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PUBLIC RELATIONS VITAL TO YOUR BRAND

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DRIVING BUSINESS DECISIONS

PUBLIC RELATIONS VITAL TO YOUR BRAND

PUBLIC relations (PR) in Malaysia has outgrown its old reputation as the department that writes speeches and runs events.

Today, PR is a core management function that protects brand value, builds legitimacy and drives business decisions for government, government-linked companies and private companies alike.

Leaders who still see PR as window dressing aren't just behind the curve — they are courting risk.

From Decoration to Decision Making

For decades, PR teams in many organisations were brought in after big decisions — merger announcements, tariff changes, or restructuring plans — had been finalised.

Only one mission? To “package” outcomes and “manage” the media. That approach no longer works. Public trust now moves



**RAVINDRAN
RAMAN KUTTY**

faster than policy.

One viral video — whether showing a vagrant mistreated at a retail branch, an airport delay or a corporate misstep — can compel regulators or boards to react within hours, even over a communication error, such as adding syariah compliance to a battery.

As one senior communicator put it, “Reputation doesn't travel by press release anymore; it travels by WhatsApp and Twitter.”

Take Petronas. Its integrated

report connects the dots between energy transition, stakeholder engagement and national fiscal stability, positioning communication as part of value creation — not cosmetic spin.

The Group Strategic Relations and Communications team sits alongside strategy and ESG leaders, helping the company explain how “more energy, fewer emissions” translates into multi-billion-ringgit projects, joint ventures and climate stewardship.

Why Boards and Ministries Need PR at the Table

Policy, operational and narrative risk now move as one. A technically sound tariff revision or subsidy update can still unravel if rolled out without compassion or clarity.

Khazanah Nasional uses its annual review to go beyond numbers — framing investment priorities, governance reforms and nation-building partnerships.

The Employees Provident Fund

(EPF) engages members through town halls, social content and explainer videos that demystify dividends and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) integration.

Petronas' transparent messaging on its RM40 billion dividend contributions and carbon-capture investments sustains trust at home and abroad.

Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB) too has a very compact public relations unit that is sensitive to public complaints.

Private companies are attuned to this shift. Beyond the GLC ecosystem, publicly listed consumer and industrial brands have learned that reputation now sits on the same line as revenue and risk.

Fraser & Neave Holdings (F&N) Bhd, for example, uses its annual sustainability reports to link product innovation, sugar reduction targets, packaging circularity and community programmes to long-term brand value and reg-

ulatory expectations, rather than treating ESG as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) side story.

In the manufacturing and technology space, companies like Vitrox and Inari Amertron communicate how automation, upskilling, and energy-efficient operations support both global supply chains and local jobs, responding directly to investor and customer questions on resilience and responsible production.

Retail-driven PLCs such as MR D.I.Y. and Padini increasingly explain store expansion, pricing decisions and supply chain standards in terms of cost of living, customer trust, and environmental impact to avoid being seen as “profiting in silence” during economic uncertainty.

These companies show that strategic communication is not confined to heavy industries or GLCs.

It is now part of how Corporate

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CLARITY, COURAGE AND CONNECTION

Good PR helps leadership listen before the shouting starts

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Malaysia signals alignment with Bursa Malaysia's enhanced sustainability reporting requirements and the National Sustainability Reporting Framework, which expect boards to treat ESG, risk and communication as integrated responsibilities.

What a Core Function Looks Like

Treating PR as strategic management means embedding it across governance and performance, not just media relations.

Progressive organisations:

1. Give PR a seat at the strategy table.

Heads of communications in top GLCs like Petronas and corporations like Maybank report directly to the CEO and sit in board or exco meetings.

2. Recognise communication as risk management.

Utilities, manufacturers and airlines — from TNB to AirAsia — test crisis response scenarios that include social media blowback and stakeholder messaging, not just technical recovery.

3. Integrate policy and communication planning.

Ministries that align announcements with policy sequencing, as seen in the Finance Ministry's 2024 Budget roadshows or the Digital Ministry's policy explainers, reduce public confusion and fatigue.

4. Use data-driven listening.

Sentiment analysis, media mapping and member feedback help banks and developers fine-tune outreach.

CIMB and UEM Sunrise, for instance, use stakeholder perception surveys to adjust ESG nar-

atives and community programmes.

5. Elevate leaders as chief communicators.

Khazanah's managing director, Petronas' president and Bank Negara's governor routinely front the media themselves — demonstrating that leadership credibility rests on clarity, not bureaucracy.

6. From Cost Centre to Strategic Asset.

Executives can quantify capital and returns easily, but trust, goodwill and the "social licence to operate" drive those very metrics in the long run.

Boards should ask two tough questions:

What is the cost of poor communication when a policy, product or system failure sparks public outrage?

And conversely, how much val-

ue is created when transparency, empathy and evidence-based storytelling secure investor confidence or social support?

Petronas' open ESG disclosures, Khazanah's partnership narrative, and Maybank's Humanising Financial Services campaign show how communication can strengthen reputational resilience while advancing Malaysia's competitiveness narrative.

A Blueprint for 2026 and Beyond

To integrate PR into governance and growth, leaders — public and private— should:

Elevate the function. Position chief communications officers at CEO or secretary-general level, with roles in ESG, risk and transformation councils.

Professionalise the talent.

Encourage accreditation through the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia and ethics-based learning.

Invest in capability. **Institutionalise** communication governance.

Lead by example. CEOs and ministers who communicate consistently, even about bad news, build more durable legitimacy than those who stay silent.

PR done well isn't about spin; it's about clarity, courage and connection.

Or, as one veteran communicator quipped: "Good PR doesn't just polish the message; it helps leadership listen before the shouting starts."

The writer is an accredited PR practitioner and a fellow of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia