

Euro-Mediterranean Public Relations and local systems of the area.

Developing a new public relations approach for cooperation among local systems in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Dott.ssa Amanda Jane Succi
CEO CEERP MED, Catania, Italy
General Secretary of the Global Alliance, Università della Svizzera Italiana,
Lugano, Switzerland

Introduction

The Euro-Med area is characterized by a lively and particular context which, thanks to its cultural characteristics and identitarian diversities, makes it an area rich of growth and development opportunities. Every day many companies, universities, institutions tie new relations with other organizations and people within this area, but nonetheless the Mediterranean area has severe difficulties in creating true and compact economic development. It is still a fragmented area, vulnerable to any kind of further exploitation.

When looking at the Med region it is also important to take into consideration three important aspects:

- 1) within the globalized scenario, the med area is a weak actor because of the stronger presence of economically more powerful countries, able to easily exploit the fragmented relational and economic Med difficulties;
- 2) in order to be a competitive “voice” in the global context, Europe needs to dialogue with a stronger Med region;
- 3) the majority of the companies existing in this area is made of small and medium companies.

If it is considered important to trigger on the economic development of the entire Euro-Med region in order to balance what today is unequal, in order to help build an homogeneous arena competitive on a global scale, in order to help the Small and Medium Companies to grow and be part of the general development, it is also important to identify the points of value of the Euro-Med area, creating strong and common interests to develop in a network system within the region itself.

What also needs to be reinforced, is the application of public relations management and strategies as support to corporate and institutional cross-country projects, which are essential for strengthening cooperation in the social and economic development of the area, as well as for the reinforcement of the Euro-Med zone as a whole.

Because the role of communication is of primary importance for every kind of project or activity intended to be carried out, especially if we consider the delicacy of differences present in the Euro-Mediterranean region, public relations must therefore be considered an important part of any start up activity. Through planning its outcomes, communication and relational effects and feed-back, it follows that public relations is inevitably the basic component of any communication programme involving all the different activities and negotiation plans to be carried out and reinforced.

Euro-Mediterranean public relations

The Euro Mediterranean context is a dynamic and complex reality, sometimes difficult to interpret and to analyze as a whole within the global perspective. It is living a process of growth and change which inevitably impacts into social, corporate and organizational everyday life and therefore needs to be supported by specific communication strategies in many and different fields and areas.

Considering that both corporate and institutional organizations are more frequently involved in common projects, it cannot be missed the importance of understanding the cultural and infrastructural differences belonging to each country or area taken into consideration. Forgetting to pay attention to this aspect makes it difficult, and in many cases impossible, to achieve effective results and success in planning, carrying out and measuring the results and success of any project of shared interest.

Even if the results may seem positive, it is sure that with the support of specific public relations programmes the achievements of the overall operation is far more valuable and strategically effective.

From this perspective, some years ago I started analyzing the Euro-Med scenario and the application of public relations in the different countries belonging to this area. The differences I came across, both in the professional development field and in the perception of the value created by PR in the private and public context, made me understand that there are two main aspects to focus upon:

- The first is related to the necessity of creating a homogeneous vision of public relations as a profession in the euro-med region.
- The second is related to discuss on specific themes related to the application of public relations in the euro-med context, especially when dealing with cross-country projects.

Euro-Med Public Relations is the approach that I foresee and aim at in both the above aspects, therefore considering it at the study, research and professional level of application and further development in this area.

Till today only in few cases public relations has really been considered strategic and functional to the success of programmes and projects carried out in our vast region. International and multinationals companies are aware of the importance of public relations and consider its application important in all its professional aspects.

Unfortunately, when we refer to business development between Small and Medium companies, which should have a greater interest in assuring all their efforts in building strong and profitable relations with companies belonging to Euro-Med countries, the situation seems to change. Less thought to the importance of PR is given, as if it is an unnecessary investment for SME's. That is why it is even more important to make sure that this category understands the delicate and strategic function that PR covers in the overall organisation, especially when decides to compete and /or build relations with SME's belonging to other countries.

The same I would say for the local governments of many towns and provinces, which have a very important role to play in the relational scenario between their pairs of the Euro-Med area.

Thinking in Euro Mediterranean public relations terms means that this profession should be applied in the region using the application of both general principles and specific applications (which I also like defining as Euro-Med PR flavours).

PR general principles refer to the professional characteristics which make public relations applicable in any part of the global arena, whilst with specific applications we refer to those variables related to the context and to the territorial infrastructure which we need to pay attention to and understand in all its parts and relational consequences. A public relations territorial infrastructure is a frame-work formed by the following elements:

- The political system
- The economic system
- The legal system
- Civil society
- The socio-cultural system
- Media system

The two principles, generic and specific, always go together and must be analyzed, drawn up, planned and applied in order to respect any specific need or differences of a territory or country. It must be considered the way to seek the perfect equilibrium of a project in order to respect all stakeholders, relational balances and reach effective results for all the parts involved, directly and indirectly. I believe that this is a very

important and delicate aspect to consider in any Euro-Mediterranean program, may it be carried out by the corporate or institutional sector.

It becomes more and more important, therefore, to focus on strengthening public relations both from the professional and academic point of view, aware that this is a changing and dynamic area which needs the knowledge of professionals and the support of academic research and updated teaching.

Training practitioners adequately in order to face the new challenge in the best and most professionally competent way is becoming essential in the development of an homogeneous platform for Euro-med pr practitioners.

Euro-Mediterranean public relations can be seen as an effect of globalisation, interconnecting local and global communication and cross-cultural relations, and it could help focus on the possibility of developing a strong and complex PR area connecting the different skills and relational approaches and resources of each country for a common socio-economic growth purpose. Identifying and building, through the aid of planned research, a Euro-Mediterranean public relations profession approach also means sharing best practices among colleagues, involving teachers and professionals on common studies in order to learn from each other's experience. This will stimulate dialogue, awareness of each other's needs and obstacles, enhance understanding the professional differences dictated by cultural nuances, and so on. Every approach will be necessary and important to all in order to be able, at a certain point, to grasp the Euro-med arena and understand its relational consequences when supporting a decision making process which involves more countries and its many similar, but at the same time different, stakeholders.

I strongly believe that in the near future the Euro-Med region will need an organized professional public relations and communication system, not limited to the single countries belonging to the med area, as it is today, but thinking in network terms, effectively bridging companies, institutions, universities, practitioners, opinion leaders, through the exchange and development of integrated public relations throughout the area as well as in application to specific new approaches.

Euro-Med PR and local systems

One of these new approaches and stronger application of the public relations profession has been identified in "local systems" and their great value to economic development of the region if considered in terms of cooperation in a network frame. This theme has been discussed during the second edition of Medcom, Euro-Mediterranean Symposium on Public Relations, held in Catania last November, which helped to share knowledge and best practices regarding the application of public relations in the success and development process of certain local systems both on a local and regional level.

It emerged that in today's global scenario (dictated by an unrestrainable speed in which the economic and social world changes and evolves, influencing market decisions, choices and trends), economic competition doesn't exist only among companies, but also among local systems belonging to different areas.

By "local system" we intend the interconnection between institutional, corporate, social and cultural tissue of a defined place, and can become source of innovation, creation of value and development of the context in which it exists, playing an important role in the development of a country. The success of a local system depends on the way the three blocks (corporate, institutional and academic field) interact, are structured, managed and are functional to one another. They must be able to keep up with and manage change both regarding internal influences of the system, as well as external factors (such as market shifts), which can affect the development of the local system itself.

This means that local systems compete, and will always compete, with one another in the capacity to attract intelligence, tourism, economic exchanges, jobs and work force. Which also means that the competitive scenario is, therefore, shifting from the single companies to local systems of an area, because it is the relevance of the local system in which every single company operates that is growing in importance and measures the strength of a specific area.

What has emerged during MedCom 2010, though, is a new possible approach for local systems. It has been underlined the importance to develop cooperation schemes and stimulate shared opportunities among Euro-Med Local Systems, in order to exchange and share best practices and know how in the socio-economical and cultural scenario of this area.

The competitive aspect existing among systems obviously remains, but the possibility of creating a strong cooperation among a certain number of interested local systems, will generate in time other forms of agreements enabling the area to reinforce its overall competitive capacity.

Therefore, cooperation among local systems of the area will help to reinforce economic and trade development in the region, enabling to achieve the necessary competitive advantage which, as consequence, will help the Euro-Med region to gain a stronger role in the global scenario.

Local systems are, therefore, a mean and tool by which a territory plans its economic, social and cultural growth and progress. And it does so communicating through the resources and decision making processes of the local system itself, both inwards and outwards.

This is the specific aspect of interest of public relations professionals.

The role of public relations for local systems

A local system is also a complex system of relations, which need to be organized and managed. It must be clear that the process of local development must also take care of the collective growth and responsibility process, from the three main stakeholders of the local system (corporate, institutional and academic field) and from the different stakeholders who inevitably influence and are influenced by the development of the local system itself. This helps to understand the importance of the relational resource existing in every system and consequently in every local system. Relational resources which are part of a very complicated and flexible pattern.

Looking at the idea of cooperation among euro-med local systems, we can imagine that each local system is a relational connecting point belonging to a much more complex relational network.

Public relations professionals represent one of the most important figures who, or can, operate in the management and government of strategic and integrated relations in structured local systems.

As mentioned before, public relations practice for a local system must consider two aspects of professional application, always connected. The first one refers to the common organizational platform in all kinds of systems, which follows the application of generic principles for PR in local systems. The second aspect takes into consideration the characteristics of the specific type of local system and its territorial distinctiveness and specificities, as well as of the context and the objectives set for the system to survive and develop. In this second aspect, public relations can identify specific applications for each local system.

There are different models of local systems, each depending on the country it belongs to, on the balance between its three main actors, on the typicality of the territory (industrial, cultural, tourism, nature, technology, a mix of elements, etc.), but in each case it is not possible to obtain a model of success without taking into consideration public relations strategies. It is not possible to do without functions such as institutional relations, research and study of publics and stakeholders, financial and industrial relations, branding, and many other aspects of pr, in order to reach the goals defined by the local system.

Looking at the great picture, the euro-med one, it has been suggested to identify a Local System Communication Model able to give the structure in governing relations of a local system and at the same time among different local systems. A complex task which will help to open an interesting debate among colleagues of different countries,

each indicating their perspective of application both on the general principles and specific application point of view. A grid that explains how to build cooperation among local systems and how public relations is necessary from the starting point, both on a local side and on the larger picture. The director general of CENSIS (Italy) suggested to verify if the Italian model of local system's of success can be taken as the basic model for the euro-med one. Of course, after verifying other success examples belonging to the area which can also be very useful to analyze, absorbing the points of strength necessary to the final version.

Conclusions

Public relations and its practitioners can help to direct a new relationship among local systems, from a competing to a cooperation approach among and between local systems, identifying shared opportunities in order to stimulate exchange actions, sharing know-how and projects of common interest. This can be an opportunity to help Euro-Med countries to develop economic growth by using a strong and synergic network among the main local systems of the area. A way of building a wider area of common interest and socio-economical growth.

I believe that the application of public relations in and for local systems must be considered as a great opportunity for further development and strengthening of the pr profession and for many practitioners. The complexity of the task will enhance the value of the profession itself and of the results obtained.

As professor Emanuele Invernizzi of IULM university stated, public relations is changing towards an entrepreneurial aspect of governing relations. Not only management, therefore, of relations, but much more. This professional development must seek the interest of universities and professors who have the chance and opportunity to study and research this new field of application, helping the profession to find weak links and points of strength to tackle and work on.

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