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EON gears up for challenges

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WHEN Malaysia first ventured into the national car project more than two decades ago, many said it would fail but Edaran Otomobil Nasional Bhd has proven it to be one of resilience.

The achievements of the national car project today through its roaring sales have silenced critics and earned sweet success through three awards recently: overall winner of Anugerah Kristal IPRM 2002 and Consumer Public Relations Category Award, and the Most PR Savvy CEO 2002.

EON managing director Datuk Adzmi Abdul Wahab, who won the CEO award, has been responsible for helping project a positive image for the Proton car, and consumer sentiment for the national car is high today judging from huge turnouts at autofairs and long-waiting period for new models.

Adzmi, 60, first entered the national car project in 1982 when he joined Hicom Bhd as its corporate planning manager, later becoming Proton's administration and finance general manager in 1985. He was appointed EON managing director in 1992.

Dedicating the award to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for having mooted the national car project as well as the EON board, management and staff and collaborative efforts of others including principal PROTON, he also attributed his sharpened PR skills to his relationship with his wife.

What did the brand-building campaign entail for the national car, which has, over the years, received international accolades, and silenced critics who doubted the ability of Malaysians to acquire high-technology skills?

The campaign, he said, required creativity, that is, thinking out of the box. It had to be responsive, innovative, a "first" in its attempt and unique in its characteristics, he added.

"Dropping A Proton Wira On The North Pole" (in 1998) was one example. This was a collaborative effort between EON and PROTON, and a major first for an Asian car. Hitting the icy ground, the car started without hesitation and laid to rest all doubts about the strength, quality, durability and integrity of Proton cars."

To demonstrate that there is a loyal following of Proton car owners, EON organised the EON/Proton Penang Bridge Merdeka Drive, which saw more than 10,000 Proton car owners waiting to cross the Penang Bridge.

In the first hour, 2,713 Proton cars led by Dr Mahathir in pole position charted an entry into the Malaysia Book of Records for the longest fleet of cars of a single brand.

Now, 19 years down the road and with EON riding high on a wave of successful car sales with more than 1.8 million Proton cars, Adzmi described the job in building the brand, sales, after sales and used cars, customer service, the business and the national car project as still on-going.

"As the PM says, 'Perjuangan belum selesai'. Ahead of us, there is a highly competitive environment and the challenges from the Asean Free Trade Area. And, I must stress 'Penjualan belum selesai'.

In the citation for Adzmi, IPRM said he was considered by many as an exemplary individual who had embraced the art of PR in today's complicated business environment, a PR practitioner at his best even though his tertiary skills are deeply rooted in economics and business administration.

In the light of a rapidly changing business environment, he said much of PR success had evolved around effective communications, consultation and delegation, and answering to the needs of customers and stakeholders.

Public relations is fast becoming a respected profession for its impact and value to companies, governments and organisations.

"Today's operating environment demands good corporate governance and timely transparency, and public relations practitioners are expected to lead or provide the necessary support to the management in private and public sectors.

"PR practitioners should always strive to excel in terms of knowledge and expertise, to be on top of things, always ready to offer solutions to challenges, and earn the trust of the chief executive officer or heads of an organisation.

"This requires constant reading, learning, understanding and appreciation of today's business trends and volatile market forces as it applies in our fast changing and challenging business environment. They must be responsive in a timely and professional manner and be excellent in meeting customers' needs.

"Whether corporate, government or NGOs, the challenge is to be able to provide the right public relations solutions to the given challenges; it has to be innovative, unique and relevant to the needs of your target audiences."

Adzmi said that CEOs, being the first PR persons in their respective organisation, would find a PR course, which includes media training, useful.

In doing so, CEOs can learn how to avoid being taken out of context and how to get their message across in the right perspective if they subscribe to public relations training.

He outlined the important ingredients for a company's PR project to take off successfully.

Projects, he said, must support business objectives through foresight, proper planning, providing the right resources, measuring the success and collective support such as media, government and the public.

"Capture the big picture for the project. Take corporate brand building, for example. "The most important questions for any company are: What is the business of this business, and, what are the critical and measurable goals of this business? These are the starting points for business strategy, for making choices and for managing the company's business in the right way.

"From this line of thought, and from implementing an effective strategy, one can develop the optimum path to success for the business and therefore, ensure whatever public relations tools that are undertaken, it will be in tandem with the business or organisational goals."

In doing so, he warned of the pitfalls to look out for especially since a lot of business-to-business orientated companies today think public relations was just a gimmick invented to separate them from their money.

"If your company is going to be successful with public relations, however, there are a few other common pitfalls you need to avoid from the beginning.

"For instance, don't start talking before you know what to say (have a good set of talking points), don't confuse short-term selling with long-term marketing and don't confuse public relations with Press relations.

"PR is a myriad of communication activities from investor relations, community relations, dealer relations, employee relations, government relations, industrial relations, customer relations, international relations, special events, publications as in newsletters and annual reports, sponsorship, writing, and more.

"Other pitfalls include the inability to anticipate the unexpected, lack of attention to the fine details, inability to understand issues at hand, poor planning, weak implementation, lack of sensitivity for a multi-racial