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Adopting versus Adapting
a PR Plan:
Investigating Why and How
Public Relations Plans
Must Be Adapted to Specific
Publics

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Adopting versus Adapting a PR Plan: Investigating Why and How Public Relations Plans Must Be Adapted to Specific Publics

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Abstract

This case study investigates whether a public relations plan should be adapted or adopted for specific publics, specifically the Quebec market. The author reviewed relevant literature and conducted several interviews, all of which confirmed that Quebec should be treated as a specific public separate from the rest Canada for PR purposes. PR practitioners should take several factors into consideration when adapting plans for Quebec, including media relations, choice of spokesperson or celebrity, and the use of statistical information specific to Quebec, as opposed to statistics that can be generalized to all of Canada. This case study also suggests future research on how cultural differences affect the development of a PR plan and the success of a campaign when adapted to other places.

Keywords: public relations, cultural differences, target market, adapted plan, local characteristics, specific public

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Background

Public relations practitioners in Quebec are faced with daily battles with their PR colleagues in Toronto head offices, where they must explain why certain communications or cultural concepts will not work in Quebec. For example, some holidays have different meanings in Quebec: Victoria Day weekend is known as Patriots Day weekend, and Canada Day means Moving Day in *la belle province* (Blais, 2012). There are other obvious differences, such as the language (English versus French) and the legal system (common versus civil law). When implementing public relations plans in Canada and Quebec, such differences have to be taken into account.

Quebec represents a very attractive market that deserves marketers' and communicators' attention. With one quarter of the Canadian population, Quebec represents a key market – perhaps an unavoidable market – for most companies

operating in Canada (“What Québec wants”, 2012). Quebec is often overlooked, but it can offer significant growth potential if well-understood.

The lack of information on intercultural communication is of importance for public relations management practitioners and the larger business community, because it can explain the success and failures of businesses who want to enter the Quebec market.

Payne (2012) argues that for a PR campaign to be successful abroad, communicators must be familiar with the target language and its cultural nuances. According to Payne, poor translations and a lack of cross-cultural understanding have led to many failures in public relations and advertising. The translation of documents, slogans, and literature must be checked and double checked for meanings and cross-cultural nuances to avoid any misunderstandings, mistakes, or possible embarrassments (para. 7). Ihator (2000) agrees:

Public relations practitioners have to be careful using metaphors, jokes, aphorisms, and maxims in English or other languages when practicing abroad. Cultural sensitiveness and the understanding of a group’s communication nuances are needed to adequately and effectively communicate. (Ihator, 2000, p.42)

Research Problem

In an attempt to understand why PR plans have to be adapted to Quebec, this case study investigates whether and why Quebec must be treated as a specific public, rather than an extension of the rest of Canada. This case study builds off on Leitch and Motion’s (2010) argument that the general public should be viewed as one of multiple publics with whom organizations can engage. This case study will demonstrate there is no such thing as a “general Canadian public” from coast to coast. Although this is beyond the scope of this particular case

study, parallels can also be made with the relationship between public relations practitioners in Toronto and their American public relations colleagues in a head office in New York.

Research Question

RQ: How and to what extent do companies and organizations need to adapt their national or global public relations plan for the Quebec market?

In their 2010 study, Meyer and Bernier showed that cultural differences can affect the extent to which a PR plan should be adapted to different markets. Their study showed that Agatha, a jewellery store chain, had been forced to adapt their products to the local culture in order to penetrate desirable segments. If a PR practitioner can determine how and to what extent a PR plan must be adapted for a unique local culture, such as Quebec, it can help them decide whether the plan is worth being deployed simultaneously in Canada and Quebec with an adapted version, or if it should just be launched in Canada with no Quebec component.

Several PR practitioners from Quebec were interviewed for this case study, and every interviewee said they faced the same situation of receiving a PR plan from a head office in Toronto and having to decide whether it should be adapted for the Quebec market. These interviews helped clarify the differences between PR in Quebec and PR in other parts of Canada. Two interviews were also conducted with public relations practitioners in Toronto regarding their perspective on adapting PR plans for Quebec.

Results

The two public relations practitioners from Quebec felt strongly that all PR plans should be adapted for Quebec, as did the Toronto-based PR practitioners. Still, Quebec-based practitioners face some interesting challenges regarding PR

plans from Toronto. “One of the challenges is that people forget we have our own media in Quebec, our own celebrities, and a completely different language,” said one of the senior public relations consultants in Montreal (S. Lyttle, personal communication, November 2, 2012). “You can’t just take a plan that’s been conceived in Toronto and translate it and expect it to work in Quebec. The plan has to be local with a local feel, with a local person as the contact, and it has to be translated properly. Otherwise, it’s just not going to work” (S. Lyttle, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

This consultant offered an example of when she had to adapt a plan to the Quebec market. In Toronto, her colleagues were using the mainstream media to promote a contest. In Montreal, they followed the same plan for one year, and it did not work. The next year, they adapted the program for Quebec by advertising through Quebec’s weekly newspapers, which are different from other newspapers in Canada. There are 150 weeklies produced across Quebec’s cities and communities, and they have tremendous reach: “It might seem a little bit silly to say “Oh, we got Echo de Laval”, but that represents 150,000 people reading it and paying attention to it, so it’s important” (S. Lyttle, personal communication, November 2, 2012). The contest story was pitched to every weekly newspaper in Quebec, and the campaign received even higher coverage in Quebec than in other provinces. The head office in Toronto later wanted to use a similar strategy with Vancouver’s weekly newspapers, but Quebec’s weeklies are far more well-read than the weeklies in Vancouver or any other part of Canada.

Another challenge for PR practitioners in Toronto who are working on a plan with a Quebec component is the need for a spokesperson. English Canada and Quebec are very different; someone who is well-known in English Canada might not be so popular or easily-recognized among Quebecois. PR practitioners must often choose different spokespeople for campaigns in English Canada and campaigns in

Quebec. Another important consideration is Quebec's star system. There are many local celebrities who have captured the hearts of the Quebecois but would not be recognizable to most English Canadians. Fashion models are part of this star system; models with French names have greater appeal with Quebecois audiences, necessitating the use of two different models (one English, one French) for campaigns running concurrently in Quebec and English Canada.

One final consideration for PR plans in Quebec is the use of statistics. In a national campaign with French and English press releases, the English-language press releases can get away with quoting statistics that are generalized to all of Canada, rather than specific provinces. But Quebecois audiences prefer to see statistics related to their home province, and French-language press releases must therefore replace Canada-wide statistical data with Quebec-based statistics.

Discussion

This case study identifies several ways in which Canadian PR plans must be changed before they can be used in Quebec by considering the cultural differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

The interviews conducted for this case study corroborate Wakefield's (2010) findings. Wakefield argues that "even the United States, seen for decades as a 'melting pot' of cultures, is now experiencing strong cultural variation and increasing calls for greater recognition and accommodation of diversity," (p.661). Wakefield discusses several studies on culture and public relations that identify cultural differences in how PR is practiced in various countries, just as the cultural differences between Quebec and English Canada necessitate different PR approaches. Wakefield also indicated that "in many countries, certain cultural communities will have cultural behaviours, communication styles, and perceptions or worldviews that differ from the majority culture," (Wakefield, 2010, p.665). This perfectly summarizes the position of Quebec within Canada.

In Wakefield's 2010 study, "Why culture is still essential in discussions about global public relations", he examined PR practitioners in Wales who were employed by companies with head offices in London. These practitioners faced similar challenges to the practitioners in Quebec when trying to reconcile the cultural differences between London and Wales. This shows that the differences in PR strategies between English Canada and Quebec are the result of more than just a language barrier; London and Wales speak the same language, but their cultures are different enough that they require vastly different PR approaches. This case study identified other aspects besides language that explain the differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada, such as the type of media used to advertise, the choice of spokesperson, and the use of local statistical data.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that culture plays a challenging role in PR practitioners' daily work. PR practitioners in Quebec and in Toronto both agreed that public relations plans need to be adapted to a specific and unique market such as Quebec. However, this case study is limited, as it only focuses on Canada and Quebec. There may be similar differences between Canada and the United States that require PR practitioners to adapt their plans and campaigns. A follow-up to this case-study might explore these differences. Is there a need to adapt? If so, how and to what extent? Future research could also explore cultural differences between other regions in Canada.

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