

Event Management Communication Strategies: Experiences in Public Relations from a Chinese Media Company in an Emergent Incident of Film Distribution

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i4/25182> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i4/25182

Published Date: 15 April 2025

Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 had a huge impact on the film industry, especially on the films released during the Spring Festival of that year. Many films were urgently withdrawn but Huanxi Media Group Limited announced to release of their film *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020) in advance. After suffering great resistance from the audience and industry practitioners, they premiered and released this film online through business cooperation with a famous Chinese Internet company Douyin Co., Ltd. (Former Name: ByteDance Company). Based on this emergent incident of film distribution by the media company as a case, this research analyzed the company's response to this incident, combining the SWOT Analysis and proposed feasible event management communication strategies from this case based on the RACE model. It found that follow-up communication or interaction with the public and different parties is also necessary after such an emergency and the company's decision-making. This case study aims to offer a reference in event management communication strategies for future emergencies of film distribution related to the public relations of organizations, expecting better responses and long-term development of media company or relevant organization.

Keywords: Chinese Media Company, Communication Strategies, Emergent Incident, Event Management, Film Distribution, Public Relations

Introduction

Event management is the application of the management science of project management to the creation and development of festivals and events (Damster, 2005; Mallen & Adams, 2008; Raj & Musgrave, 2009; Van der Wagen, 2010). It involves studying the intricacies of the brand,

recognizing or identifying the target audience, and planning and coordinating the technical aspects before getting down to actually executing the modalities of the proposed event. Event management is considered one of the strategic marketing and communication tools by various companies (Shone & Parry, 2004). For media companies, they create events to help them communicate with audiences and potential interest-related groups. They might target their audiences by using the news media, hoping to generate positive media coverage which will reach thousands or millions of people.

From this point of view, it can be discovered that event management communication strategies play an important role in organizational activities to the public, no matter which company, and when and where. The Chinese media corporations are no exception. They also need to reference the experience of communication strategies about event management to carry out actual activities smoothly and effectively, thereby achieving a win-win situation for multiple sides as possible.

This study involved the analysis of a specific activity to the public of an actual organization and offered related event management communication strategies. The objective of this study is to keep a better reputation for the media company or obtain recognition on a larger scale, maintaining the relationship between them and audiences, as well as them and different parties including the media-related industry.

It is of great importance and necessity for this field to be studied. In terms of practical implication, the study of this topic provides a certain reference for both film producers, distributors or relevant practitioners, through the analysis of a specific case based on the theoretical framework. This is beneficial for their practice of film distribution in the future, especially when meeting similar situations. In terms of knowledgeable implication, the study of this topic contributes to the existing body of knowledge in event management communication strategies, by offering the experiences of a local case. It can also strengthen the understanding of public readers of this article and academic scholars towards related topics.

Introduction of Huanxi Media Company

Huanxi Media Group Limited is an innovative media platform company in China, which includes film and television content investment, production and new media broadcasting. It was co-founded by Dong Ping, Ning Hao, Xu Zheng and Xiang Shaokun in 2015. It was mainly controlled by the chairman/executive director and chief executive officer, and mainly constituted by shareholder directors and signed directors. The rest are ordinary staff or officers. This company signed and cooperated with many famous Chinese directors, such as Zhang Yimou, Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Chen Kexin, Wong Kar-wai, Zhang Yibai, Gu Changwei, Ning Hao, Xu Zheng, Huang Bo, and so on.

Huanxi Media Group Limited is listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, then the main nature of business of the organization is registered listed companies. Based on the exclusive and original content of Chinese film and television dramas, it aims to contribute quality content to the fast-growing Chinese film and television industry. It invested in and produced many excellent film and television works. In recent years, their famous produced films include *Full*

River Red (Zhang, 2023), *Caught By The Tides* (Jia, 2024), *Li Na* (Chen, 2024), *The Hedgehog* (Gu, 2024), *The Movie Emperor* (Ning, 2024), and so forth.

The Description of the Incident and the Response of Huanxi Media Company

Tracing back to the beginning of 2020, an epidemic caused by a sort of new pneumonia has changed people's lifestyles and disrupted the order of the market. Affected by the pandemic, many films announced their collective withdrawal from the arrangement of Spring Festival (Shi, 2020), including seven films such as *Detective Chinatown* (Chen, 2021), *Vanguard* (Tang, 2020), and so on. Apparently, the withdrawal of the films from the cinema during this special period will bring great financial loss. For Huanxi Media company's film *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020), this will be unavoidable as well. However, in order to increase the possibility of reaching the profit standard, Huanxi Media Group Limited announced to broadcast *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020) one day in advance (New Year's Eve), which was originally scheduled to be released on New Year's Day (24 January 2020). They released the film ahead of schedule for higher box office, which greatly caused dissatisfaction among related parties, peers and audiences. This behaviour caused a huge decline by the audience in the reputation of this film, its related producers and the company (Wei, 2020). And this will inevitably affect the re-release of films after the epidemic.

Viewing this situation, the company sold this film to Douyin Co., Ltd. (Former Name: ByteDance Company) at cost on 24 January 2020. Meanwhile, they announced the withdrawal of the film and broadcasted it online for free on 25 January 2020. Such copyright sales and the first free online broadcasting of film have won the good impression and reputation of the audience and enabled the online video platform to gain user traffic. Online premiere means that viewers do not have to go to densely populated cinemas, which is beneficial to the prevention and control of the epidemic. Besides, free viewing signifies that the platform pays for the audience, which shows a certain charity nature of the platform and apparently has been well received by the audience. Apart from that, they subsequently cooperated with other thirteen high-quality films and were also freely open to audiences.

Methodology

The research adopted case analysis as the main method, combined with the SWOT Analysis and the RACE model for further discussion. The emergent incident of the Huanxi Media company this study selected is a typical case to analyze and discuss event management communication strategy. This method is beneficial to specifying or concretizing an abstract topic, which makes people easier to understand under a certain context.

Discussions of the Main Findings

SWOT Analysis of the Company's Response to the Incident

This research thoroughly discussed the main findings based on the SWOT Analysis methods, demonstrating the incident itself involving the company's response and proposing related event management communication strategies in future similar organizational incidents.

The SWOT Analysis is an analysis method used to evaluate the "strengths", "weaknesses", "opportunities" and "threats" involved in an organization, a plan, a project, a person or a business activity (Gürel & Tat, 2017). As the following figure (Figure 1) shows, it has four main elements and the following are the specific descriptions of their corresponding concepts. In

organizations, “strength” refers to the characteristics that give an advantage over others in the industry; “weaknesses” signify the characteristics that place at a disadvantage relative to others; “opportunities” are the external elements in the environment that give benefits to the organizations; and “threats” mean the external elements in the environment that could cause trouble for the organizations. This analysis approach can not only help to analyze the specific case, and discover the company’s internal situation and external environment, but also help to make proper decisions accordingly and effectively in the future.

Organizational Strengths	Characteristics that give advantage over others in the industry.
Organizational Weaknesses	Characteristics that place at a disadvantage relative to others.
Environmental Opportunities	External elements in the environment that give benefits for the organizations.
Environmental Threats	External elements in the environment that could cause trouble for the organizations.

Figure 1. Four Elements of the SWOT Analysis and Their Concepts (Gürel & Tat, 2017)

Based on the SWOT Analysis and its relevant connotation above, in terms of the emergent incident about the online release and broadcasting of *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020) by Huanxi Media Group Limited in the epidemic period, it has several points to be thoroughly examined, which are specifically demonstrated as follows.

Firstly, from the aspect of strength, Huanxi Media Group Limited aims to achieve a win-win situation through the communication of multiple sides. When facing the emergent incident related to their public reputation after their initial decision, the company instantly communicated with Douyin company and let *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020) first enter the market during the Spring Festival. They rely on and utilize the social media platform to promote their film. Meanwhile, the Douyin platform also can obtain the traffic of audiences. The free release not only reduces the pressure on gambling with other films and recovers capital costs in advance, but also reaps the audience’s favour and reverses word of mouth to a certain degree.

Besides, from the angle of opportunities, they tightly grasp the chance of Internet advantages and disseminate broadly under the special epidemic context. Their countermeasure is especially fit for the special epidemic period when people cannot go out to watch films in the cinema because of the movement control regulations. Their free release can attract more potential audiences, which is invisibly broadening the viewing group. In addition, their practice of utilizing new media as a communication strategy (Zhang & Shao, 2025) blurs the boundary between the online and offline release of films. Such dilemma they faced in the sudden epidemic can be regarded as an opportunity for the film and television industry to enter the Internet. Together with the looser restrictions on themes, the free online release of films also displays and leads to a sort of new tendency of film distribution in this industry.

One point that needs to be mentioned is that because the weaknesses of the organization in this incident and the threats this organization faced in this situation have overlapped, then this research put them together to discuss here. Then finally, from the perspective of weakness and threat, the decision of the media company is not perfect and has a certain negative impact. Huanxi Media company did not take care of the overall situation, not considering the interests of cinemas and other insiders or directors of the film industry. Although they have won the favour of ordinary audiences, they suffered large-scale resistance from many famous cinemas and amounts of criticism from producers of other films. Due to the online free viewing mode they adopted, it was directly connected to the audiences and bypassed the cinema, meanwhile, it was a great blow to other films released at the same time. Therefore, it was resisted by industry insiders and became “public enemies of the industry”.

Many cinemas argued that this action was treacherous and undermined the industry rules. These cinemas jointly submitted the boycott document to the Film Bureau, requesting the Administration to urgently stop the free Internet premiere of *Lost in Russia* (Xu, 2020) and ban all kinds of screening modes outside cinemas (Gong, 2020). From these, it can be found that such a free business model hurts the paid marketing model in the film industry and is not conducive to their long-term development in the film and television industry, which is a point that the media company ignored or did not think well during the decision making of the communication.

From above, through exhaustive analysis of this case from different aspects, it can be found that although this media company seized the chance and brought many advantages in the process of the incident, it also has several negative sides that should be paid more attention to. In fact, the disadvantages of the media group’s behaviours can be compensated in follow-up actions or remedies. However, to some extent, some solutions can help to relieve or make up the negative influence.

Event Management Communication Strategies Based on the RACE Model

In fact, strategic planning is a key to successful strategic management communication. It is utilized by many organizations nowadays, and it can also be applied in this case. Strategic event management communication is the continuous process of creating, implementing and evaluating decisions that enable an organization to achieve its objectives. It allows an organization to be more proactive than reactive in shaping its own future, to initiate and influence (rather than just respond to) activities, and thereby exert control over its own destiny (David, 2011).

One key point that must be mentioned here in advance is the RACE model, which belongs to one of the effective communication strategies (Bégin & Charbonneau, 2013). The RACE model is a long-standing process and it is used by public relations practitioners, and it incorporates research, analysis, communication and evaluation (Marston, 1963), which can help to develop strategies for event communications in this new era. According to the RACE model, public relations is typically addressed as a four-step process, incorporating “research”, “planning or analysis”, “implementation”, “execution and communication”, as well as “evaluation” (Board, 2010). Based on this procedure, the media company can also reference related ideas from it. In view of the sudden nature of emergent incidents, then “research” in advance that mentioned this model is not possible for this case.

In the “planning and analysis”, actual planning action and relevant analysis are necessary. This is the key to the success of the communication management strategy. It is possible to timely analyze or predict the response of the general public, stakeholders and so on. Because the public or other external sides are the basis of public relations activities or decisions (Allagui & Breslow, 2016), which should be understood by an organization thoroughly. In this case, it is important for the media company to timely prejudge the trends of public opinion before decision-making, whether for the initial decision of releasing in advance (after the epidemic happened) or the latter decision of free releasing (after facing the boycott from many parties). Once the event is underway, it is related to the “implementation, execution and communication”. For better effectiveness, the communicators should convey clear messages when communicating things, and consult the other party’s opinions. In this case, a clear and sincere explanation of the company’s purpose and constant two-way communication or multi-directional communication is needed for the company, which easily lets others understand the actual thoughts or original intentions. In this process, it is also necessary to track the corresponding status of different parties and identify the potential risks.

After the event, the “evaluation” is also very important. After the implementation of communication, it is also necessary for an organization to evaluate how the public reacts, and how their attitudes or other feedback relate to the company’s response and the incident. It is conducive to finding out the remaining problems or new problems and provides a reference for similar situations in the future. It seems that in many cases, the opinions of the general public are not taken into account when implementing most social events carried out by certain organizations (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). In fact, this is very necessary for the future sustainable development of corporations and even the prosperity of the industry.

In fact, Huanxi Media company also can carry out some measurements for the subsequent impact of this incident. Because profits and reputation earning during a short period are not enough, more importantly, they should consider the subsequent incident situation and long-term sustainable development of themselves. The Huanxi Media company can further learn the attitudes or views of different parties through online or offline forms of communication and interaction, including feedback from audiences and other interest-relators. Certainly, public opinions, views or perceptions play an important role in analyzing the emergent and countermeasures incidents an organization experiences. It is very necessary to implement certain activities to communicate some information about the organization or some explanation about their behaviours in certain things to the public.

In the current era, social media enables open communication, which accelerates communication and interaction between different sides. This also helps media organizations to understand the public and motivates these practitioners to respond proactively and efficiently to those needs. As for this incident, Huanxi Media company can use famous social media platforms as tools (such as Douyin/TikTok, Weibo, Weixin, and so on) to conduct online discussions. They can let related creators (actors, directors or producers) or other staff interact with people. Such kind of evaluation process of incident can learn or understand the audience’s viewpoints or attitudes on the company’s response, and further illustrate specific reasons for the company’s behaviour to the general public and thereby build a trusting relationship between each side. Besides, the discussed content could not only be this certain incident or the single company itself, but also broader topics such as the thoughts about

diverse film broadcasting channels. Such approach is beneficial for the good reputation of the company and the maintenance of public relations.

Conclusion

In fact, in this incident, Huanxi Media Group Limited did not do better in the beginning because they just considered their own interests related to the film and released the film earlier than the previous plan. However, after they received negative responses from audiences and other insiders or relevant practitioners of the film industry, they adjusted their strategy, which not only kept their profits and maintained their reputation but also created a new model of online film premiering and releasing rather than traditionally offline. Overall, although there are many drawbacks such as the damages to the benefits of certain parties in the relevant industry, Huanxi Media Group Limited successfully created free online screening through business cooperation with an Internet company, which can be regarded as the lowest cost and the most profitable broadcasting approach for them in that epidemic situation. Such broadcasting channel makes film consumption more convenient. In the case of the spread of the epidemic and the lack of entertainment activities, it also can meet the spiritual consumption needs of the audience. Actually, it is a channel supplement for the cinema, and will not really replace the status of the cinema.

Such fast and effective measurements in that specific epidemic situation are worth referencing. Actually, the change in the external environment really influences the decision more or less, which makes it difficult to plan in advance and to make the decision suddenly. Nevertheless, the company can make a certain follow-up communication or interaction, to strive to make more appropriate and more comprehensive decisions without losing the interests of most parties in future similar accidents. Certainly, such forms of participatory communication or interaction could be two-way or multiple-directional rather than one-side. In times of crisis in particular, an agile event management communication strategy can assist communicators in developing a better understanding of public opinion and close to the audiences. It is also beneficial for a company or an organization's future development and long-term interests.

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