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In an exclusive interview with ICE Business Times

Public Relations with a Purpose

Welcome to Bangladesh. How do you think we are doing country wise?

It's been 10 years now, and this is my third visit. I came here in May 2009 to launch Concito PR with the objective to lead the development of professional public relations in Bangladesh. I continue to be amazed by the transformation this country is going through. The city looks very different; the skyline has changed. One thing that has not changed, which is a great tribute to the character of the youth of this great country; everybody is driven by a spirit of enterprise. Every young person I meet, is a serial entrepreneur of some sort. A banker friend of mine told me that the micro entrepreneurship is the biggest strength of this nation. That is what I knew 10 years back and it has prevailed 10 years hence, and it is terribly exciting and the growth engine of this great nation. This makes this country unique; I have not experienced this in all my travels around the world.

You started your career in hotel management. So how did the transformation happen?

I was an accidental communicator. I am an Economics major with a degree in Hotel Management. After a few years in the industry, I felt I needed to educate myself further to do a better job of my brief. I completed my MBA, and was looking to go back to hotels, when a friend of mine working in Public Relations suggested that I try my hand out in a unique area of consulting. I agreed and took a month to research the industry. I felt that it was a nascent industry and that there was an opportunity to do a lot more. That's how I came into it and that was in '94'.

It was purely by accident, and it has given me so much more than I bargained for in terms of the experience, exposure, the kind of work, the kind of people I have met, and the learning I have had. Perhaps, it's the best decision I have made in my professional career.

How would you like to introduce yourself? A Public Relations expert or a Reputation Advisor? How are these two terms related or different?

None actually. If you look at my Twitter handle it says I am a “student of the science of persuasion”. I am a student first of all, learning all the time. Whether you are a public relations expert or a reputation management specialist, at the end of the day we are trying to persuade someone to make a choice. When we do this ethically, we help people make informed choices. Our persuasion is done through ethical means using the tools of dialogue or engagement. The science behind persuasion or the science of reputation management is about understanding the scientific principles of persuasion and applying them in an ethical manner, this is what I do.

Public Relations is a tool to engage and influence stakeholders to shift their belief and attitude towards a particular company or person or object – It's a management tool. [Reputation Management](#) is equally a process, so they are one and the same. The definition of reputation today has broader horizons and it usually means encompassing a reputation impact in everything that one does. So as a reputation advisor the process is the same, but we look at in a far more all-encompassing manner across stakeholders, across platforms. It's a good way to create a distance between misunderstood aspects of PR to what PR should truly be.

You often say, staying relevant to the audience is the key issue in these days. Could you explain?

We all look for relevance, right? Relevance is timeless, but why is it more pertinent today? It is pertinent today because of the constant bombardment of messages, from the time we wake up, to the time we go to bed, especially as we get more and more engaged with our devices. Our sensory perception is being constantly attacked with assorted messages and our selective retention is even becoming greater. The first way to go beyond that selective retention is to be relevant. The first gate to any communication or conversation is that it needs to be relevant and engaging. To be relevant one needs to understand our audience better: what makes them tick, how to stand out through the clutter of exponentially mounting content. We need to remain relevant and engaging so as to be able to grab attention.

You say reputation is measurable? How so?

If you think about the brand equity of a company or you look at the value of a company – it far exceeds the liquidation value of its assets; the intangible format of a company in a financial sense is far more important than the tangible sense. So, in one sense the equity of a company is expressed in the Price Earnings (PE) ratio because of its past performance and future prospects. That's one form. How much better is the company EPS from the industry? that's another measure.

We say that reputation is earned over a period of time. It's the feeling of goodness, respect that we carry for a person. Now those are all emotions, but those emotional attachments are built out of a rational set of criteria. Subconsciously our minds are ticking off rational boxes as we establish criteria. When we say someone is a great bowler we are looking at the stats.

When we say someone is a nice person, then we have our definition for why someone is nice. When you start to think about how you measure this, you can by using research techniques looking at the strength of favorability, the strength of attachment and the rational sort of yardsticks that we attach. You can see and compare.

At Astrum, we have created a measurement framework called the [Reputation Health Index™](#) (RHI) to measure and benchmark the health of company's reputation. It's a framework we have created over the two decades of my work in the sector. We consider the momentum from awareness to recommendation of a particular company and benchmark drivers of its reputation, using our proprietary reputation audit survey. RHI walks you through the choice matrix to be able to say what is driving the reputation, how are people estimating this company against others and makes a company's health of reputation measurable. What is important to understand is that each industry is unique, each company in the industry brings its own unique set of characteristics; but overall from experience, there are conservatively about 70 factors that impact the reputation of a company. The drivers are unique to each sector. There is no concept of universal reputation drivers. There are common themes in terms of good behavior. There are attributes, but what they connote for each company means completely different things in different industries.

More importantly, RHI informs the Reputation Strategy that we develop, seen through the lens of our "LeadershipWithAPurpose" reputation management framework we have named C Cube™. Today the need to align your actions and communications to the rapidly changing expectations of your audience is even greater than ever before. Mobile internet has changed the way we consume and share information. Unless companies start to live a larger purpose that strikes a chord with your audience, they cannot stand apart.

For e.g. in developing economies Environmental Consciousness displayed by companies may not be as important as some more immediate considerations related to growth and impact on livelihoods. But as economies become more sophisticated and people become more discerning, we have seen sustainability/environmental consciousness become an important consideration driver in estimating the reputation of a company. In the same vein, governance and business ethics become important. These attributes keep changing in relative importance as audiences become more informed, more discerning and less forgiving; Companies need the knowledge to be more agile than their competitors to adapt to win hearts and minds and stand apart. This is where the science-based reputation management helps. We are able to move the needle from insight to foresight. We help our clients see the emerging issues that they need to factor into their reputation strategy and embed a core purpose into their business strategy. This way they gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

You conducted a workshop here in Dhaka on "taking public relations to the board room." What do you actually mean by that?

At the start of my career, most PR people were called when everything was done. Some wanted to distribute a press release, or get cheap publicity, so PR people were not in the decision-making matrix at all. They were merely an execution agent who had no say whether it was newsworthy. In my sense, value chain for a PR professional is a three-step ladder. First

Step: the lowest value chain: How to Say? E.g. should I do press meet or an interview. Second, Step-up is: What to Say; e.g. What should be our message? What should our content say? And the Third and most important when our clients ask "What should we Do" to earn our reputation. When I say taking PR to the boardroom, it really is about getting a seat on the decision-making table. Where you are operating in the zone of "what to do and what to say" rather than just 'how to say'.

As we read about you, your involvement in some of the political campaigns came up. Can you share some experience?

The biggest learning, I have had from my work in political campaigns is that voters are becoming discerning in their choice and make informed and considered decisions. They have started to value their vote. For example, in India, due to the penetration of TV, Internet and mobile and emphasis on education, women are playing an important role in the Indian political scene. They are starting to express themselves far more independently. In the good old days, we would say there were 3 Cs in our political campaigns: Caste, Coalition and Candidates. Now the 4th factor is the 4th C called Communication, that is now becoming the "X factor". Hence the need to better understand voters and align your programmes and campaigns. Hence, the use of data science.

The use of data science and data analytics insights is becoming more and more sophisticated in the application of political strategy. I am glad I had the opportunity to do this pioneering work with the BJP government in 2012 when we launched the work, and 2014's victory was a testament of the fact that we could use data science and analytics to be able to ethically work on election strategy. We do it scientifically and statistically, and our sample sizes are very large. We have conducted the largest political polling in the history of Indian elections. And we used applications of analytics and statistics to actually help political parties make choices around battlegrounds, which constituencies we should be fighting in, what should be our narrative, candidate selection and how the candidate will appeal to a large cross section of voters, which segments should we be talking to. It's the classical marketing that we have in business – segmenting, targeting and positioning. We apply the same logic in elections except that now you need to have a political background, a social background to be able to put this together, and when we apply data science to all of this, some interesting pictures emerge which aid decision making.

Your perception on Bangladesh and what do you think needs to be done to increase the image of the country as a whole?

It's an economy in transformation. It is one of the fastest growing economies and I think pretty soon the per capita income is going to outpace many of the fast-developing economies. As an economic engine, Bangladesh is on the right track, and the median age here I am told is 26, so the youth here is really powering the economic engine, and I hope that will continue. I think we need to keep the pedal on the economic reforms, the government needs to continue to look at how to create a more liberal environment for unleashing the entrepreneurship spirit of the people, because it is the heart of the engine here.

As you start to build, and I was reading about the budget in the news. The Government has looked at tourism, aviation, infrastructure in a big way. My hosts informed me that they felt like

the country is under construction which means there is a lot of investment in infrastructure. I think the foundations for the future of Bangladesh is being laid which will make the nation attractive to both visitors and investors from outside of the country, but more importantly to the people of this country. While FDI is important, first we have to serve the citizens of our nation. When Government invests in infrastructure and tourism, it creates jobs and opportunities for its people and improves the quality of life of its citizens. These investments bring pride of nationhood in the country.

You often recommend purpose-driven campaigns for corporates? Why do you think it's important to do so?

At Astrum, we see the millennial have different aspirations of why they want to work. If you look at surveys of global millennial, they'd rather work for companies that have an embedded social purpose in their spirit. When you say the world is millennial dominated then purposeful communication resonates very well, where companies start to live their purpose.

This is more than just branding yourself with a purpose. I don't advocate "purpose driven communication" instead I counsel companies to achieve "Leadership with a purpose". What I say to my clients, is that to take leadership in the marketplace, embed a purpose in your strategy. For example, what is the purpose of Astrum? One, we want to bring greater respect and recognition to the professional practitioners of public relations, and I can only do this by increasing the usage of know-how far more than the demand for know-who. Know-who has to be lesser than bringing knowledge and expertise to strategy development, stakeholder engagement, and understanding public perception, which is where the science is. Every organization has to understand the purpose it serves, it has to be beyond the mere commercial gain. Companies have to live their purpose and align actions to that purpose. Leadership will follow. That's how we have come to be the youngest and fastest growing public relations firm in India in the last four years. By living our purpose.

You look at the aspirations of the people who you serve, and strive to meet and exceed those expectations honestly, respect is a natural outcome. I say respect is something you earn, and hence reputation is earned. Hence, the know-how today companies need is to answer questions like what do I need to be to be seen as I want to be seen? What should my larger purpose be? How I do embed it into my strategy? What actions and communications I need to align? How will I know I am being successful? Those are the answers that science-based [reputation management](#) helps answer, That is what Astrum does: The Science of Reputation.

If you lead with the purpose and live with purpose, chances are (a) you'll be able to weather crises far better than anybody else and emerge out of them stronger (b) you will build a differentiated position and hold some respect and esteem in the minds of the people.

One thing you said

"I will help you to tell the truth well" can you explain a bit more what you mean?

Unless you do good work, there is no good communication. As Harold Burson, one of my teachers and mentors would say "good communication is not a substitute for bad strategy".

You first have to do good, to be seen to be doing good. Then if people ask if we first have to be seen to be good, then what is your value to us, I say my value is exactly this – first, to tell you what you need to do to be good. There is a whole world of “what do I need to do to be good”, that’s where the know-how comes in making the right choices. Second, I say, to translate your “good” into an engaging and believable story that wins both hearts and minds. In other words, “tell your truth well”.

Today, authenticity is central to respect. Our studies have shown that over 70% of people would believe peer reviews over advertising. So, you have no choice but to be real.

As the new sources of information and influences emerge, companies need professional advice and expert help to help you navigate the complexity of reputation management and to tell their truth well.

Any suggestions for the new Public Relations professionals in the area of capacity building?

I said to the participants at my workshop that the world of PR is seeing tectonic shifts. Automation and technology will have a significant influence in the way we communicate and engage with each other. Data is going to be important in decision making.

Many PR professionals come from a liberal arts background, because writing was an important aspect. However, mobile internet is moving text to visuals and video. In the context of Bangladesh, where the median age is 26 and Facebook/WhatsApp are dominant social media platforms, video consumptions is the largest form of content being consumed.

The skill sets needed are changing. We have to start thinking about where are the skill set – (1) if we are going to be driven through data and insights then are we empirically minded (2) how we communicate and engage is changing, storytelling is changing, what are the capacities you require, how would you remain relevant?

The nature of the consumption of content is driven by the amount we need to consume and the time in which we need to consume, therefore finding the path to least resistance. Complex data sheets driven through visualization makes understanding simpler. Capacity building must be in relation to what is happening in the environment, and the place of change is something you have to establish to see what is going to happen. Bangladesh will rapidly change in the next 5-7 years. It’s not going to be a generational shift, it is going to be relevant in our current generation, which is why I remind my young professionals to check their relevance in the changing environment and start absorbing.

There are courses on Coursera that will make you digitally literate. If you choose to invest, it is not very difficult. Unless you have the orientation of a student to learn, the curiosity to learn, and the desire to upgrade and upscale yourself, you will quickly become irrelevant.