PR comes of age in Sri Lanka



The Rowland Company is the first multinational Public Relations Agency to be set up in Sri Lanka. Inaugurated on the 29th of November, this new venture is a collaboration of Bates-Strategic Alliance and Rowland Worldwide. “This is a very logical evolution for us. We started working on PR ever since Strategic Alliance was formed and we’ve done a lot of exercises and have certainly made our mark as one of the leading forces of PR in this country. To us the time is right now, to link up and bring some multinational expertise in”, says Nimal Gunewardena, Managing Director of Bates Strategic Alliance.

The Rowland Company is an autonomous subsidiary of Cordiant plc- a 700 million Pound Sterling communications company which also owns Bates Worldwide, Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising, Zenith Media and other marketing communications companies. It has its headquarters in New York and is managed by a board of five

regional Managing Directors spread across the globe: from the Americas, UK, Europe, South Asia to North Asia. The company employs over 300 people in 34 offices in five continents and has an annual fee revenue of USS 40 million. It also ranks among the world's top ten PR firms.

"We are not tied to the traditional approach to Public Relations. Instead, we tailor programmes to each client's unique needs. We don't just write media releases and do media relations", says Sean Barrett, Director South Asia for Rowland Worldwide.

The Rowland Company is a specialist communications consultancy, skilled in the strategic development and management of all aspects of communications between an organisation and its various 'audiences', be they the media, employees, customers or clients, industry colleagues, unions, governments or special interest groups. Whether the goal is maintaining shareholder loyalty, minimising damage from negative issues, making an announcement, launching a product, working out a crisis management plan or simply generating some publicity The Rowland Company will do it all.

Commenting on the tie up with Bates Strategic Alliance Barrett says, "language and cultural differences must more and more be factored into communications. It is for this reason that we seek to find partners in new markets rather than opening offices staffed with expatriates. We believe the appropriate balance is local expertise with international reach and support".

This new venture will initially come under Strategic Alliance (Pvt) Ltd., "but it will have its own team of people and at some future stage, we will spin it off as a separate company with its own identity", says Gunewardena.

Ever since Strategic Alliance (Pvt) Ltd., was formed three years ago, the company has carried out several PR related projects, from media coverage, product launches, event marketing, exhibitions, sponsorship handling, to community programmes, "and now lately, we are doing the heavy duty PR stuff for PERC (Public Enterprises Reform Commission) which is in the whole area of Issues Management", adds Gunewardena.

Issues Management is an important area of PR and Bates-Strategic Alliance works very closely with PERC in this regard.

With regard to PERC the emphasis is on PR communications as opposed to

advertising, “you can-not get people to accept new ideas by running flashy ads. It needs a lot more use of other communication tools which are in the PR ambit and our work with PERC involves advising them on the use of these tools”, says Gunewardena.

Apart from changing perceptions about the process of change PR is also required to promote investments into the country. Our link up with The Rowland Company which has a worldwide network of offices can do a lot of investor promotion work and PR work to create the right perceptions about Sri Lanka abroad. So that is a huge challenge and through The Rowland Company we are trying to provide a resource as we pitch for that business”, says a hopeful Gunewardena.

He feels that the same applies to the tourist industry as well, where there is a requirement to rehabilitate Sri Lanka’s image abroad and attract the tourists back into the country, “there is a need to do PR and image building abroad in this regard. Having a multinational network that we can be part of and link it to, becomes. all the more meaningful when you look at that macro level. That is very much part of our rationale for making this link up now and becoming a part of The Rowland Company which is one of the top ten PR networks in the world.”

The Rowland Company in Sri Lanka will be concentrating on the larger organisations which require PR services and as Gunewardena says, “our own clients are a captive market who demand PR services, so certainly we will continue to provide these services to our existing clients and as the organisation grows, we will also look at the whole idea of bringing the multinational expertise and the network linkages in, to try and address some of the larger projects in investment, tourism and privatisation promotion. We will offer the services to some of the larger organisations eventually who may not be our clients now, but who will be needing PR.”

Some of the larger companies in Sri Lanka do have their own PR divisions but Gunewardena is of the view, “they may have one or two people who are titled Public Relations Officer or PR Manager or whatever it is, but that’s about it. The work that they can do is limited.”

According to Rowland World-wide, the character of a Public Relations firm today must be global. We are living in an era in which anyone virtually anywhere in the world has access to information almost instantly. Therefore, new communication technology and a rising global consciousness make thinking and acting on a global

scale essential. In this context, the strength of a Public Relations. firm must be judged by its reach, in order to provide effective strategic communications solutions to the ever changing challenges faced by public and private sector organisations. Companies of The Rowland Group have worked on programmes for Investment Boards, organisations or groups needing support services. It is also very active in the area of financial public relations and has undertaken IPO/ Investor Relations work for hundreds of public companies, banks and financial services organisations. This has brought them into close contact with the financial communities of Asia, North America and Europe.

Gunawardena believes that the time has now come for PR to come of age in Sri Lanka, “there has always been a latent demand for PR services, it’s just that the service itself and the expertise has not been there or has not been offered or put to use in the way it can. So it’s a need that has been there which has been inadequately addressed in the past.”

He also says that with the wealth of experience in PR related services which Bates-Strategic Alliance has acquired over the years and with the launch of Sri Lanka’s first multinational Public Relations Agency we will be able to see the induction of professional expertise in this area which has so far been lacking in this country, “PR is a new field in this country, although people have been doing it on their own steam. So we are bringing on one hand the technology transfer in terms of professional expertise.”

With Sri Lanka entering the multinational Rowland network which operates through wholly owned offices and alliances in 38 countries around the world, PR is bound to make waves in Sri Lanka- shaping the trends that influence the way people live, companies work and individuals think. [redacted]