

“There is no equivalence of PR to advertising”

That's what ECCO International's Sara Render told Campaign India's Payal Khandelwal when she visited India

Sara Render, chairperson of ECCO International Public Relations Ltd. and CEO, Kinross + Render has been in the thick of action in the global PR industry and has now decided to divert a part of her attention to India, which has become “too important a market ignore”. She's here to meet Pressman PR, which has recently become a part of the ECCO group.



Render's secondary objective of this visit is to get first-hand knowledge of what the diverse and vibrant Indian market has to offer. “You can learn about the Indian landscape and Indian psyche only by being here. I am here to learn new ideas. In the UK, people want to learn as much as we can pertaining to the most attractive market comprising of Indians,” says Render.

Render, who started her public relations career with international accountants Arthur Young McLelland Moore (now Ernst & Young), is very attracted by the Indian PR industry.

Render's background

In 2000, Render co-founded and became a board director for ECCO International Public Relations Limited. Based in London, ECCO is a non-profit model and has a shareholder based operation. It has a set of agencies which are in the top ten percent of their respective countries. It includes agencies which are award winners, produce case studies, which have people who are there to invest in central coordinating operations while retaining their independence. ECCO's members have to put in substantial investments into the organisation. Founded in 2000 by leading owner-managed agencies across Europe and the US, ECCO is now one of the world's largest international PR and marketing services groups, with member agencies across the globe. India is a very important market for ECCO.

Choosing Pressman as a partner

Pressman had to pass some tough tests before it became an ECCO member, Render says. “Pressman was one of the agencies which understood the difference between a media relations shop and a PR agency. They had an added advantage as they also run an advertising agency. One of the pressures on the PR industry today is the shift to online communication. This offers opportunity as well as risk. The opportunity is that PR is a discipline which manages reputation and generates dialogue. Online communication comes handy here, as it can be used for building user groups. Here is the advantage as advertising and PR can come together for online management.”

On the state of the state of PR in India

“Indian PR is growing faster than most other countries and is relatively mature. Similar growth can be seen in Eastern Europe and China., the main reason behind this being the large number of senior experienced professionals in this industry. Even though India is not as advanced as Europe and the US now, this is going to change soon,” she says.

On mobile and SMS

“There is phenomenal growth in India in the field of mobile telephony which is commendable. Soon, there will be significant use of SMS for mobile campaigns. There will be a series of social media-led gatherings through



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the use of SMSing. India, with the extensive use of Mobiles, will accelerate very fast.”

Evolution of Indian PR

Tracing the evolution of Indian PR, Render says, “In India, a significant percentage of the first PR companies were set up by journalists. Then came a shift as marketing professionals partnered with the journalists. Thereafter, PR became ubiquitous and every MNC started using it. Then came the in-house PR, which is now known as corporate communications. The skills of the PR professional were used in a company for a better understanding of the target group as these professionals came with valuable insights. Then, these people went back to the PR consultancy to make it broader.”

Perception of Indian clients

The perception amongst clients towards the PR industry in India, which is limited to it being a media relations industry, is what worries Render. “It is still an unsophisticated market in context of the clients' perception. PR is considered to be just press relations. The clients' perspective here is wrong and is different from more developed markets. PR includes corporate communications, internal communications, stake-holder management, and finally, media relations.”

How PR adds value

The question that arises now is how this perception can be

changed. “PR whines too much and the people in this industry don't take the responsibility that they need to change. They need to come together and produce case studies which explain how they can add value. There is a huge need to evaluate PR.” “There is no equivalence of PR to advertising. You can't buy editorial. A large part of PR involves third party endorsement. Generating recommendations for a product is a marketing tool of PR. The important groups of this third party include existing customers, media, industry analysts and major bloggers. You have to give reasons to the customers to talk about your client, you have to create loyalty schemes, arrange events which bring together the users and the non-users, create opportunities for the speakers and arrange for sponsorships. Until the PR industry produces case studies which show them using PR effectively (this includes outcome of all the activities and not just media relations), it can't become a sophisticated market.”

Needed: an effective industry body

An effective PR association is what she believes India needs. “There is a need for an association as agencies need to come together. In India, understanding about PR is very weak. PR in India initially came through big groups like Ogilvy and Burson-Marsteller which were advertising-led. They had no need to explain the aspects of non-media relations to the clients. Today, there are small and specialized PR setups which have interest in explaining the clients about the various functions of PR. However, they are focused on their business and don't have much time to educate their clients on the width and depth of PR. This needs to be changed and these agencies need to come together to produce case studies.”

Challenges of PR

Render is not just excited about the opportunities in PR but is equally concerned with the challenges. With the advent of more media vehicles, PR has become more complex, she says. “Now, we have to work much harder than we traditionally had to. We have to buy skills from advertising agencies. It has become a science. It is not possible just as a PR firm that everything you send out is heard, seen and received. It is creating challenges, giving some agencies a bad name.”