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Title: Profiles in PR: “Kizuna” perspectives: Takashi Inoue’s 35 years of PR innovation in Japan

Public Relations Tactics

John Elsasser, 8/2009

Profiles in PR: Leading the profession

Summary: Takashi Inoue, Ph.D., has achieved international recognition as a spokesperson for Japan over the course of his 35-year PR career. As the first recipient of a doctorate in public relations in Japan and founder of the Japan Public Relations Institute (JPRI), he has led the development of the PR profession in his country. He has written several PR books, including the recently released “What is Accountability.” Here, Inoue, president and CEO of Inoue Public Relations, Inc., speaks with Tactics about the importance of cultural context in public relations, his innovative “Self-Correction Model” and the need to expand PR education in Japan.

Full Text: Tactics: How did you get your start, and why did you decide to go into the PR profession?

Inoue: Growing up in Tokyo, I had a few major influences on my career choice. One was a relative who was a leading strategist in the Japanese Navy. Learning about his life and line of work fascinated me. Another was the founder of Dentsu PR, who was actually my neighbor in Tokyo. He often tried to explain to me about PR. In those days, we didn’t use the phrase “public relations” in Japan. It was always “PR.”

After graduating from college, I entered Yamaha Corporation. However, I soon discovered being a cog in the corporate wheel wasn’t for me. After working there for a little more than three months, I left and started in the PR business. Interestingly, Yamaha was my first client. Soon after, on July 4, 1970, I incorporated Inoue Public Relations and we have been in business ever since.

Tactics: What was the PR agency landscape like at that time? Aside from the multinational firms, were there many other Japanese-based PR firms?

Inoue: The first Japanese PR firms appeared in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. In 1970, however, there really weren’t any multinationals operating independently, although there may have been some affiliations in place. Except for a few independent PR firms, Japanese firms at that time were offering services closer to publicity, or producing corporate brochures, employee newsletters — that kind of thing. And it was common for them to work through big ad agencies.

Tactics: Explain the concept of two-way communication and the “Self-Correction Model.”

Inoue: Like many people working in our field, I found that it is often difficult to explain public relations to people not familiar with it. After giving this question a lot of thought, what I have come to call the “Self-Correction Model” (SCM) came to me one day.

We base SCM on three key elements: ethics, two-way communications (symmetrical) and self correction, all of which need to be integrated to achieve your objectives. This is a way to build favorable relationships with stakeholders and targeted publics and can be considered the theoretical foundation for relationship management.

Tactics: What did you learn from your work at Intel and Apple as one of the first PR professionals to be actively involved in the high-technology industry?

Inoue: When we worked with them in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Apple and Intel were both still venture companies. What struck me about them was how quickly they were able to make decisions, the openness of their corporate cultures and their sense of fairness. Their openness and transparency especially impressed me. Also, they put a first priority on marketing and public relations, especially Intel, together with a keen pursuit of advanced technology. And this was a surprise in Japan at that time since marketing concepts were still at a very early stage.

Tactics: You recently became the first PR professional in Japan to receive a Ph.D. in public relations. What does this honor mean to you?

Inoue: The prototype for the SCM concept came to me after our company received IPRA's Golden World Award Grand Prize in 1997 — a first for an Asian PR firm — for work we did related to U.S.-Japan trade friction. After that, I felt a strong desire to integrate public relations into the Japanese mindset.

Japanese people are generally modest and not adept at explaining themselves. But along with Japan's growing role in global affairs, it has become essential for Japanese to be better communicators — and an understanding of public relations can promote that. To achieve that goal, we need to educate Japanese people about public relations.

However, it is important that public relations be introduced in a proper way. Japan is often called a high-context culture, one in which communication between people has developed to a level where words are often not required. We have something called "kizuna," which could be translated as a way to cultivate and build favorable relationships. This is similar to public relations in some respects. But when interacting on a global level, it is not always possible to apply these same standards. Hence, Japanese people need to learn the communications skills that come from an understanding of public relations. And when we teach public relations, we need to do so by integrating it with the existing concept of "kizuna."

To make all that happen, you need to have good relationships not only with business and government, but also academia. That is one reason why I decided to study for my Ph.D. Another is that to be a well-rounded PR professional, I believe you need to have experience both as a practitioner and an academician. I have had many years experience running a business, so I wanted to develop my knowledge base as well.

Tactics: You were also the first professor in Japan to teach PR as a regular course subject at a major university. How do you describe the state of PR education in Japan?

Inoue: PR education is at a very early stage in Japan and most of the teachers teach something called "koho" (public information, publicity), which is different than public relations. There are some 35 to 40 universities teaching "koho" now, although there are very few offering public relations — less than 10 and they offer degrees in communications but not public relations. I'd like to see at least 20 major Japanese universities start offering programs in public relations in the next five to eight years.

Tactics: The PR Society of Japan (PRSJ) was formed in 1964. Describe the evolution of the profession in Japan.

Inoue: In the early stage, Japan's ad agencies heavily influenced the PR profession here. To them, public relations equated to "publicity" and people did not understand its broad capabilities.

The profession has grown and developed to the point where two years ago the PRSJ started certifying the skills of PR professionals, similar to PRSA's Accreditation in Public Relations. This is a project I was deeply involved with starting in 2007. Currently there is a lot of interest in public relations in Japanese society, not only as a career path but also as a way to make Japan more dynamic.

Tactics: How would you describe the Japanese media's perception of public relations?

Inoue: There is a general lack of understanding of public relations among the media. It is often confused with advertising and publicity. But in the last 10 years, the perception of public relations has been changing among media who have started to recognize the role of the PR professional in covering crisis scenarios, governmental matters and complex issues requiring highly developed communications skills.

Tactics: And how have the current economic conditions affected the PR profession?

Inoue: There is no question that they are affecting the PR profession. However, Japanese companies have traditionally spent a lot of money on advertising, which has suffered far worse. So in that sense, public relations hasn't been hit as hard as the ad industry.

Tactics: What are a few basics that U.S.-based companies looking to do business in Japan need to know?

Inoue: There is a saying in Japan that no one wants to take the first bath (in Japan the same hot water is reheated for multiple usages). So if you are a newcomer to Japan, companies are hesitant to work with you. In that sense, media relations in Japan is very important to build initial awareness. It is also important to build strong relationships with industry and the government.
