

PUBLIC RELATIONS ISN'T SELF-SERVING (IT'S SERVING OTHERS)

For us in Y'sdom, Public Relations should be the drive that collectively propels us to gain public awareness of the common cause that we espouse, that of lending a helping hand in response to the needs of those less fortunate than we are in coming by the necessities of life as also making common cause with the civic concerns of the public. It is all about earning a trusted reputation with the public, acting in their best interests and not just in our movement's narrow interests. Thus, by acting in concert, we hope to promote goodwill between us and the public. The degree of goodwill we win would solely depend on how well we live up to our pledge to render service to those in need of help. If we suit our action to the word in this regard, there is no better communication strategy than that for our voice to be heard, our message to spread, our mission to be achieved; in short, for our community service to make a positive impact on the community's collective psyche. No amount of glossy in-house brochures, souvenirs or photo-op newsletters would be a substitute for wholeheartedly lending a hand to those who need our assistance. To their great credit, there are many Y's Men's Clubs that live up to that ideal.

Often, however, past experience has shown how such efforts turn out to be a flash in the pan. A lot of energy goes into creating a stir at the start in planning a new project by way of exhortations, both in speech and in print, but when it comes to acting further on it, there is no staying power or sustained effort to see the plan through to its logical conclusion. The whole thing fizzles out and in the end happens to be a damp squib. For instance, you will recall how after the Tsunami tidal wave that left in its wake catastrophic scenes of death and destruction in Japan, the past Area President Y'sm Philip Mathai had made a fervent appeal for funds to help its hapless victims tide over their troubles. True, with more than a little coaxing from him, some leaders who were present on that occasion responded handsomely in their personal capacity, but that was as far as it went. Apparently there was hardly any effort on their part to use their persuasive powers to let the appeal trickle down to the grassroots, as the sequel to the appeal was to prove.

I think it is a crying shame, considering how we have no hesitation in otherwise digging deep into our pockets and spending hundreds, nay thousands, of Rupees frivolously to keep up with the Joneses or to soft-soap our superiors. As it turned out, in the present instance, some regions were marginally more responsive than the others in coughing up for Tsunami. There was one region that did not even feature in the list of donors to the cause, with the solitary exception of a club in that region. If all the clubs in India had followed their modest example and came up with a matching sum we could have raised hundreds of thousands, instead of what was only an apology for a donation that we raised, to ease the sufferings of our fellow human beings! Had we done that, that one exercise alone would have fetched us by way of public relations more than the sum of its parts. Giving is not giving unless it hurts the giver! **AND IF NOT NOW, WHEN?**

Merely wearing your badge of elevated office or sporting a colourful rosette large enough to catch the eye and set you apart from the rank and file will not impress the passerby quite enough to stop you and ask you, 'Excuse me, Sir/Madam, Are you someone in particular?' Such a display can only be a wasted effort, for it is hardly openly acknowledged by the audience you most want to see it; that is, the community at large. Only when we keep a finger on the pulse of the community to know what help they need and go down to them with compassion can we expect to accumulate goodwill, which no doubt will be a fund to draw on when we need their co-operation. An unobtrusive social worker is more than likely to be stopped by a passerby and greeted warmly at least in his own backyard. The question we must therefore ask ourselves is, 'Are we making a difference in the community by our services, however modest they may be?' Our responsibility as human beings is to march into tomorrow lending a hand to all those that need our help. 'Service before Self' is our motto; that is what we Y's Men are pledged to uphold. Something positive must be done to make a difference to the neighbourhood or the community you belong to. **AND IF NOT YOU, WHO?**

But what are your credentials to claim membership in a service organisation such as ours? It has to be said that a large number of 'Johnny-come-latelies' have infiltrated into our movement, who, in short order, have shown their true colours and proved to be interlopers and oath-breakers. No doubt, membership of our movement is open and voluntary. This doesn't mean that anyone who seeks membership has to be accepted. But the whole group should be able to decide whether someone applying to join is likely to support the group's aims as set down in the constitution (**e.g. working together, without discrimination, for the benefit of the community**, especially that of the neighbourhood). The group, the club, that is, could also limit its size so that it is easy for everyone to have a say in its deliberations. If a committee is needed, it is up to the members to tell the committee what needs to be done and not the other way round. The committee can act on behalf of the club members, but best results are obtained when everyone shares the workload.

Even inexperienced people can gain the goodwill of their community when they act together in identifying and helping to alleviate the problems facing their neighbourhood. What is important is that they should be able to establish links with the local community and work out their objectives within the context of the local needs and the available resources. In order to do this, the first step would be to invite the people in the community who are in constant contact with the community in their day-to-day lives, such as the local Panchayat ward members, the vicars of the local parishes, the functionaries of the local temples and mosques and other like-minded people who are already known in the community for their social work among the people. They are people who have first-hand knowledge of what needs to be done. A word of caution may not be out of place here about inviting high-profile political leaders, who may have their own axe to grind.

Apart from the assistance we have rendered one way or the other, sadly only in dribs and drabs in some instances, to the families that are economically and socially deprived in our communities, there are many other things that demand our immediate attention in the

context of the prevailing environmental problems that affect one and all, irrespective of their financial resources.

Of those, the most pressing problem in my opinion is the lack of civic sense many reveal in the way in which they pollute the environment by disposing of their garbage, both commercial and domestic, by surreptitiously flinging them out in plastic bags along our highways and byways or over their boundary walls, without any thought of the dangers their actions pose. Incidentally, we read in the newspapers how school children and college students in some places have volunteered, with great success, to tidy up their neighbourhoods, and in the process setting an example to the shamefaced locals how the environment should be protected for the welfare of all. Can we not as a movement, at every level, take this up as an urgent priority and follow their example? This could be done by a club as a neighbourhood service. Y's lings and Y's youths could be put through their paces by delegating them to do the needful, no doubt guided by the seniors. We could also convene public meetings to increase awareness among the public. There is no doubt that such acts of goodwill, let alone their residual effect, will endear us to the community.

Of course, there are other pressing problems too that we can help tackle and in so doing win the goodwill of the long-suffering public. Two years ago, I recall coming across a report titled *Vazhikannu* in a local newspaper. It was about a training programme that the paper had started with the intention of inculcating in school children a social commitment to road safety. I was particularly drawn to the efforts of the AJB School in Palakkad as a sequel to their commitment. They took the initiative to get the drivers of public vehicles - the main target group to be tamed and re-trained- not only to participate in their innovative awareness campaign through rallies and street plays but also to get them to take a solemn pledge that they would not drink and drive or exceed the speed limits or exhibit road rage or do anything that would distract their attention while they were behind the wheel. Surely, we too can take a leaf out of their book.

Any highway code would tell you that knowing and applying traffic rules could significantly reduce road accident casualties. Cutting the number of deaths and injuries that occur on our roads every day is a responsibility we all share, whether we are pedestrians, cyclists, motorcycle riders, or drivers of vehicles big or small. But, there's the rub. How many of us know the rules, let alone observe the rules? Not all that many, I am afraid. More so the guardians of law, among whom are many who cannot identify traffic offences or, if indeed they can, turn a blind eye even to the most blatant of traffic violations. A detached observer of our roads can notice how the drivers who flout the rules, or, for that matter, the pedestrians who jaywalk, do so not so much because of their ignorance as because they want to find out what they can get away with, not caring to extend the common courtesies they owe to other road users. One-upping the other road users might massage your ego and momentarily thrill you, but in the end it kills. Of course these problems, whether they are those of environmental pollution or of flouting traffic rules, are so daunting that they cannot be solved by our efforts alone. But, we can certainly set an example.

My mind goes back to 15th August, 2004, the last day of the 66th Y's Men International Convention held at Kochi. The guest of honour for the day was Shri J. Alexander, the then

President of the National Council of Y.M.C.A's. In his address, I recall his saying, *inter alia*, that man could land on the moon, but if he were able to 'land on the hearts and minds of his neighbours', in other words 'be his brother's keeper', that certainly would be more momentous. Resolutions to help our fellow human beings was all very well, he added, but, sitting as we are in our comfort zones, that often only ended in complacency. In contrast, he cited the example of a Latin American bishop who prayed God that he did not let his flock rest content. His prayer went on thus: 'Disturb us O Lord! We have fulfilled our dreams, but we have dreamed so little. We have reached our haven safely, but we had merely sailed close to the shore. Disturb us, O Lord, evermore!' Shri Alexander ended his talk with the tale of the setting Sun, who was worried that there would be no more light to dispel the looming darkness after he was gone. Guessing at the quandary of the Sun, the little glow-worm reassured the great star, 'I will take your place!' And in their thousands, the ubiquitous little fire-flies in unison gave their mite to the night.' If our movement in India can retrieve the Bottom-Up dispensation that it once was proud of, in which no member was a bystander or a token fellow-traveller but everyone an active participant in one capacity or another, we might yet gain a far greater fund of goodwill than ever before.

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