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Public Relations Review



Research in brief

Commentary: Practicing public relations in Poland—Experiences of a cross-cultural consulting partnership

Kenneth Rabin*, Andrzej Kropiwnicki

Alfa Communications, ul. Swietokrzyska 20, Suite 52500002 Warsaw, Poland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 December 2012

Received in revised form 10 January 2013

Accepted 10 January 2013

Keywords:

Public Relations

Poland

Cross-cultural communications

Three years ago, the first author was privileged to review the revised edition of *The Global Public Relations Handbook* (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009) for *Public Relations Review*.

Recently, he dusted off his copy of this text and his notes on it. He re-read both the editors' introduction and theoretical framework for global public relations, and the specific chapter on PR in Poland, which the authors (Ryszard Ławniczak, Waldemar Rydzak and Jacek Trębicki) referred to as an economy and society in transition. Then he asked his Polish business associate to co-author a short article that would compare the editors' global framework and the chapter authors' broad assertions about Poland (and their now rather dated 1999 case study of the "The Capitalist Manifesto" of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers) against the reality of doing 21st century PR in this unique country.

So as not to keep the reader in too much suspense, we will state from the outset that the general framework described in the *Global Public Relations Handbook* is pretty solid, and that Poland is still transitioning slowly away from a half-century of socialism in its economic and political life, a process that began in 1990. But as always, the devil is in the details, and any American who wants to practice PR cross-culturally in Poland (or anywhere else) had better defer to his local partner if he or she wants to succeed.

Let's start with theory. Sriramesh and Verčič state upfront (p. 3) that they "believe that identifying the impact of environmental variables on public relations practice helps increase our ability to predict which strategies and techniques are better suited to a particular organizational environment." To link environmental variables to public relations practice, they draw on the 1996 work of the Excellence Project, which suggested five specific variables that "could be used to design public relations strategies specific to a given country: political ideology, economic system (including the level of development of the country's economy), degree of activism (the extent of pressure organizations face from activists), culture, and media system" (p. 4).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +48 226350726.

E-mail address: khrabb@aol.com (K. Rabin).

Understanding the Polish PR environment

A quick look at how these factors interact on PR practice in Poland suggests that a number of environmental pitfalls await the unprepared.

In respect to *political ideology*, Poland is today a representative democracy. Local governmental officials, parliamentarians and the country's President are all freely elected. But most citizens remain as suspicious of politicians today as they did under socialism (as the Communist regime is referred to more commonly here). And the government in turn remains deeply suspicious of capitalism. Regulation is not particularly friendly to business and lobbying carries a stigma (and legal proscriptions) that Americans, in particular, find hard to understand. For PR practitioners in Poland, interacting with government officials is a dance step that, like a Chopin mazurka, is both delicate and lively.

The Polish *economy* is, surprisingly to some, among the most vibrant in Europe. But the government's ability to keep producing even low single-digit GDP growth is predicated on tight budgets for government services. Medicines, for example, are inexpensive but Poles have among the lowest access to latest medicines, and highest co-pays for existing drugs in Europe. Also, it is best not to plan on having serious surgery in the last quarter of the fiscal year, as for the last few years the National Health Budget has tended to run dry in October. Wages lag Western Europe and there is an on-going "brain drain" as educated, young Poles seek opportunities elsewhere in the EU, which Poland joined in 2004.

Activism exists in Poland but do not expect to find an "Occupy" here. A Gay Rights movement exists, but is quite subdued by American or Western European standards. Where Polish activism flourishes, it is either (a) union driven, as befits a society that threw off the yoke of Communism through the activism of Solidarity, or (b) Church driven, primarily by conservative Catholics who are closely allied with the political party called PiS (Law and Justice), whose leadership was decimated in the tragic April 2010 plane crash at Smolensk.

Polish Culture, as suggested by the nature of Polish activism, has deeply conservative roots. Although Church and State are formally separated, the country is a bastion of Roman Catholicism. Pope John Paul II is the country's most important modern historical figure. Abortion is legal only in very specific instances. Encouraged by the Church, Polish family life is a powerful cultural force, often stretching across three and four closely-knit generations. The formidable ecclesiastical, political and economic power of the Church also represents an interesting challenge and opportunity to PR practitioners, although in our experience few have attempted to leverage it significantly.

Polish Culture is also highly patriotic. Polish history – including landmark twentieth century events such as Poland's defeat of the Red Army in 1920, the role of Polish airmen in The Battle of Britain in 1940, the Stalinist Russian massacre of Polish officers at Katyn in 1940 (the Smolensk disaster occurred while the Polish leaders were en route there to commemorate its 70th anniversary), and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, which are all but unknown to people elsewhere – is deeply ingrained. So too is sensitivity regarding the Holocaust, which took place in Nazi German camps on Polish land.

Polish Culture also means Polish music (Chopin but also Szymanowski in the present century) and Polish science (Copernicus, Maria Skłodowska Curie), which are national treasures that Polish public relations draws upon routinely.

Finally, the *Polish media* are a heady mix of powerful public broadcasters, a growing private broadcast sector, magazines for every taste and interest, national and financial newspapers, gritty tabloids and the inevitable Facebook and Twitter. Journalists are often called the fourth power but – especially after recent cost cutting – are poorly paid and in most cases today there are too few of them in newsrooms to do their jobs effectively. As a result, some journalists are open to publishing news releases unchanged, though in general the efforts of PR people face considerable media scrutiny and criticism.

Doing PR in Poland – three cases in environmental context

The authors collaborated with other consultants on each of the cases described in this section, both in communication strategy development and implementation. The solutions that emerged, and the successes and frustrations we encountered, underscore the unique nature of doing PR in Poland.

1. Issues management in the medical device industry – allegations of contamination, activist prosecutors, sensationalist press and a breakdown in regulatory procedures

In 2007 the Polish subsidiary of a global manufacturer of disposable medical devices was ambushed by a press report in a leading national daily, stating that up to 60,000 contaminated devices made by this company were on the shelves of 150 Polish hospitals, waiting to do untold harm to patients. Within 24 h, almost 400 negative media stories had appeared in the press, on TV and radio, fueled in part by a previous report of fatalities from contaminated medicine and charges that western companies were "dumping" inferior products in Poland.

The original story had been planted by an activist procurator (some state prosecutors in Poland, like state's attorneys in the US are notorious "leakers") who had found a few samples of the reportedly contaminated product that had been turned in to the police by a hospital nurse languishing in the desk drawer of a less ambitious colleague.

Since the contamination had not been reported through normal medical regulatory channels, both the company and the Polish Ministry of Health were forced to play "catch-up" while under intense prosecutorial and media scrutiny. The communication objectives were clear: prevent Polish regulators from arbitrarily suspending sales, and protect the company's reputation not just in Poland but from spillover to neighboring countries and the entire EU.

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