

“Total Communications” – Its Evolution Overseas

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"Total Communications"—Its Evolution Overseas

By HAROLD BURSON

EVERY BUSINESS CYCLE seems to spawn its own vocabulary. The newest is "total communications." While in many ways little more than a label, "total communications" is advantageous in that it seems to be understood by most business executives. Mention "total communications" and the typical sales vice president comprehends; talk about public relations or even publicity and the comprehension factor diminishes appreciably.

This seems particularly germane for those American businessmen concerned with establishing footholds in overseas markets. The word "communicate" is particularly effective. Communicating at the outset of their offshore experience is often their single most difficult chore. Even those fluent in the native tongue frequently complain of the difficulties in making themselves understood. A drawing room conversation in a language not your own is not equivalent to conducting business in that language, especially when one is not conversant with business practices or even terminology—which is often the case when companies spread their wings overseas.

UNIQUE PROBLEMS

It is, therefore, little wonder that the transplanted American executive is eager to discuss "communications" when he could not care less for a discussion of public relations or publicity. At the same time, it should be said that the newly established overseas company does have unique "communications" problems. (They also have public relations problems, whether they are recognized as such. Communications problems

are, to most businessmen, tangible; public relations problems are intangible. Therein lies the greater interest in communications.)

The typical company moving overseas has usually followed a well-trod cycle. It has gone through the stage of a successful export business: good profits, very few problems. Next, the licensee phase: royalties came in at a steady rate without too much work (plus the incentive of a trip overseas every year for one or more of the officer group). Finally, the move overseas, first with a marketing group, then as a manufacturer.



It is in this latter stage that communications assumes importance. The first shock is that few if any people overseas ever heard of the parent company. The next shock is the realization that the market potential is much better than anyone back home ever thought—and that most of the cream is being skimmed off by the competition. The third surprise

is that distribution can't be taken for granted, that a distribution organization must be built, one distributor at a time.

The result is that the American executive transplanted overseas feels naked. Everything he takes for granted back home becomes a major project often from the ground up. He must start from the beginning to tell people about his company and his product, its operating advantages, maintenance superiority, where it can (or cannot) be used. "People" to whom he must tell these things are in all directions: his own sales force, distributors and distributor salesmen, customers (purchasing agents, design engineers, plant operating personnel, maintenance and service specialists). No wonder "communications" has become the handy word that it is.

A company's overseas communications program usually starts with product literature. That's basic to the entire marketing function. It's difficult, if not impossible, to sell a product—other than package goods or other impulse items—without literature for use up and down the channels of distribution.

PRINTED PIECES

Most companies do have printed material when they go overseas, some frequently of excellent quality. Usually there are two problems: (1) it is printed in English; (2) dimensions are stated in inches and feet, volume often in pints, quarts, gallons. If the company is moving only into the United Kingdom, there's no problem; but many companies are also going to the Continent.

For that reason, the company going overseas is well advised to give priority to printing new sales literature. In spite of the common belief that English has become the universal language, a significant portion of the population in every Western European country still



can't read or speak English—and even those who do are not as comfortable making purchasing decisions based on their knowledge of English as they are in their own tongue. Those who are comfortable working in English would rather not take the time to convert inches to centimeters or gallons to liters. When one manufacturer distributes literature in the language of a country with dimensions stated in the metric system and his competitor depends on his "Printed in the USA" material, it's not difficult to predict which gets the higher readership. A further factor is that the European purchasing decision is becoming more broadly based with the expansion of middle management. This means there are more people to be reached than before—often people the salesman cannot see—or of whose existence he may not be aware.

SELLING DIRECT

The best literature in the world does not sell a product—unless it's specifically an item and the literature specifically plans to sell the product through direct mail channels. The key to selling is a distribution organization. Sometimes the U. S. company operating overseas sells directly to the ultimate consumer; it is perhaps more frequently the case that he reaches the ultimate consumer through one, two or more steps that include distributors, agents, dealers and retailers.

The job of building such an organization is more a problem of marketing and sales than of communications or public relations. But once having achieved a distribution organization, the marketing manager is faced with a monumental problem—making that distribution organization effective. The task of educat-

ing and motivating that organization is certainly one for communications. Without education or "product knowhow," without motivation, the distribution organization is so many names on a sheet of paper.

It is, therefore, frequently the case that the second priority job for the overseas communicator is in the area of educating and motivating distributors and salesmen—the manufacturer's own representatives who call on distributors and dealers, the distributors' and dealers' salesmen who call on either the ultimate consumer or the retailer; and in the latter case, the retailer's sales force.

MANY DEVICES

The techniques for accomplishing this task are varied. They range from the planning, preparation and execution of sales meetings to the preparation of direct mail programs. Just as in this country, many devices can be employed effectively ranging from the professionally-produced industrial show to an earnest discussion by the sales manager to small groups of salesmen. Technical manuals stressing product advantages, printed material directed to telling the salesman "how to sell," strip films, "canned" sales presentations with flipcharts or other graphic devices—all are used and can be useful.

There are some who would say that all of this is well and good, but hardly the job of the public relations man. Certainly, judging by U. S. experience and practice, these are functions assigned to the advertising or sales promotion specialist. But the problem overseas is frequently different. The overseas company with the problem usually does not have access to the staff of specialists who are immediately available back in the home office. It most often does not have a public relations man, an advertising man and a sales promotion specialist on its overseas staff. The fortunate company—save for the very large overseas operations—is the company that can produce a single human being assigned full time to all of these jobs.

There are, of course, in most countries, specialists in all of these functions— independent public relations consultants, advertising agencies, sales promotion and direct mail houses. The problem in using specialists for each of the three functions, however, is often one of size. Many U. S. companies starting out in an overseas market operate on so small a scale that it is often economically impractical to separate the various segments of the communications package and distribute it among the several specialists as we know them in this country. Or even if the outside specialist would find it economically attractive, the client is frequently so hard-pressed for manpower and time that he insists on doing business

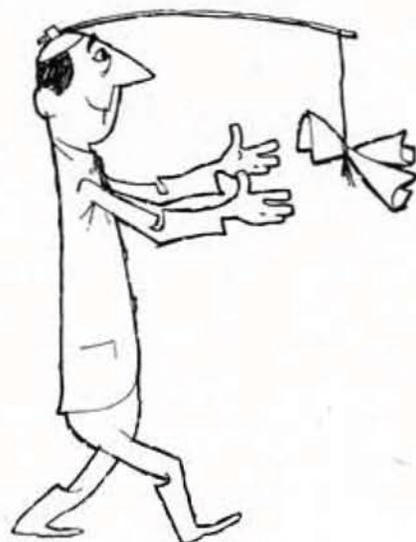
with a single source to whom he can look for communications help. To him, the job is one of reaching his market, selling his customer. He is not as sensitive to the nuances in differences among public relations, advertising and sales promotion. He has a problem: a communications problem.

It is for this reason that there can be a substantial difference in the operation of the public relations consultant overseas vis-à-vis the U. S. More specifically, perhaps, this observation should be limited to the U. S. public relations firm representing U. S. companies in overseas markets—or, to be entirely specific, it has been our experience working for some 15-18 American corporations in Western Europe. After four years, the pattern is a familiar one. The typical client is not particularly interested or concerned about his *public relations* requirements; he is, however, vitally interested in and concerned about communicating with his distributors, customers and prospects, the general business community and various governmental levels.

WHAT IS IT?

Nor is this exclusively the experience of the public relations firm. It seems also to hold true in the case of the internal department (or to be more exact, the one man on the European staff professionally experienced in dealing with the printed and spoken word). Internally, as externally, the public relations department is as much an advertising/sales promotion department as it is public relations. In essence, it is a communications department.

Being in all phases of communications, in my opinion, neither detracts from nor debases the "public relations" appellation. The difference, if any, seems to me to be largely in semantics. "Communications" has a technical connotation involving the mechanics of moving a message from the sender to the re-



ceiver; public relations has a professional connotation built around both the real and the fancied belief that the public relations man represents the policy position—the difference between right and wrong as regards the public interest.

HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE

It seems to me that both connotations have validity. At the same time, they are hardly mutually exclusive of one another. The skilled communicator is skilled because he knows what message to communicate; he has, in fact, applied a public relations dimension to his message that makes it effective. And it makes no difference whether it is in the form of a paid advertisement, a sales promotion leaflet, a news release or a policy pronouncement from management. Similarly, the converse may be applied to the public relations counsel. To be effective, he must be an effective communicator.

The differences, if any, are largely semantical.

None of this is intended to imply that there is no place for the traditional function of the public relations man or the publicist overseas. To the contrary, there is as much, if not a greater need for him offshore than at home. It is simply that there is a greater job for him overseas than here—involving functions not com-

monly encompassed in the public relations sphere.

The public relations aspects of a company moving into an overseas market are of major importance. Even if a company wants only to establish a sales beachhead overseas, the public relations considerations deserve the most careful attention and professional counsel. If a manufacturing operation is to be established, the public relations requirements expand enormously.

But the regrettable fact in the case of most moves overseas is that the decisions involving public relations considerations have usually been made before the public relations man has been brought into the inner counsels—if he ever gets there at all. (This does not mean that improper decisions are made if a public relations professional is not involved; as a matter of fact, it's remarkable how good the public relations sense of most U. S. executives really is.)

Even so, there is a continuing public relations need as in the U. S., and this could frequently be a full-time occupation for the overseas public relations man—it seldom is because of the lack of trained manpower or because the function cannot be justified economically as a full-time occupation.

Though not as highly developed as part of the marketing communications

as in the U. S., product publicity can be a vital ingredient in the total communications program overseas. In almost every developed country, there are relatively as many media outlets as in the U. S. and, in most instances, an editor is as interested in a good story as is his American counterpart. Less and less, throughout the world, an advertising schedule is ceasing to be the *quid pro quo* for editorial recognition.

GOOD FOR BUSINESS

It would appear that the overseas public relations encompasses a broader spectrum than in the U. S. The reason is largely in two directions: first, economic; second, the lack of trained specialists in other functions. The result is that the overseas public relations firm or department must view itself as a provider of "total communications." Frequently its emphasis must be more in the marketing sphere than corporate, largely because the very establishment of the company overseas is more a marketing than a corporate consideration. This is good for business and good for public relations, I believe, because it takes the public relations man out of the area of the intangible and make what he does seem tangible indeed—and more important, comprehensible to the corporate executive who pays the bills.