

The Development of Vietnam’s Public Relations Industry

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Purpose – Being a relatively new industry in Vietnam, records on the emergence of public relations practices in Vietnam are limited. The current study will focus on key milestones in the evolution of the public relations industry in Vietnam, major cultural and economic factors that shape current practices, and the ways in which these factors will influence the industry’s future growth. **Design/ methodology/ approach** – This paper adopted library research and expert interview as its methodologies. **Findings** – Public relations in Vietnam is diverse and influenced by both Western practices and the local culture. As more companies are considering the use of public relations, and more students and journalists seek to join the field, the industry is emerging rapidly, promising changes and development in the field. However, public relations practice in Vietnam is still marketing-oriented, one-way, and may not be effective in reputation management. Public relations firms in Vietnam need a common standard that is based on the standards of global and local public relations. **Practical implications** – The research adds to the limited scholarly research on the development of the public relations industry in Vietnam by providing useful information about the industry’s background, growth, and the future directions.

Keywords: PR industry, public relations, public relations practice, Vietnam

Introduction

The public relations (PR) industry has been established for a long time, but in Vietnam, it is still a relatively new industry. It is because of the development of the economy and society, in which the role of the market economy must be taken into account. It is the market economy that has created fierce competition in the economic field, promoting competition in other areas of social life, which becomes the basis for the formation and development of the public relations industry (Tran, 2014).

Today, public relations is one of the most interested professions in Vietnam. According to the popular recruitment site Careerlink, while other industries post jobs with an average salary, they can find suitable candidates within a few days, public relations job postings with a double salary usually find it difficult to recruit for months (Glints, 2022). The high demand from businesses leads to a surge in applications to the public relations undergraduate programs, with more than 100,000 students (about the seating capacity of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum) applying and more than 6,500 admitted in 2021 (Glints, 2022).

Despite being a fast-growing and increasingly influencing industry to the economy and society in Vietnam, academic research or media articles on the formation and development of the industry are relatively limited. When the author learned

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about studies on this topic on Google Scholars, most of the late research on this industry is oriented towards domestic and foreign applications or case studies, while the studies on the industry development, practices, and trends are few, mostly published before 2015. Therefore, the author aims to provide academia and public relations practitioners with a more thorough understanding of the public relations industry in Vietnam. Specifically, the study looks at the milestones in the development of the public relations industry, cultural and economic factors driving current practice, and future directions of the industry. In addressing these objectives, this study tries to fill the gaps in academic research and render practical insight into the evolving field of public relations in Vietnam.

Methodology

This research employs library research and expert interview as its methodology. Library research (also known as secondary data analysis) involves gathering factual information or expert opinion relevant to a research question from reliable sources in order to conduct further research (George, 2008). Both academic literature and media articles were reviewed to identify the development and practices of the public relations industry. A mix of academic and non-scholarly sources provides a variety of perspectives from both researchers and experts.

The research also includes a series of semi-structured expert interviews to better understand how the industry is doing and where it is going. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility in exploring complex topics while maintaining a focus on predefined themes. The interview questions were developed based on a review of the relevant literature and aimed to address the study's research questions. Meuser and Nagel (2009) described expert interviews as qualitative interviews based on thematic guidelines. These guidelines focus on professional knowledge, generally characterized as specific knowledge in specific areas. Unlike the general interview participants, the interviewed experts have deep knowledge of the research subjects. The purpose of expert interviews is to obtain additional unknown or authoritative information, authoritative opinions, and a serious and professional assessment of the research topic (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015). This type of survey is intended to obtain reliable data due to the high competence of the respondents (Dorussen et al., 2005).

The selection criteria for the interview experts are as follows. There is no preference over sex.

- The participant has practiced public relations in an agency or an in-house department within an organization in Vietnam.
- The participant is a senior public relations practitioner, with the job title of supervisor, manager, or director.
- The participant has had at least five years of experience in public relations practice.

The expert interviews were conducted with twelve participants: six were male and six were female; seven worked in agencies while five worked in-house; and the

participants had varying ranges of experience. Eight participants had five to eight years, and four had nine or more years. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key milestones in the development of the public relations industry in Vietnam?

RQ2: How have cultural and economic factors shaped current public relations practices in Vietnam?

RQ3: What are the challenges and opportunities for the future growth of the public relations industry in Vietnam?

Literature Review

An Overview of Vietnam's Public Relations Industry

Earlier research by Mak (2009) noted the weaknesses of the public relations industry in the country. According to her, public relations in Vietnam is a relatively new practice and is mostly unexplored by both academic scholars and industry practitioners. The main reason for its late interest is that the business environment only recently perceived a need for public relations. In the late 1990s, economic growth was boosted by the government's Renovation ("Doi Moi" in Vietnamese) policy through which more than 30,000 businesses were created, including both private and foreign-owned organizations (James & Merchant, 2013). Later, in 2007, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and revised most of its trade and investment laws, widely opening its doors to welcome foreign investors Vietnam financial and trade policy handbook (*Vietnam Financial and Trade Policy Handbook*, 2007). Since then, the country has seen brisk economic development and increasing international business opportunities (Mak, 2009), and public relations has risen as an asset to keep organizations on a competitive edge.

Before the 2010s, public relations largely remained a new concept. At that time, major companies started to realize that they needed to establish better relationships with customers through the media or events. Since then, the demand for public relations professionals has increased, resulting in the rise of many public relations agencies and internal public relations departments on both national and international levels (Hang, 2010; Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2018; Glints, 2022).

Tables 1 and 2 were adapted from Barnes Reports (2022), which showed that public relations agencies in Vietnam witnessed a rising trend in sales in the recent two consecutive years. There is an upward growth in the sector, except for the decrease in sales between 2019 and 2020, which could be due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. However, the industry quickly regained its momentum in the year after. This data prove that public relations is growing in demand in Vietnam.

Table 1. Industry Establishments, Sales, and Employment Trends

	Year					Percent change year-to-year			
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22
Establishments	8,091	8,221	8,000	8,111	8,179	1.6%	-2.7%	1.4%	0.8%
Sales (\$ millions)	206	219	214	231	247	5.9%	-2.1%	7.8%	6.9%
Employment	26,868	27,301	25,567	26,936	26,974	1.6%	-2.7%	1.4%	0.1%
Sales (Dongs billions)	4,769	5,051	4,945	5,330	5,700	5.9%	-2.1%	7.8%	6.9%

Table 2. Industry Ratios

(Industry averages)	Year					Percent change year-to-year			
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22
Sales (\$M) per establishment	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	4.2%	0.6%	6.3%	6.1%
Sales (\$) per employment	7,680	8,006	8,054	8,563	9,144	4.2%	0.6%	6.3%	6.8%
Dongs (B) per establishment	0.59	0.61	0.62	0.66	0.70	4.2%	0.6%	6.3%	6.1%
Dongs per employment	177,502	185,016	186,135	197,893	211,332	4.2%	0.6%	6.3%	6.8%

Diverse Backgrounds and Practices

Public relations in Vietnam is diverse and influenced by Western practices and the local culture (Van, 2013; Domm, 2015; Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2018; Ly-Le, 2020). According to Ly-Le (2020), Vietnamese public relations practitioners have three main educational backgrounds: domestic programs, overseas programs, and local journalism programs. These programs helped develop the public relations guidelines and approaches used in most Vietnamese practices. In Vietnam, there were not many universities that offer public relations programs. The growing need for public relations professionals has recently caught the attention of local colleges, which have started offering public relations courses, but the options are still limited. Furthermore, public relations coursework in Vietnam focuses more on theory, while paying less attention to case studies and real-world projects. As a result of these limited in-country study options, as Van (2013) assessed, about half of Vietnamese public relations professionals have studied abroad and are influenced by Western practices. The other half of public relations practitioners are from a journalism background. Since the local public relations practices engage in a high level of media relations and copywriting, journalism-trained practitioners can leverage their strengths without any formal public relations background. This diverse background explains the many ways public relations work is done in Vietnam.

Public relations in Vietnam usually focuses on marketing purposes (Van, 2013), media relations and short-term public relations campaigns (Hang, 2010; Doan & Bilowol, 2014), even though the Vietnamese public relations industry now sees an opportunity to evolve with growing demand for reputation management support. It is only when a crisis occurs that public relations practitioners pay more attention to reputation management (Van, 2013; 2014).

A previous study on Vietnamese public relations by Van (2014) provides background information for understanding the importance of this current study. Van evaluated the practice of public relations in Vietnam according to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) theory of public relations to establish whether and how the theory, which was developed in the West, was applicable in Vietnam. Van (2014) posited that the

theory might not hold in Vietnam because the culture conducts private and business relationships quite differently from the West. In Vietnam, relationships carry a much greater influence (Tran, 2004).

According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), public relations may be practiced in four different ways, which are: (1) press agency or publicity, (2) public information, (3) two-way asymmetrical, and (4) two-way symmetrical. Under the first model, practitioners aim to persuade or manipulate their stakeholders according to the desires of the organization. Practitioners aim to emphasize an organization's positive features and minimize any that are negative even to the point of misleading stakeholders. Under the second model, practitioners also disseminate positive information, but the information tends to be truthful and factual. Under this model, organizations are neither aiming to manipulate nor to be untruthful. Under the third model, which is two-way asymmetrical, practitioners conduct research on stakeholder attitudes to determine how best to communicate with them. The practitioners do not try to change how their organization is acting. Finally, under the fourth model, which is two-way symmetrical, practitioners research and communicate with stakeholders to better understand them, solve their problems, and build trust. When an organization follows this model, it learns from its stakeholders and changes its behavior instead of trying to manipulate and control them (Grunig, 2006). However, critics of this fourth model say that it represents the ideal for public relations but that public relations cannot always be practiced this way because stakeholders often present too many viewpoints (Wakefield, 2008). To move toward the ideal of two-way symmetrical, or the more realistic mixed-motive model which joins two-way asymmetrical with two-way symmetrical, Grunig and Hunt (1984) said that an organization moves from the first model of "complete truth not essential" to the second model of "truth important," to the third model of "scientific persuasion" (p. 22). Under the mixed-motive model, practitioners try to help their organizations achieve their goals while also looking after stakeholders.

Through interviews with 29 public relations practitioners working in-house and in agencies, Van (2014) found that Vietnamese public relations practitioners follow Grunig and Hunt's (1984) first and second models which involve one-way communication, but do not follow the other two models which involve research on and communication with stakeholders. Public relations in Vietnam, therefore, tends to be one way and organizations do not communicate interactively with stakeholders.

Lack of Standardizations and Regulations

An important aspect of public relations in Vietnam is its lack of focus on stakeholder and reputation management. Public relations in Vietnam is usually confused with marketing or advertising, and its role in the entire crisis management process including reputation management and crisis response receives little attention (Hang, 2010; Van, 2013). Many organizations do not have a separate department for public relations or communications, and public relations activities are usually covered by the marketing department (Van, 2013).

Even though reputation is one of the main concerns for individuals and businesses alike, Mak (2009) found that polishing a corporate reputation is done not

only to meet the expectations of Vietnamese stakeholders but also to fulfill a strong desire from the management for appreciation, approval and respect. Further, unlike in Western culture, Vietnamese people and organizations believe it is impossible or nearly impossible to repair reputation once it is tarnished (Higuchi, 1997). Therefore, in this country, a positive reputation is regarded as a quality of utmost importance, one that every person and organization must have.

According to Vietnam Report (2015), an annual report on the reputation ranking of Vietnamese businesses, organizations now pay more attention to their reputation than ever. In general, they commit more time and effort to reputation management in front of the media and public stakeholders, and carefully plan for any potential reputational risks. However, reputation and business ethics are somewhat tricky in Vietnam. Do et al. (2007) conducted a series of case studies on multiple state-owned, foreign-owned, and joint venture organizations in which they observed unique and conflicting characteristics of business ethics in Vietnam. These scholars found that while reputation and ethics are keys to success for business, bribery is widely associated with doing business. Media have produced reports on the topic, and the public has criticized the practice, but the situation has not changed for many years (Do et al., 2007). Therefore, it is challenging for public relations practitioners to find a balance between maintaining good practice and upholding corporate reputation.

As stated, even though reputation is a main concern of Vietnamese businesses, it is not a main concern in Vietnamese public relations practice. To explore the perceptions of public relations in Vietnam, Doan and Bilowol (2014) conducted 12 interviews with senior public relations practitioners based in Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi, the two commercial hubs of the country. The study found that public relations in Vietnam predominantly centers on media relations and product public relations, that public relations campaigns are restricted to short-term efforts instead of building long-term relationships, and that public relations practitioners have mixed views about ethics in which some uphold ethical practice while others are more goal-oriented without much ethical concern. Van's (2013) research yielded similar results. She found that public relations practice in Vietnam focuses primarily on marketing, with half of her respondents considering public relations as equivalent to promoting products.

On the other hand, the practice of public relations in Vietnam still lacks regulation, although it has been more than 30 years since the Renovation economic reforms, which marks the beginning of public relations in Vietnam (Mak, 2009). Van's (2013) research found that Vietnamese public relations practice is under-developed. As media tips and gifts are always expected to conduct relationships, and information about a government-owned business is turned away, creativity may be limited, and the public relations industry may be misunderstood as corrupt and unreliable.

Nguyen Quoc Bao, CEO of Awareness I.D., a prominent Vietnamese member of the ASEAN Public Relations Network, mentioned during a 2014 interview that the Vietnamese public relations industry lacks regulation; thus, every agency enacts its own public relations definition (Linh Lan, 2014). According to Nguyen, public relations firms in Vietnam need to codify a common standard that is based on the standards of global and local public relations. They also need to set specific regulations

for the industry and boost local public relations practice to the next professional level (Linh Lan, 2014).

As there is no recent academic study on the standards, regulations, and upcoming trends of public relations in Vietnam, this research would check in with the field experts to understand the current practice and predicted future of the industry.

Expert's Insights: How the Industry is Doing and Moving Forward

Dialogue with Stakeholders is Still Not Preferred

In the interview, the participants were asked if their organizations think it is important to engage in dialogue with stakeholders, especially during sensitive times like crises. Five participants mentioned that while dialogues are important, their organizations want to limit engaging in dialogues, and even do not want to dialogue at all during crises, either offline or on social media.

“Having dialogues is a chance for the media to pick up the story and they can spin the story in an unwanted way for us. Thus, we choose not to engage in any dialogues.”

– Participant T, an agency practitioner with eight years of experience.

“Having dialogues with stakeholders in crisis is theoretically important, but in fact, no one actually listens to the dialogue... For example, when a customer buys a dairy product and the product is damaged, instead of going directly to report to us, they refuse to do that. In addition, they demand a higher price. And this is a very common problem because they are using personal information to put pressure on the business. They do not want to go back to a conventional dialogue, but want to escalate the issue to another level. People usually want to have higher benefits than what they have suffered.”

– Participant V, an in-house practitioner with eight years of experience.

On the other hand, seven other participants said that their organizations might engage in a dialogue with stakeholders, but the conversation should be offline, not on social media.

“Dialoging is extremely important. However, engaging with the stakeholders on social media will expose ourselves, both strengths and flaws, to the public. The information is not kept among the involved parties anymore. The government may interfere. The [traditional] media can jump to find new angles of the story and report it in an unwanted way. Therefore, if a piece of information is intended for the public, we can put it on social media. If not, we prefer to take the conversation offline.”

– Participant U, an agency practitioner with 20 years of experience.

To conclude, from the interview results, while some Vietnamese organizations can engage in a dialogue with stakeholders, most of them do not want to do it on social media.

Public Relations in Vietnam is Mostly Promotion, but is Gradually Changing

The researcher aimed to explore whether public relations in Vietnam is still aligned with promotional and marketing goals, instead of reputation and reputation management. All participants who were asked (if they agree with this alignment) said yes.

“Public relations in Vietnam targets mainly consumers. [Organizations] always ask if a piece of news or article is good for branding and promotion, if it displays the product brand clearly enough, and if it could increase brand awareness or sales. Nowadays, readers are smarter and often ignore articles that are too promotional. These articles are not trusted anymore.”

– Participant Q, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.

The findings are also in agreement with Van's (2014) assessment that Vietnamese public relations place a strong emphasis on media relations and short-term promotional campaigns. The strong focus on marketing objectives often crowds out long-term reputation management strategies, which Grunig (2006) argued are crucial to the practice of effective public relations.

All these participants also added that this promotional objective of public relations also promotes the “paid” nature of public relations and media in Vietnam. As a result, communication effort is easier, and somewhat less trustworthy to stakeholders.

“In other countries, there is no public relations concept to pay money [in exchange for positive coverage]. For example, our partner in Taiwan was surprised and did not understand why we gave information to the newspapers in Vietnam but still had to pay... In other countries, the issues that are supported by the press are usually free of charge, while in Vietnam, everything is paid for. However, the good side is that everything monetized is actually easy to manage. For example, when crises occur, [organizations] can impact [the press] to deliver more positive news. However, stakeholders have understood this practice and placed less trust in news that supports organizations [during crises].”

– Participant S, an in-house practitioner with ten years of experience.

The practice of monetized media relationships reinforces the concerns of Doan and Bilowol (2014) regarding ethical challenges in Vietnamese public relations since such practice of paying for coverage could undermine stakeholder trust in such coverage. Three participants revealed that there was some progress, with some organizations gradually learning to appreciate reputation management alongside promotional goals.

Among them, three participants expressed that public relations in Vietnam is changing for the better. Organizations now pay more attention to reputation management and crisis communication.

“[Organizations always] try to justify and promote themselves, but the most important thing is to maintain their reputation. Organizations now understand the importance of [reputation management and public relations]. They've learned that when handling a crisis, reputation matters as much as a product. They've trained the spokesperson to

...speak in the position of the company, to protect the reputation, not using a brand manager to speak for the product [anymore].”

– Participant R, an agency practitioner with ten years of experience.

In general, from interview results, Vietnamese public relations practitioners believed that the current practice is mostly promotion, but it is gradually improving.

Overcoming Challenges and Setting New Standards

All participants agreed that there is a serious lack of quality public relations practitioners in Vietnam, as domestic public relations educational programs lack training in practical applications of public relations knowledge.

“Currently, there are only eight universities/institutions that offer public relations programs to their students. There is also a lack of a common code of conduct in the local community to address service standards and ethical issues. To overcome these weaknesses, some organizations send staff abroad to improve public relations knowledge, which also helps bring Western practices to local public relations firms.” – Participant A, an agency practitioner with ten years of experience.

Despite the challenges, public relations practitioners in Vietnam are coming together to set new standards and leverage local practices. Local boutique agencies are joining the international public relations associations to adopt international standards.

“In recent years, Vietnam Public Relations Network was established to gather talented public relations professionals to discuss best practices and share knowledge. The prestigious Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) also launched its Vietnam chapter in 2021. There are also national awards hosted to celebrate outstanding performances in the public relations industry, such as the National PR & Communications Awards 2020 hosted by PR Newswire, or the Vietnam Public Relations and Communications Excellence Awards 2021 hosted by Vietnam Public Relations Network. These events show that the local public relations community is becoming more structured.”

– Participant H, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.

Local universities are upgrading their curriculum to offer a well-rounded education program and equip future public relations practitioners with the required skill sets and knowledge.

“Changes are being made from the very basic foundation – education. With such effort, it is expected to innovate Vietnam’s public relations industry in the upcoming five or ten years.”

– Participant A, an agency practitioner with ten years of experience.

Discussion

As found through all the interviews, most organizations still do not want to engage in dialogues with their stakeholders, which aligned with Van's (2013) findings. This result indicates that these organizations are still acting within the model of public relations that Grunig and Hunt (1984) described as press agency or publicity. To review, Grunig and Hunt described four models of public relations practice, which are (1) press agency or publicity, (2) public information, (3) two-way asymmetrical, and (4) two-way symmetrical. Under the first model, practitioners aim to persuade or manipulate their stakeholders according to the desires of the organization. Practitioners aim to emphasize an organization's positive features and minimize any that are negative.

As found in this current study, the statements of many interview participants indicated that organizations commonly use social media channels following the model of press agency, which is also how they use traditional media. Besides the preference for one-way communication, according to the reviewed literature (e.g., Van, 2013), organizations also pay for positive coverage of themselves in traditional media. In a Vietnamese context, these payments may be thought of as gifts that practitioners and organizations give to cultivate positive interpersonal relationships with journalists who work for top-tier publications. These gifts guarantee journalists' attendance at organizations' press conferences and the publishing of organizations' stories in traditional media that many stakeholders find credible. Therefore, the public relations model followed by most Vietnamese organizations and the media does not follow the same expectations of open and truthful reporting found in the West.

Several reasons explain why many Vietnamese organizations follow the press agency model in which they work to control what the media says about them. The need for control follows Vietnamese organizational norms of avoiding uncertainty or taking no risks and playing it safe. Although Vietnam as a country has a relatively low score on the Hofstede cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance (30 out of 100) (*Country Comparison – Hofstede Insights*, n.d.), the goal of avoiding uncertainty or removing risk from any crisis communication was noticed throughout the interviews. The practice of public relations as press agency in Vietnam is also reflected in the country's high power-distance score (70 out of 100) (*Country Comparison – Hofstede Insights*, n.d.). Organizations would perceive themselves as having a higher position in society than their customers and would therefore not think that they need to respond to them.

Conclusion

To conclude, public relations in Vietnam is diverse and influenced by both Western practices and the local culture. As more companies are considering the use of public relations, and more students and journalists seek to join the field, the industry is emerging rapidly, promising changes and development in the field. However, public relations practice in Vietnam is still marketing-oriented, one-way, and may not be effective in reputation management. Public relations firms in Vietnam

need to codify a common standard that is based on the standards of global and local public relations. They also need to set specific regulations for the industry and boost local public relations practice to the next professional level. If marketing is a sprint, then public relations is a marathon. The public relations industry in Vietnam has made noticeable progress, but there is still a long way to go.

This research contributes to the field by filling an important gap in understanding the historical evolution and contemporary practice of public relations in Vietnam. It provides a foundation for future academic study and practical application within the emerging market.

However, the limitation of the study includes the sample size for expert interviews. Though well-balanced, it is relatively small and may not be representative of all the diverse views in the public relations industry. Qualitative methods could also be complemented with quantitative approaches to allow for the validation of findings and the expansion of the scope of analysis.

Future research could explore the industry behavior in the Vietnamese context concerning ethics and global standards. These could provide wider contexts within which to locate an understanding of public relations in Vietnam and its regional relevance.

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