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TQPR Thailand: from crisis to strategic revival

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Abstract

Title: TQPR Thailand: from crisis to strategic revival

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This Case Study analyzes the strategic adaptation of TQPR Thailand, a public relations agency, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Through qualitative data from internal reports, interviews, and industry sources, the research explores how the agency navigated a market collapse, retaining the relationships with clients and transforming its service model.

This thesis demonstrates how TQPR leveraged trust and transparency to remain competitive using theories from strategic resilience, digital transformation, client relationship management. The case highlights a hybrid transformation approach, where modular changes, supported continuity and preserved the identity.

TQPR's case offers insights into the challenges and opportunities for mid-sized service firms which operates in volatile markets such as Thai PR Market.

The case raises critical questions about how mid-sized service firms can adapt under uncertainty without compromising their identity, bringing up a reflection on crisis-driven decision-making, client relationship strategies in disrupted markets, and digital transformation. These issues are explored through the firm's case study and the strategic dilemmas posed in the following teaching note to help instructors for the in-class discussion.

Keywords: Public Relations, Strategic Resilience, Digital Transformation, Crisis Management, Client Relationship.

Resumo

Título: TQPR Tailândia: da crise ao renascimento estratégico

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Este estudo de caso analisa a adaptação estratégica da TQPR Tailândia, uma agência de relações públicas, durante e após a crise da COVID-19. Através de dados qualitativos provenientes de relatórios internos, entrevistas e fontes do setor, a pesquisa explora como a agência navegou pelo colapso do mercado, mantendo as relações com os clientes e transformando o seu modelo de serviço.

Esta tese demonstra como a TQPR aproveitou a confiança e a transparência para se manter competitiva, utilizando teorias de resiliência estratégica, transformação digital e gestão de relacionamento com o cliente. O caso destaca uma abordagem de transformação híbrida, em que mudanças modulares apoiaram a continuidade e preservaram a identidade.

O caso da TQPR oferece insights sobre os desafios e oportunidades para empresas de serviços de médio porte que operam em mercados voláteis, como o mercado tailandês de relações públicas.

O caso levanta questões críticas sobre como as empresas de serviços de médio porte podem se adaptar à incerteza sem comprometer sua identidade, trazendo uma reflexão sobre a tomada de decisões impulsionada por crises, estratégias de relacionamento com o cliente em mercados perturbados e transformação digital. Essas questões são exploradas por meio do estudo de caso da empresa e dos dilemas estratégicos apresentados na nota didática a seguir para ajudar os instrutores na discussão em sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: Relações Públicas, Resiliência Estratégica, Transformação Digital, Gestão de Crises, Relacionamento com o Cliente.

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1. Case Study

It was a humid May morning in 2021 in Bangkok, and Tom Van Blarcom, 60 years old, the owner of TQPR Thailand, sat at his desk, scrolling through his inbox. Every single email he was receiving brought the same disheartening news, clients were postponing media engagements, canceling press conferences and indefinitely shelving product launches.

For over 20 years, TQPR Thailand had the privilege of being considered as one of Thailand's top public relation firms, providing services not just to local businesses and multinational corporations, but to government agencies and public institutions as well. (Top 5 PR Firms in Thailand, 2016)

Since Tom joined the company to manage the office of Bangkok in 1997, he navigated different economic downturns, including the worldwide recession of 2008 and the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

Now the COVID-19 outbreak, which had slightly affected the country starting from March 2020, had finally arrived fully, leading citizens to strict lockdowns, widespread uncertainty for the economy, and a sudden stop to business as usual. (Belghith & Arayavechkit, 2024) Bangkok's bustling event venues were empty, reporters worked from home, and corporate executives refused to support any public facing project. At this point, looking out over the city skyline, Tom couldn't ignore the feeling that this crisis was unlike anything TQPR had ever faced before.

Unlike past challenges, the pandemic had put nearly all industries on pause. TQPR's fundamental activities, operations, press conferences, brand activations, and high-profile networking gatherings, which had always been key to delivering value to its clients, had now disappeared overnight. The financial impact was immediate.

As Tom leaned back on his chair, he was wondering whether TQPR could reinvent itself quickly enough to survive. If traditional PR methods were no longer effective, was there a way forward, or was this the beginning of an irreversible decline?

1.1. Thai PR Industry

In the 1990s, when TQPR was founded, Thailand's PR industry was in its nascent stages. Then, in 1997, the Asian financial crisis impacted the country's economy, raising awareness and spurring an initial demand for professional PR services, with a focus on media relations, corporate communications, and reputation management. As Thailand's economy recovered in the first quarter of 2000, the PR industry experienced a good expansion. Businesses increased

investments in PR activities, PR departments within organizations became more and more important, and the education of public relations gained traction with the help of universities, which started introducing communication programs for the new generation of professionals. Furthermore, the internet and digital technologies helped revolutionize the PR landscape in Thailand in the mid 2000s. This shift led to the study of new strategies to engage audiences, manage online reputation, and exploit digital content. Throughout the 2010s, PR in Thailand evolved considerably, traditional media relations integrated with marketing communications, influencer partnerships, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. The industry's role became increasingly strategic. When 2020 arrived, it hit the global economy with unprecedented challenges due to COVID19, and Thailand was no exception. The major task for PR firms was the ability to navigate and rapidly adapt to changes brought by the new situation.

Even though this was a global crisis, it highlighted the industry's resilience and adaptability in Thailand, as a survey conducted by the Public Relations and Communications Association showed: over 80% of industry professionals in the Thai Industry believed that COVID-19 strengthened the relevance of PR services. (Staff, 2025) (Munis, 2022) (see Exhibit2)

From the humble beginnings in the late 1990s to its prominent status, Thailand's PR industry matured into an indispensable sector, playing a pivotal role for Thailand national economy. Hence, Thailand's Entertainment and Media (E&M) industry, reached approximately 691,400.00 million Thai baht, 18,800.00 million euros. (see Exhibit 1) A forecast developed by PWC suggested the E&M Thai sector to reach 21,800.00 million euros by 2028. (Bangkok Post, 2024) (see Exhibit 2)

Several PR agencies have emerged as key players in the country's market, and contributed to Thailand' PR Industry growth: (Top 5 PR Firms in Thailand, 2016)

Midas PR Group, established in 2007 and based in Bangkok, was a PR agency that combines good local connections with international experience, and offering services such as event management, branding, and digital strategy. (Admin, 2025)

JC&CO Communications was founded in 2008 in Bangkok, specializing in public relations and digital strategy. Their main competence was represented by tailored communication solutions, with a focus on brand visibility enhancement. (JC&CO, n.d.)

Vero was instead an award-winning communications consultancy based in Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Indonesia that specialized in integrated marketing strategies. (Vero, 2024)

Asia Media Publishing Group, established in 2017, was recognized as a comprehensive media and marketing company specializing in brand development, marketing communications, and video production. (Asia Media Publishing Group, n.d.)

1.2. TQPR Thailand

TQPR was founded in 1995 by Gai Chaplen in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam; and it had a simple yet bold vision: to help every single business succeed in the Southeast Asia media landscape.

Two years later the journey took a significant turn, when, in 1997, Tom joined the company from London to manage the new Bangkok office along with the one in Naypyidaw in Myanmar. As Tom always mentioned, the road was not easy, indeed, just a year later, the Jakarta office closed due to massive riots and political unrest in Indonesia.

Over the years, after this unexpected setback, Tom, with his previous experience as a public relation professional and manager, gradually started to acquire shares in the company. When Gai passed away in 2009, Tom took full ownership of TQPR, with offices in Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Naypyidaw, and Bangkok, that had become the company headquarter.

In December 2018 TQPR's revenue reached 36.120 million for the current year with a net profit of 2,04% equal to 736,000.00, representing one of the leading PR and communications agencies in the whole country offering a wider range of services, with a mix of traditional and digital PR strategies. (see Exhibit 3)

The firm served over 20 clients across different industries, including technology, luxury goods, financial services, and healthcare, with some of its top clients represented by Hong Leong Group, Stripe, NokAir, JPMorgan, Galerie Quynh Contemporary Art, and Yeo Workshop. (see Exhibit 4) The company's workforce included 18 professional staff specializing in strategic planning, corporate positioning, media relations, influencer engagement, crisis management, and digital marketing. (IMF, 2021) (see Exhibit 5)

TQPR generated approximately 30% of its revenue from corporate positioning and image strategies, 25% from media relations and influencer engagement, 20% from strategic planning, counseling, reputation management and crisis handling, and the remaining 25% from PR and various digital marketing communications. (see Exhibit 5)

However, the real test came up with the immediate and severe outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Thailand facing its worst wave of infections in the beginning of April 2021. From that moment in person meetings, press events and media gatherings began to be canceled indefinitely, revenues started dropping sharply, and TQPR had to make very difficult decisions. 2021 was not just about surviving but about reinventing the business, with a question needing immediate answers: how could TQPR shift from a model based on personal relationships and face-to-face interactions to one that was entirely digital?

1.3. The Revival of TQPR Thailand

1.3.1. The Days before the Revival

In early 2021, Thailand's economy stood at a crossroads. COVID-19 affected nearly every sector. It led to a 6.1% contraction in Thailand's GDP by the end of 2020, marking its largest decline since the Asian financial crisis. The tourism sector, contributing about 20% of GDP, was particularly affected due to halted international travel. (see Exhibit 6)

PR was particularly vulnerable. The industry had evolved over decades in the country. Even though it went beyond media relations, at its core, PR remained deeply personal, built on handshakes, boardroom meetings, and press conferences. Suddenly, those methods were impossible.

As lockdowns spread, clients paused campaigns, canceled events, and slashed marketing budgets. Consumer behavior changed rapidly. Luxury brands, financial services, and hospitality clients were among the hardest hit. Advertising budgets were shrinking. PR firms had to justify the very purpose of their existence in this completely new reality.

The pandemic accelerated a long-brewing digital shift, while PR firms had integrated online strategies before COVID-19, most still relied on traditional event-based approaches; but now, digital engagement wasn't just an option - it was the only way forward.

Thailand's leading PR agencies took different approaches to survival.

Midas PR Group pivoted to digital strategies. With online workshops, influencer partnerships and content creation solutions, it managed to keep the engagement without in person events. (Admin,2025)

JC&CO Communications suffered from client losses as well as budget freezes, but it focused on helping clients adapt their messaging for the new era with crisis communication, ensuring its always strong public image. (JC&CO, n.d.)

Vero went a step further, recognizing that remote work was here to stay. They restructured internally, shifting entirely to a hybrid work model while developing immersive digital campaigns. A bold approach, that required significant investment, which turned to be successful. (Vero,2024)

Asia Media Publishing Group, the newer player in the market, leveraged video production and interactive digital content. It helped brands maintain an online presence. A strategy that worked well for larger companies but not for smaller businesses, who struggled to see the value in PR spending. (Asia Media Publishing Group, n.d.)

Unlike competitors, TQPR Thailand's core strength had always been personal engagement along with strong clients' relationships, a rooted trust that was always the key to its success. But, as April 2021 arrived, it became clear that those very strengths were now weaknesses. The immediate question wasn't just how to adapt but how to survive. While a bank overdraft provided temporary relief, it wasn't a long-term solution.

1.3.2. A Shockwave

In early 2021, Bangkok was quiet. Streets once buzzing with business activity were still and within a single week in April of that year, TQPR lost four retainer clients, two of them major ones. It was a record no one wanted because sudden cancellations weren't just about lost income. They were an early signal that the agency's traditional model might not survive in a contactless world.

Tom had already led the firm through regional crises but this time was different. *"Our biggest fear was survival itself"* Tom later recalled, *"We had no idea how long this would last or how deep it would go."*

TQPR's core value proposition was under threat and its strategy was no longer fitting the reality of a world going remote.

Pre-COVID, TQPR was a profitable and lean agency with a margin of 2,04% for 2018, serving industries such as aviation, technology, luxury, and financial services. 2019 was already a weak year, with a revenue of 35.240 millions but a negative net profit of 1.25 million. The onset of the pandemic triggered an industry-wide collapse across Thailand, PR efforts were paused, and after an already weak year, 2020 was really disappointing. (see Exhibit 3)

TQPR's client portfolio reflected this turbulence; Indeed, between 2020 and 2021, Razer, DJI, and Expedia disappeared from the roster. (see Exhibit 6)

Clients who decided to stay with TQPR like Airbus or Nissan, requested drastic reductions in retainers. In Nissan's case specifically, this came during a 70% collapse in car sales in 2020. Revenue plummeted, staff wages were TQPR's largest cost line, and in response, Tom had to implement tough financial measures.

From Tom's perspective, more than a financial crisis, this was a strategic identity crisis. TQPR, which had never relied on timesheets or commoditized billing, prided itself on value, trust, and overperformance, because for him clients weren't buying hours, but relationships, reputation protection, and the ability to navigate complex Southeast Asian markets with cultural sensitivity.

With lockdowns in place and journalists working from home, the foundations of that service model began to erode, "*Zoom didn't replace in-person sessions,*" said Tom, highlighting that "*Soon became clear that creativity, reaction speed, and idea-sharing were all taking a hit.*" The firm's strength, its human touch, was now its vulnerability.

From a logistical standpoint, remote work wasn't a major technical problem, TQPR quickly ensured secure, stable setups at home for all team members. However, culturally and operationally, cracks began to show.

The work was getting done, but not in the same way. Team dynamics suffered. Creativity slowed. Projects took longer. Clients noticed.

Crucially, internal feedback loops were now sluggish. At first it wasn't dramatic, but over months, the difference became undeniable. Without casual conversations, hallway ideas, and physical presence of the team, execution quality dropped.

In this mess TQPR wasn't alone enduring those challenges; although competitors pivoted aggressively, TQPR took a more measured path. It didn't pivot overnight. Instead, it focused on protecting what mattered for them: client trust, service consistency, and internal cohesion. For Tom this meant not cutting staff entirely, not closing offices, and resisting the urge to completely abandon the old model before the new one was clearly identified. Tom's bet was that the firm could weather the storm without abandoning its DNA, and that meant walking a fine line, cutting costs without cutting values.

By May 2021, the crisis had morphed from a shock into a new normal. Tom decided to make a controversial decision, i.e., to bring everyone back to the office, mentioning "*We gave staff ample warning, they understood. We were transparent from the start.*"

Tom and his team had to confront four difficult strategic choices:

The first was whether to cut costs even further. TQPR had already implemented salary reductions, but financial pressure continued to rise. Additional cuts might offer relief, but they risked damaging team morale as well.

The second option was to invest in digital transformation since the pandemic had rapidly accelerated the shift to digital communication.

The third path was to expand into new service areas. In this new fast changing world, the demand for things like crisis communication, internal communication and virtual offerings was growing.

The fourth was strategic alliances. TQPR was already part of the global PR network WorldCom, but the option of merging or partnering could extend its reach even more, although compromising its independence, one of the firm's most valued principles.

The biggest constraint was time; TQPR had secured an overdraft through a third-party partner, giving it breathing room. Within an uncertain recovery timeline, and with no government relief in sight for firms like TQPR, the question wasn't just how to act, but also when.

Tom couldn't afford to wait too long. Some opportunities appeared, Stripe came knocking, Lufthansa returned with emergency flight campaigns, and Airbus agreed to reduce retainers instead of a complete cut. These were lifelines, not solutions, and TQPR needed more than resilience. It needed reinvention.

With its business model no longer viable, its revenue streams drying up, its operational foundation under strain and its identity as a people-first PR firm at risk, pressure was increasing.

There was one advantage: trust, the only capital that hadn't depreciated, because clients trusted TQPR and employees trusted Tom.

TQPR needed to evolve, without erasing its essence.

1.3.3. Responding to the Pandemic: from Shock to Strategy

When the worst wave of COVID-19 shook Thailand's PR industry in early 2021, TQPR found itself standing at the edge of a cliff.

It was a complete erasure of everything the agency had built its value on, and for a lean agency with 18 professionals and a strong reputation, the shock was immediate and paralyzing.

Tom Van Blarcom, the veteran behind TQPR Thailand realized that the goal was not only survival but preserving the agency's core without breaking its spirit.

"We knew we had to react and plan," Tom said. "Survival itself became the focus. We had no idea how long this would last or how deep it would go."

The most immediate challenge was financial. TQPR's business model was retainer-based: long-term agreements with clients, usually renewed annually.

The system began to collapse.

The revenue, which had already dropped from an estimated €1 million in 2019 to around €650,000.00 in 2020, touched the lowest point in 2021 with €550,000.00. (see Exhibit 3)

Cash flow dried up; Tom had to act fast. After a full review of company expenses, it became clear that salaries accounted for the largest cost block. Drastic decisions were inevitable.

Unlike many agencies that laid off employees or closed operations in Southeast Asia, TQPR chose to take a more humane, transparent route; hence, Tom personally met with every team member. In each conversation the owner of TQPR explained the company's situation, the strategy to survive, and, most importantly, the value each individual still had within the company.

"We worked very closely with our team," he explained. "We made sure they fully understood exactly what was going on, and that they were heard."

Despite reducing staff from 18 to 14, the remaining employees were more senior and experienced. The goal wasn't to weaken the company; it was to streamline it for a prolonged storm.

This approach helped preserve morale and avoided internal panic.

Once financial breathing room was secured, attention turned to operations; with lockdowns and distancing measures taking effect, TQPR transitioned to remote work. Technically, this was manageable. The team had previous experience working from home occasionally. IT systems, supported by an external vendor, were quickly optimized for security and remote access.

The deeper issue was cultural though.

PR was a high-touch, collaborative industry. Brainstorming, pitching, writing, editing, much of it is done in real time, across desks, with constant feedback, and over Zoom, something changed. Momentum slowed down. Communication gaps widened. Team cohesion, the invisible glue behind fast delivery and creative problem-solving, started to fade.

"There was no sudden collapse," Tom noted, "but slowly, you could feel the work changing. It took longer to execute. Ideas weren't shared with the same energy."

Clients began to feel the difference too.

By late 2020, the management team noticed a worrying trend: delays, diluted messages, missed media hooks, prompting an internal review of communication flows, file-sharing processes, and meeting structures. However, no matter the digital tools, remote work was not sustainable for TQPR's model.

And so, in one of the most decisive moves of the entire pandemic response, TQPR became one of the first PR agencies in Bangkok to mandate a return to the office late April 2021.

The decision was not made lightly, but it was essential to restoring the company's competitive edge and protecting the delivery standards clients expected. The team had been kept in the loop from the beginning, so they returned without any resistance.

While restructuring internally, TQPR knew the real battle was external, i.e., retaining clients in an era of frozen budgets and corporate uncertainty.

TQPR chose to invest in loyalty even when contracts were inactive, and in several cases, Tom decided to keep delivering value, even to clients who had paused retainers.

For example, media monitoring and monthly reporting continued for specific clients at no charge. This was not charity; it was strategy.

"We showed loyalty," Tom explained, "even when some weren't paying us anymore. Some took advantage, yes. But others remembered."

Airbus, a client since 2003, negotiated a 29% retainer reduction during the pandemic. TQPR accepted without compromise on service quality and by 2021, Airbus extended the contract for three more years.

Lufthansa, after canceling its contract, returned to promote emergency flight campaigns during the peak of the pandemic.

Stripe, a new entrant, initially tried working with others but then turned to TQPR for a crowd-funded launch campaign; the campaign succeeded. Stripe became a core client.

Nissan, amidst a 70% drop in car sales, slashed its PR budget, but TQPR stayed and supported them through the downturn, and eventually saw the client return at full capacity.

This strategy, based on goodwill and overperformance, not only preserved long-term relationships, but also converted former clients into brand ambassadors, ready to speak about TQPR's reliability under pressure.

During the whole duration of this crisis TQPR was alone but not unarmed.

Unlike firms in Europe or the U.S., where stimulus packages cushioned some sectors, TQPR Thailand received no government support.

“There was no funding available for companies like ours,” Tom noted. “The government focused on lower-income families and individuals, not the service sector.”

With no external safety net, TQPR had to create its own, i.e., securing an overdraft line through a third-party partner bank, giving the agency the liquidity buffer needed to survive the first critical months.

This financial tool bought time. It allowed the agency to keep operations intact while reevaluating contracts and pitching new ones, bringing weeks of stability.

While other agencies sought partnerships or considered mergers, TQPR remained independent. Its only network affiliation was with WorldCom, a global alliance of PR agencies, which Tom used for benchmarking and informal advice but not for operational support.

The short-term strategies TQPR deployed in the first 12 months of the crisis formed the foundation of what would become its long-term revival. TQPR’s short-term strategies were aligned with the agency’s culture: preserve relationships, not just revenue; communicate transparently with employees; focus on delivery even when unpaid; reduce costs without destroying culture. TQPR’s leadership understood that COVID-19 was not just a financial crisis, but a reputational test. The way the agency behaved when no one was watching would define how clients remembered it when things returned to normal.

With the stabilization of the crisis and with new contracts appearing, TQPR emerged smaller, leaner, but also more resilient and trusted.

The groundwork was laid.

The next phase would not be about survival anymore, it would be about transformation.

1.3.4. Reinventing Relevance: The Long-Term Transformation of TQPR

By late May 2021, the storm had not passed, but it had changed. What started as a survival exercise was gradually turning into something more profound: a chance to rethink the foundations of public relations in Southeast Asia. TQPR Thailand, having navigated the turbulence of COVID-19 with careful cost reductions, transparent communication, and loyalty-driven client engagement, now faced a new question: How could it evolve to thrive and not just survive in a world that had changed forever?

The crisis had exposed vulnerabilities in TQPR's traditional model but also unveiled new opportunities. Tom reflected on the fact that if in-person interaction could disappear overnight, then trust, adaptability, and innovation had to take its place. While TQPR had remained operationally conservative during the worst months of the pandemic, the company was now ready to explore more transformative paths.

The Thai PR industry remained cautious but active. Zoom fatigue was real, but so was the new reality: digital PR wasn't a temporary fix, it was the new normal.

TQPR recognizing this shift not as a trend but as a strategic direction, had long delivered value through strategic counseling, media relations, and reputation management. Clients were demanding digital-first services, from social media strategies to influencer marketing and agile content production. This didn't mean abandoning its traditional expertise but integrating new layers into its existing services.

TQPR began supporting clients in mapping social media campaigns, identifying influencers, and developing online activations that replicated the effect of live events. The agency started with clients like Stripe and Amazon Global Selling, which needed hybrid outreach models that balanced press announcements with high-impact online visibility. Rather than targeting traditional media alone, the agency built new media lists that included key voices across Thai Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube; collaborating with content creators in lifestyle, tech, and finance to ensure that brand narratives reached both consumers and niche audiences. Relationships like this had to be cultivated digitally, and they required careful tracking, trust building, and analytics. In the absence of product launches and press tours, clients still needed a way to be visible, reason why TQPR responded by creating bespoke content calendars for corporate storytelling, thought leadership campaigns, and executive positioning. These were used across newsletters, LinkedIn, and local digital publications.

The pandemic had made crisis communication more important and more complex. Now, a delayed tweet or a poorly phrased Facebook comment could go viral. TQPR enhanced its digital crisis management offering, advising clients on how to prepare for and respond to online backlash, misinformation, and reputation risks in real-time social media environments.

TQPR didn't try to compete with large digital agencies. Instead, it found a competitive advantage in being a hybrid PR player, combining strategic rigor with localized digital execution.

“Our goal was never to become a full digital agency, but we needed to make sure we could speak the language our clients’ audiences were using, and that was increasingly digital.” Tom shared.

While TQPR remained independent, it understood the need to broaden its operational scope. The pandemic didn’t just impact how PR was delivered, it reshaped what clients needed from their PR partners.

Some clients began asking for support, blurring the lines between PR, internal communications, and change management. As remote work reshaped corporate culture, companies needed help explaining new policies, managing employee expectations, and keeping organizational trust intact.

TQPR quietly entered this adjacent space, working with long-standing clients like AWS and Prudential to manage internal communication campaigns; these included: remote onboarding guides; CEO video statements; employee newsletters addressing mental health and hybrid work practices; virtual town halls and media training conducted via Zoom.

By building these internal capabilities, TQPR became more embedded in clients as strategic communicators.

“The line between external PR and internal messaging blurred,” noted Maetavarin Manee-kulpan, Partner at the firm. *“We weren’t just helping clients speak to the public. We were helping them speak to their own people.”*

While the company did not pursue new formal partnerships during this period, it remained active within WorldCom, its global PR network. With COVID-19 this network became a sounding board, a place to benchmark, share survival tactics, and explore co-pitching opportunities with international agencies.

TQPR evaluated joining new networks focused on luxury brand communications, as that market segment was beginning to rebound; although, it held off for the moment. Tom mentioned: *“Build relationships today to leverage when the market is ready.”*

Furthermore, TQPR had always been known for its high-touch service, not for flashy technology; but the crisis made clear that manual PR processes no longer scaled.

Without a major investment budget, TQPR took a lean and modular approach to adopting technology:

- Instead of relying on traditional press clipping services, TQPR began using FeedHive, an AI powered tool that tracked brand mentions across online and social platforms in real-time, allowing TQPR faster reporting to clients and immediate response planning when narratives shifted.
- TQPR launched its own press portals for key clients, enabling journalists to access releases, images, videos, and backgrounders at any time. (TQPR, 2021)
- The company tried video platforms with integrated Q&A and media breakout rooms, recreating the intimacy of traditional events. The firm wrote speeches, pre-filmed B-roll content, and managed post-event follow-ups: Stripe and Vietjet Air benefited the most from these activations.
- Finally, the company adopted shared tools, specifically Trello, which helped TQPR replacing endless email threads, making campaign execution smoother.

By the end of that short period, TQPR was no longer just a traditional PR firm, it became a resilient hybrid agency, with the client count rose reaching 16 in May 2021, a signal that the transformation strategy was bearing fruit.

Xbox, Amazon Global Selling, Stripe, and Franklin Templeton were added to the portfolio, many of whom had no prior experience with TQPR before the pandemic. The company not only retained most of its legacy base, but it also opened doors to new sectors.

TQPR Thailand had completed a period of adaptation. The company had continued operating throughout the crisis, maintained key client relationships, and introduced new digital services in response to changing demands; its internal structure remained lean, and its operational focus stayed aligned with the needs of long-standing and newly acquired accounts. Digital tools had become part of daily routines, remote communication practices had reshaped how projects were delivered, the service portfolio had expanded, but the company's core identity remained largely intact.

Strategic planning, media relations, and issue management continued to define the agency's positioning, now supported by hybrid tools and digital capabilities; hence, clients engaged TQPR for a combination of local expertise and adaptable communication strategies, needs that had only grown during the pandemic.

As of May 2021, no formal structural change had been introduced. Tom and his team had not launched a reinvention process nor committed to a new business model, the company had

responded to events as they unfolded, adjusted operations to the immediate context, and made selective additions to its approach. Future developments remained open. It was unclear whether the current trajectory would be extended, revised, or replaced, but still, discussions focused on maintaining consistency while responding to an environment still in flux. The reason of TQPR success.

The agency remained anchored in its original model, shaped now by the experience of navigating prolonged uncertainty. TQPR stood in a moment of transition, with the space to reflect on how much change was necessary, and how far its current path could carry it.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction: Purpose and Scope

The central objective of this literature review is to establish a theoretical framework that explains how professional service firms, especially in the public relations (PR) industry, can adapt, survive, and evolve during periods of systemic shock.

It supports the Thesis by grounding in academic theory the best practices across strategic management, organizational resilience, digital transformation, and client relationship management with a review around three key literature streams:

- (1) Crisis management & strategic resilience.
- (2) Digital transformation in professional service.
- (3) Client relationship management during uncertainty.

2.2. Literature Streams

2.2.1. Crisis management & strategic resilience

Crisis management and strategic resilience have gained considerable attention in academic research, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations have had to respond to external shocks that are sudden, disruptive, and often unpredictable; as a result, resilience, the capacity to absorb stress, recover critical functionality, and thrive in altered circumstances, has become a vital concept for firms of all sizes and sectors. In the field of strategic management, this links to how well organizations prepare, respond and recover from crisis events.

The literature distinguishes between operational resilience (ability to maintain business continuity during disruption) and strategic resilience (ability to evolve in response to long-term shifts) (Hamel & Välikangas, 2003). Strategic resilience goes beyond simple survival.

Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) argue that resilience is rooted in high reliability organizing, where firms develop processes and routines, enabling fast recovery and flexible responses, emphasizing mindfulness, improvisation, and the capacity to learn from near misses. This perspective aligns with Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2005), who introduced the distinction between “adaptive fit” and “robust transformation”: adaptive fit refers to incremental adjustments focused on maintaining alignment with the environment, robust transformation reflects significant change in strategy or structure.

Williams et al. (2017) merge insights from crisis management with resilience research. They suggest that resilience is built through a portfolio of capabilities, such as resource redundancy (such as financial reserves), clear internal communication, shared organizational purpose, and strong leadership. These capabilities enhance a firm's agility. They enable it to manage complexity and uncertainty. Their framework integrates structural and behavioral.

Leadership plays a key role in resilience. Boin and van Eeten (2013) argue that resilient organizations often display distributed decision-making, manifesting autonomy at different levels of the organization. This flexibility enables rapid local responses and reduces bottlenecks. Leaders in resilient firms promote a culture of learning and psychological safety. In these firms employees are encouraged to share concerns and propose solutions without fear of retribution.

Teece (2007) offers a complementary view through the lens of dynamic capabilities. He defines these as a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. In this framework, resilience is a dynamic capability that must be developed and nurtured.

Doern, Williams, and Vorley (2019) provide empirical insights into how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) managed during the COVID-19 crisis. They found that SMEs that had prior crisis experiences were more adaptable. Moreover, social capital, strong relationships and local networks were all a significant enabler of resilience.

Burnard and Bhamra (2011) argue for embedding resilience into organizational strategy and operational routines, this includes scenario planning, investment in flexible supply chains, and the training of employees in problem-solving skills. This way the authors propose a resilience capability maturity model, which helps firms assess their preparedness and identify areas for improvement.

Beyond organizational factors, the literature also considers psychological resilience. Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) highlight the role of individual-level mindfulness and coping strategies in building collective resilience, suggesting that during prolonged crises, supporting employee well-being and mental health becomes essential for maintaining overall organizational performance.

Other scholars like Linnenluecke (2017) expand the discussion to include environmental resilience. This involves aligning organizational resilience with sustainability goals and long-term risk management. The integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into strategic planning is important for stakeholder trust and long-term viability, especially during systemic crises like climate change or pandemics.

Taken together, the literature emphasizes that resilience is multi-faced, involving different elements: financial resources, organizational culture, leadership, learning mechanisms, and strategic foresight. Firms that build resilience across these dimensions are better positioned to navigate crises, recover quickly, and seize emerging opportunities. Crisis management and strategic resilience are not isolated processes. They are embedded in organizational strategy and design. While operational resilience allows for short-term survival, strategic resilience enables long-term growth and adaptation; hence, both are necessary, and their integration is crucial for firms facing increasingly complex and volatile environments.

2.2.3. Digital transformation in professional services

Digital transformation refers to the process through which organizations adopt digital technologies to improve business operations in general, create value, and adapt to a changing environment. In the professional services sector, such as law, accounting, consulting, and public relations, digital transformation presents unique challenges and opportunities, reason why these firms rely heavily on human expertise, client relationships, and trust-based service delivery.

Gregory (2010), Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015), note that even before the pandemic, the digitalization of communication and public engagement was reshaping professional service delivery. Then, the pandemic forced many firms to accelerate these changes under time pressure and limited resources. Phongpetra et al. (2021) describe this as “forced digitization”, digital tools were adopted out of necessity rather than strategic planning.

Empson et al. (2015) highlight that professional service firms are often conservative in adopting new technologies. This phenomenon happened because their business models are rooted in reputation and expertise, and digital change can disrupt traditional workflows and alter client expectations.

Nambisan et al. (2019) identify three levels of digital transformation: enhancement (using

technology to improve existing services), extension (adding new digitally-enabled services), and transformation (redefining the business model). Most professional service firms operate at the enhancement and extension levels due to risk aversion, cost limitations and client expectations.

The literature also discusses the enabling conditions for successful digital transformation. Westerman et al. (2014) argue that leadership commitment and a clear digital strategy are more important than the technology itself. Digital transformation should be linked to client needs, market trends, firm's long-term vision; and without alignment, digital initiatives risk to become superficial and ineffective.

Digital tools can bring numerous benefits to professional services. They increase efficiency and also allow for better data collection and analysis, supporting service personalization. However, they also pose risks, like cybersecurity threats and data privacy issues, along with the erosion of human contact in client relations (Bican & Brem, 2020). These trade-offs must be managed through clear governance and an ethical guidance.

Susskind (2015) explore the future of professions in a digital world predicting that many tasks performed by experts today will be automated or delegated to machines, meaning a redefinition of professional service firms value. Digital transformation should support human expertise, not replace it.

Kane et al. (2015) emphasize the cultural side of digital transformation, saying that a successful shift requires a change in mindset across all levels of the organization. This involves the removal of the fear of failure. Digital culture is built over time and must be supported by leadership with incentives, communication, and continuous learning as well.

Client expectations also play a crucial role. As Sklar (2020) explains, clients increasingly demand real-time access and digital channels such as customer portals, chatbots, and dashboards allow firms to meet these expectations efficiently, but the challenge lies in maintaining a personal and trustful relationship through digital means.

There is also an important discussion around "digital maturity." According to the Digital Maturity Model by Deloitte (2017), organizations pass through stages from digital awareness to

digital transformation. Each stage requires specific capabilities: among those leadership vision, cross-functional collaboration, digital talent, client-centric design. Digital tools are used to support but not redefine services for most of the professional service firms that are in the early to middle stages.

Barley, Bechky, and Milliken (2017) identify resistance to change, lack of IT infrastructure, and unclear ROI (return on investment) as common challenges. In some cases, professional identity itself becomes a barrier; practitioners feel that digital tools may reduce the perceived value of their expertise.

Hybrid models are seen as a practical solution. These models combine digital tools with traditional service delivery. For example, client meetings may occur online, but complex issues are discussed in person. Reports are shared digitally, but key decisions are made through trusted advisors.

Digital transformation must be understood as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time event. Technologies evolve rapidly and client needs shift accordingly; firms must develop adaptive capabilities to keep up with change, including investing in continuous training, monitoring digital trends, and being willing to revisit strategic assumptions.

In conclusion, digital transformation in professional services is a complex process. More than just adopting tools, it involves rethinking processes, culture, client relationships, and even the professional identity of the firm. Hence, successful digital transformation balances innovation with tradition, speed with care, and automation with empathy; firms that achieve this balance are more likely to thrive in a digital world.

2.2.4. Client relationship management in times of crisis

Client relationship management (CRM) is a central theme in the literature on professional services. These firms typically offer intangible and experience-based services where trust, communication, and long-term relationships are more important than transactional efficiency. During periods of uncertainty, the quality of these relationships becomes more critical.

Grönroos (1994), with the concept of the “moment of truth” in service relationships, identifying the points when a client forms a judgment about the quality and reliability of a service. During a crisis, these moments become more intense and frequent. Clients are anxious. How a firm

responds during these interactions determines if the client will stay loyal or move to a competitor.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) developed the commitment and trust theory, which is still one of the foundational models in CRM research. They say that trust and commitment are very important for long-term relationship success, automatically reducing uncertainty and promoting cooperation.

Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2006) studied the idea of “generosity as strategy.” They suggest that providing free advice, sharing market insights, or checking in regularly can improve client loyalty, even without a commercial motive. Even though this kind of relational investment may not bring immediate profits, it could build a strong reputation.

The “service recovery paradox” proposed by McCollough, Berry, and Yadav (2000) suggests instead that when a failure occurs, a properly managed recovery process can increase client satisfaction to higher levels than before. This is relevant especially during crises, since service disruptions are common

Ulaga and Eggert (2006) explored the concept of relationship value in B2B markets, where dimensions such as product quality, service support, delivery performance, and personal interaction becomes more salient components in uncertain times. Clients often need reassurance and a sense of partnership, not just functional performance.

Gounaris (2005) examined the emotional and psychological aspects of CRM, arguing that perceptions of fairness and empathy shape client satisfaction more than technical outcomes. Crises create emotional stress, and firms must respond with emotional intelligence. Listening, showing understanding, and adapting the tone of communication improve client perception.

Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer (2004) provided evidence that CRM systems, while useful, are not sufficient on their own, the real value lies in how firms use these tools to create a more personalized and responsive service experience. CRM systems have to support and not replace human interaction.

Payne and Frow (2005) present CRM as a holistic strategy rather than a software product. Their

model includes these elements: customer insight, value proposition development, multichannel integration, and performance assessment, which become even more important during crises. It can help maintain loyalty.

Das and Teng (2004) emphasize the role of trust in reducing perceived risk in relationships when the external environment becomes unpredictable. During these times clients rely more on familiar and trusted partners. Trust acts as a stabilizing factor. It allows clients to tolerate temporary service lapses.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) find that emotional satisfaction, along with perceived care, outweigh functional satisfaction. Clients remember how they were treated; thus, emotional satisfaction becomes a key differentiator.

Men and Bowen (2017) argue that open, honest, and frequent communication is the most effective way to maintain relationships during change, while silence create anxiety. They find that even when there is no clear update, reaching out to acknowledge the situation can maintain a sense of partnership.

Other studies, such as Ballantyne and Varey (2006), emphasize co-creation of value, suggesting that firms and clients have to work together to define needs and consequently find solutions.

Technology also plays a growing role in client management: CRM software, chatbots, video calls, and automated emails allow firms to stay connected with clients. But Sklar (2020) notes that digital interactions must be designed with empathy in mind because over automation can lead to a perception of coldness or indifference; balancing efficiency with the human touch is essential.

There is also a cultural dimension to CRM, according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, expectations around trust, communication, and service quality vary across regions: for firms serving diverse clients, cultural awareness becomes critical.

Finally, the literature highlights the long-term impact of relationship strategies. Firms that act generously with empathy during difficult times are more likely to retain clients, building a

strong reputation. Relationship management is not only a tool for client retention, but also a strategic asset.

Managing client relationships in uncertain times requires more than standard service delivery. It does demand empathy, responsiveness, strategic generosity, and consistent communication. Firms that invest in these elements are better positioned to survive. CRM is a defensive and offensive strategy. CRM protects current business and opens opportunities for future success.

2.3. Conclusion: What We Know and Don't Know

The review establishes that:

- Crisis induced strategic adaptation often favors incremental transformation over radical shifts, particularly in trust-based industries.
- PR firms benefit from hybrid models that fuse traditional client relationships with digital enablement.
- Maintaining client trust during crises is not only reputational but can become a differentiating strategic asset.

However, gaps remain:

- There is limited literature on digital transformation specific to Southeast Asian PR firms.
- Empirical work on long-term effects of informal value delivery (e.g., working without contracts) is scarce.
- The balance between resilience and transformation in mid-size agencies during post-COVID recovery is still under-researched.

3. Teaching Note

3.1. Learning Objectives

This case provides students with an opportunity to discover how a small mid-sized professional services firm can resist and navigate a systemic shock; working through the story of TQPR Thailand, will help students questioning timing and positioning in the real world of strategy execution.

Specific goal for an in class discussion may include:

- Understanding the concept of organizational resilience in practice, particularly within trust-based industries like PR.
- Analyzing the balance between strategic adaptation and preserving identity during difficult and disrupting times.
- Reflecting on the decision making process under high uncertainty.
- Assessing the role of digital transformation in a sector that is driven by relationship.
- Identifying strategic alternatives during recovery after crisis and assessing how context, values, and resources shape their feasibility.

3.2. Assignment Questions

1. How would you define TQPR's core value proposition, and how was it challenged by the COVID-19 crisis?
2. Imagine you are part of a consulting team hired by TQPR in May 2021. Which strategic alternative would you recommend and why?
3. What are the risks of trying to transform a professional service firm too quickly? What are the risks of waiting too long?

3.3. Class Plan

1. How do you evaluate the position of TQPR at the beginning of the Covid 19 crisis?
2. What were the strategic options available to TQPR and the main constraints impacting the company?
3. What is your assessment of how TQPR responded to the pandemic?
4. How do you evaluate the impact of digital transformation on the business model of the firm?
5. What are the challenges that TQPR has to face at the time of the Case?

6. What are the strategic alternatives open to TQPR? What are the pros and cons of each?
7. What are your recommendations for the management of the company?

3.4. Analysis

1. How do you evaluate the position of TQPR at the beginning of the Covid 19 crisis?

Introduction to the Context

In May 2021, Thailand found itself in the grip of its most severe COVID-19 wave. TQPR Thailand, which was a stable and respected mid-sized public relations (PR) firm, was no exception. With two decades of consistent growth and a reputation built on close client relationships the agency was suddenly paralyzed, marking the most critical inflection point in its history.

TQPR's business model, centered on in-person interactions, long-standing client trust, and press-driven visibility, faced a brutal reality with the beginning of the pandemic: all physical engagements vanished overnight. Hence, revenue collapsed, long-term clients left or paused contracts, the company's traditional strength became a vulnerability. Understanding this position in full requires a structured look at financial, operational, strategic, and industry-wide dynamics.

Financial and Operational Position

TQPR entered the crisis lean but not without weaknesses. It closed 2018 with €1 million in revenue and a modest net margin of 2.04%. Instead in 2019 revenues shrank to €952,000.00 and turned into a net loss of €34,601.00. The pandemic then pushed 2020 revenues down to €650,000.00 with 2021 reaching a new low at just €550,000.00; TQPR lost nearly half of its revenue over 24 months, as it is highlighted from Exhibit 2.

Operationally, the agency had a team of 18 professionals in early 2020 and staff salaries were the largest fixed cost.

Strategic Identity and Vulnerabilities

At the beginning of COVID-19, TQPR was facing a strategic identity crisis. While larger firms adopted tech-heavy digital approaches and with smaller firms trying to pivot as fast as possible, Tom Van Blarcom, the TQPR's owner, positioned the agency as a relationship-driven advisor in Southeast Asia. This model functioned well when face-to-face engagement and physical media events were the norm. But that model was now under existential threat.

Tom understood that TQPR wasn't just dealing with a temporary downturn, but with a structural shift, and as lockdowns erased all in-person formats, the company's unique selling proposition lost relevance. Its historical strengths (trust-based PR delivery, personal client service) had become temporary liabilities, without having developed a digital identity to fill the gap yet.

Competitive Landscape and Industry Positioning

Thailand's PR industry, even if relatively young, matured significantly by 2020, with several major players like Vero, JC&CO, Midas PR, and Asia Media Publishing Group entering the industry. They were able to adapt quickly to the pandemic by pivoting toward digital events, influencer partnerships, and hybrid campaigns.

These agencies had more digital muscle and were structurally more prepared to shift strategies. TQPR, by contrast, took a more measured and cautious path, prioritizing internal cohesion and service consistency.

This conservative response gave the firm stability but limited its short-term market agility.

Client Base and Service Structure

TQPR's client portfolio before the pandemic included prestigious companies such as Airbus, JPMorgan, Nissan, Stripe, and NokAir, deriving 30% of its revenue from corporate positioning, 25% from media relations, 20% from strategic planning and crisis management, and 25% from digital PR and marketing.

With COVID-19, this model became unbalanced. Corporate positioning and media relations saw immediate decline. PR budgets were cut. TQPR lost major accounts such as Razer, DJI, and Expedia within weeks; this contraction of the client base and shift in service demand underscored a fundamental issue: TQPR was positioned too heavily in traditional PR formats, and not sufficiently diversified into service areas like digital engagement and data-driven strategy.

Strategic Constraints and Position Summary

Several constraints defined TQPR's position at the beginning of the crisis:

- Liquidity, TQPR secured a temporary overdraft through a third-party partner but lacked substantial financial reserves to resist prolonged inactivity.
- Time, without clear recovery timelines or state support, strategic decisions had to be made quickly but with limited foresight.

- Cultural Anchors, TQPR valued a lot of independence and resisted rapid operational shifts that would undermine its identity. It was not inclined to lay off staff quickly or rush into partnerships or mergers.
- Digital Lag: digital tools weren't embedded deeply into client engagement models, even though they were in use. This delayed adaptation and revenue substitution.

Through the Williams et al. (2017) framework of resilience capabilities we can see that TQPR had high internal cultural resilience but low strategic resilience.

| Resilience Capability | TQPR at COVID Onset | Evaluation |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Resource Redundancy | Low (relied on overdraft) | Financial fragility exposed the firm to prolonged risks |
| Clear Communication | Strong (internal transparency) | Helped stabilize team morale |
| Shared Purpose | Strong (culture and trust-driven) | Cohesive identity helped avoid panic |
| Leadership | Strong (experienced founder) | Tom's consistency created internal confidence |
| Strategic Flexibility | Moderate (reluctant digital shift) | Delayed transformation limited competitive agility |
| External Connectivity | Low (no new partnerships) | Lost ground compared to more collaborative rivals |

2. What were the strategic options available to TQPR and the main constraints impacting the company?

Strategic Decision-Making under Crisis

In early 2021, during COVID-19 heaviest hit in Thailand, TQPR faced unprecedented challenges: decline in revenue, client loss, operational disruption, uncertain economic outlook. In this scenario TQPR had to make decisions with limited information and high risk. The agency had four strategic options available even though it was constrained by structural, financial, and

cultural limitations that significantly impacted its ability to execute change. Below we analyze the four strategic paths TQPR could have followed, the rationale and the obstacles for each.

Option 1: Further Cost-Cutting

This was the most immediate option. Even though TQPR had already implemented salary reductions and reduced its team from 18 to 14 members, deeper cuts were possible.

Cutting costs gives quick cash relief and helps the company survive hard times, but it can lower morale, cause loss of experienced staff, and make it harder to deliver good services later.

Option 2: Invest in Digital Transformation

Investing in digital transformation involved redirecting resources toward digital tools, platforms, capabilities that allow the company to operate effectively in an either remote or hybrid environment.

Going digital matches industry trends, creates new services, and improves efficiency.

By 2021, when PR had already shifted toward digital models, TQPR lagged behind some competitors like Vero and Midas PR. Only with COVID-19 hit in May 2021 TQPR began to incorporate FeedHive for real-time monitoring and Trello for internal collaboration.

Option 3: Expand into Adjacent Services

Expanding services was meant to broaden the agency's portfolio and include internal communications, crisis communication consulting, virtual event support, or even light change management consulting.

TQPR experimented this strategy during the pandemic, exploiting internal communication campaigns such as mental health newsletters, CEO video statements, and onboarding materials to support important clients like AWS and Prudential.

The move TQPR undertook was subtle but strategic, i.e., offering new value without changing the company's identity.

Option 4: Seek Strategic Partnerships or Mergers

TQPR could have explored a formal alliance, merger, or acquisition to strengthen its position financially, digitally and service wise.

Working with another company can quickly bring money, new skills, more services, helping TQPR grow stronger in the future; but on the other side it can also cause teamwork problems, take away independence, and be hard to set up, especially during a crisis.

TQPR was already part of the WorldCom global PR network, an informal affiliation for benchmarking and referrals. A formal partnership would be a more radical shift.

Main Constraints Impacting TQPR's Strategic Choices

Each option we analyzed was shaped, and in some cases limited, by some key constraints. Understanding these constraints is fundamental to evaluate both what TQPR could do and what it chose not to do.

a) Financial Liquidity

TQPR's margin was low even before COVID-19, the firm ending 2019 with a net loss and further revenue decline in 2020 and 2021. The agency got an overdraft with a third-party partner that, even though it provided temporary breathing room, was not a sustainable financial buffer and strategic decisions requiring investment (like digital expansion) were constrained by this limited liquidity.

b) Organizational Culture and Identity

TQPR's identity was built around trust and humanity, and this rendered difficult the execution of structural changes or adoption of technology-driven service models. Tom's style was participative, prioritizing long-term relationships over short-term gains.

c) Lack of Government Support

Unlike firms in Europe or the US, TQPR received no subsidies or financial assistance for the pandemic because the Thai government focused its COVID relief programs only on individuals and low-income sectors, leaving mid-size service firms unsupported. This constrained TQPR's financial and strategic possibilities as well.

d) Market Uncertainty and Client Behavior

Clients were in crisis. Industries like aviation, luxury, and hospitality were paralyzed. Many slashed PR budgets. Others paused retainers entirely. This meant TQPR couldn't rely on its

usual sales pipeline to finance its reinvention, because loyal clients, like Airbus and Nissan, also demanded drastic retainer reductions.

e) Time Pressure

Perhaps the most pressing constraint was time. TQPR was not facing a strategic problem to be solved in a quarterly meeting; it was facing an existential decision that had to be made in weeks. The pressure to act fast limited the firm’s ability to test or prototype strategies in the traditional sense.

TQPR’s Strategic Choices Matrix

| Option | Feasibility | Short-Term Impact | Long-Term Impact | Alignment with Identity |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Further Cost-Cutting | High | Immediate | Negative | Low |
| Invest in Digital Tools | Medium | Moderate | High | Medium |
| Expand Services | Medium | Moderate | High | High |
| Strategic Partnerships | Low | High (potential) | High (but uncertain) | Low |

In conclusion, TQPR’s strategic space was both constrained and full of opportunity. The firm made deliberate choices that prioritized cultural continuity over rapid transformation, opting for a hybrid path: limited cost reductions, selective service expansion, cautious digital investment, and a firm refusal to merge.

This strategy was high-risk in the short term but crafted the way for a longer-term revival, proving that sometimes, resilience is about balance, not speed.

3. What is your assessment of how TQPR responded to the pandemic?

Navigating the Unknown

TQPR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was not explosive or disruptive, it was deliberate and human.

Faced with an unprecedented external shock that impacted the foundations of its service model, TQPR didn't react by reinventing itself overnight, it chose to preserve its internal trust, protect its culture and adapt its delivery methods, while cautiously extending into new terrain.

This approach had limitations, but it also had hidden strengths. The firm emerged smaller and leaner. It emerged reputationally stronger, bringing up a profound lesson in strategic resilience for professional service firms as a result.

The Financial Response

TQPR began the pandemic under financial duress. After a modest profit in 2018, it saw a revenue collapse from €1 million (2018) to €550,000 (2021). Amid this descent, Tom decided not to completely dismantle TQPR's cost base.

TQPR reduced its team from 18 to 14, retaining its most experienced staff. This, symbolically, reaffirmed the firm's loyalty-first values, and practically, it ensured that the agency's strategic knowledge and client relationships didn't evaporate.

TQPR also secured an overdraft from a third-party partner, avoiding decisions taken with panic. This temporary liquidity bought time in a volatile period.

Thanks to the IT support TQPR operationally adapted fast to remote work; but culturally, the cracks soon became visible. Creativity slowed. Team dynamics suffered. Communication loops weakened. TQPR wasn't just delivering press releases, it was selling strategic agility, fast ideas, and media sense, which all eroded in a Zoom-based environment.

To respond, in April 2021, TQPR became one of Bangkok's first PR agencies to return to the office. This move underscored a deeper insight: not all digital transformations are worth it if they harm the very capabilities that define your firm. TQPR didn't reject remote work entirely, but it understood its costs early. Still, this decision carried risk. Some staff may have felt unsafe or unprepared to return, and the firm offered no flexible or hybrid model

A Cautious but Purposeful Service Expansion

Instead of changing its business model, TQPR made small and smart moves into related areas. For example, it started helping clients like AWS and Prudential with internal communications, supported crisis communication planning, created digital campaigns for Stripe and Vietjet Air, and built video platforms and online press centers.

TQPR didn't try to turn into a digital agency, it added digital tools to what it already did well in public relations with a step-by-step approach. This approach helped TQPR grow its services without losing its identity.

The company also avoided doing too much at once, rather than offering new products it couldn't fully support, TQPR focused on services that matched what clients already expected. This reflects the idea of "adaptive fit" (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005): making small but important changes that keep the company aligned with its goals and clients' needs.

The Strategic Restraints: A Counterintuitive Strength

Many competitors reacted with speed. Vero shifted to hybrid models. Midas PR dove into influencer marketing. TQPR's more measured response was more conservative, but with a logic: TQPR prioritized clarity over speed, trust over novelty, and incremental learning over rushed reinvention.

This is strategic resilience in practice and according to Williams et al. (2017), resilience is about recombining existing strengths to navigate change, not about leaping blindly into the new. With this being said, for a firm that saw half its revenue evaporate, this level of caution could be seen as excessive.

Constraints Acknowledgement to Results and Important Impact

TQPR operated with major constraints:

- No government support.
- Financial fragility.
- Limited digital infrastructure.
- Time pressure.
- Cultural resistance to abandoning its high-touch model.

TQPR didn't let these paralyze decision-making, instead it found workarounds:

- Selective tech adoption (Trello, FeedHive).

- Clear internal communication.
- Role clarity during remote transitions.
- Tactical return to office.

Even Though some of these constrains could have been addressed more proactively, this is consistent with the idea of bounded rationality: making the best decisions under known constraints, leading by mid-2021 to:

- Revenue stabilized at €550,000.
- Client count began to rebound.
- New clients entered.
- Existing clients extended partnerships.
- Team cohesion returned.

No miracle. No unicorn transformation. But a firm still standing, respected, resilient, and re-connected. In a world where most SMEs in services collapsed or pivoted, TQPR remained relevant without rupture, responding not to winning the race, but to walking the path without losing the map.

4. How do you evaluate the impact of digital transformation on the business model of the firm?

A Digital Wake-Up Call

Before the crisis brought up by COVID-19, TQPR's business was built on personal trust with clients, deep media relationships, high-quality service from experienced staff, long-term retainers (clients paid monthly to get support over time), and face-to-face client engagement and event-based campaigns. Furthermore, it focused on areas like media relations, corporate positioning, crisis communication, reputation management.

These services which were mostly delivered in person, through personal networks and in real time, were considered TQPR's strength, because the agency's human touch was its strongest tool, not its tech.

With the pandemic there were no more physical events, no in-person meetings, no press trips or media gatherings. Clients paused retainers or canceled them completely leading TQPR to lose of key accounts like Razer, DJI, and Expedia. Some, like Nissan, cut budgets by over 70%.

TQPR had two options: either stick to the old way and risk becoming irrelevant or embrace digital transformation, but in a way that stayed true to its identity. Tom and his team chose a middle path, not trying to become a digital agency overnight; instead, they layered digital tools and services onto their existing strengths.

This cautious move allowed the firm to stay consistent with its values, but it also meant TQPR did not take bold steps into areas like marketing automation, digital analytics, or scalable service platforms, all moves that some competitors pursued more aggressively.

The Digital Transformation at TQPR

TQPR didn't go for big tech changes., but it adopted practical digital tools to improve how it worked and what it could offer.

- The agency used Trello for better project management, replacing long email threads.
- It enabled remote work with secure IT systems.
- It returned to the office as soon as possible to regain speed and creativity.

Client Services:

- Social media campaigns and influencer mapping (for Stripe and Amazon Global Selling).
- Digital press kits and media portals so journalists could access information anytime.
- Video production and online press events (for example, for Vietjet Air).
- Digital crisis management to help clients respond fast to online backlash.

New Offerings:

- Internal communications support (newsletters, CEO videos, remote onboarding).
- Thought leadership content for LinkedIn, blogs, and digital publications.

These were all extensions of what TQPR already did, just now delivered in new formats and through new channels. The approach undertaken by TQPR fits the idea of “modular transformation” in the literature, changing parts of the business without changing everything.

TQPR's Hybrid Business Approach

a) Revenue Model Still Based on Retainers

TQPR kept its focus on long-term relationships and strategic counsel. Hence, while some clients paused payments, many returned later. The retainer model stayed central, but with more flexibility. TQPR didn't use the crisis to explore alternative pricing models, such as tiered digital service packages, limiting its ability to diversify revenue streams.

b) Broader Service Portfolio

The agency added digital storytelling, social media strategy, video communication, hybrid press events, helping in this way to meet new client needs, especially in industries shifting to online platforms.

c) Hybrid Work Model

While many competitors went fully remote, TQPR saw that creativity and fast execution suffered without in-person collaboration, so they allowed remote work but made office presence part of the comeback, a mixed model that became a key part of their way forward.

d) Strategic Positioning

TQPR didn't try to become a digital agency. It positioned itself as a hybrid PR firm: one that combined traditional expertise with modern tools. This was well received by clients who wanted high-touch services delivered at digital speed.

Key Challenges, Risks, and Effects

TQPR had a limited investment capacity, and was short on cash. Its digital changes were small and focused, with no budget for big tech innovation.

TQPR's brand was based on quality and depth while digital communication is fast. So, finding the right balance took time. Since clients now expected real-time feedback, faster delivery and more visibility. TQPR had to adapt its service rhythms without burning out its team.

By mid-2021 the effects were notable:

- New clients like Amazon, Stripe, and Xbox joined.
- Old clients extended contracts (Airbus renewed for 3 years).
- Digital tools became part of everyday operations.

- Internal communication services became a new revenue stream.

TQPR didn't just survive: it evolved, not by replacing its model, but by expanding it. This fits with Teece's (2007) concept of "dynamic capabilities": adapting without losing your edge.

TQPR used technology to protect what mattered: relationships, quality, and trust. Doing so, it showed that real transformation isn't about changing who you are. It is about evolving how you deliver who you are.

But this came at a cost. The firm remained dependent on manual work, had limited data capabilities, and lacked a scalable digital offering. TQPR succeeded in protecting its culture, leaving some gaps in innovation, speed, and positioning.

5. What are the challenges that TQPR has to face at the time of the Case?

First Challenge: Unclear Future of the Industry

The PR industry in Thailand was still changing fast. Many things were uncertain:

- Clients were not sure about their budgets.
- Press events were still rare.
- Many people were tired of digital meetings.
- New players were entering the market with online-only offers.

TQPR didn't know if the traditional way of PR doing would come back, or if the new, digital first way would stay forever, making it hard to plan. This uncertainty about the market was a big challenge, every strategic decision felt risky.

Second Challenge: Pressure to Transform More

TQPR had started using digital tools, but in small steps. The company didn't try to become a tech firm, it stayed close to its core values, but now, clients were asking for more: digital media campaigns; social media influence; online content production; fast, real-time reactions.

These demands created pressure and if TQPR didn't offer more digital services, it could lose ground. At the same time, changing too much, too fast, could harm what made the firm special, this was a strategic tension: evolve or fall behind, but don't lose yourself in the process.

Third Challenge: Keeping the Team Motivated

During the crisis, TQPR made a strong effort to protect its team; hence, it kept most people, communicated openly, and avoided mass layoffs. Still, working from home changed how people interacted and some energy was lost.

Now that the team was back in the office, things were better. But motivation wasn't the same as before. People were tired. There was still uncertainty. The team was smaller. Tom and the managers had to keep the culture alive, rebuild confidence, and help people adapt to new ways of working.

Fourth Challenge: Competing Without Changing the DNA

Other PR firms in Thailand had moved faster and some firms even partnered with tech companies.

TQPR wanted to stay independent. It didn't want to merge or sell. It believed in personal relationships and high-touch service. But that model was harder to maintain now.

The challenge was this: how can you compete with faster, tech-focused firms without becoming like them? This was a question of strategy, but also of values.

Fifth Challenge: Financial Fragility

TQPR had lost big clients and the revenue had dropped from over €1 million in 2018 to just €550,000 in 2021. The firm had secured a small overdraft to survive, but this was not a long-term solution. Cash flow was still tight and hiring new people or investing in new services was difficult. The company had to make careful choices, because every euro spent had to bring value.

This financial weakness limited what the firm could do, even if the strategy was clear.

Sixth Challenge: Rebuilding Client Confidence

Some clients had left. Others had cut their retainers. Even loyal partners, like Nissan or Airbus, had reduced their contracts. TQPR had managed to keep relationships alive by continuing to deliver value, sometimes without being paid.

But the hard part had to come: rebuilding contracts, getting new business, showing that the company was still strong when clients were more cautious than before, wanted more results, and faster. Trust was still there, but it needed to be refreshed and earned again.

Challenges Faced by TQPR in May 2021

| Challenge | Meaning |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Uncertain PR market | Hard to plan investments or strategies |
| Digital service pressure | Clients want more tech-based services |
| Team motivation | People are tired, and the team is smaller |
| Cultural and competitive balance | Compete with digital firms without losing identity |
| Limited financial resources | Difficult to grow or innovate |
| Client re-engagement | Need to rebuild strong contracts and active relationships |

TQPR had made it through the first wave of COVID-19 but the road ahead was just as tricky. The company had to make careful moves, protect what mattered, and slowly build something new without forgetting who they were.

This case shows that survival is not the end of the story. Sometimes, the harder part comes after the storm, when the world expects you to start running again, but your legs are still tired.

6. What are the strategic alternatives open to TQPR? What are the pros and cons of each?

The Crossroads

By May 2021 TQPR had survived the crisis. The team was smaller, the revenues were lower. The doors were still open, and clients were slowly returning, but still, it wasn't enough to just stay afloat; and so, Tom and his team had to choose a direction.

TQPR was at a strategic crossroads, with different paths the company could take, each of these with its benefits and risks. Choosing one meant giving up something else, and time was ticking.

Alternative 1: Go All-In on Digital PR

Going all-in on digital PR would mean hiring digital experts, expanding into areas like SEO PR and data driven campaigns, paid media and influencer performance, automated media monitoring, video content and short-form storytelling (e.g., Reels, TikTok).

Adopting digital platforms and software to track engagement, reach, and campaign ROI more closely meets client demand for digital-first solutions and attracts new clients such as startups and tech brands; however, it requires significant investment in tools, training, and personnel, it also risks confusing existing clients who value traditional PR, and could dilute TQPR's "human-first" identity. It is a promising strategy for future-proofing, but risky if implemented too quickly or without clear positioning.

Alternative 2: Focus on High-Touch, High-Trust PR

The firm would focus on its core strengths: media relations, reputation, and crisis management; thought leadership for senior executives, and personalized campaigns for premium sectors like luxury, aviation, finance and positioning itself as the “craft PR firm” of Southeast Asia. This approach leverages established relationships and quality service, but it risks slower growth, missing younger digital clients, and vulnerabilities.

Alternative 3: Create a Hybrid Service Model

TQPR can keep helping its longtime clients with traditional PR while also building a small digital team. By mixing old and new ways of working, they create one clear service that fits both types of clients. This balance is flexible and smart because it doesn't force a complete change, but managing two different styles in one company is tricky, and some clients might feel the firm is neither fully traditional or digital. Clear communication and strong leadership are needed to make this work well.

Alternative 4: Join or Build a Strategic Alliance

TQPR might team up with a tech company, media agency, or bigger PR firm instead of building new services on its own. This would let them offer fresh services, share clients, or work together on campaigns. They could also join specialized global networks in areas like luxury PR, crisis PR, or B2B tech. This approach costs less and brings in new expertise while keeping the company small. However, it could create dependence, weaken TQPR's brand, and requires a strong

match in trust and culture. Overall, it's a fast way to grow but only works if the partner truly fits well.

Alternative 5: Specialize in Internal Communication

This new area grew during the pandemic. Companies need help talking to their own employees, not just the public. TQPR has worked with clients like AWS and Prudential on newsletters, mental health messages, remote onboarding kits, and CEO speeches or Zoom town halls, and it could try to focus more on this work. The good side is that this area is less crowded, clients usually have budgets even in hard times, and it fits well with TQPR's strength in building trust. The downsides are that this work is less visible and harder to show in marketing and it also needs knowledge of HR and company culture; plus, it might move TQPR away from its media roots. Overall, it's a smart niche but may not please clients who want public attention.

7. What are your recommendations for the management of the company?

What TQPR Did Right?

Before talking about what TQPR should do next, it's important to recognize something: TQPR made it through the storm, and doing it with no support is a big achievement.

The agency didn't panic. It didn't fire half its staff. It didn't sell out or close down. It protected its values. It stayed loyal to its team, and it kept serving clients.

TQPR proved it could survive, and now, it needs to show it can grow again, with clarity, with focus, and without losing what makes it special.

Recommendation 1: Build a Clear Hybrid Strategy

TQPR should stop thinking like it's stuck between two worlds, the old PR and the digital one. The truth is that the best future for the firm is right in the middle and a hybrid model isn't a compromise, but a strategy.

What does it mean? It means:

- Keeping high-touch service and senior-level support.
- Expanding digital services where they make sense, i.e., social media campaigns, online press rooms, video content.

- Offering blended PR plans to clients like a press release along with a media pitch and a digital boost.
- Training staff to work across transversal spaces, media and digital, not in silos.

This kind of offer is not only rare in Southeast Asia, but it is also exactly what many mid-sized brands want: smart, local, flexible PR support that doesn't feel like a factory.

Recommendation 2: Reinvest Carefully in People

The team is smaller now. But the work is coming back. It's time to start hiring again, but slowly and strategically. Here's how:

- Bring in digital-native staff who are adaptable and aligned with TQPR's culture.
- Offer training to existing staff, especially in analytics, the toughest part.
- Promote from within, where possible, in order to rebuild motivation and loyalty.

Also, create time for internal exchange, because in my opinion creativity is born in casual conversation. Tom was right, Zoom killed that spark. Bring back lunch talks, team brainstorms, informal pitch circles, these don't cost much, but they rebuild rhythm.

Recommendation 3: Define and Communicate Your New Identity

TQPR is not the same agency it was in 2019, and this doesn't mean a bad thing, but clients and prospects need to understand what TQPR stands for now.

The firm should develop a simple but strong narrative, and a good way to do it could be position itself like: "We are Southeast Asia's boutique PR agency for complex stories. We blend old-school relationships with smart digital delivery. We don't sell noise. We build trust, online and offline."

This message should appear on the website, in every proposal and during every client meeting, as a slogan. It gives people a reason to choose TQPR over bigger, noisier firms.

Recommendation 4: Use Existing Clients as Growth Engines

TQPR needs five to ten loyal clients who grow with the agency rather than hundreds of them, and do that by:

- Offer multi-country support through WorldCom or local partners.
- Propose pilot projects for internal communications or social media.

- Use case studies from successful accounts (like Airbus or Stripe) to pitch similar companies.

Also, make these loyal clients feel special; offer previews of trends, media insights, and networking tips to help TQPR turn into an agency trusted partner rather than a vendor.

Recommendation 5: Make Time for Strategic Thinking

It's easy to fall into the "do, do, do" loop, especially after a crisis; but now that the firm is stable, Tom and the team need to find valuable time to sit and discuss for real strategy.

This could be a quarterly strategy offsite, a 6-month planning cycle, or a shared document with goals, experiments, and learnings.

TQPR doesn't need a five-year plan. TQPR needs short, clear milestones:

- 3 new digital clients in 6 months.
- 1 internal communications contract by Q4.
- 1 new sector tested before year-end.

These mini goals give the team direction rendering progress feel real.

Final Word

TQPR doesn't need to be the biggest agency in Southeast Asia. It just needs to be the most trusted one.

That trust was tested and survived. Now, the task is to take that trust and use it to build a business that's ready for the future, without forgetting the people, values, and choices that kept it alive during the worst of times. Survival was the beginning. Now it's time to grow with purpose.

4. Conclusion

This dissertation offered an opportunity to follow a real firm through a moment of crisis, reflection, and reinvention. By tracing the evolution of TQPR Thailand during and after COVID-19, I was able to explore how you survive during a shock. What impressed me the most in this case was that resilience isn't only about having resources, but about knowing who you are and being consistent with your values, when the whole world shifts.

One of the principal takeaways is that strategy isn't always loud: sometimes, it's a collection of quiet choices: keep a team intact, serve clients even if they can't pay, resist the pressure to follow every trend. This way TQPR showed that small steps, if coherent, can rebuild a future.

Another insight is the importance of timing. The pandemic forced TQPR to change. The firm had to choose when to speed up and when to hold back. That tension, between evolution and identity, is at the center of many strategic dilemmas in professional services, and thanks to this, I learned how difficult it is to make those decisions when there are no resources or a unclear path.

One challenge I found during the project was to keep the tone neutral, as well as shaping the company's difficulties into a journey to learn from. I had to understand how theory connects to practice as well, and how terms like "strategic resilience" or "modular transformation" specifically apply in a small business context.

If I had more time, I would have liked to further explore the client side: how TQPR's clients experienced this transformation. I also would have gone deeper into digital capability development in Southeast Asia's PR sector.

I believe TQPR's case teaches something deeply human: strategy is not only about competing, it's about staying meaningful. Particularly, in a world full of noise, staying meaningful is what keeps clients coming back.

5. Appendices

5.1. Case Exhibits

Exhibit 1) THB/EUR Exchange rate

Exchange rate in 2021 equivalent to 0,027/1 Bath/euro → 691,400.00 million Thai baht = 18,800.00 million euros

Exhibit 2) Expansion of PR tasks over the years (2020-2022)

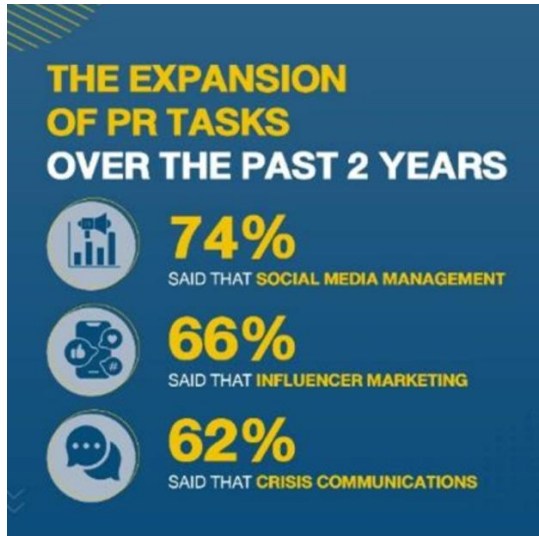


Exhibit 3) TQPR revenues (bath)

| FY ending June | Income | % increase | Net Profit | % Profit |
|----------------|------------|------------|-------------|----------|
| 2017 | 35,138,290 | | 1,210,179 | 3.44% |
| 2018 | 36,120,259 | 2.79% | 736,044 | 2.04% |
| 2019 | 35,240,388 | -2.44% | (1,285,264) | -3.65% |
| 2020 | 24,607,166 | -30.17% | (3,782,341) | -15.37% |
| 2021 | 21,429,402 | -12.91% | (593,180) | -2.77% |
| 2022 | 31,341,671 | 46.26% | 2,243,801 | 7.16% |
| 2023 | 36,711,795 | 17.13% | 413,430 | 1.13% |

Exhibit 4) TQPR Thailand Clients by year

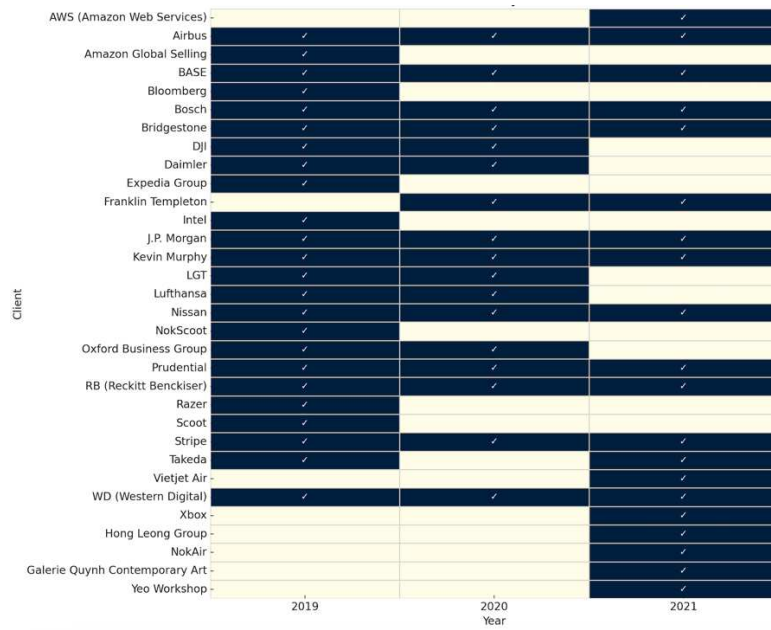


Exhibit 5) TQPR Revenue by Service Area

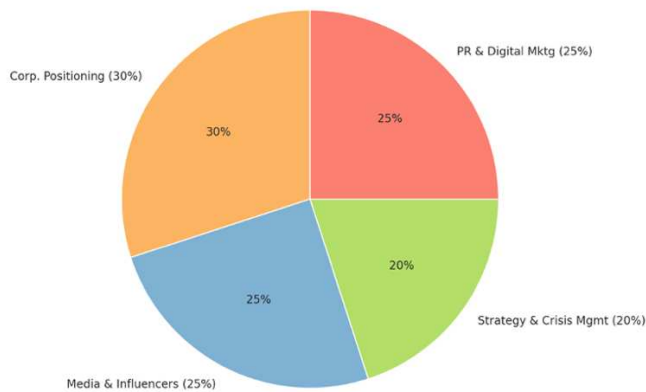
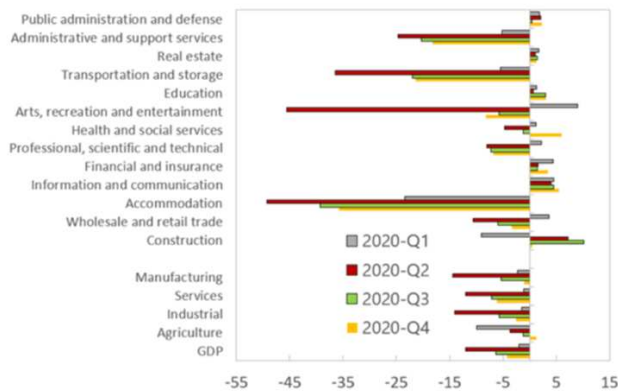


Exhibit 6) Thailand's GDP percent change by industry (2020)



5.2. Methodological Transparency

5.2.1. Search Strategy

A structured and documented literature search was conducted between April 13 – 17, 2025. The objective was to identify peer-reviewed academic articles from high-impact journals that directly relate to the themes of organizational resilience, crisis response, digital transformation, and relationship management, specifically within the context of Southeast Asia, with a primary focus on Thailand, where TQPR operates.

The search included databases and repositories (Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, MDPI, National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), UN Women & World Bank websites)

5.2.2. Keywords and Boolean Operators

To ensure relevance, a refined set of search queries was employed using Boolean logic. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were used to filter and combine keywords strategically.

Key phrases included:

“COVID-19” AND “resilience” AND “Thailand”

“remote work” AND “pandemic” AND “Thailand”

“organizational resilience” AND “professional services” AND “Asia”

“crisis communication” AND “PR industry” AND “COVID-19”

“digital transformation” AND “public relations” AND “Southeast Asia”

Citation tracing was applied to landmark papers (e.g., Grönroos, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) to discover newer publications that expanded on these frameworks post-COVID.

5.2.3. Selection Criteria

Papers were included if they:

- Were peer-reviewed (journal articles, not opinion pieces or blog posts)
- Focused on strategic responses to crises in service industries
- Provided either a theoretical model (e.g., resilience, relationship value) or empirical data on PR/communication firms in Asia
- Were relevant to the teaching objectives of the case

Instead, Non-academic or generalist articles were excluded unless they originated from institutions like the World Bank, IMF, or UN, and offered empirical data on Thailand’s socio-economic conditions during COVID-19.

5.3.4. Key Anchor Sources

Some of the foundational or high-frequency sources used to structure the review include:

- **Phongpetra, S., Jermsittiparsert, K., & Phonwattana, P. (2021).**
Implementing remote working policy in corporate offices in Thailand: Strategic facility management perspective. *Sustainability*, 13(3), 1284.
- **Williams, T.A., et al. (2017).**
Organizational response to adversity: Fusing crisis management and resilience research streams. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(2), 733–769.
- **Grönroos, C. (1994).**
From marketing mix to relationship marketing. *Management Decision*, 32(2), 4–20.
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