

Date: 31.10.2023

Publication: BW Marketing World

Headline: - There's Greater Synergy Between Comms, Digital Marketing & Customer Service: Nikhil Bharadwaj

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In our exclusive series, 'PR Powerhouse,' we delved into the world of Public Relations and Corporate Communication with Nikhil Bharadwaj, Vice President and Head Corporate Communications at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance.

Bharadwaj shares insights into the world of corporate communication, the evolution of the profession, influencer collaboration and much more.

Excerpts:

How has the role of PR and corporate communications evolved in the age of digital media and social media?

It's all about speed, digitisation is instant. Whatever is out there is going to be out there very fast. Response speed is something that PR folks are trying to now get very fast at. You can't wait for your spokesperson to be free and then give your output out there. Something small can snowball into something very big. With social media, crisis could emerge out of nowhere and you have to put it out immediately or you could be in a big fix so as to speak.

I don't think big crisis per se are not manageable, now with organisational reputation management on social, even solving the smaller crisis is crucial because social media can have a large impact on your reputation.

What emerging trends do you foresee in the PR industry, particularly in terms of crisis management and reputation repair?

I think it's no longer a matter of understanding a crisis and deciding whether to respond to it or not. It's now more understanding how can you mitigate a problem on the go. Digital crisis communication and organisational reputation management are very critical. I think there's a greater synergy between Comms, digital marketing and customer service. Ensuring that you take a customer's feedback from a live tweet to a direct message and solve the problem and convince the customer to put a positive response once you have responded to their query.

Solving their problem is necessary because you want your NPS cost to be good and you want to convert a detractor to somebody who speaks good about you and promotes your product in the long run.

In today's fast paced digital landscape, how important do you think real time engagement and storytelling is for effective corporate engagement?

Now with newspapers shrinking in size, everything's going digital, it's very important to understand that formats that are acceptable are much different than they were on print.

Editorials still have their space, long article formats still have their space, but you must make content more palatable. Listicles are a classic example of how this can work, especially on topics that are not very interesting. Insurance, for example, people don't take a lot of effort to get to know. Making it a simple 'five things you need to know about buying insurance,' for example changes the format of your content and makes it more palatable.

I think a lot of brands have suffered using automation to a large extent, whereby just keywords are read and responses are sent out. I think persons manning it with the right combination of AI is what engagement should be all about.

How would you measure the ROI of PR and corporate communication efforts in an increasingly data driven marketing world?

It's very important to understand the objective of a communication effort. PR must have an objective. For example, today, insurance is only 1 per cent of the country's GDP, that's predominantly because it's in larger cities.

Typically, industries look at share of voice as one of the measurable metrics for reach. Then it's split into sentiment as positive, negative, neutral. You look at measurable metrics such as MAV because you want to have media ad value because PR traditionally is thought of as an editorial hand of the advertising or the marketing division. It's very important to understand how much you can put out there in terms of awareness.

The purpose of marketing is to simulate sales, to drive demand and you can be in love with your idea, your share of voice might be large, but at the end of the day you must sync organisational priority with that of advertising.

Could you provide some insights into the integration of PR and marketing to create a cohesive and impactful brand narrative?

They are two sides of the same coin. Personal marketing is considered a form of paid media. PR is looked at as owned media or earned media. Ensuring that amplification of your PR campaigns happen through marketing is very crucial. If you have a large editorial piece in a reputed newspaper, ensuring that it reaches a wider audience on the digital front is very crucial. Even if you have digital links, it's important that you're able to amplify that through your social media reach.

Employee advocacy is also important. It's not just about your brand reposting it, retweeting it, sharing it, liking it, but an employee takes a genuine interest in the content that they're putting out.

PRs can add SEO value to a digital marketing team. If the right articles go out of the right content, and that content can be backlinked to your website, then you can get a lot of value, a lot of domain authority for what you're putting out. Content is what drives search and content is what will drive AI related search in the future as well.

The other side of the coin is ensuring that what you're doing goes out and creates a brand image for the organisation.

As sustainability and CSR gain prominence, how can PR executives effectively communicate a company's commitment to these values?

CSR is very important for a brand to do, not just from an obligation standpoint, I think it's more about trying to make a genuine difference to society. If you want your brand to grow, you need to communicate that very well.

We believe in financial literacy as an important facet of our business. We feel the more people know about financial protection, the more people will opt for it, the more people will stay protected. ESG is nothing but an extension of your business model. I don't think any of us have a choice because the planet needs to reverse age a bit for us to get back on track.

Social is a very important facet because we create jobs, we employ people, we employ partners and if somebody is in distress, the insurance product pays for their distress.

Most organisations now have a business responsibility or sustainability report. When you embark on a journey, you need to understand what's your endpoint and you need to communicate that to your stakeholders and what steps you're taking towards that journey. PR plays a crucial role because you can't wash away your sins.

What are the challenges you think in managing PR for a global brand? What challenges do you think can come up when dealing with diverse cultural audiences and how would you address these issues?

Every culture, every language, every region is unique. What is right in one country may not be right in another.

Look at India. We are countries within a country. Diversity exists from north to south, west to east. English doesn't work everywhere, neither does Hindi. A lot of brands put advertisements of PR in a particular language, publication without understanding what the cultural nuances of that location might be. Same ad is translated as it is without understanding what impact it might have on your target audience. Talking to a local is very important, running it by them, because it's always better to take time putting out PR and other communication rather than firefighting later, when you're being trolled.

With the rise of influencer partnerships how do PR effectively collaborate in the new realm of public relations?

Influencer marketing is something that I feel is a little overused today and a lot of brands are getting in line to do it. Look at GenZ, the only thing they do is consume reels on Instagram or Facebook for example. There's billions of content videos and these people make a living out of it. You need to understand who the genuine influencers are and who the influencers are who just speak about any advertising or any brand or anything that they get paid for.

There are niche influencers like a finance influencer or a banking influencer. Influencers cut the clutter, keep focus and do a lot in terms of getting your brand out there. You need to understand what the objective of your communication is.