

**PR Act means no more Apco
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COMMENT There is one group of public relations consultants in favour of the introduction of the Public Relations (PR) Act while another is opposed to it.

While the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) wants the speedy introduction of the Act, the Public Relations Consultants Association Malaysia (PRCA) is saying no to the act. However, the PRCA is all for the PR industry to be self-regulated.

In a dialogue held last Thursday, both IPRM and PRCA presented their side of the story to about 100 practitioners and government officials who were bent on supporting IPRM's push for the implementation of the Act.

NONEPublic relations made headlines recently when foreign consultant Apco came under fire for its alleged Jewish roots and for advising the PM's department.

Unlike Apco which got a contract worth RM78 million, Malaysian spin doctors get crumbs. A Malaysian PR company would be fortunate to even get RM1 million in billings for one year, and to track one down that actually does is difficult.

That Apco be paid such a hefty amount when local PR consultants are having difficulty raking out a living is clearly unfair.

The irony is that the US-based agency has only two foreign consultants; the other staff who execute the jobs in Apco are all Malaysians would not in total earn even RM1 million if they worked five years for Apco.

For this reason Apco stands out like a sore thumb, but Malaysians seem to have forgotten the fact. Meanwhile this company continues to guide the PM's office on how to massage the minds of the rakyat.

Is regulation necessary?

What was more shocking to Malaysians is that it is unusual for a contract to be signed in the Prime Minister's Office, which was the case with Apco.

However, the PM's office will not be able to continue to enjoy Apco's services if the proposed PR Act is passed, as the act forbids foreign PR companies from taking up local jobs.

While IPRM and PRCA may not favour the idea of Apco getting a RM78 million contract from the PM's office without an open tender, PRCA feels that the PR Act violates World Trade Organisation's rules in restricting entry of international PR companies.

It feels there is always need in the communications industry for well-qualified professional assistance from abroad, especially in today's rapidly changing socio-economic environment.

What is the compelling rationale to legislate the PR industry?

PRCA president Julia Ahmad says there is no justification, as the industry is not under siege; there has been no incidence of fraud, unethical activities or incredibly poor quality work of any magnitude.

"Public relations practitioners are bound directly or indirectly by the regulations that govern their clients, and therefore have to be accountable and responsible for their actions.

"There is ample legislation related to our clients' industries that govern the way in which we practice our

trade, how we provide advice and other communications-related services to our clients.

"Public relations is a management service; its success is determined by market forces, not by regulation. The market will determine the good and the bad, and make the distinction. Legislation does not," Julia said.

'Act will drive professionalism'

Meanwhile IPRM president Hamdan Adnan said that the PR industry was fragmented and needs to be unified.

"There is a poor understanding of what PR is and what it is not, and that there was a negative image of PR professionals as 'spin doctors', 'flakes', 'PR doctors', 'apple polishers', 'airheads' and others."

Hamdan Adnan interview 280706 reflecting For this reason, Hamdan (left) said that PR practitioners had not earned respect and the profession not recognised.

Therefore, he said there was a need to review PR practices, PR education and skills training to be competitively benchmarked with professional standards to meet global needs.

"So the Act will drive professionalism, like other professions and close the 'legitimacy gap'." One thing is for sure, having legislation via the proposed Act does not automatically raise standards or quality of the public relations industry in Malaysia. And mandating accreditation does not automatically ensure high quality either.

Contradicting liberalisation policy

Any legislation will require enforcement; any accreditation process requires the accrediting body itself to be of the highest standards. Who is to monitor adherence to the proposed legislation, and potentially enforce the punitive aspects of the proposed legislation?

If we want legislation, be prepared to pay equal measure to enforcement, or else, pay the price of making a mockery of the legislation.

As mentioned, the proposed Act will also contravene Malaysia's compliance of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The public relations industry is dynamic, and there is constant growth and development of knowledge, methodology, strategies and approaches to communications issues. We must benefit from the dynamism by embracing openness of the industry, not impose barriers via accreditation.

The Act will also counter the government's liberalisation of the PR industry as one of the 27 services sub-sectors under management consulting services. The proposed Act will place barriers which can hinder the material transfer of technical knowledge from, and access to, foreign expertise.

Conversely, it may also lead to a brain drain, with experienced Malaysian public relations practitioners moving overseas.

Taking a leaf from overseas, so far there is no evidence of improved standards in four countries that have such legislation in place: Brazil, Greece, Nigeria and Panama.

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