The Standardization of Online Public Relations is Imperative

Li Hongxin, Ma Jing, Duan weihe
School of Economics and Management, Changchun University of Science and Technology, CUST
Changchun, China
e-mail: lihongxin18@sohu.com

Abstract—The existing problems of online public relations industry have seriously affected the healthy development of the industry; therefore the industry standardization is imperative. Firstly, we review the fact that public relations were obstructed during its development in the mid and late 1990s in China, from which we could draw a lesson. Secondly, we analyze the construction of PR industry's standards and occupational ethics. Thirdly, we summarize the impacts of internet on PR and the main performances of manipulating public opinions by online PR. Finally, we propose suggestions on the standardization of online PR from the following aspects: legislative, moral bottom line, industry self-regulation and the establishment and improvement of industry standards.

Key words—online public relations; industry standards; manipulation of public opinions

Online PR is an extremely important and new stage in PR development. It has completely changed the way and content of work on PR and penetrated into the PR work of almost every organization. At present the existing problems of online PR greatly obstruct the healthy development of the industry, therefore online PR standardization is absolutely imperative.

I. ENLIGHTENMENT ON BLOCKED PR IN THE MID AND LATE 1990S IN CHINA

From the early- to the mid-1990s the development of PR stepped into a relatively stable and mature period in China. However, since the mid and late 1990s the development of PR in China was hampered and slid down from the high tide stage. There are two very essential reasons below. Firstly, since PR was introduced into China and developed rapidly, it appeared to be the scene of prosperity in short term, but actually the industry was not standard, which the key problem is hidden behind. At that time, the level of PR was low with good and poor ones mixed up, which could not really meet the needs of Socialist Market Economy development. Secondly, there was too much misunderstanding on PR in society, which demonized PR. These misunderstandings had not been clarified promptly and then some people who pursue truth, goodness and beauty did not like PR.

The regular vocational education of PR started in December 2000. "China PR Industry Service Norms" (instruction opinion) drafted by the Public Relations Firm Working Committee, China International Public Relations Association was officially promulgated and implemented in June 2004. It indicates that China's PR industry produced the industry service standards, which had a historical significance for standardizing PR services market and practitioners' behavior and for promoting the industry's sustainable and healthy development. In 2006, the professional standards of "PR Master" was recognized, which further standardized PR policies and regulations and also promoted the improvement of occupational ethics of PR staff. Simultaneously, entering the 21st century after experiencing over one decade during impetuous 90s, PR practitioners made every effort to explore how to mellow and standardize the industry more. Then PR industry stepped into a rational and standardized development stage and started healthy development.

The falling down in the mid and late 1990s and the re-emergence in the 21st century of PR suggest that PR industry must be constantly examined of the existing problems in order to be standardized and adapt social development; otherwise the industry will be tremendously hampered.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDUSTRY STANDARDS AND OCCUPATIONAL ETHICS OF PR INDUSTRY

Industry standards are formed on the basis of occupational ethics construction. The genuine maturity of one discipline or one industry is neither marked by massive increasing of practitioners, nor by a rapid growth of turnover or the number of customers, but the formation of the industry's occupational ethics criterions. Industry standards are not only the result of industry development, but also the foundation on which the industry develops. As to any industry or occupation, only when its occupational ethics and industry standards are conscientiously fulfilled, it will be accepted, supported and understood by society.

PR's occupational ethics and industry standards have always been attached great importance by the general practitioners and industry associations. They become an unavoidable exploration in PR business' developing process. As early as 1991, the Chinese International PR Association was established in Beijing. Under its coordination, guidance and supervision, the PR Firm Committee was established in 2003, which has done a
lot of work in industry self-regulation, Standardized service etc. In September 2009, "2009 Business Research Report on Online PR of Chinese PR Industry" was published by the Chinese International PR Association and PR Firm Working Committee at 2009 Summit Forum of China's Online PR, in which the specialized research and analysis to online PR's service patterns, the profit patterns, the team structure, the service standards and the moral rules and so on were carried on, playing a positive role for promoting industry standardization.

As a creative and intelligent industry, although the establishment of PR industry standards is more difficult compared to other industries, the industry standards have always been the target that PR industry directs to, and also the soil that its healthy, rational and harmonious development relies on.

III. THE IMPACTS OF INTERNET ON PR AND THE MAIN PERFORMANCES OF MANIPULATING PUBLIC OPINIONS BY ONLINE PR

A. The Impacts of Internet on PR

Online PR in essence is a kind of professional service, in which Internet, as a new media platform, is applied to traditional PR. Its core value is how to implement effective communication between PR's subjects and objects based on the new media platform.

Online PR has not jumped out of the scope of PR yet. However, compared to other traditional media, internet has many inherent advantages, such as personalization, interactive nature, information-sharing and infinite capacity, prominent effectiveness, multimedia dissemination methods and equal dissemination rights and so on. All the above advantages indicate essential differences between online PR and traditional media PR. Network heavily influences PR on information feedback, communication and coordination, integrated marketing, crisis management, etc.

Chen Mo, the CEO of Chen Mo Network pointed out "Looking back on Internet industry in last three years, can we see any essential change? The biggest change · · · · · is that online PR turned out and has thrived as an emerging industry" in the article "Online PR is not underworld, but traditional PR's gravediggers" in early 2010.

Currently, online PR has shown its unique value and advantage, building up the embryonic form of "prosperous times of network" in a special way.

B. The Main Performances of Manipulating Public Opinions by Online PR

Online PR injects new vitality into PR service market by means of the innovative media value and performance-to-price ratio, but as a new thing, many aspects need to be standardized and consummated. Manipulating public opinions by network do not comply with the principles of PR, having affected PR services, and even online PR having been strongly resisted. To sum up, the main performances of manipulating the public opinions by online PR are as follows.

1) Network pushing hands
In recent years, from the controversial "Sister Furong " to the pure "Angel Younger Sister", from "Forcing-out Wang Laoji " to "Jia Junpeng, your mother is calling you to go home for dinner", there were always pushing hands behind each hot network event. Network pushing hands become a major force of guiding network public opinions. Network Pushing Hands is not wrong per se, but it is applied wrongly. For instance, the following words or advertisements:
   a) Your name can not be found on Baidu. Or a new product has never been heard before. How can you do at this time? I can help you.
   b) In the users’ capacity some user experiences are issued in the form of texts and pictures, and videos as well.
   c) We ensure to send posts for you every day on more than 60,000 ID and 2000 blogs.
   d) We can make your competitors' negative news cover the entire network overnight, which guides users to walk along our direction.
   e) "A hundred thousand water-armies" are led by "network pushing hands", with diverse methods and remarkable record. The main task of "Water-armies" is posting and supporting them at network forums, pretending to be ordinary Internet users and consumers. They start from the community with the highest CTR, and then turn to the leading forum, blog, and even major paste Bars and QQ groups by transferring posts. The enterprise participation traces can not be seen in the whole process. When things develop smoothly into the later period, indeed network upsurge of netizens' spontaneous discussions and reproducing is established, which may even attract traditional media if fortunately.

2) Network deletion
One of the firms successfully deleted the negative news that the customer designated from several main websites in just a week. Price table shows that charges of deleting the contents in Sina and Sohu are the highest, up to ten thousand Yuan per service. Others are charged respectively according to different levels.

The internal personnel of some net shops deleted “negative feedbacks”. Some articles revealed that some network companies deleted posts by illegal means or even the tricks of black websites.

3) Network thugs and network underworld
On December 19, 2009, the column "economic half an hour" of CCTV financial channel broadcasted a piece of news, "network underworld manipulate public opinions, with 50,000 Yuan dominating court decision". It explosively exposed a profitable industrial chain producing hot topics by posting on the Internet. Some Internet firms help people "avoid evilness for pay" or act as the network thugs by the name of "public relations". It is reported that the "network thugs" have become an industry with a complete operation flow and resources allocation. They can not only provide brand hype and other services for business, but also post intensively, slander and libel competitors according to customers’ instructions, and even dominate court decision by influencing public opinions.
The phenomenon is regarded as "network underworld" by CCTV. In the upcoming 2010, a new term appeared. 

4) Network PR utilize "Virus Marketing"

Some online PR firms install the advertisement plug-in unit and even “Trojan horse” program to the users’ computers through the techniques of bundling and even “hacking”, in order to force sales promotion advertisement to users through this illegal software. Even worse, they steal the users’ private information like a variety of accounts and passwords by means of "Trojan horse" program, and then send advertising messages to the victims’ good friends or request their friends online shopping for them by pretending to be the victims, in order to achieve the so-called "advertisement effect". These instruments are called “Virus Marketing”.

IV. SUGGESTIONS ON STANDARDIZATION OF ONLINE PR

Manipulating public opinions on Internet by money is one kind of sorrow. The appearance of network pushing hands and the firms of deleting posts show the lack of self-consciousness and of moral obligation. Furthermore, network thugs and “Virus Marketing” are illegal. The standardization of online PR needs to begin on the following four aspects.

A. Strengthen Network-related Legislation to Avoid Online PR Walking on the Edge of the Law

Although the improper operating behavior of online PR firms, like so-called "Virus Marketing" and "network underworld" occur in the suppositional network world, the behavior per se is substantial and the harm to the real society can not be denied. Therefore, these behaviors must be restricted by law.

But there are no specific laws and regulations to adjust and regulate these behaviors in China at present. So the issue that some online PR behaviors walking on the edge of the law is inevitable. A network-related legislation should be established as soon as possible in order to make online PR obtain legal support, restrict improper behaviors of online PR, and jointly maintain the healthy and favorable network environment. At the same time, we must attach great importance to the implementation of laws and regulations, as they should not become a mere scrap of paper.

Internet legislation will not occur overnight, but it is quite necessary to make corresponding management approach as early as possible.

B. The Moral Bottom Lines of Online PR

The improper online PR behavior presents the characteristics of diversified means and hidden behavior, so legal norms itself can hardly govern it effectively. Morals are the best rule for restraining online PR, while law is the last method. Online PR must have own moral bottom lines.

Firstly, online PR must guarantee the accurate and real information without carrying on false propaganda. Secondly, confreres should not compete with each other maliciously and attack competitors; otherwise it is proved that the industry is chaotic and irregular. Thirdly, services should be provided to a specialized organization and brand, rather than individual. Fourthly, when we make the commercial promotions we should consider their value to society and users as much as possible. All these above should be the moral bottom lines of online PR.

C. The Development of Online PR Industry Needs Thorough-going Reform and Strengthening Industry Self-regulation

At present, for the problems of online PR in China, the industry needs to achieve a self-purification process.

1) Web sites

In general, online PR firms are unlikely to eliminate online negative information through simply technical means. Online PR firms usually get in touch with web sites only, requesting the source sites to delete information by means of negotiation, payment, issuing false certificates and so on.

"Network Media Anti-PR Alliance", which is set up by sites of Dahe Network, Peninsula Network and Dazhong Network altogether, issued a written proposal, reiterating that they should adhere to civilized Internet, abide by professional ethics, strengthen internal management and support enterprise business. "Network Media Anti-PR Alliance "demanded mutual supervision among its members to safeguard the image of Internet media together, to create a civilized and orderly Internet media environment, to maintain the purity of network public opinion supervision and to establish network's credibility.

As to strengthening industry self-regulation of online PR, web sites should and can play a certain role.

2) Online PR firms

By the name of online PR, some online PR firms become greedy at sight of money. For the information which is impossible to be removed, they issue a large number of irrelevant information to cover them; or aiming at the information "to be processed", deliberately release distorted explanation and out-of-context statements to divert the public’s attention and mislead them. Some other online PR firms, by means of "Trojan horse" program, steal users’ accounts to issue negative information through simply technical means. Online PR firms should strengthen industrial cooperation and self-restraint so that irregular online PR firms could get smaller and smaller and even die away.

3) PR industry association

PR industry associations also should play a relevant role on the industry self-regulation, managing, supervising, and guiding the industry’s business activities.

D. The Establishment and Improvement of Online PR Industry Standards

"2009 Business Research Report on Online PR of Chinese PR Industry” proposed that online PR service standards are absent, so three stages could be followed to establish and improve them. Referring to their proposals, we suggest the measures of establishing and improving online PR industry standards as follows,

First of all, online PR should adhere to PR’s basic principles to establish online PR's value system, which includes
legitimacy, authenticity, non-malicious competition, accordance with socially accepted values, and so on.

Secondly, we should unify and regulate online PR service standards, which include service mode, business process, service standards, charges standard, monitoring guideline, evaluation system, application method and so on.

Thirdly, the goal and direction of online PR. From the perspective of PR’s subjects, an orderly online PR system should be established in order to ensure good effect of PR’s subjects and sustainable development of the industry. From the perspective of PR’s objects, a good user’s experience should be achieved. From the perspective of PR’s intermediary, PR’s subjects and objects should communicate effectively with information transferring quickly and accurately.

The standardization of online PR is a long-term process requiring the efforts of entire industry. Through the industry’s efforts, we are confident that online PR is not an online PR underworld at all, but an important stage of PR development.

REFERENCE