

The Development of Vietnam's Public Relations Industry

Purpose – Being a relatively new industry in Vietnam, records on the emergence of public relations practices in Vietnam are limited. Thus, there is a need to shed some light on the development of the public relations industry in Vietnam since its early days. This study aims to explore the evolution of the public relations industry and the factors that influence current practices. 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 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

1 the public relations industry in Vietnam. This study investigates the background,
2 development, and future directions of the public relations industry in Vietnam, and
3 from there on, promotes a better understanding of the industry in academia and
4 guides future research in this emerging market.

5 6 7 **Methodology**

8
9 This research employs library research and expert interview as its
10 methodology. Library research (also known as secondary data analysis) involves
11 gathering factual information or expert opinion relevant to a research question
12 from reliable sources in order to conduct further research (George, 2008). Both
13 academic literature and media articles were reviewed to identify the development
14 and practices of the public relations industry. A mix of academic and non-
15 scholarly sources provides a variety of perspectives from both researchers and
16 experts.

17 The research also includes a series of expert interviews to better understand
18 how the industry is doing and where it is going. The expert interview is a well-
19 discussed qualitative method in political and social research since the early 1990s.
20 Meuser and Nagel (2009) described expert interviews as qualitative interviews
21 based on thematic guidelines. These guidelines focus on professional knowledge,
22 generally characterized as specific knowledge in specific areas. Unlike the general
23 interview participants, the interviewed experts have deep knowledge of the
24 research subjects. The purpose of expert interviews is to obtain additional
25 unknown or authoritative information, authoritative opinions, and a serious and
26 professional assessment of the research topic (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015). This
27 type of survey is intended to obtain reliable data due to the high competence of the
28 respondents (Dorussen et al., 2005).

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

- 31
- 32 • The participant has practiced public relations in an agency or an in-house
33 department within an organization in Vietnam;
 - 34 • The participant is a senior public relations practitioner, with the job title of
35 supervisor, manager, or director;
 - 36 • The participant has had at least five years of experience in public relations
37 practice.
- 38

39 The expert interviews were conducted with twelve participants: six were male
40 and six were female; seven worked in agencies while five worked in-house; and
41 the participants had varying ranges of experience. Eight participants had five to
42 eight years, and four had nine or more years.

43

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," 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%

1 **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%

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3

3 *Diverse Backgrounds and Practices*

4

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

24 Public relations in Vietnam usually focuses on marketing purposes (Van,
25 2013), media relations and short-term public relations campaigns (Hang, 2010;
26 Doan & Bilowol, 2014), even though the Vietnamese public relations industry
27 now sees an opportunity to evolve with growing demand for reputation
28 management support. It is only when a crisis occurs that public relations
29 practitioners pay more attention to reputation management (Van, 2013; 2014).

30 A previous study on Vietnamese public relations by Van (2014) provides
31 background information for understanding the importance of this current study.
32 Van evaluated the practice of public relations in Vietnam according to Grunig and
33 Hunt's (1984) theory of public relations to establish whether and how the theory,
34 which was developed in the West, was applicable in Vietnam. Van (2014) posited
35 that the theory might not hold in Vietnam because the culture conducts private and
36 business relationships quite differently from the West. In Vietnam, relationships
37 carry a much greater influence (Tran, 2004).

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

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

34 35 *Lack of Standardizations and Regulations*

36
37 An important aspect of public relations in Vietnam is its lack of focus on
38 stakeholder and reputation management. Public relations in Vietnam is usually
39 confused with marketing or advertising, and its role in the entire crisis
40 management process including reputation management and crisis response
41 receives little attention (Hang, 2010; Van, 2013). Many organizations do not have
42 a separate department for public relations or communications, and public relations
43 activities are usually covered by the marketing department (Van, 2013).

44 Even though reputation is one of the main concerns for individuals and
45 businesses alike, Mak (2009) found that polishing a corporate reputation is done
46 not only to meet the expectations of Vietnamese stakeholders but also to fulfill a

1 strong desire from the management for appreciation, approval and respect. Further,
2 unlike in Western culture, Vietnamese people and organizations believe it is
3 impossible or nearly impossible to repair reputation once it is tarnished (Higuchi,
4 1997). Therefore, in this country, a positive reputation is regarded as a quality of
5 utmost importance, one that every person and organization must have.

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

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

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

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

1 also need to set specific regulations for the industry and boost local public
2 relations practice to the next professional level (Linh Lan, 2014).

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

9 **Expert’s Insights: How the Industry is Doing and Moving Forward**

11 *Dialogue with Stakeholders is still not preferred*

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

18 “Having dialogues is a chance for the media to pick up the story and they can
19 spin the story in an unwanted way for us. Thus, we choose not to engage in any
20 dialogues.” – Participant T, an agency practitioner with eight years of experience.

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

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

33 “Dialoging is extremely important. However, engaging with the stakeholders
34 on social media will expose ourselves, both strengths and flaws, to the public. The
35 information is not kept among the involved parties anymore. The government may
36 interfere. The [traditional] media can jump to find new angles of the story and
37 report it in an unwanted way. Therefore, if a piece of information is intended for
38 the public, we can put it on social media. If not, we prefer to take the conversation
39 offline.” – Participant U, an agency practitioner with 20 years of experience.

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

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

2
3 The researcher aimed to explore whether public relations in Vietnam is still
4 aligned with promotional and marketing goals, instead of reputation and reputation
5 management. All participants who were asked (if they agree with this alignment)
6 said yes.

7 “PR in Vietnam targets mainly consumers. [Organizations] always ask if a
8 piece of news or article is good for branding and promotion, if it displays the
9 product brand clearly enough, and if it could increase brand awareness or sales.
10 Nowadays, readers are smarter and often ignore articles that are too promotional.
11 These articles are not trusted anymore.” – Participant Q, an agency practitioner
12 with five years of experience.

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

17 “In other countries, there is no PR concept to pay money [in exchange for
18 positive coverage]. For example, our partner in Taiwan was surprised and did not
19 understand why we gave information to the newspapers in Vietnam but still had to
20 pay... In other countries, the issues that are supported by the press are usually free
21 of charge, while in Vietnam, everything is paid for. However, the good side is that
22 everything monetized is actually easy to manage. For example, when crises occur,
23 [organizations] can impact [the press] to deliver more positive news. However,
24 stakeholders have understood this practice and placed less trust in news that
25 supports organizations [during crises].” – Participant S, an in-house practitioner
26 with ten years of experience.

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

30 “[Organizations always] try to justify and promote themselves, but the most
31 important thing is to maintain their reputation. Organizations now understand the
32 importance of [reputation management and public relations]. They’ve learned that
33 when handling a crisis, reputation matters as much as a product. They’ve trained
34 the spokesperson to speak in the position of the company, to protect the reputation,
35 not using a brand manager to speak for the product [anymore].” – Participant R, an
36 agency practitioner with ten years of experience.

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

40
41 *Overcoming Challenges and Setting New Standards*

42
43 All participants agreed that there is a serious lack of quality public relations
44 practitioners in Vietnam, as domestic public relations educational programs lack
45 training in practical applications of public relations knowledge.

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

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

11 “In recent years, Vietnam Public Relations Network was established to gather
12 talented PR professionals to discuss best practices and share knowledge. The
13 prestigious Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) also
14 launched its Vietnam chapter in 2021. There are also national awards hosted to
15 celebrate outstanding performances in the PR industry, such as the National PR &
16 Communications Awards 2020 hosted by PR Newswire, or the Vietnam Public
17 Relations and Communications Excellence Awards 2021 hosted by Vietnam
18 Public Relations Network. These events show that the local public relations
19 community is becoming more structured.” – Participant H, an agency practitioner
20 with five years of experience.

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

24 “Changes are being made from the very basic foundation – education. With
25 such effort, it is expected to innovate Vietnam’s public relations industry in the
26 upcoming five or ten years.” – Participant A, an agency practitioner with ten years
27 of experience.

30 Discussion

31
32 As found through all the interviews, most organizations still do not want to
33 engage in dialogues with their stakeholders, which aligned with Van’s (2013)
34 findings. This result indicates that these organizations are still acting within the
35 model of public relations that Grunig and Hunt (1984) described as press agency
36 or publicity. To review, Grunig and Hunt described four models of public relations
37 practice, which are (1) press agency or publicity, (2) public information, (3) two-
38 way asymmetrical, and (4) two-way symmetrical. Under the first model,
39 practitioners aim to persuade or manipulate their stakeholders according to the
40 desires of the organization. Practitioners aim to emphasize an organization’s
41 positive features and minimize any that are negative.

42 As found in this current study, the statements of many interview participants
43 indicated that organizations commonly use social media channels following the
44 model of press agency, which is also how they use traditional media. Besides the
45 preference for one-way communication, according to the reviewed literature (e.g.,
46 Van, 2013), organizations also pay for positive coverage of themselves in

1 traditional media. In a Vietnamese context, these payments may be thought of as
 2 gifts that practitioners and organizations give to cultivate positive interpersonal
 3 relationships with journalists who work for top-tier publications. These gifts
 4 guarantee journalists' attendance at organizations' press conferences and the
 5 publishing of organizations' stories in traditional media that many stakeholders
 6 find credible. Therefore, the public relations model followed by most Vietnamese
 7 organizations and the media does not follow the same expectations of open and
 8 truthful reporting found in the West.

9 Several reasons explain why many Vietnamese organizations follow the press
 10 agency model in which they work to control what the media says about them. The
 11 need for control follows Vietnamese organizational norms of avoiding uncertainty
 12 or taking no risks and playing it safe. Although Vietnam as a country has a
 13 relatively low score on the Hofstede cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance
 14 (30 out of 100) ("Country comparison," n.d.), the goal of avoiding uncertainty or
 15 removing risk from any crisis communication was noticed throughout the
 16 interviews. The practice of public relations as press agency in Vietnam is also
 17 reflected in the country's high power-distance score (70 out of 100) ("Country
 18 comparison," n.d.). Organizations would perceive themselves as having a higher
 19 position in society than their customers and would therefore not think that they
 20 need to respond to them.

23 Conclusion

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 25 To conclude, public relations in Vietnam is diverse and influenced by both
 26 Western practices and the local culture. As more companies are considering the
 27 use of public relations, and more students and journalists seek to join the field, the
 28 industry is emerging rapidly, promising changes and development in the field.
 29 However, public relations practice in Vietnam is still marketing-oriented, one-way,
 30 and may not be effective in reputation management. Public relations firms in
 31 Vietnam need to codify a common standard that is based on the standards of
 32 global and local public relations. They also need to set specific regulations for the
 33 industry and boost local public relations practice to the next professional level. If
 34 marketing is a sprint, then PR is a marathon. The public relations industry in
 35 Vietnam has made noticeable progress, but there is still a long way to go.

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