



BY ANDY SEE

MARKETING

LISTENING: AVOIDING THE “SYIOK SENDIRI” TRAP

IT may sound cliché to assert that listening is the most important yet least taught communication skill, but the reality is, we often neglect the critical role that listening plays in any corporate or brand communication effort.

The danger of this phenomenon is that we may and most likely will fall into the “*syiok sendiri* trap”. I call this “*syiok sendiri*” because the management or communication teams of the companies or brands simply are in love with their proposed campaigns whilst little consideration is given to how the stakeholders will feel or react.

The “*syiok sendiri*” approach to reach out to stakeholders of a company is fraught with danger for the corporation or brand concerned. At best, it could result in some red faces and at worst, it could lead to reputational loss for the brand, with adverse impact on its bottom-line.

The following examples may provide some learning points for companies embarking on stakeholder communications.

Dove’s 2017 advertisement in the United States to promote its soap showed an African American woman taking off her brown shirt to reveal a white woman in a white shirt. The backlash forced Dove to pull the ad and apologise.

D&G’s ad to promote 2018 Shanghai Fashion Show drew scorn and protests on social media. Several celebrities backed out from the show, which was eventually cancelled. The situation deteriorated when Stefano Gabbana’s Instagram account, @stefanogabbana, defended the ad which was subsequently

labelled as an insult to China and the Chinese in general.

These situations illustrate the failures that can happen when companies are not listening to their stakeholders. To continue to do so, these companies run the risk of being no longer relevant to their audiences.

OPEN OUR EARS BEFORE OUR MOUTH

In today’s digital age, stakeholders are bombarded with information on a 24/7 basis. In the days of press, bad news used to have at least a few hours before it spread. Now, with social media, it’s a matter of minutes. As such, listening to stakeholders is more important today than ever.

On top that, how we listen is equally important. A recent controversy should serve as a cautionary tale about the importance of not just listening, but how we listen. In other words, listening itself requires planning and strategy.

In February this year, Federal Territories Minister Khalid Samad announced that a one-kilometre stretch along popular shopping district Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (Jalan TAR) will only be accessible to buses starting from March 15.

Kuala Lumpur Mayor, Datuk Nor Hisham Ahmad Dahlan said that public feedback on the DBKL’s online survey showed that over 60% of the 2,000-odd respondents supported the change of traffic plan.

DBKL also went on the ground to speak to the traders. However, when the announcement was made, the traders along Jalan TAR were highly critical of the move. They quickly organised

themselves and went public with their dissatisfaction and even threatened legal action.

Why was there so much pushback despite DBKL’s public engagement efforts? I’m guessing that DBKL’s online survey was not a very suitable channel to reach the key stakeholders - the actual traders or shoppers in the area. Or if it did reach them, they did not feel that it was a fair hearing for their side of the story.

The traders also claim that the on-ground engagement session was merely to inform them of DBKL’s decision to close the road and not to solicit feedback.

This issue demonstrates a very public breakdown in communication. While DBKL’s efforts to listen to stakeholders is commendable, I think it goes to show that listening exercises have to be very carefully thought out in order to avoid public controversy later.

It’s important to realise that listening exercises should be to collect valuable data to base future plans, decisions and communication efforts on.

Good listening exercises include on the ground surveys, feasibility or impact assessment studies, walkabouts or meet-and-greets, and collaborative discussions with the affected stakeholders to find an acceptable solution together.

These are invaluable efforts before making any announcements about significant changes. Even though these may cost more in terms of time and resources, successful listening requires such careful and thoughtful engagement with key stakeholders.

As the example above shows, listening

Three simple stages to protect your company from the "syiok sendiri" trap.

- 1 First, a change of mindset is necessary. In today's environment, doing business is not just focusing on the business itself. Besides this, a company has to contend with the demands of all its stakeholders, with some of these demands/ interests in conflict with each other.
- 2 Second, set up appropriate mechanisms to obtain the feedback of stakeholders. Use these platforms as opportunities to build meaningful relationships too.
- 3 Third, use the feedback gathered as the basis for communication and content strategy. In this way, the communications campaign will resonate with stakeholders as these are based on stakeholders' feedback.

Most importantly, we must listen with the intent to understand and avoid what leadership guru, Stephen R Covey described as a mistake most people make i.e "most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."



carefully to stakeholders is crucial to building meaningful and long-lasting relationships.

This is especially important today as social media enables negative news and views to be spread to millions within a matter of minutes.

People tend to trust what their friends post, even though the information is unfiltered or unverified. As a result, public confidence and trust in companies and organisations are easily eroded, resulting in a general sense of suspicion regarding their integrity.

However, if a company has built up trust and confidence among its stakeholders, these qualities will serve as the first line of defense while the company's official response is being prepared.

This can only happen when stakeholders feel satisfied that their views have been duly heard and

seriously considered.

TRUST AND GOODWILL

As stakeholder trust and goodwill have a key impact on the success of business activities such as regulatory costs, brand affinity and sales, many corporations embark on stakeholder relationship activities including comprehensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes.

These programmes provide the platforms for the companies to interact directly or indirectly with their stakeholders.

They serve as sounding boards to elicit the concerns, likes and dislikes, fears and pet causes championed by the various external and internal stakeholders, including customers, regulators, politicians, special interest groups, employees and shareholders.

Listening and being willing to

sincerely engage show that you are serious about getting their feedback and thoughts.

For illustration, let me give an example. **Darkie** was a popular toothpaste brand in Asia but it came under pressure from civil society which labelled the product as racist. Colgate-Palmolive, which had bought over the brand, took the decision to rename and re-design the 50-plus year brand and called it **Darlie**.

By listening to its stakeholders, the **Darlie** brand today continues to be an important product line in the Colgate-Palmolive stable in the Asian region.

However, many corporations shy away from meeting consumer groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whom they regard as antagonists.

Those that overcome this fear are working with these groups as collaborative partners in common causes, a much more productive strategy and certainly a cheaper alternative to counter-lobbying activities.

DIFFICULT BUT REWARDING

Is stakeholder relationship-building easy? No, it is not. Like any other relationship, it requires investment and commitment in terms of people, time and money.

But the fruit of successful communication or dialogue will result in long-term relationships that will benefit both parties.

Without a commitment to listen to stakeholders and the effective listening processes in place, companies would simply be guessing what their stakeholders want or expect of them. This is the right recipe to fall into the "syiok sendiri" trap.

The cost is too high for companies not to listen to their stakeholders and use the feedback to communicate with them. **mb**

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