

The Rebranding of Perdana KLCC As a Muslim-Friendly Hotel from Islamic Public Relations Perspective

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Abstract

The rapid development in Islamic tourism or halal tourism contributed to the high demand for halal services. One of the sectors that received the impact in this new dimension is Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH) which leads to a transformation from a conventional hotel to a Muslim-friendly hotel. The effort to brand MFH needs public relations expertise that functions as a powerful medium in planning branding strategies through the creation of identity, image, and reputation. This paper aims to examine the branding strategies of Perdana Kuala Lumpur City Centre (Perdana KLCC) as MFH through Islamic public relations perspectives. It intends to highlight Islamic perspectives based on the reason that conventional public relations are less appropriate to study Islamic branding in Islamic-based organisations as the foundations are contradicted. Besides that, this paper also wishes to study the functions of Islamic public relations in the branding process. Data for this study was gathered through in-depth interview and document analysis by applying content analysis. Two informants at Perdana KLCC have been chosen to be interviewed to get the data. The findings are showing that the strategies of Islamic public relations significantly contributed to the branding creation of Muslim-friendly hotels as it produces identity and image that align with Islamic teaching. The findings also revealed that values in Islamic public relations

contribute effectively to the branding of MFH. Therefore, it gives a clear insight into the concept of Islamic public relations in MFH that leads to a positive image of MFH.

Keywords: Public Relations, Islamic Public Relations, Muslim-Friendly Hotel, Branding, Identity and Image

Introduction

The increasing demand for Muslim-friendly services is growing in line with the rise of Muslim tourists worldwide. The Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) (2018) report showed the growth of one billion users in the market comprising of Muslims including tourists from China and India which contributed to the growth in the sector. Malaysia ranks as the third Islamic country in the destination of choice after Saudi Arabia and Turkey (GMTI, 2018). Halal food attraction was a key factor for Muslim tourists to visit Malaysia as their destination (Universal Crescent Standard Center, 2013). In addition to the factor of halal foods, tourists are also interested in MFH service facilities. This growth in the tourism industry has provided an opportunity for MFH entrepreneurs to recognize and understand the needs of Muslim tourists (Khan, 2018), thus striving to fulfil them.

The implementation of MFH requires specific guidelines to ensure uniformity from all angles. The Department of Standards Malaysia in collaboration with the Islamic Tourism Center has taken proactive steps by launching a standard called 'MS2610: 2015 - Muslim-friendly Hospitality Services in late 2015. The objective of this standard is to enhance the ability of organizations and individuals to produce and manage Muslim-friendly products and services that adhere to shariah principles. Also, these standards play a role in preserving and safeguarding the system and integrity of service products and the Islamic tourism of the country (Mustaffa, 2016). The next objective of this standard is to increase consumer satisfaction by meeting their needs (Malaysian Standards, 2015). This standard is also provided due to awareness in the importance of the halal tourism industry and the increasing sensitivity of Muslim consumers to halal products and services (Battour et al., 2012; Battour et al., 2010; Jafari & Scott, 2014), in addition to being useful guidelines for industry insiders especially in dealing with Muslim clients. Other standards that assist in the implementation of MFH are the Halal Food Standards (MS 1500), the Shariah-based Quality Management System (MS 1900), the Islamic Quality Standard for Hotel (IQS) as well as the 'Salam Standard' (Tukiran & Kamri, 2018).

Perdana KLCC is also not an exception in responding to current economic challenges by transforming MFH in 2015. Previously, the hotel was known as PNB Darby Park and was owned by Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB), and jointly owned by PNB Management Services Sdn Berhad (PMSSB) and Darby Park (Management) Pte Ltd. The hotel name then changed to PNB Perdana Hotel & Suites on the Park Kuala Lumpur when its managed 100% by PMSSB (a hospitality management company of PNB). In 2019, Perdana KLCC was completely owned and managed by Attana Hotels & Resorts Sdn. Bhd (previously known as PMSSB). The success of Perdana KLCC in implementing the Muslim-friendly concept as a whole has opened the eyes of many and is considered one of the biggest successes in the Islamic hospitality sector. Transforming PNB Darby Park into PNB Perdana Hotel & Suites on the Park and later to Perdana KLCC as MFH certainly requires hard work. It involves the branding process of Perdana KLCC as MFH which requires a strong commitment to being well-known not only to local but international tourists as well. In addition to introducing Perdana

KLCC to tourists, Perdana KLCC's new image also needs to be conveyed to local organisations to realise the hotel's transformation into an MFH.

Branding Perdana KLCC as an MFH requires public relations expertise, especially in promotional activities involving the introduction of new identities and images. The element of public relations enables a hotel to be competitive in the market and the role of public relations is seen as critical in ensuring the success of the hotel industry today (Tomasevik, 2009). In addition, Broom and Sha (2013) stated that public relations are a management function that includes planning, organising, leading and controlling the organisation of work within an organisation. Therefore, this paper seeks to look at the method of rebranding Perdana KLCC as MFH through Islamic public relations strategies. In addition, this paper aims to explore the value of Islamic public relations in the branding and the functions involved.

Methodology

This study was conducted to look at the branding of Perdana KLCC through the function of Islamic-based public relations. Two informants were selected for the purpose of explaining several related questions in one in-depth interview session. An in-depth interview method was chosen because it is the ideal method for understanding an informant's social perspective (Lindlof, 1995). The first informant is the Assistant Vice President, Branding & Marketing of the Attana Hotels & Resorts Sdn Bhd (the PNB's hospitality subsidiary that managed Perdana KLCC and other five hotels nationwide) and the second informant is the Religious Officer at Perdana KLCC. The criteria set for both informants were more than five years of work experience to obtain a clearer picture of the situation under study. Interview sessions for both sessions lasted for one hour and 15 minutes and were recorded for transcribing by the researchers. Transcription data were then qualitatively analysed using inductive content analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method requires the researcher to briefly note the statements made by the involved informants. Further, the researchers formulate themes from the results of repeated transcription analysis to ensure the validity of the statements. The findings of this study will be discussed according to the theme formed through the data analysis.

Public Relations in Muslim-Friendly Hotels

The implementation of Islamic public relations practices from the point of view of Perdana KLCC creates positive values and can further enhance the image of Perdana KLCC as MFH. The success of Perdana KLCC can be considered the biggest breakthrough in the Islamic hospitality sector, making it a reference to several other hotel chains who have sought the advice of said hotel management in implementing the concept. Ismail (2017) explained about the blessing of Allah SWT when the hotel achieved an increase in profits when implementing a Muslim-friendly concept even without selling alcohol and so on.

In addition to meeting the Islamic consumer market needs reaching up to 1.8 billion, MFH also acts as one of the ways for *jihad* for the Muslim economy, through the selection of suppliers such as hotel bath sets, raw material suppliers, open employment opportunities for women wearing hijab in the frontline or front desk while providing the opportunity for the Muslim workforce and professionals which are somewhat overlooked in other sectors. In fact, the MFH also received an overwhelming response from non-Muslim tourists for the cleanliness and uniqueness offered (Ismail, 2016).

The value gained from this practice of Islamic public relations lies in the framework of worship that makes it different from the common practice. Conventional practices do not place *sharia* as the basis of public relations. Therefore, these conventional practices do whatever possible to maximise profits. The function of public relations, in general, is to help organisations compete at their best through refining the image and reputation, which in turn leads to profitability. The means of achieving the desired profit must be based on Islam because Islam does not recognize or prohibit every act that is harmful to the people, and it goes beyond humanitarian policy.

In addition, public relations is the best function of disseminating information that can benefit from its function by spreading da'wah through various channels or mediums. Sulaiman (2007) lists seven mediums commonly used in communication activities. Figure 1.0 shows a list of the indicated mediums.

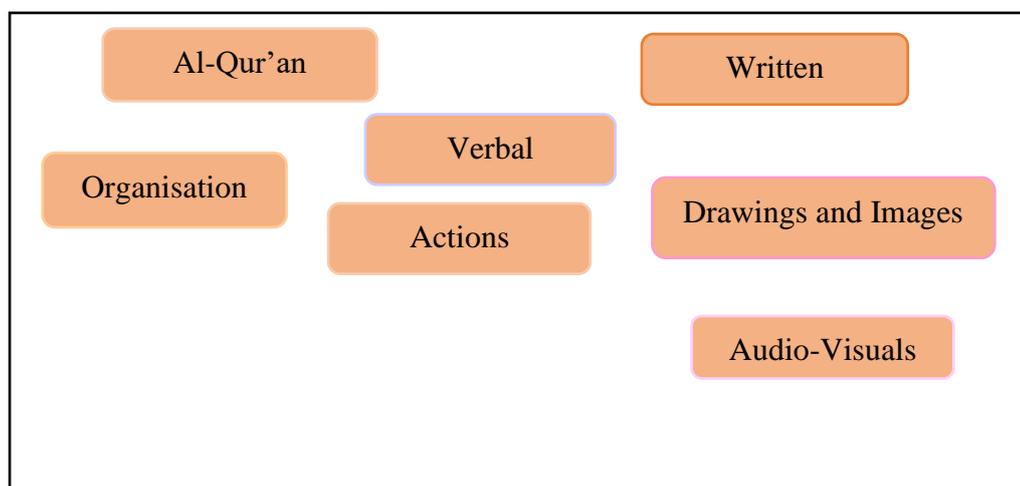


Figure 1.0: Communication Channels

Figure 1.0 shows seven channels that can be used by public relations practitioners in MFH as agents of delivering the Islamic message. First, the Qur'an placed in each room can serve as a communication agent if utilised by each individual. It contains information on all aspects of life that can be used as life guidance. Second, MFH is an organisation that can communicate Islamic messages through its shariah-compliant image. The prominence of the Islamic image will open the eyes of the hotel customers which in turn will leave an impression on them. The third channel is verbal and is the most widely used channel by public relations practitioners.

Fourth is through written means. The importance of this medium requires public relations practitioners to make the most of it by selecting and displaying pleasant words on every printed material and content of the MFH website. Printed materials such as brochures, brochures, posters, magazines and letters are the best medium for promoting good values. The fifth medium is drawings and images. According to Sulaiman (2007), these two mediums are the oldest in the history of communication. Accuracy in the portrayal of images is important in advertising activity so it is consistent with the message conveyed. Additionally, public relations practitioners can display pictures and drawings to convey this Islamic message in the MFH building itself.

Next are the actions. Every human tends to see behaviour instead of words. Actions can also be categorised in non-verbal communication which is acknowledged to be more widely used than verbal communication. Thus, public relations practitioners need to set an example of best practices and actions through the application of values by The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as their principle of action. The seventh medium audio and visuals, is getting influential and is the choice of many in this era. Monitoring of the graphic and word selection aspects is essential to ensure the message of *da'wah* is conveyed to the target audience.

In addition, the value of Islamic-based public relations is in line with the MFH's identity and image. Good public relations practices will give the hotel a positive image. According to PR002 (2018), the function of public relations is increasingly critical as MFH does not offer some of the services available in conventional hotels such as liquor and non-halal foods. Theoretically, this could reduce the number of MFH customers, but well-established Islamic public relations that function well are believed to be able to attract customers to continue to choose MFH as they are impressed by the good and friendly service and the high virtue exhibited by all hotel staff that may not be available at a conventional hotel.

Branding as A Public Relations Function

Branding is one of the main functions of public relations. However, it is also a concept in marketing. The definition of a brand or brand itself has different meanings and different definitions in its own context. Prominent scholars in marketing define branding as strength within their own products and services (Kotler & Keller, 2015). The American Marketing Association (2015) defines branding as the branding activity of a product or service that includes the name, shape, symbol or other feature that distinguishes one manufacturer from another. Brand ownership is a valuable asset to an organisation which grants a competitive advantage. From an individual point of view, Quart (2003) explains that brands are used to develop a person's image and identity, acceptance and recognition in society and increase in self-worth. In fact, brands have become a popular idea and a group of ideas lives with their owners (Grant, 2000). Crosby Associates considers brands an essential element of life that needs to be nurtured, maintained and disciplined in order to survive and grow (Wheeler, 2009).

Explaining the definition of branding in the context of MFH can be concluded as a process that gives the hotel meaning across its services and products offered by creating and shaping a brand in the mind of the consumer, this branding strategy must be developed by the MFH itself to ensure that it is known to the public. The objective of branding is to attract and retain loyal customers by providing quality service in line with brand promises (Kotler & Keller, 2015). This brand promise is important as an indicator for measuring the image of an organisation.

The process of transforming Perdana KLCC into an MFH has the potential to attract based on location factors. It is located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur and is one of Malaysia's first Muslim-friendly hospitality brands located near Petronas Twin Towers and LRT stations (Johari, 2017). However, the factor of location alone does not guarantee the effectiveness or success of an organisation if not equipped with the right strategy. A hotel can only make a name globally through organised and ongoing public relations activities. Linton (2016) described these planned and consistent activities as enabling them to identify potential

issues, change the negative perceptions of the hotel, create synergy between all stakeholders such as employees, employers, media and especially with the customers, and offer the best possible services to future customers. Most organisations are unaware that public relations are the most effective marketing asset to enhance a hotel's reputation. Public relations also allow a hotel to freely create its own identity in the most creative way to attract potential customers through a public relations campaign.

The above discussion deals with branding strategies through public relations. This paper aims to look at the method of Islamic-based public relations in the branding of Perdana KLCC based on the rationale behind studying Islamic-based organisations through Islamic methods. This is because the policy derived from the current practice of public relations is not in line with the policy of Islamic-based public relations based on two major sources of Shariah, the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*.

Analysis of Perdana klcc Branding

Discussions on Perdana KLCC's branding methods are conducted in the context of Islamic-based public relations through data obtained from the interview analysis. The findings show that there are at least three key functions of public relations at Perdana KLCC namely advertising, council management, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Informants explained the function or scope of conventional public relations works with Islamic-based public relations is quite similar. The difference lies in the way the function is implemented because every function in Islamic public relations prioritises the *Shari'a* as the basic principle (PR002, 2018).

“Everything that we do is at the very top of it we put the Quran and the hadith so that what we do is on track based on shariah basis. Usually, people declare halal hotels and so on, they only have halal restaurants”

The PR002 (2018) clarification was further strengthened when he stated that there were specific guidelines for the implementation of all public relations functions and other functions within the hotel. Hotels that declare themselves Muslim-friendly should apply this Islamic-based practice, especially to form the MFH brand. He also added that the halal of a hotel is not only about the preparation of food and drink, but it is comprehensive in ensuring the purity of Islam. For example, in advertising activities, every advertisement issued requires the approval of a religious officer in advance for approval in all aspects such as graphic selection, word choice and model usage.

PR001 (2018) states that any management of an event that is to be held should be refined first so that no error is made especially in the case of violation of the shariah principles contained in the guidelines.

“In organising an event, there are no female singers if we follow JAKIM guidelines, which are entertainment guidelines. If there is an event I will follow JAKIM, JAWI or mufti guidelines to gain strong support. Why do I do this is because the fatwa said so. If there is an event providing a quotation, we also include JAKIM guidelines. We will mention in the quotation about terms and conditions to the client, for example if the client wants to have a company event such as an annual dinner. For example, according to JAKIM guidelines, male singers are okay, female

singers are not prohibited but there are conditions. From the standpoint of song selection, usage. An example is if an overseas artist wants to perform her dress code. She can't be too sexy. "

(PR002, 2018)

Explanation of PR002 indicates that Perdana KLCC emphasises compliance with guidelines in the implementation of event management functions. PR001 (2018) also states that hotel management will take action against customers who violate the guidelines.

"Before this karaoke was a no, but now it's all right but with compliance to the terms of the song selection. Another thing is overacting, hugging is prohibited. There was one time when a female guest in the Perdana KLCC danced a bit too much that she went out to a corridor. I don't want to ruin the company image; people will say "is Perdana KLCC a nightclub? So, I forbid karaoke. We do not want to punish but to educate. So, if you want this karaoke there are guidelines, you can sing but obey the dress code, if there is *Azan*, slow the volume or turn it off"

The act of disobeying the guidelines by customers caused the hotel's karaoke activity to be temporarily halted to educate the client about the importance of adhering to or following the guidelines. Ignoring the guidelines will damage the image of the hotel if failed to resolve properly. According to PR001 (2018), the views of public relations practitioners are taken into account in this regard.

"The public relations unit is always requested and considered in many things. We used to have a traditional dance event but now since there is a religious official, every event cannot be mixed. This means that if there is a prayer recital, the events mentioned before cannot be held and the views of the religious person are considered by the management".

Explanation of PR001 (2018) shows that management considers public relations practitioners and also adheres to the advice of religious officers on the procedure and ethics of managing an event.

The Perdana KLCC branding also involves corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities as one of the functions of public relations. Among the activities of CSR are donating to orphans, and holding prayer appreciation workshops in cooperation with Surau of Bank Islam, the KLCC mosque program and other mosques under it. This activity received an overwhelming response from the masses due to very low fees (PR002, 2018). In addition, PR001 (2018) added, Perdana KLCC took precautionary measures in every CSR activity, especially sponsorship. PR001 (2018) states:

"Like the *F1*, he suggested we sponsor the accommodation so as a result of that sponsorship they will put company stickers on the F1 Car. So, our issue is, sponsorship is fine. The problem is when the car shows up and there are women around the car which can jeopardise our image. So, we are not sponsors."

This explanation indicates that Perdana KLCC cares about the implications towards the organisation's image if they do not follow the CSR guidelines. Obviously, MFH's status needs to be safeguarded as much as possible to uphold Islam's sanctity and display images consistent with the hotel brand.

Implementation of Islamic-based public relations functions symbolizes Perdana KLCC taking appropriate action in forming a Muslim-friendly brand. This is because the function of public relations is carried out in accordance with *sharia* sources which involve special monitoring of religious officers so that each function performed does not exceed the guidelines.

Suggestions and Conclusions

The findings show the Perdana KLCC branding method as MFH through the practice of Islamic public relations. The goal of Perdana KLCC branding is said to be successful because Perdana KLCC is now widely known as the MFH in the heart of the city and even among the top choices among Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. The involvement of religious officers in advising on all aspects of implementing Islamic public relations functions further strengthened the image of Perdana KLCC and was consistent with *Sharia* principles. The values in Islamic-based public relations are the key difference between conventional public relations practices. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other MFHs, the findings provide a new dimension to the basis of Islamic-based public relations that should be indicative to other MFHs.

Future studies can be done through case studies or interviews at other MFHs to obtain more comprehensive results and enable comparisons of public relations practices of MFH in Malaysia. In addition, various studies can be conducted to examine public relations practitioners' views on the concept of Islamic-based public relations in MFH to produce a generalizable finding.

This study is significant as it contributed to the body of knowledge and practice as well. Theoretically, this study is one of the contributions to viewing the Islamic-based public relations methods in the Islamic hospitality service. The application of Islamic public relations practices in any Islamic-based organization should be examined so that it does not conflict with Islamic law. Studies on Islamic-based public relations are studied in the MFH environment. Thus, this study contributes to the development of new concepts in both communications and hospitality as it can be said to be a pioneer that opens up Islamic public relations practices in the context of Islamic hospitality.

Islamic-based public relations is also important to study because religion is a tool for uniting human beings, and it suits the role of public relations to promote the value of goods to the entire public. Furthermore, it is a social responsibility to encourage the implementation of Islamic-based public relations in Islamic organizations in particular. In conclusion, in order to strengthen the practice of Islamic-based public relations at MFH in Malaysia, the government should support the implementation of MFHs through various ways to encourage more hoteliers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to brand their hotels as MFH.

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