

SURVIVAL SKILL IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

COMMUNICATING in a plural society is not a soft skill. It is a survival skill. In Malaysia, where cultures, languages and beliefs intersect daily, a single careless phrase can ripple far beyond the news cycle, while a carefully chosen word can calm anxiety, open dialogue and build trust. For public relations (PR) practitioners, the task is not merely to “avoid trouble”, but to engage difference with courage, clarity, empathy and respect.

For PR practitioners, a plural society means:

MULTIPLE audiences with different sensitivities, expectations and lived experiences;

THE need to anticipate how a single message may be heard in many different ways; and,

A CONSTANT balancing act between being honest, being fair and being respectful.

In such a setting, “neutral” communication does not mean saying nothing; it means choosing words that recognise reality without assigning blame, and inviting people into a shared space of understanding.

Sensitivities are Real, Not Imagined

Race, religion and culture are not abstract topics here; they are anchors of identity. When people feel their identity is misunderstood, ignored or mocked, they often experience it as a deep personal hurt, not just a “PR issue”.

Sensitivity in communication is not about walking on eggshells. It is about:

SEEING issues through the eyes of others;

UNDERSTANDING that symbols, rituals and places carry emotional weight; and,

RECOGNISING that history shapes how today’s messages are received. For example, if a long-



**RAVINDRAN
RAMAN KUTTY**

established house of worship is affected by a new development, the issue is rarely just about land or buildings. For devotees, it may be about memory, continuity and dignity. A purely technical explanation, “We followed all procedures” will sound cold if it does not acknowledge those deeper concerns.

Development, Heritage and the Power of Early Engagement

Across Malaysia, infrastructure and property projects sometimes intersect with places of worship or cultural landmarks. In many of these situations, the difference between cooperation and confrontation is communication.

When engagement is late and legalistic — letters, notices, hoardings suddenly appearing — communities often feel ambushed.

When engagement is early and human-centred, the dynamic changes. Effective teams:

MEET community representatives before plans are finalised;

WALK the ground with them, listening to how spaces are used — procession routes, peak prayer times, festival preparations; and,

WORK with project teams to explore alternatives, such as alignment tweaks, phased work or alternative access.

Even if not every request can be met, the act of listening, explaining and adjusting where possible signals respect. People may still be unhappy with certain decisions, but they are less likely to feel ignored or bulldozed.

A useful principle here: do not treat heritage and faith as “obstacles” to be managed. Treat them as shared assets to be protected wherever possible.

Corporate Missteps

In today’s hyper-connected environment, brands can be drawn into cultural or religious controversy in a matter of hours. A design on a product, a phrase in an advertisement, or a joke on a broadcast can be deeply offensive to a community. These episodes carry several hard lessons for PR practitioners.

Internal diversity and cultural literacy are not “nice-to-haves”; they are risk management tools.

A genuine apology is not a script; it is a sequence of actions.

When a misstep occurs, an effective response includes:

IMMEDIATE acknowledgement without defensiveness;

WITHDRAWAL or correction of the problematic content or product;

DIRECT engagement with affected communities; and,

CONCRETE internal changes to prevent repetition.

The public looks not only at what you say, but at who you talk to, how fast you act, and whether your behaviour changes afterwards. That is where trust is either rebuilt or lost.

The Danger of ‘Race Card’

In a diverse democracy, words used by leaders, influencers and institutions have amplified impact. When issues involving culture or religion are framed as “tests of loyalty” or “proof of who

truly belongs”, the national conversation becomes brittle.

For PR practitioners working with leaders, parties or public institutions, this presents a clear ethical choice. Use communication to calm, clarify and connect, or use communication to provoke, polarise and score short-term points. Professional, responsible communication calls for the first path. This means:

AVOIDING language that suggests any group is “less Malaysian” or “less deserving”;

EMPHASISING shared aspirations such as safety, education, dignity and opportunity; and,

STEERING away from zero-sum narratives (“if they gain, we lose”) and towards shared-benefit narratives (“we all gain when systems are fair and robust”).

Core Disciplines for PR in a Diverse Society

From infrastructure disputes to product controversies, a coherent set of disciplines emerges for communicators dealing with race, religion and sensitivities.

Engage early, not only when there is noise. Early briefings, dialogues and walkabouts show respect and allow adjustments before positions harden. It is easier to shape expectations than to repair broken trust.

Treat practice, not just buildings, as essential. A place of worship is more than bricks and paint; it is the rituals, rhythms and relationships within and around it. Ask: “How is this space used? When? By whom?” Then reflect those answers in project plans and public messages.

Use law and design to build, not impose, trust. Legal rights and technical standards are important, but how they are communicated makes a huge difference.

Frame issues as shared problems and position challenges

around common concerns. Invite communities to co-create solutions, even if the final outcome is imperfect. Ensure leaders carry the message — reassurance from visible leaders carries weight. PR practitioners must help them speak with empathy, precision and consistency. Guard against politicisation and misinformation. Document, deliver and report back, as communities remember promises.

The Communicator’s Inner Toolkit

Technical skills alone are not enough. In a fragile landscape, PR practitioners need an inner toolkit such as historical memory — awareness of past tensions and narratives that still echo today — empathy and cultural literacy.

A Malaysian Strength to Build On

Despite periodic tensions, Malaysia holds countless examples of everyday harmony: neighbourhoods where houses of worship stand side by side, workplaces where colleagues respectfully share festive foods, and communities in Penang, Melaka, Sabah and Sarawak where diversity is a fact of life.

For every PR practitioner, even if you are seasoned or aspiring to be, the task is clear: to speak and write in ways that honour this reality, protect it in moments of strain, and strengthen it for the next generation.

The real measure of a communicator is not how well they polish good news, but how bravely and responsibly they help a diverse nation talk its way back from the edge, again and again.

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