Role of Communications with Reference to Media in Strengthening Professionalisation of Co-operative Management: An Indian Experience

SANJAY KUMAR VERMA Jr. Editor

National Co-operative Union of India E-mail: sanjayverma422@hotmail.com

Introduction

Image building is part of communication process of modern organisations. Every organisation wants to grow, prosper and dominate the world in this era of open competition. No doubt, management in general in today's era is aware of adopting professional norms for responding to environmental demands, constraints and opportunities in an effective manner. Professionalisation demands devising strong communication strategies for communicating within the organisation and also with other organisations.

The co-operatives the world over have made rapid strides in all areas of socio-economic activities. However, it is generally agreed that communications is the weakest plank of co-operative organisations. The co-operatives have not been able to communicate their strengths, achievements, the degree to which they are different and effective as compared to other organisations, etc. in a powerful manner. Does this indicate that co-operative management is not professional in understanding the significance of communication for the success of co-operative organisations? How can strengthening professionalisation of co-operative management through communications enable the co-operatives in the Asia-Pacific Region to enhance their competitive edge in the market economy as well as build up their image?

Viewed in the above perspective, my paper would explore the communication angle of co-operatives in India with focus on media.

Professionalisation and Communication

The phenomenon of professionalism is a function of modernisation. Professional management requires certain special skills, abilities and attitudes which enables an organisation to carve its niche in the modern era of competition. Professionalisation of management is essential for the success of an organisation. Understanding finer nuances of communication as a tool to help achieve project and developmental objectives is an important yardstick for professionalisation of any management. If the communication tools are utilised professionally by the management, effective links can be established with the target group. Communication enables an organisation to advance its agenda, disseminate its messages, achieve its social and economic objectives, as well as project favourable image of the organisation.

Organisational dynamics today demands that communication managers of modern organisations must be well-equipped to handle various the aspects of communication-public relations, media, journalism, advertising, marketing, websites. The degree of expertise shown by them in handling these multi-farious aspects not only enable them to act as an effective link with the top management, but also enhances professional competency of the management in understanding the usefulness of communication in strategic planning.

Co-operatives and Communication

The pulls and pressures of competitive economy have posed various challenges to co-operatives. However, despite this the concept of co-operation is still considered an effective method to solve the socio-economic problems of modern era. Diversification of co-operatives in new areas of socio-economic activities is a definite indicator in this regard. Co-operatives have to keep their identity intact, while combining their social and economic objectives judiciously. While they have to serve the community by not sacrificing their principles and values, they have to be modern, efficient, profitable and cost-effective. Due to their ever expanding areas of operations and activities, the management has to adopt professional communication strategies which can highlight the ways in which co-operative can be superior to other forms of organisations. Enhancing the professionalism of the management which can sell the concept of co-operation is the demand of the era. This can materialise only when the management is very well sensitised on the issues of communication. The management which adopts a professional attitude to communication can not only popularise the concept of co-operation among the masses, but also spread it to the non-co-operative world which is not at all aware of the strength of co-operatives.

A dispassionate analysis of communication trends in Asia-Pacific Region indicates that communication has yet to be used effectively for professionalising the cooperative management. As a result, the profile of the co-operative sector is low.

In a comparative perspective, the management of co-operatives in USA, UK, Europe, etc. has started giving importance to communications primarily because the co-operatives have started expanding their business operations in a big way. In Asia-Pacific Region, the socio-cultural and economic milieu being different, with the co-operatives being expected to play a pronounced developmental role, the inhibiting factors stunting the growth of professionalisation of co-operative management through communications are:

- Excessive politicisation of co-operatives which hinders the management to broaden its vision by taking into account the importance of communications.
- Resource crunch with lack of effective communication strategies for resource mobilisation.
- ●⇒ Lack of well-trained communications personnel who can visualise and implement the communication strategies.
- Inability to conceive internal and external communications strategies for

- every activity of the organisation with emphasis on media and public relations.
- ●⇒ Lack of well chalked-out communication strategies for advocacy and business purpose.
- ⇒ Lack of strategies on liasoning with other international organisations so that fruitful collaborations may be forged.

INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Spread and Achievements of Indian Co-operatives

The co-operative movement is the world's largest movement. There are more than 5 lakh co-operative societies with 230 million members. It is great achievement to note that 100% of the villages are covered by the rural network of co-operatives. The share of co-operatives in agricultural credit is 43%. Dairy co-operatives have revolutionised the production and distribution of milk, giving tough competition, even to internationally acclaimed brands of private sector and MNCs. Amul is a world famous name in the dairy co-operative sector. Due to the hard toil of dairy co-operatives, India is the largest producer of milk in the world. Co-operatives are involved in a big way in production of handloom fabrics and cotton yarn, accounting for about 55% and 17% respectively of the total production. The co-operatives are engaged both in the production and distribution of fertilisers. Two fertiliser co-operatives viz. IFFCO and KRIBHCO together are producing about 20% of total indigenous nitrogenous and phosphatic fertilisers in the country. Co-operatives account for 30% of total fertiliser distributed in the country. At the grass-root levels, there are numerous examples of co-operatives which are working hard for improving the lives of the common masses.

Professionalisation of Management

Strengthening professionalisation of Indian co-operative management has been a neglected field, despite the rapid strides made by the co-operatives in various fields. Where in some cases it has been realised, the results have been quite positive and encouraging. Probably one of the reasons behind these successes is independence and autonomous character of these co-operatives which have managed to develop their strong organisational basis through careful human resource planning, while also devising internal and external professional communication strategies for building up the image of the organisation. Otherwise the general trend is that growth of professionalism is hampered in co-operative organisations because professional managers have a limited role in the co-operative organisations which are fully dominated by political leaders. They are not motivated to formulate and communication implement strategies which can enhance the status of the co-operative sector. A scientific and fool proof system of recruitment is totally absent, as the vested interests hold sway over the personnel policy jeopardising its growth. An ad-hoc approach to the management of training programmes is visible, as there is a clear absence of professionally designed training programmes which are in well accordance with the situation.

Role of Media

Media in the recent times has emerged as an effective mode of communication. It is a strong component of external communication strategy. The management of all organisations have adopted a professional attitude in devising effective media strategies so that the activities and achievements are well publicised. In this respect corporate media strategies are more business oriented. However, the media strategies of the co-operative sector have to ensure that the dynamics of development is well projected by the media. Efforts are made to ensure that proper awareness is generated on co-operative issues through media.

Media Trends in India Co-operatives

It we study the media trends in Indian co-operatives, we find that the achievements of Indian co-operatives have not been projected by the media to the desired extent. This is mainly because the management of the co-operatives has not adopted a professional attitude in handling the media issues, barring a few co-operatives which can devote optimum financial resources for building up their media profile. The few such successful examples in this respect are — IFFCO, KRIBHCO, AMUL, etc. However, in the other cases we find that despite various limitations in resources, infrastructure, etc., the management has not shown an inclination to treat the subject of media in a serious manner. The negative attitude towards the co-operative sector which has developed in India has been due to unprofessional attitude in handling the media issues. Now, let's examine the main trends:

Neglect of Success Stories

As discussed above, the co-operative sector in India has numerous success stories. The National Co-operative Union of India's, Co-operative Education Projects are doing commendable work in the rural areas. Women Self-Help Groups promoted by NCUI are not only empowering the women, but they also present an innovative form of leadership. Presently, the mainstream media in India does not give due prominence to the success stories of Indian co-operatives. Similarly, the co-operative media consisting of co-operative journals adopt an ad-hoc approach to success stories, as the stories are written in an a casual manner without professional expertise. The drama, spirit and toil of the common people in neglected in the success stories, as there is much emphasis on cold statistics which does not portray the hard work behind the success story.

The co-operative management must be sensitized to adopt a professional attitude towards highlighting success story. The successful business organisations are presently not devising effective communication strategies to project their various components of success. Efforts must be made to highlight success stories in business co-operatives from various angles and show the difference in effectiveness as compared to other organisations. For example, Amul a major player in co-operative milk sector can continuously project its successful endeavours on a continuous basis by showing its distinctiveness as compared to the private players. The promotional organisations must continuously project the triumph of the co-operative sector which is lacking at present. An aggressive advocacy professional of strategy through media can highlight some of the following factors:

- ●⇒ Co-operatives have unique structural advantages as compared to other organisations as they are formed by members themselves, who are aware of their social obligations.
- Co-operatives help eliminate poverty, sustain environment, provide employment, and are doing commendable work for community development.
- Co-operatives provide cost effective solutions to problems of consumers. Co-operative housing units cost 20-25% less as compared to houses delivered though public/private institutions.

The co-operative management must devise innovative strategies so that mainstream media understands the need to portray the dynamism of the co-operative sector. All assistance and facilities must be provided to the mainstream media representatives in this regard, which is presently lacking. The editorial staff of co-operative journals must be trained to write the success stories and must be considered effective communicators for depicting the ground realities to the management thus enhancing its professional competence. The co-operative management must adopt a professional attitude for tapping the electronic media for depicting success stories. Recently, the National Co-operative Union of India sponsored a programme "Sugandh Mati Re" on Doordarshan which very well highlighted the sectoral achievements of the co-operatives. All the co-operative organisations should think of launch a website on success stories where a layman can easily find a vast resource of staff related to success stories.

Media Relations

Media relations can play an important role in strengthening the professionalisation of co-operative management as the management of most of the organisations is actively pursuing the policy of media relations. However, the Indian co-operative sector is placed in such a situation where it has to work hard for media attention because of media's obsession with issues of politics, entertainment, glamour, celebrities, etc. Co-operation is considered a dry subject. In this respect, some of the following steps must be undertaken:

Lianson with the media representatives must not be need-based limited, only during the occasions of conferences and seminar. Media must be flooded with multifaceted information on the sectoral co-operative issues on a regular basis. Informal links of communications must be established with the media. Strong media relations can dispel the misconception about the bad image of the co-operative sector. The Indian co-operative banking sector in the past was hit by a major scam, the notable one being of Madhavpura scam in which the media blew the incident out of proportion thus harming the image of the co-operative sector. If the co-operative media public relations personnel would have established close liaison with the media representatives doing those stories by briefing them continuously, a negative image of the co-operative sector may not have emerged with a huge intensity. If "Meet The Press" meetings were organised after appearance of such stories, this would have provided a solid platform for highlightly various issues which may have gone in favour of the co-operative sector.

- The co-operative PR personnel must understand media psychology which is very important in building up of media relations. Increased interactions of the PR personnel with the media will provide them more chances to learn about this art, which is not found today. Based on this, the co-operative PR personnel must make earnest attempts to make the co-operative management/leadership fully confident in handing the press. At present the co-operative management is somewhat shy in handling the media, which is not a professional approach. The PR personnel must be aware of the latest trends in the co-operative sector and must gauge the organisation's possible response to these. If the data, facts and figures with neat analysis are presented to the co-operative management, chances become brought for strong publicity of the organisation.
- The co-operative management must adopt a professional attitude in organising a media conferences every year in which media representatives and co-operative sector personnel are able to share their experiences, identify areas of focal concern, etc. The National Co-operative Union in the recent years has set a trend for establishing strong media relations. A National Workshop on Strengthening Links Between Media and Co-operatives in 21st Century set the ball rolling as the workshop provided a good platform for media representatives to express their views on the co-operative sector, while the PR personnel too came up with their experiences in handling the media. The co-operative/leaders/management no doubt became aware that a professional approach for handling media relations is important.

Co-operatives in Liberalised Economy and Media

In today's era the management of every professionally sector or organisation wants to utilise the media for building up a favourable public opinion in support of its policies and programmes. A general perception has developed that various sectors/organisations have to devise strong communication strategies so as to compete in the market economy. Media's's understanding of the co-operative issues would have certainly resulted in maintaining a favourable public opinion towards co-operatives which is very vital for a sector like co-operatives which has a strong presence at grassroots levels. Due to lack of constructive coverage of the co-operative sector in the wake of challenges of market economy, the public opinion in India has veered towards the view that the co-operative sector would be badly affected in the wake of liberalised economy which would damage the sector to a great extent. The co-operative sector has to do a lot of soul-searching and involve itself in solid groundwork so that the media plays a definite role in projecting a robust image of the co-operative sector in the wake of market economy.

The co-operative management must take into account the significance of the following factors which can strengthen professionalism in the coverage of the co-operative sector through media. In this respect, strong strategies must be formulated so that media can project a strong image of co-operatives:

■⇒ Mainstream media must highlight stories projecting advantage of co-

operative way of life. It is a fact that in the wake of several failures of the public sector and various limitations of the private sector, co-operative-based solutions are mooted immediately in various areas of socio-economic activities.

- ■⇒ Mainstream media must highlight stories where co-operatives are trying to professionalise themselves, wherever they are adopting cost-effective methods, whether they are going for technology upgradation, value addition, etc.
- ■⇒ Involvement of mainstream media representatives in consultancy services or co-operative policy making bodies can be an useful exercise in sensitising them on the identity of co-operatives and the need to preserve it amidst the changing economy, while also making them aware of complexities of co-operatives.
- ■⇒ Co-operative management must formulate sectoral media strategies as every sector has its unique character which must be publicised in a powerful manner. The co-operative journals must cover current developments in the co-operative sector against the backdrop of changes in economy. The impact of the co-operative sector and the ways in which the co-operatives can cope with the changes must be well projected.
- ■⇒ Film is a powerful media, which can not only show the dynamics of the cooperative sector, but also portray the challenges before the co-operatives with simple images. Presentation of organisational profiles in a professional manner through films against the backdrop of current changes is a good image—building exercise.
- ■⇒ Community media is an unexplored area which the co-operative management must explore so that voice of the people involved in co-operative development is well projected. Community media run by the people themselves has great capacity to mould the opinion in forum of co-operatives by incorporating reports on co-operative activities undertaken by the co-operatives in the local area in a positive manner.

Lack of Strong HRD Policy

The status of public relations in the Indian Co-operative Sector is not professional. If the co-operative PR managers are developed in a professional way with adequate training and exposure, on regular internals they can strengthen the communication plank of co-operatives in a big way. They can then understand the intricacies of media as an important plank of communication strategy. At the entry level we do not have courses on Co-operative Journalism or PR. The training opportunities for the editorial and PR staff are very limited and irregular. Co-operative Journalism has yet to develop as a specialised discipline which can play a big role in the growth of professionalism of co-operative media. Editorial aspects of co-operative sector can be handled professionally only when there is a specific discipline of Co-operative Journalism. Training can play a big role in boosting the growth of professionalism in PR.

Vaikunth Mehta National Institute of Co-operative Management, a premier co-operative training centre in the country under the aegis of National Co-operative Union of India should start a six months course on Co-operative Editorial and PR aspects for those who are working in the field of co-operatives, at all levels. National Co-operative Union of India in association with other co-operatives has been conducting PR/Editorial/Workshops for the co-operative PR personnel from time to time.

The Co-operative Leaders/CEOs/Managers of Co-operative Organisations must have a professional orientation media/PR so that they can come up with innovative communication strategies for boosting the image of their organisations. This is a major policy short-coming hampering the growth of professionalisation in co-operative management. In this respect, it is heating that National Co-operative Union of India, the apex organisation of the Co-operative Movement in its Leadership Development Programmes has incorporated the vital component of media and communications. Media can play a great role in providing a new dimension to the growth of co-operative leadership in India. The co-operatives at the grassroot levels are not able to utilise the media in a powerful manner for creating a strong awareness for the co-operative sector despite the fact that co-operatives in rural areas are doing commendable work which often goes un-noticed.

Conclusion

The Indian experience clearly indicates that media can really play an important role in strengthening professionalisation of co-operative management in Asia-Pacific Region. The co-operatives in Asia-Pacific Regions must communicate effectively with the help of media so that co-operative development in the region is not neglected. Indian co-operative movement with a remarkable degree of achievements in various fields can utilise media in a most powerful manner for raising the profile of the co-operative movement and providing useful pointers to the other countries in the Asia-Pacific Region.

