

## Conference Discussion Note

6 Apr 2006 (Day 2):

### **The Role of PR within the Innovation Communication System – a Case Study**

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Discussion

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### **Comments by Vilma Luoma-aho**

In his presentation, Jan Sandred described a case study of excellent cooperation in innovation journalism: the case where the Swedish government worked together with Microsoft to prepare a manual for safe surfing on the internet (Surfa Lungt). Thought this was clearly a PR-project to enhance Microsoft's image as more caring and sharing (instead of dangerous and greedy), the manual and its various spin-offs such as courses and lectures, was very well received by the Swedish public, teachers, governments and decision-makers. This example seems to prove that when the need is big enough, it doesn't matter where the help comes from. Or does it?

Even though big companies may be seen as contributors to social problems, they still can come out as winners if they fill the social need for help. Finding this need is a place for innovation and monitoring. Companies willing to survive in the ever-changing world must constantly have their antennae out to sense what the various stakeholders and publics are experiencing, and in which directions the stakeholder expectations are shifting. And not only sense these, but adapt to them and meet these needs.

There are some definitions that I'd like to correct. PR is not merely as Jan suggested, talking in third person about someone, it is a strategic management function that includes communication. The long time-span of PR is often not understood. Public Relations (PR) has been defined as management of the relationships and communication between the organization and those in contact with it (Ledingham & Bruning 2000, Grunig 1992). More precisely, Public

Relations is an ongoing and target-oriented management function for evaluating the attitudes of publics, identifying policies and procedures to suit the public interest and the execution of programmes to earn the acceptance of publics (Kotler & Andreasen 1987).

In fact, PR creates general goodwill and collaboration. PR is not just the words uttered out in the media (in this case about Microsoft), but the processes and relationship building that took place months, maybe even years before that. PR is the choice that was made on the top level to care about what the stakeholders want and need, the decisions to monitor, the ability to listen and the willingness to collaborate. It was the decision to fund potentially beneficial projects. It is actually because of strategic PR-choices that projects such as Surfa Lungt were possible for Microsoft. And it was not only good PR but it was thought through on various levels of different stakeholders even with differing needs. Microsoft addressed ministries, decision makers, teachers, students, parents all at their own levels, met their various needs.

The concept of stakeholder is a vital one for organizations and corporations. It refers broadly to those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist as well as to those who aim to influence or are influenced by the organization (Freeman 1984). The organization may or may not be aware of its stakeholders, but through monitoring and picking up weak signals they may be identified. Identifying the various stakeholders is vital as opinions and alternate points of view may quickly be expressed to large masses through real-time media (Luoma-aho, 2005).

Doing good becomes good PR only through journalism. Part of the success of the Surfa Lungt was the extensive press coverage it received. Various media were supporting and promoting it. Yet another reason for success was its contents. It hit a timeless topic, the fear of the unknown. As the internet is becoming more available to those good and bad in society, the social need for safety increases. Microsoft practiced excellent PR and picked up a weak signal of fear and acted to answer that signal before it became a crisis.

A guide or a study programme is an excellent example of long time-span PR, and it would be interesting to know how many meetings occurred between the Swedish government and Microsoft before the deal was reached? Though it later often looks like a clean deal, there were probably many talks on what names to use, which examples to use, where could Microsoft Logo be present and how many times their name should be mentioned during training days. Yet the Swedes received this PR project with enthusiasm, as from God.

Are the Swedes naïve? Maybe so. Big PR projects have been known to go down 'without swallowing' (Finnish expression meaning 'without hesitation or deeper thought') in the Nordic countries before. One such example was the massive propaganda put forth by the European Union before national votes in the 1990's. There is a certain cultural trait common to the Nordic countries to accept and trust the authorities as given. Questioning the authorities' decisions is not as common in the North as it is in countries with older civil societies such as France (Luoma-aho, 2005). When the government collaborated with Microsoft, it was a seal of approval

for the public to accept the project. After all, they trust their government. And if government trusts Microsoft enough to engage in a project, the public should, too. It was a matter of transferred trust.

But why did the media, the watch-dog of the powerful, not criticize the project or even report on the PR-nature of it? Why were there no reports of how much positive feedback the project provided Microsoft? How did it affect Microsoft's sales in Sweden?

This raises the bigger question of which PR-projects fail, and which succeed? Which campaigns go down as winners for innovation journalism?

One suggestion can be found through the theory of Isomorphism. Isomorphism can be described as the attempt to become similar, or to maintain a standard by mirroring others in their field and try to become similar enough to fit in (Thompson 1967, Parsons 1956, Meyer & Rowan 1977.) The point is that organizations both interact with their environments within the dominant boundaries and imitate the structures of other organizations within those same boundaries. Microsoft used isomorphism, by similar enough to be understood and accepted, different enough to stand apart from others. Microsoft took a common problem (partly self-caused) and approached it via sponsoring and collaborating with the government. There were familiar measures and means, yet the target and companion, government and guidebook were different enough to stand out as new and interesting. Maybe this novelty as well as its good nature excused the lack of critical reporting on the event.

Without the collaboration with its major stakeholder, the government, the project probably would not have had such a huge success. In fact, Surfa lungt was a good example of innovation PR but a very bad example of innovation journalism, as it seems that the PR ate away the critical light so necessary to reporting on new and innovative topics... and we are all familiar with the dangers of reporting too positively on innovations and new phenomena.

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