

Silvia Bucur, General Manager Prais Corporate Communications, advises about the crisis:

To survive, you need to be in the mind of your “buyers”

Silvia Bucur, Managing Director of the consultancy company Prais Corporate Communications, talks in an interview given to “Financiarul” about how to build success in the public relations field, about the effects of the economic crisis on PR and the measures required to combat them. What shouldn’t however be done in these times? “One should not lessen the communication with business partners, consumers, customers, regulatory institutions, it is beneficial to be present in the universe of those we interact with”, says the General Manager of Prais Corporate Communications.

“Financiarul”: What advice do you give to the young people who want to work in the public relations field?

Silvia Bucur: It’s a complex profession. You need knowledge and substance in what you do. A good news is that you may also be trained in a different field to be a good PR person. Everything depends on learning and assimilating all that is new in PR; communication techniques and instruments change extremely rapidly today. If you do not know the international trends, “you are dead”. To be a “pro”, you must have a broad general knowledge, be up-to-date with everything that is important from a social, economic, cultural point of view. Your vocabulary, speaking, writing must be outstanding, you should have a good command of at least English. You should have a positive thinking and attitude – not to be “a bundle of negatives”. You should be a good observer and a good listener. Time and project management are critical... And there is one more thing that I should have started with: have a good portfolio of relationships, or be able to develop one, as you cannot exist as a PR person if nobody knows you and listens to you. To be honest, I think this is a plus in any profession.

What is an efficient PR campaign in your opinion?

To have dissemination power, to be understood and rapidly appreciated by the target audience, to be memorable. To reflect the values of the company, the brand or the person which are the theme of the campaign. In the case of brands, it should meet the expectations of the customers or consumers, without any exceptions.

What was the campaign which brought you the biggest professional satisfaction?

It is hard to choose out of the 1,600 campaigns and projects developed in the last decade. I remain loyal, in terms of the power of change, to the 15 CSR projects (social responsibility) we created for our customers or Prais Foundation. They transformed us. When you address responsibly to millions of people, on important topics regarding education, environmental protection or culture, you feel like you left something behind. When you see that what you created is aligned to the new global thinking, in an era of change when the heads of state talk about ethical capitalism, about the power of being able to do something, you feel solidarity with each and every one of those who struggle to take the world out of the crisis situation.

How did the economic crisis influence the activity of Prais Corporate Communications?

Being consultants in the crisis communication, we may anticipate, we are connected to reality. The words written, heard on the radio or said on the TV, the direct dialogues, have a content and a big power of leavening, and we may interpret them. Last March, being connected to the world trends in communication, and on the background of some major changes in the world economy which had appeared over more than a decade, we launched the LOHAS platform “Lifestyles of Health

and Sustainability” in Romania. With knowledge and resources, we continue to develop fundamentally – we act as a house of software, major projects, adjusted to the current “diet budgets”. We want to win through together with our current and future customers. To be able to restart the mechanisms of economy, we need to act appropriately, fast and communicate responsibly. Rebuilding trust and solidarity are key factors hereof.

What was the evolution of the company’s turnover in 2008, compared to 2007? What’s your estimate for the turnover in 2009?

Our turnover increased by 13.9% in 2008, compared to 2007, within the targeted growth trend for every year. The results in the first quarter of 2009 make us be optimist. However, it would be prematurely to give an estimate at the moment, it all depends on the evolution of the companies we assist. As a particularity of our company, since its establishment, we decided to include in our turnover only the value of the PR consultancy services, so that the turnover in 2008 was 2,156,019 lei. If we were to include also all the costs directly related to the projects, as the majority of the PR companies chose to do, then our turnover would double. The turnover in 2007 was 1,891,433 RON, representing only the value of the PR consultancy services.

Is there any change in the structure of the customers’ demand this year, compared to the similar period of last year?

Yes, companies reconsider their internal and external communication strategies from one month to another, it is a period when you must be able to communicate in real time with your audiences, we are practically working on-line.

Can we say there is a trend of the communication strategies within the crisis context? What is that? What do the new messages of the companies depend on within the crisis context?

We are going through a systemic crisis of the world economy, its effects are seen every day through the global media: we see, read, hear. Companies, opinion leaders, politicians, society communicate fragmented. Messages change sometimes on a daily basis, tensions appear related to the evolution of the financial markets, of the business environment we operate in, social tensions appear. All these exacerbate a type of defensive or aggressive communication with the partners, employees, regulatory institutions, mass-media. Unfortunately, all these affect the trust of the customers, consumers, the overall public. Communication strategies at this stage? They are very complex, there cannot be only one pattern to be followed. We recommend two keys: the use of the power of the word to offer trust and generate solidarity – I think they are critical to restart.

Many international PR companies resorted to dismissals on the background of the economic crisis. What is your situation?

We are in the recruiting process, while the issue of seniority and “savoir-faire” of the candidates in public relations remains a problem across our entire business in the first semester of 2009, when it will be seen who knows “what” and “how” to do.

It is said that this economic crisis is an opportunity for certain companies, what are they?

Crisis communication is a line of services where you should be specialized, have years of direct experience, you cannot just pretend you know. We have been providing our customers with consultancy in crisis simulations for 12 years, we prevent and act appropriately in situations when crises start, we provide unconditional assistance in terms of time and human resources in the fields of the industries we represent.

What do you think about the phrase “Romania, land of choice”? Do you think it will draw the tourists’ attention?

That is a broad subject. Ethical advertising has a rigueur: the promoted product should have all the qualities you promote. A country’s image is much more than a good wine or a bucolic landscape.

A country's image is us throwing the garbage out the window or jamming the traffic. A country's image is the state of the infrastructure, the quality of services, the welfare of the economy, education, legal system, all these reflect the image. In this period of world economic crisis, the impact of an advertising campaign on the brand of a country like ours is limited.

The international and local mass-media, on the background of the real decreases in our economy, of the weaknesses of our economic system and of the social context, offers transparency to the situation. National TV stations, the written press reflect the real life every day. The tourism consumer, the business traveller, the investors look on the internet, on the international or local TV stations and see exactly what the real situation is.

What shouldn't companies do in periods of crisis?

They should not lessen the communication with the business partners, consumers, regulatory institutions, it is beneficial to be present in the universe of all those we interact with. It is not beneficial to put pressure on the professional environment and on the relationship with the employees, it is good to be transparent in the relationship with the media and take the shine off the current situation. A powerful enemy of the man is fear.

What is the enemy of the communication companies?

Lack of thorough knowledge of the mechanisms of the world we live in and of the vocational world.

Have the customers started to reduce the marketing budget allocated to the PR component?

I have noticed a decrease in product advertising on TV, radio, written media. In terms of brand or corporate PR, this has been a good economic option for companies, it has a great force of penetration through the complexity of the new communication channels made available, such as e-communication, including blogs, micro-blogs.

Is there an increase of the promotion budget allocated by the companies within this crisis context?

The budget fluctuates considerably – different needs appear from one month to another, as well as different financial constraints for the companies. Certainly, the last thing that should be stopped is the communication, without which the company disappears, particularly in crisis periods, when you need to be in the mind of your “buyers” in order to survive.

CURRICULUM VITAE

She started her activity in communication in 1991 with Coopers&Lybrand. After several years, when she acquired broad knowledge in corporate and brand communication, she established the consultancy company Prais Corporate Communications. Over the years, she has been a member of several professional organizations:

- “Chair” for Romania – Member of the IPRA Council (International Public Relations Association) 2003/2004
- Founding Member of the Romanian Association of the Professionals in Public Relations
- Vice-President until 2003
- Responsible of the Corporate Communication Strategy for the Central and Eastern European countries within “European Marketing Communications Task Force” of Coopers&Lybrand – 1996.