



Vietnam

PR Country Landscapes 2018

**Global Alliance for Public Relations
and Communication Management**

Acknowledgments



Authors: Tham Nguyen, Ph.D. Student in Mass Communication/Public Relations, University of Oklahoma, USA. Contact email: Tham.T.Nguyen-1@ou.edu

Supervised and guided by: Katerina Tsetsura, Ph.D., Gaylord Family Professor of Strategic Communication/Public Relations, University of Oklahoma, USA.

Read and approved by: Mr. Mateus Furlanetto, CAO Global Alliance

Industry Reviewer: Mr. Vinh Le, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Le Group of Companies, Vietnam

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Snapshot of the profession

Origins

The birth of public relations dates back to the 1970s when some universities taught various public relations courses in South Vietnam (Huynh, 1975), but these programs were suspended from 1975-1992 during the period after the American war (Dinh, 2008). It was not until the early 1990s that public relations agencies started to emerge in Vietnam (McKinney, 2000). The first two domestic agencies were Public Relations Bicultural Consulting established in 1995 in Hanoi and Max Communications in 1997 in Ho Chi Minh City (McKinney, 2000). The Public Relations Bicultural Consulting organization offered services in the areas of media relations, cultural training, and special events management. Batey Burn was the first international public relations agency to open a representative office in Hanoi in 1994. It later ceased business operations in Vietnam in 2007 (Vietbao.vn, 2007). In the mid 1990s, John Baily & Associates (Australia), Ogilvy Public Relations, Leo Activation, and JWT Vietnam were the first four international agencies that provided public relations and advertising services in the country (Loan, 2011).

Although many clients of international agencies are international business corporations, contextual difficulties and price competition with local agencies challenged international agencies' business (Loan, 2011). Some chose to withdraw from the market (i.e., John Baily & Associates) (Le, 2007; Loan); others found that forming a joint venture with local business to utilize human resources with business relationships and cultural business understanding is a good solution for market penetration and/or expansion. Three global firms entered Vietnam through acquisitions, including TBWA acquiring a significant shareholding of a local marketing communications firm—Biz Solutions in 2008 (The Saigon Times, 2008), Ogilvy & Mather buying majority stake in T&A Communications in 2009 (Vietnam Breaking News, 2009), and Edelman with the acquisition of AVC Communications in 2012 (Bush, 2012).

Despite the growth of the sector, McKinney (2008) found many people viewed public relations simply as free advertising, media relations, and event planning. After 20 years of development, the industry is still in the infancy stage. Many agencies are improving

capacities and enhancing professionalism in order to move toward strategic communication consulting services. Applied and academic research is scarce.

Although a few practitioners studied abroad, many current practitioners learned the craft from on-the-job-training. Academy of Journalism and Communication was the first to provide an undergraduate program in Public Relations in 2007 (H. Nguyen, 2010). New graduates who gained Bachelor's degrees in the country are still on their way to gain more experience. However, the potential market for industry development is enormous.

Resources

The industry is about two decades old (Loan, 2011). At first, many practitioners came to the field from other disciplines, such as journalism, business administration, English, or linguistics. Self-learning and on-the-job-training that help to obtain professional knowledge and improve skills are popular. Industry expansion creates plenty of jobs. The professional community, however, is not organized. Vietnamese professionals have yet to establish a public relations association as well as an official professional code of ethics. At this time, it is not possible to estimate a number of practitioners in the field; however, new undergraduate programs in public relations started to produce graduates, and many practitioners who received public relations and communication degrees abroad have now entered the job market. In part, official training programs help to enhance professionalism and performance and to build trust and credibility with clients, according to some professionals.

Practitioners also need to polish their consulting and digital communication skills to adapt with changes in the media landscape (T. Nguyen, 2014). To be a strategic communication consultant in Vietnam, a practitioner needs to have strong personal relationships and a solid background across different disciplines: reputation management, brand management, and corporate image. Clients in Vietnam expect strategic communication activities that could yield communication and business outcomes.

Priorities

Most public relations agencies are located in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi. Top agencies are moving toward strategic consulting services. Areas of practice, such as crisis

communication, digital media, integrated marketing communication, and internal communications are prominent (Doan & Bilowol, 2014).

State of the profession

Challenges

The public relations industry in the country faces two major challenges: unhealthy competition and a shortage of talent (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; T. Nguyen, 2014). Although the demand for public relations services continues to grow, competition among firms is fierce. Some of this competition is unhealthy as several firms are offering unrealistically low rates for their services. Price competition has the potential to derail industry progress because, in an effort to achieve credibility among clients, providing quality services can be impaired when corporations undercut competitors causing low profit margins. In turn, low profit margins can possibly translate into decreased customer service or even the lack of reinvesting in initial or continuing training for personnel. Common features for new industries, particularly in emerging countries include a lack of: professionalism, codes of conduct, a professional public relations association, a legal framework, and a firm body of knowledge (T. Nguyen & Tsetsura, 2015).

The second challenge is a shortage of talent (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; T. Nguyen, 2014). These challenges reveal the weaknesses in capabilities and professionalism of some agencies. Professional training in public relations is new, and many of those who now work in public relations do not have any substantial professional training. Educating practitioners is vital to developing the industry and becoming a profession.

Another concern is that not many public relations practitioners perform strategic management roles and are instead expected to work in technician roles (H. Nguyen, 2010). Some cite a lack of knowledge and experience as reasons for practitioners' predominately technical roles (Dinh, 2008). Yet, the perception organizational leaders have about the importance of public relations activities also affects public relations practices and practitioners' roles. The growing public relations industry calls for additional research about the perception of the value public relations brings to organizations and to

the society. It is only when the importance of public relations is emphasized, public relations practitioners can improve their positions and occupy strategic management roles.

Media

Media systems consist mostly of state-owned organizations that practice under the control of the government. Changes in the media system, although not significant, became open to different types of media ownership. Many private media organizations specialize in film production, program production, and media training programs (Loan, 2011). Cable television and Internet have also become wide spread. In 1997, Vietnam officially connected to the Internet, making the start of an impressive development of Internet users. Rapid Internet growth has fostered a rise in blog and social media users. Traditional media (i.e., newspaper, broadcasting) are now present on social media, which provides the opportunity to engage audiences interactively. Some public relations agencies pioneer forming social media teams to provide social media services. New media forms challenge the profession where the shortage of talented professionals could not meet the growing demand.

Stakeholders

Some people also think of the concept of public relations as problematic, with little understanding of the field, they confuse public relations with advertising and marketing. Confusing public relations with advertising and marketing might be understandable, particularly with the non-professional public, due to overlapping supporting activities among professions. Some go so far as to view public relations as mere tricks to create scandals in order to gain public attention. Amateurish practitioners are often behind-the-scenes influencers in creating scandals as shortcuts to quickly gaining media coverage in which they reproduce stereotypical negative perceptions of public relations in Vietnam (T. Nguyen, 2014). The general public has limited knowledge of public relations and even view promoters in bars or restaurants as public relations practitioners who promote consumption of the brands they work for. Yet, Doan and Bilowol (2014) noted changes in public perceptions of public relations and the media have been aware of the role of public relations. Yet, according to Mr. Vinh Le—CEO of Le Group of Companies, many private-

owned online media organizations, known as “curating electronic news websites” that are not considered to be official media organizations by law, do not operate professionally within the norms of mass media. Hence, these online news sites could cause a lot of trouble (i.e., spreading unverified information or creating scandals) for organizations and public relations practices.

Some agencies’ clients do not have expertise in public relations (Doan & Bilowol, 2014). Some clients perceive public relations as purely advertorial placement and media relations, and that “PR agencies as suppliers, not partners” (Doan & Bilowol, p. 488). Therefore, some clients do not value public relations expertise and are not willing to share business information (Doan & Bilowol) to create sound public relations strategies for long-term effects.

Some journalists also hold negative perceptions about public relations practices. Professional journalists seek interesting news and stories that satisfy professional standards. They do not agree with envelope practices by some public relations practitioners. As media outlets try to improve financial figures through advertising revenue, booking advertorials is a way to gain media coverage for those who really do not have a good story to tell (T. Nguyen, 2014).

Context for the profession

Culture

Individuals value familial and personal relationships. The personal influence model, proposed by Sriramesh (1992), is applied in Vietnam when public relations practitioners make a conscious effort to establish relationships (sometimes friendship) with media, government officials, and relevant activist groups. Establishing personal relationships with journalists is a critical task to avoid facing difficulties in gaining media coverage. The country's gift-giving culture also helps with establishing personal relations between public relations practitioners and journalists (T. Nguyen, 2014).

History

Hallin (1992) found public relations activities in Sai Gon (which has been known as "Ho Chi Minh city" since 1976 when its name was changed) with the use of "press briefings" about war. Several universities in South Vietnam taught public relations in the early 1970s (Huynh, 1975). After the nation was unified in the fight for independence, all public relations programs in South Vietnam were suspended from 1975-1992 (Dinh, 2008). In recent years, public relations programs were re-introduced at several national universities and colleges in Vietnam (namely, the Academy of Journalism and Communication, RMITVietnam). The Academy of Journalism and Communication provides Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Public Relations. Some Western universities chose to form a partnership with a local university or institution to provide Master's degree. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Vietnam (RMIT-Vietnam) is among the most prominent Western universities in the country, which offers public relations degrees. RMIT-Vietnam is a branch of RMIT, located in Australia. No Ph.D. programs in public relations are offered in Vietnam. As of today, the industry demands knowledge-based, skilful and hands-on practical training. However, as these needs grow, so does the need for quality education programs. The profession continues to contribute to the economic development of the country.

Government

Vietnam is a Communist country, in which the Communist Party controls key political institutions (Chinhphu.vn, n.d.) and the media system, in which all media organizations are required to be licensed (controlled) by governmental organizations (Vietnam Journalism Law, 1989). The Party has a tight connection with the media. Government organizations propagate and inform the Vietnamese people about governmental decisions and policies.

The government can play a role in shaping public relations practices. As the role of media is to support Vietnamese governmental policies (Loan, 2011), the level of professionalism and freedom of speech could affect the way journalists practice journalism as well as their relationship with public relations activities. For example, undisclosed news sources from government organizations in the media environment could more or less impact the level of transparency in working with public relations sources during the media commercialization process in the country.

Issues for the Profession

Social

Vietnam, is located in Southeast Asia, and has a young population with over 50 percent of Vietnamese being under 35 years old (Ministry of Information and Communications, 2011). The familial and relational oriented culture values collective work over individual achievement. However, these orientations are limited to what Schwartz (1990) called the “ingroup collective” (p. 141). The concept implies the idea that people in the same group tend to act like each other and collectively value group decisions. These social features affect the way public relations practitioners frame messages to communicate with stakeholders.

Business

Economic growth fuels the development of public relations. Vietnam’s growth is also recovering to levels achieved before global economic crisis in 2008 (Worldbank.org, n.d.). One professional said that in economic downturn, clients cut advertising budget while expenses for public relations activities was not affected that much (T. Nguyen, 2014). It also means that clients’ expectation seek for the effectiveness of strategic communication. Consequently, it challenges the creativity and strategic thinking skills of public relations practitioners to pitch the story with appealing messages and select the right channels to communicate with key public audiences. This is to say the public is becoming an intelligent audience where advertorials may not yield much influence.

The diversity of clients’ demand and personal network of leaders in public relations agencies affect organizational business. Some public relations leaders with journalism backgrounds are strong in media relations, while others who come from business backgrounds focus on communication and business outcomes when consulting with customers. Others specialized in government relations, while some young public relations firms focus on online public relations. At certain levels, big public relations agencies have more sources to provide integrated marketing, public relations, and advertising services,

while some others prefer to focus only on public relations activities or to primarily provide event planning services but promote themselves as public relations agencies.

Individual

Before widespread digital media, television and print newspapers were important news sources and channels for public relations practitioners. However, the popularity of smart phones and abundant Internet news sources cause practitioners to work harder. Practitioners also must be more creative in figuring out ways to pitch messages and provide multimedia content in order to earn media coverage and gain public attention.

Future for the Profession

Trends

Two key trends are prominent: the reinforcement of the industry and digital media growth. The rapid growth of a young industry from the mid 2000s to 2010 left an unanswered question about the number of agencies and how many of them actually provide public relations and consulting services (T. Nguyen, 2014). When public relations practitioners were asked to name a few agencies that provide public relations and communications services in Vietnam, they could only name a few well-known agencies when in reality, there are hundreds (T. Nguyen, 2014). The above phenomenon could be because many small agencies naturally have a smaller market share or, as part of their niche, they may focus solely on digital markets or work under the shadow of big agencies as outsourcing agents. In addition, smaller agencies struggle with finding new clients and adapting to digital media trends. Some agencies also left the market during the economic downturn in the latter part of the first decade (2008-2009) yielding ground for big players. As many companies have their own public relations practitioners or divisions, they will more likely seek agencies for strategic communication and consulting services than simply basic publicity services. Many professionals are reluctant to name themselves as strategic communication consultants but they are well on the way to enhancing consulting capacities to better serve their clients.

The growth of digital media changes the business of traditional media, public relations, communication agencies, and consumers' habits. Partly funded by the government, traditional media firms were recently asked to seek other financial resources to support their own business (T. Nguyen, 2014). The downturn of circulation figures force traditional media firms to seek advertising revenue, to restructure organizations, and to proactively reach target audiences. Because practitioner must keep abreast of the latest trends in digital media, public relations practices do not fall apart when digital media penetrate the industry. In fact, a few agencies pioneered the way to incorporating new digital media methods and grasped ways to use social media to better approach target audiences. At the same time, increasing clients' expectations about positive outcomes as well as their

perceptions of public relations activities helps to build agency credibility which in turn results in more credible and more productive relations with clients and the public.

Opportunities

Being affected by economic recession in the end of 2000s, Vietnam is still considered an emerging market. Publicity demands are still high in all public relations areas such as corporate PR, social media, technology, and healthcare.

Capabilities

Among the main challenges are a shortage of skilled and talented public relations practitioners, therefore, formal academic training and industry experience combined with the motivation to learn from work experience on their own are all key factors to success. Many practitioners acknowledged the need to move beyond tactical public relations and media relations toward providing clients with more strategic communication counsel (T. Nguyen, 2014). Because company reputation is an important asset, practitioners with knowledge in digital communication, marketing, branding and storytelling would bring tremendous value to the developing industry.

Resources for the Profession

Professional Associations

In interviews with managing directors of public relations agencies in the country, many agreed that establishing a public relations association is one solution for dealing with industry challenges (T. Nguyen, 2014). A group of agency leaders and senior public relations practitioners have been collaborating with academia such as RMIT-Vietnam and the Academy of Journalism and Mass Communication to establish a professional network to discuss the foundation of an industry association in Vietnam. Research showed that an association can help in achieving five things: (a) enhancing public relations professionalism to improve public perception of public relations values, (b) develop professional codes of ethics and standards for healthy competition, (c) provide a place for knowledge and experience sharing among professionals, (d) create fair game for public relations and media professionals and eliminate the need for an envelope practice, and (e) provide a voice for public relations professionals. Yet, establishing such an association is challenging (T. Nguyen, 2014).

Although professionals have been in discussion about forming a professional association for years, many factors prevent its establishment. Some outlined three challenges for creating a public relations association in Vietnam: (a) reaching a consensus among professionals that an association is needed, (b) finding a suitable president since all associations in Vietnam have to gain approval and even be managed by government agencies, and (c) finding a suitable way to structure the association (T. Nguyen, 2014). The professional group also has been searching for someone to lead, motivate, and further the association formation discussion. Finding a professional to lead in this capacity has been difficult because most practitioners have tight daily schedules. Practitioners also acknowledged the challenge to avoid having an association leader with limited professional experience and prestige but who was assigned by authorities—a popular norm in Vietnam. The group also proposed a codes of conduct draft, yet, the discussion surrounding it has not moved forward because of multiple reasons, such as non-transparent media systems and amateurish practitioners who just pay to-play to get their clients' messages published.

Establishing a professional association is important to enhancing the development of the industry, but how the association can operate effectively is also an important consideration. When professional public relations associations are managed by government agencies, operations become limited because the professional association lacks autonomy. However, having any kind of professional association, even if limited by government oversight, is better than having nothing. Ensuring industry progress is on the right track requires professionals and academia to come together and deal with industry challenges that enhance clients' experience and serve the public interest.

Academic Institutions

Very few academic institutions in the country offer undergraduate programs with Public Relations or Communication degrees. Some Western universities coordinate with local business or universities to provide Masters programs. Yet, to really have a good Masters program, this model needs to ensure teaching quality at similar levels. Some prestigious local professionals also open institutions or training programs that attract enormous numbers of practitioners to attend courses; many said they learned a lot from these short-training sessions. Universities in Vietnam employ different approaches to train students in public relations. There is no systematic research about public relations education in Vietnam, but we can offer some examples. The Academy of Journalism and Communication, a public university with the primary focus in journalism, provides an environment for students to take courses in journalism, advertising, and public relations. The Bachelor's program in Communication offered at RMIT-Vietnam, a Western private university, provides courses that focus on public relations, advertising, and media. Several other universities including University of Social Sciences and Humanity, Institute of Foreign Affairs also offer undergraduate degrees or training in public relations. Some Western universities already form partnerships with local universities (i.e., the Academy of Journalism and Communication) to provide public relations programs and are therefore able to reduce some compulsory-but-unrelated higher education courses taught at local universities as required by the Ministry of Education.

One study of practitioners in Vietnam found that the most important skills for practitioners in the country include interpersonal communication skills, strategic planning skills, and

writing skills (H. Nguyen, 2010). These critical skills were emphasized in recent studies. A growing demand for practitioners who can understand and perform public relations activities in digital media is also clear (Doan & Bilowol, 2014; T. Nguyen, 2014). Digital media practice requires adequate training for both public relations and new media professionals.

Research

Few research studies about the public relations profession and field are available in English. One can find a pioneering research conducted by H. Nguyen (2010) who followed McKinney (2000, 2006, 2008) and examined public relations roles and important skills for practitioners. Loan (2011) researched the history of public relations in Vietnam. Doan and Bilowol (2014) explored questions of professionalism in the industry, T. Nguyen (2014) and T. Nguyen and Tsetsura (2017) studied a gift-giving culture, media practices, and media transparency in the country. Local scholars and companies also published several research studies. As the public relations industry is still in its infancy, applied and academic research does not garner much attention from practitioners. To develop research activities that benefit industry development, respecting copyright and following scientific research methods are a must.

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