general insurance in the last 6-7 months, they're higher than the total number of news stories on the sector in the entire year. Obviously it's to do with context too, but speed and quick turn-around time does matter.

PR plays an important role in building your brand reputation and also helps you in shaping a positive opinion of the company. How do you measure your performance and evaluate them every year?



We have a media monitoring and analysis agency that tells us where we stand on a monthly and quarterly basis for both print and online media. It tracks our performance and ranks it in comparison with about majority of our peers with whom we would want to compete in the industry. This gives us a good idea on where we are as a brand in terms of media visibility.

Yes, there are times when the SOV may be lower and we might rank 2, 3, 4, etc. But, we take pride in the amount of content we put up out there. Our focus is mainly generating enough quality content, participate in maximum stories and reach out to maximum cities. All of this might not lead to the highest SOV, but it fulfils our purpose to be the content king and thought leaders in the industry.

We are now analysing online and offline media separately. We have just started the online bit, which comprises a small part of analysis as there are very few websites who authentically carry content in the industry. However, the online space is set to expand in the future and hence, we have already started working towards it. As the online metrics get tighter, we will measure that even more actively.