

Living in the PR world Your 24/7 dose of Surprises

Having spent about three decades in the Communications business – Advertising, Media & Public Relations, one has realized that each of these offers a different type of excitement, challenge and satisfaction. While all three require you to put in long hours, face unexpected situations and interact with clients from across industries, with varying levels of professionalism, I think PR is the One Business in which the unexpected can happen ever so often and completely demolish months of planning that you may have put in.

Let me illustrate the above with some examples:

1. Around this time last year, we were working on an industry event, for which a speaker from Delhi was to come down to make a presentation to PR professionals in Mumbai on a subject of great interest and learning. Preparations for the event started a few weeks before the date. We managed to get a Sponsor to host the event. Invitations were sent out and over 60 confirmations of participation received, as on the eve of the event. That evening we left the office feeling comfortable that we would have a full house the next day and an interesting and participative session.... We didn't know what was in store.

That night it poured in Mumbai with heavy incessant rains all night. The next morning most parts of the city were flooded, bringing the public transport system virtually to a halt. Even those of us who travelled by car made it late to the office and started calling all the participants to our event. We got through to only some of them. Eventually, when we reached the venue of the event, there were only 5 out of 60 participants who had promised to attend. What was planned as a large screen presentation to a hall full of people, actually turned out to be a round table discussion around a laptop, resulting in severe embarrassment for us with the speaker and sponsor!

2. A very different situation from the one above, is what I'd like to now share. Some years ago at a meeting to share a company's growth strategy, the Vice Chairman of the Rs. 700 crore company, spent an hour with a senior journalist from a very well reputed publication, explaining at length the company's business model and focus areas for the coming year. He explained, that while the company would continue to focus on its core competency of large projects, it would also lay emphasis on smaller variants for individual use, because individuals now had spending power and were looking at a better life style.

Imagine the agency's surprise the next morning when they opened the newspaper to find a prominent headline stating that the Company was getting out of its core business and would be concentrating on smaller variants. Once again what was planned to be a big-ticket positive story for the client, actually got the agency only his wrath, as he was very perturbed about the effect this article would have on the company's existing customers.

3. A somewhat different experience was the one a friend had, when they organized an Analysts meet for an outstation client – not a very high profile company. Post invitations and follow-ups, it looked like they would have about 40 analysts attending the meeting.

Imagine the surprise when at the venue, people started walking in one after the other and in a few minutes they crossed 50 and it looked like there were going to be about 75. The hotel was promptly asked to add more chairs. Within half an hour, the number had crossed 100 and people were virtually spilling out of the room. It was later learnt that a rumour / tip by one analyst about the company had sparked of a sudden interest.

4. We were breaking news about a product launch with a journalist who had got wind of it and was doggedly pursuing us for a meeting with the client. We let that happen. The journalist filed a story that evening and we were looking forward to seeing it the next morning. However, when we opened the papers, we didn't find it anywhere. Instead, we got a call from our Bangalore office that the Bangalore edition of the paper had carried a large piece. Within the next two days the story appeared in a few other editions of the paper, but eventually didn't appear in Mumbai, where the story originated from!
5. A colleague on a routine visit to one of the Publication Groups was in conversation with a couple of journalists. It so happened that the Editorial team from their women's magazine was doing the cover shoot in the compound. Suddenly they got the idea and decided to use a young guy for the cover and asked our colleague to be the One. Highly embarrassed, he agreed to be part of the shoot. A week later he was on the cover of the magazine and by helping out had cemented a strong relationship with the journalist.
6. Sometime ago, at a large media event for a consumer product company a very popular film actress was the Chief Guest. While everything went smoothly, when it was question and answer time, a journalist asked the actress a personal question, which she tactfully didn't answer. This angered him so much that he took a picture of hers, which was provided to all journalists, drew a moustache on it and placed it prominently on the buffet table. Some photographer managed to click pictures of it before it could be removed and the next day these appeared in some morning newspapers becoming a huge embarrassment to all concerned.

As you can see, there's never a dull moment in PR. However much we try and plan, there is always that late arrival of a journalist, a no show by a client, a howler in a press release or a product demo failing to do its trick at a Launch Press Conference. Perhaps it's not the Headline, which appears that PR professionals end up worrying about, it's the disappearing hairline! But all said and done, I am sure all PR Professionals agree that along with surprises, there are rich rewards and satisfaction that PR offers and they wouldn't change it for anything else.

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