

23 July 2020 - PResent Panel Discussion

Public Relations (PR) skills needed in the digital age and PR opportunities arising from COVID-19 were the main topics of *PResent*, a webinar and Q&A session organised by the Student Chapter of the University of Newcastle, Singapore (UONS) and the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (IPRS) to commemorate the renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UONS and IPRS.

During her speech, UONS' Professor Chan expressed her gratitude and excitement about the third renewal of the MoU between the two organisations. The first MoU was made in January 2016. She congratulated IPRS on their 50th anniversary and indicated the year 2020 also marks UONS' 55th anniversary. "UONS' and IPRS will work together to nurture the next generation of professionals for the Public Relations industries in Singapore and the Region," she said.

IPRS' Mr Keshvani thanked UONS for its partnership, active engagement of students and pledged their commitment to support all the IPRS Student Chapters. He congratulated UONS on its third Student Chapter renewal while announcing that as part of IPRS' 50th Anniversary, at this particularly difficult time, and as a show of support, graduating UONS and other student chapter graduates will receive a one-year free affiliate membership to IPRS.

76 participants located in various countries joined the panellists Ms Lily Lim, Senior Lecturer for Communications Skills, Temasek Polytechnic, and Mr Justin Fong, Director of Corporate Communications, Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR), and the moderator Ms Nicole Quek, Administration Manager, UONS-IPRS Student Chapter Executive Committee for the session.

The first half of the discussion, *PResently*, addressed the PR skills needed in the digital era.

Ms Quek started the panel discussion by stating: **"Technological digitisation started over two decades ago. How has the professional communications landscape changed as digitisation became omnipresent, and why is it important to understand this?"**

Ms Lim commented, "With technology available at our fingertips through devices and applications, response time has increased exponentially. New technology has also changed the formatting of information. It is thus not enough to just push content out. One has to know how to package it in a way that people want to digest it," she said.

Mr Fong added that with increasing media literacy, it is insufficient for PR practitioners to simply send information to journalists as there are now more platforms for people to share information.

He raised another point that there is a lack of trust in digital platforms in which there are numerous information sources and opinions. "Nobody knows who to believe anymore," he said.

Ms Lim added that communicators and companies need to be authentic and “walk the talk” to maintain their reputation among stakeholders.

The panellists also shared their take on the crucial soft and hard skills needed to successfully operate in today’s PR industry in the digital era.

For soft skills, Ms Lim valued relationship management skills, teamwork and persuasiveness whereas Mr Fong believed that adaptability is essential.

For hard skills, Ms Lim emphasised the importance of good writing skills and tailoring writing to technology requirements while Mr Fong foresaw the usefulness of data analytics skills given its increasing demand.

The second part of the discussion, *PResenting* addressed PR opportunities created by COVID-19.

COVID-19 has adversely affected the global economy, including the PR industry. What opportunities have emerged during such trying times?

Mr Fong stated that PR is always about “building relations”. It is becoming increasingly important for companies to strengthen their bonds and relationships with existing and new customers.

“By being kind and compassionate in difficult times like these, people will remember you... The crisis actually has a lot of opportunities to leverage on,” he concluded.

What are some online challenges faced by PR practitioners in the light of the constraints caused by COVID-19, Circuit Breaker and confinement measures?

Mr Fong mentioned that online platforms help to build awareness and networks. He also raised another important question for PR practitioners to consider: “how can we do it safely in a cost-effective manner?”

Ms Lim added that another challenge is the limited ability to be creative online.

The webinar then progressed to the Q&A Session wherein questions raised by the attendees were addressed by the panellists. Below are some takeaways:

“When is communicating too much a bad thing amidst this pandemic? Have the OB markers for PR engagement shifted during COVID-19?”

Ms Lim and Mr Fong took the stance that there is no such thing as “communicating too much”, especially during a pandemic crisis, saying that communications have to be carried out consistently.

“It is crucial to maintain trust in relationships,” Mr Fong explained, based on his work experience in the government sector.

“What do PR companies look for in resumés? Is there any specific thing that’ll make them go ‘Ahh you’re hired !’ ? ”

Mr Fong asserted that a ‘can-do’ attitude and willingness to learn are important to employers, like himself, while Ms Lim valued people passionate in their own interests beyond academia.

“Some people have the view that PR practitioners are not needed anymore because anyone with a social media account can ‘do’ PR. How would PR professionals advise (UON) students to respond to that view when looking for jobs?”

Mr Fong answered that although much can be learnt online, watching a few videos and a lack of in-depth training simply cannot enable adequate engagement with so many of the complex elements of professional responsibility for high quality PR to be delivered.

That was reiterated by Ms Lim, and they both explained how self-learning teaches the ‘how’ but not the ‘why’ hence leaving a considerable knowledge gap.

Both agreed that deep understanding is required to effectively accomplish goals in the PR profession, as certain things can only be learnt through formal education and some only through experience.

PResent was made possible by the staff of UONS and IPRS.

From UONS, they are Dr Rama Venkatasawmy, Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media, Ms Michelle Zhang, Deputy Director of Strategic Planning and Operations, and Mr Tirtharenu Bhaumik, Senior Executive of Finance and Operation.

From IPRS, the IPRS Secretariat provided immense support with special credit to Ms Irene Lim, the Acting Head of the Secretariat.