



Shefali Khanna
Chief Marketing Officer
+91 971 111 8615 / shefali.khanna@astrum.in
www.astrum.in

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Technology-rooted work will certainly be the 21st-century driver: Ashwani Singla

In today's 'Year-ender story of 2021', Singla, Founding Managing Partner, Astrum, says that for his team, understanding the 'hearts and minds' of audiences is the foundation of science of reputation



As we step into 2022 and look forward to it as a year full of hope and possibilities, e4m PR and Corp Comm presents the "Year-ender story of 2021" series with the theme 'The possibilities that the new year holds for PR agencies and the way ahead'. The series encompasses the views, opinions and thoughts of some of the leading names and veterans of the PR and Corp Comm fraternity on how they perceive the new year, the transitions they expect to see, and their vision for the future.

In this interview, Ashwani Singla, Founding Managing Partner, Astrum, explains how NLP in combination with other tools creates the ability to read, understand and digest unstructured content into structured content

Excerpts from the interview:

How important has the trend of personalised pitches become for the PR industry?

I am surprised to hear that this is a growing trend today!! I believe that to the norm for any successful communicator. For over two decades plus in the industry I have always practiced and advocated for 'relevant and compelling' (personalised) content to be directed to audiences based on insights we have gained about their attitudes and beliefs, i.e. understanding what they know, think, believe and feel. Using that insight, one can craft a pitch/direct a message that grabs and holds their attention.

How you might ask? Simply put, it answers the most important question that a recipient of a message asks: "What's in it for me (WIFIM)?" So yes, customising your messages to the audiences is the key to increasing your probability of success.

For us at Astrum, understanding the 'hearts and minds' of our audiences is the foundation of the Science of Reputation.

Artificial Intelligence is the future - irrespective of industries. What are the ways AI can come to the aid of PR and Corp Communication professionals in 2022?

Technology-rooted work will certainly be the 21st-century driver and amongst them AI would play its part. In the communication industry, the most pertinent tool in the AI arsenal would be Natural Language Processing (NLP). NLP in combination with other tools creates the ability to read, understand and digest unstructured content into structured content. This would lead to the automation of some of the jobs in the public relations industry; "authoring" content like press releases, opinion articles and speeches would be one such development.

For example, a friend of mine recently authored a book on technology and he had a whole chapter written by AI. Another example, at the media analytics firm that I founded in 1998, Impact Research & Measurement, which today is India's premier media intelligence firm, we experimented with NLP (emerging technology) over a decade ago rather unsuccessfully, but with recent developments in NLP and its more widespread availability, our R&D is showing promising results in monitoring media and creating the intelligence needed to make smart/evidence-based communication decisions.

What are the trends the Indian PR and Corporate Communications industry can look forward to/ expect in 2022?

I am not a crystal ball gazer, but I can share what we are working on with our clients to stay ahead of the curve:

1. Data/Insights-driven advocacy will continue to find greater adoption. I am proud to say that Astrum has been a pioneer in basing its work on Insights. This has allowed our clients to embed reputation strategy into the core of their business, develop persuasive messaging and drive a more focussed (personalised) stakeholder engagement. The Science of Reputation drives evidence-based results, answering the most important questions about measuring outputs and outcomes of our programmes.

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2. Authenticity will be the currency of communication. Real stories, real people and real emotions will be the heart of brand engagement. The pandemic has not only reshaped lives for many but reshaped how they see themselves in the world. Changing priorities seen through just one example of the 'great resignation' will reshape how they engage as consumers, employees, entrepreneurs and investors, among other roles. On the other hand, brands will need to guard against 'deep fakes' and 'fake news' to protect their credibility and authenticity.
 3. Sustainability will take centerstage. Sustainability of lives, livelihoods and the planet will have to be embedded into the corporate discourse; and stakeholders will extract a price from those who fail to rise to this challenge. The changes that people are experiencing through flash floods that have immersed cities and washed away villages, heat and cold waves that have caused mass casualties in developed as well as developing economies or the way lives have been lost due to the pandemic has truly made the world borderless. Citizens will force governments to respond, and consumers and employees will punish companies that fail to integrate sustainability into their corporate strategy. We don't have to look beyond our borders to see that this change is upon us. So paying lip service to sustainability through CSR would be detrimental to corporate reputation and companies practicing 'green-washing' will pay a price. Communicators have the opportunity to be the first responders to this challenge and become the 'go-to' resource of the company.
 4. Hybrid living will be the new normal: Pandemic has accelerated the adoption of a 'hybrid life' and made almost all our experiences of our everyday part physical and part virtual. Movies, shopping, eating, gaming, working – we are discovering how to strike the right balance between both. Communicators will need to adapt to this new reality to create bespoke engaging content that straddles both worlds. Do we have the answers yet? Perhaps no, but certainly we will need to learn quickly to understand this developing psychographics, leverage the power of technology and become more engaging storytellers.
 5. Regulators will become more cautious: The rapid pace of the changes that the technology will unfold will confound policymakers and regulators who will tend to 'err on the side of caution'. Loss of control and influence would drive lawmakers to introduce stringent rules to play the game or become a playing referee. Corporations will need a relook at the lines shaping their licence to operate. Add to this the reshaping of global supply chain due to pandemic drive the demand for self-reliance and raising of the border fences.

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