



## Research in brief

## Public relations functions: Perspective from a Japanese corporation

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 20 September 2011

Received in revised form

23 November 2011

Accepted 14 December 2011

## Keywords:

Japan

Product

Culture

Interview

Image

Corporate

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines public relations (PR) functions in a large Japanese corporation as well as the PR role in the management function. The corporation under study is Kao Corporation, which is one of the largest Japanese consumer and industrial goods manufacturers. Information was collected from interviewing a PR manager of Kao Corporation. Evidence suggests that Kao's PR department functions more or less like an advertising department. Press releases are placed in the media as paid advertisements. Kao's PR uses a third-party endorsement to establish a new product's credibility. The company has a participative corporate culture that allows the PR director to work closely with the top management. The idea of collaborative efforts between departments and the practice of being a socially responsible company suggest that Kao's PR department uses a combination of communication models and Japanese management styles to project a good corporate citizen image.

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) was introduced in Japan after the second World War by the US Occupation Administration to disseminate information related to public policies on rebuilding the country (Kelly, Masumoto, & Gibson, 2002). When the Occupation ended in the early 1950s, the Japanese government itself had set up central and regional PR offices to communicate with the public (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008). The rapid economic growth in the 1960s brought forth the rise of a mass consumption society and Japanese corporations started using PR as a form of marketing communication to promote their products or services. In the following decade, the oil crisis and industrial pollution made large Japanese corporations realize the importance of projecting a good public image because that would bring consumers trust in the companies' products (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008).

In recent years, a protracted economic downturn plus corporate scandals and corruption have made Japanese consumers more critical of corporations' misdeeds and more aware of consumer rights. In Japan, a new product launch is always linked to a company's public image. The justification for Japanese consumers to try a new product is based on the public image of the company, not on the perception of the brand or the product attributes (Mooij, 2010). Introducing new products or services to Japanese consumers has become more challenging because of the decline in consumer purchasing power. Based on interviews with a Japanese PR manager, this paper examines the use of PR in a new product launch and its role in the management function.

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## 2. Japanese management theory and organizational culture

A review of the Japanese management models helps provide a better understanding of the PR practice in a Japanese corporation. According to Ouchi (as cited in Grunig, 1992, p. 228) the two models of Japanese Management are “Type Z” and “M-Form.” Lifetime employment is a key component in the “Type Z” model as it offers employees job security that in turn makes them loyal to the company. The participative nature of the “Z” culture encourages consensus over individual decision-making. The “M-Form” model is characterized by interdependence among managers from different departments within a corporation. Besides collaborating with each other, managers also retain a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making. The “M-Form” model maintains a balance between the independence and interdependence of individual managers. Kaizen is the continuous improvement involving both the managers and workers. This style of quality management emphasizes improvement in the process rather than the development of a new process (Imai, 1986). Japanese companies that stress quality through culture and structure are more likely to have effective PR programs.

## 3. Media relations in Japan

In Japan, PR practitioners focus on cementing good relationships with journalists who are members of the press club system (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008; Watson & Sallot, 2001). The press club system is a networking channel for journalists to gain access to the business elites and governmental agencies. Each governmental agency has its own press club and only members are allowed to access its official information and resources (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008). Major media including newspapers, broadcasting companies and magazine publishers are the press club system members.

The public relations department of a Japanese company functions more or less like an advertising department. Its relationship with the media is similar to the one that advertisers have with the media. News releases are placed in the media as paid advertisements (Kelly et al., 2002). Japanese PR is a front line operation for developing media relations. In the early 1990s, large Japanese corporations consolidated all communication functions under the PR department to handle publicity (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008).

## 4. Kao Corporation's public relations

The corporation under study is Kao Corporation, a consumer and industrial goods manufacturer that employs 5854 staff with annual sales of US\$9.9 million (Kao Corporation Website, 2009). Kao Corporation produces soaps, detergents, shampoos, and cosmetics for the consumer market and chemical goods for industrial use.

The PR department in Kao Corporation is a 40-staff operation that divides into corporate PR, customer PR and marketing PR. The department is under the directorship of a communication director who works closely with the board of directors.

## 5. Interviews

Information for this study relies primarily on interviews with one of the PR managers (who requested anonymity) at Kao Corporation and Ms. Asakawa Saori, a marketing executive, helped translate all the information provided by PR manager X.

According to PR manager X, the director of communication works closely with Kao's top management in developing consumer communication programs. Most of the time, Kao's top management seeks the communication director's advice before making any important decision about activities pertaining to consumer affairs. However, the management style in the public relations department is a top-down approach, that is, junior level PR staff usually follows senior personnel's instructions to carry out assigned technical tasks such as writing brochures or news releases. They are not involved in any of the strategic planning. In a general sense, Kao's top management recognizes that PR is an important strategic communication for achieving its organizational goals. Kao has a responsive organizational structure that allows a quick response to any crisis.

“The barriers between sections or departments are low. This enables our department to call for all related divisions' cooperation when something important happens. As a general rule, all the public relations functions are performed in-house. This gives our department direct control of all the internal and external communication in order to achieve consistency of the communication messages—one organizational voice.” – PR manager X

According to PR manager X, Kao's higher management does not interfere in the development of the message strategy. The PR department has the autonomy to decide the best solution for the communication problem. It is the duty of the communication director to ensure that all departments within the company work closely together toward achieving the communication goal. Kao's responsive organizational structure resembles Ouchi's M-Form organizational model, which suggests balance between independence and interdependence of various departments within an organization.

### 5.1. New product launch

One successful case illustrates how Kao's PR department helped support the launch of “Healthy Econa Cooking Oil.” Riding on the wave of promoting a healthy diet, Kao's R&D department developed a new formula for producing a functional cooking oil that could prevent fat deposits. Working with the marketing team, Kao's PR product group took more than

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