PR SPECIAL EVENT- IRINA SHARMA

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I went to the Public Relations Society of America Luncheon in Milwaukee on Wednesday, Sept. 9. The title of the event was Public Relations Practices in an Emerging Market and featured eKadaa Public Relations founder and owner, Irina Sharma. The purpose of this meeting was to gain insight about public relations from an international point of view. It was also an opportunity to get to sit and talk with other public relations students and professionals. PRSA events are very good places to meet people and network because everyone there has public relations as a common interest.

The majority of the students attending the PRSA Luncheon were University of Wisconsin-Whitewater students. There were also students from UW-Milwaukee and UW-Marquette. Also in attendance, were a lot of public relations professionals and PRSA members. I had the privilege of meeting a few of them at the table I was at.

The event definitely fulfilled its purpose. Sharma gave a great speech on public relations strategies from a general viewpoint and from the viewpoint of the Middle East. She furthered these points by providing specific strategies and tactics she had used in some of her past campaigns as examples. Also, with all the students and PR professionals attending the event, it was easy to network and get a chance to talk to some new people. There was interaction between everyone attending the event as well as interaction with Sharma throughout, and after, her presentation.

The thing that surprised me the most was how Sharma got started in the public relations business. She began working in the broadcasting field and one day Estée Lauder, a beauty product company, asked her to be their PR person. Sharma said she didn’t wear any makeup, or know much about public relations, but took the challenge anyway. From there, she grew her skills and founded eKadaa Public Relations in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. I was also surprised that when Sharma first got her company started, she sat in a room full of boxes and had only one phone. She would also have her sister call when potential clients would to make it seem like they were constantly busy.

The main content covered by Sharma was how to use public relations for different clients and she also used specific examples of tactics she has used for clients. One of the main things she wanted us to walk away with and understand was that successful public relations is all about the approach. All countries and cultures are different and this is one of the key points she tried getting across. What worked for a campaign in one location, may not work for the same campaign in another location. In Sharma’s words, “you can’t just copy, paste.” The approach is different for each company and country. She also has to act as a mediator sometimes, and has to tell foreign press coming into Dubai that there is a certain way they need to ask and word their questions to not insult their culture.

Sharma also covered the differences between doing business and public relations in the Middle East versus the United States. Again, it’s all about the approach. When working with Arabs, they don’t respond well to emails and faxes. Sharma said their main way of communication is through phone calls. Also, if she has a meeting with someone at 11 a.m., she has to call them at 10 a.m. to remind them about their meeting. She also said that some PR agencies in the Middle East don’t use contracts. The agencies can’t legally take them and some potential clients won’t do business with someone who asks them to sign a contact because they see it as a sign for lack of trust. She also covered three main things that she thinks public relations agencies in the Middle East need: crisis management, social media, and corporate social responsibility.

The main campaign/client that Sharma and her audience were geared toward was her work for Durex, a condom company. This was also a very interesting story because eKadaa was not allowed to use the words “sex” and “condom.” So instead of using those words, they promoted Durex by referring to its brand name and by taking an educational standpoint. eKadaa Public Relations wanted to educate people on HIV and AIDS because most people didn’t know the difference between the two. I didn’t know the difference between the two. What Sharma did was give out an online survey to Arabs that, if they filled out with their contact information, would receive a free iPod. This strategy worked because 67 percent of the surveys came back to eKadaa. Sharma would also go up to Emirates in the mall and ask if they had time to discuss their sex life. Most of them didn’t have a problem talking to her about it.

From that research, Sharma was able to find out more information on sex so she could promote it safely in her campaign. She put out ribbons and flyers to educate on keeping people “healthy” and “safe.” eKadaa also had a 6 foot, 9 inch man dressed in a condom at nightclubs. One of the fearless things Sharma did during the campaign was airlift condoms during the Megarock Festival in Dubai.

Sharma had no fear about doing a campaign for a client that some may consider being “risqué” because she knew she wasn’t doing anything wrong. She was just educating the public on HIV and AIDS and prevention methods. Sharma did get phone calls from the Criminal Investigation Department warning her that they knew what she was doing. The CID is kind of like the Federal Bureau Investigation we have here in the United States. Sharma also walked around with her passport in her back pocket just in case she was deported for what she was doing. But, Sharma did the Durex campaign tastefully and did not give the CID any reason to deport her.

Another way people were educated on HIV was when Sharma found an FBI agent when used to be a heroin addict and contracted HIV. The agent came forward and he and Sharma spoke about HIV to try and educate more people about it. One of the best and worst things she had ever seen was during this part of the campaign. The best part was that this FBI agent was brave enough to come forward and talk about it with a room full of people. Then, Sharma went around with the agent and introduce him to other people. The people didn’t know he was the one with HIV. The worst part was that when the people who shook his hand found out that he had HIV, they stayed away from him and would wipe their hand on their pants. They made it seem like the agent was some bad, diseased person. She said this broke her heart to see.

The last thing Sharma touched upon was the use of social media. She had already previously stated that social media was something that the Middle East needed to get better at. She said that social media shouldn’t be shut down, but controlled by the people who use it. The best way to reach a large group of people, without limit to geographic areas, and get it to them in the quickest way possible is through social media.

I made four contacts at the event, three of whom sat at my luncheon table. I met Chrissy Kruger-Gruendyke, who is the owner and president at CKG Independent Public Relations Consulting in the Milwaukee. Kruger-Gruendyke used to live in Florida till her husband’s job moved them to Wisconsin. She then decided to start up her own public relations business and works with Wisconsin and Florida clients. Also at my table, I met Froedtert Hospital Public Relations Associate Samantha Andrews. Andrews had a lot of knowledge of how to do public relations in the hospital and healthcare industry. The last PR professional who sat at my table was Jacqueline Janz. Janz is the marketing director at Milwaukee County Transit System.

We all spoke about our interests in public relations and UW-Whitewater student Bethany Pape and I began asking all kinds of questions about each PR professional’s line of business and how they got started. After Sharma’s presentation was over, I spoke to Nicholas Bauer. Bauer is an account manager at 3tree Marketing. I got all four business cards and sent them a “nice to meet you” email. I also received responses back from everyone as well.

I can use all the information I learned from the PRSA Luncheon in my future public relations career. The most useful information I found was through Sharma’s specific examples she provided. This way, I got an inside look at the thought process and tactics used in an actual campaign. Hopefully, I can do what Sharma did and create my own public relations firm. She showed that all it takes is knowledge of the industry, living with no fear, and having the drive to do it. Another important aspect of her speech to remember is that public relations is all about the approach. No matter whom the client or where the location, public relations can always work if the right approach is used. It’s also important to have respect for other countries and cultures and know key differences when trying to do business in that country.

Here are the emails I sent to the contacts I met at the Luncheon:

   