

## Main Aspects of Function and Organizational Role of Public Relations

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### Abstract

*“The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear” –Socrates*

The public relations (PR) practitioner serves as an intermediary between the organization that he or she represents and organization's publics. Consequently, the PR practitioner has responsibilities both to the institution and to its various publics. Public relations can involve research into all stakeholders: receiving information from them, advising management of their attitudes and responses, helping to set policies that demonstrate responsible attention to them and constantly evaluating the effectiveness of all PR programs. This inclusive role embraces all activities connected with influencing the opinions of a group of people. It is just the communications aspect and management function. At the same time public relations can involve responsibility and responsiveness to the best interests of the organization and its publics.

**Keywords:** advertising, challenge, facilitate, mutual benefit, performance, promotion publicity, pursuing, reputation, vibrant process.

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### Introduction

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations as a management function that involves counseling at the highest level and being involved in strategic planning for the organization. Yet another definition of public relations as “reputation management” has gained currency. Consequently **Public relations is about reputation—the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations Practice is the discipline which looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behavior.**

As a practical matter, good public relations involve confronting a problem openly and honestly and then solving it. In the long run the best PR is evidence of an active social conscience.

#### 1. Organizational Role and Function: 10 Basic Principles

Public Relations is the strategic mobilization of the society. As the definitions suggest, the result of public relations efforts must be the real behavior of the organization and perceptions of that behavior by its publics. Therefore, among

the various titles now being used for the role of the public relations function are communications management, (or sometimes strategic communications management), reputation management and relationship management.

We can describe the function and role of public relations practice by stating 10 basic principles:

**1. Public relations deal with reality, not false fronts. Conscientiously planned programs that put the public interest in the forefront are the basis of sound public relations policy. (Translation: PR deals with facts, not fiction.)**

**2. Public relations is a service-oriented occupation in which public interest, not personal reward, should be the primary consideration. (PR is a public, not personal, service.)**

**3. Since the public relations practitioner must go to the public to seek support for programs and policies, public interest is the central criterion by which he or she should select these programs and policies. (P’R practitioners must have the guts to say “no” to a client or to refuse a deceptive program.)**

**4. Because the public relations practitioner reaches many publics through mass media, which are the public channels of communication, the integrity of these channels must be preserved. (PR practitioners should never**

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lie to the news media, either outright or by implication.)

5. Because PR practitioners are in the middle between an organization and its publics, they must be effective communicators—conveying information back and forth until understanding and ideally consensus are reached. (The PR practitioner probably was the original ombudsman/ woman.)

6. To expedite two-way communication and to be responsible communicators, public relations practitioners must use scientific public opinion research extensively (PR cannot afford to be a guessing game.)

7. To understand what their publics are saying and to reach them effectively, public relations practitioners must employ the social sciences—psychology, sociology social psychology—and the literature of public opinion, communication and semantics. (Intuition is not enough.)

8. Because a lot of people do PR research, the PR person must adapt the work of other, related disciplines, including learning theory and other psychology theories, sociology, political science, economics and history. (The PR held requires multidisciplinary applications.)

9. Public relations practitioners are obligated to explain problems to the public before these problems become crises. (PR practitioners should alert and advise, so people won't be taken by surprise.)

10. A public relations practitioner should be measured by only one standard: ethical performance.

## 2. PR Functions Through History

Because the effort to persuade underlies all public relations activity, we can say that the general endeavor of public relations is as old as civilization itself. For society to exist, people must achieve some minimum level of agreement, and this agreement is usually reached through interpersonal and group communication. But reaching agreement often requires more than the simple act of sharing information; it demands a strong element of persuasion on the part of all parties involved in the decision-making process. Today persuasion is still the driving force of public relations, and many of the tactics that modern PR people use to persuade have been used by the leaders of society for thousands of years (Newsom, 2004).

Monuments and other art forms of the ancient world reflect early efforts at persuasion. Pyramids, Statues, temples, tombs, paintings and early forms of writing announce the divinity of rulers, whose power derived from the religious convictions to the public. Ancient art and literature also celebrated the heroic deeds of leaders and rulers, who were considered gods or godlike. Speeches by the powerful or power-seeking used institutionalized rhetoric as a principal device for persuasion (Tench, 2006).

Looking at some of the early techniques and tools used in persuasion can help pill today- PR activities in perspective. Certainly such an overview will reveal that, in the process of its development, PR has achieved various persuasive techniques that have proved their utility and effectiveness through the centuries.

## 3. PR and Related Activities

Public relations involve many activities. People's participation in the activities of public relations and their subsequent assertion that, therefore, they are "in public relations" often cause confusion in others' understanding of what public relations is. The activities of PR practice include: press agency, promotion, publicity, public affairs, research (primary and secondary), graphics, and advertising, marketing, integrated marketing communications and even merchandising support.

- Press agency involves planning activities staging events—sometimes just stunts—that will attract attention to a person, institution, idea or product.

- Promotion goes beyond press agency into opinion making. Promotion tries, to garner support and endorsement for a person, product, institution or idea.

- Publicity is placing information into a news medium. Publicity is not always good news. A PR writer may be crafting a response to an unpleasant situation. Publicists are primarily writers, one of the technical support team for public relations. Publicists working for government are often called information officers.

- Public affairs, when the term is used by government, means the same thing as public relations, with external publics. However, in companies or nonprofit organizations, it usually means the person responsible for that organizations relationship with all branches of government. Most of the activity is with the legislative and regulatory branches.

- Research is the foundation of all good public relations strategy. Much research involves publics and public opinion, although other research may involve the marketplace and the social, economic and legal climate in which a public relations activity is centered.

- Graphics are important because all public relations readers and viewers are "volunteers" who will reject any presentation that is visually unappealing and not user-friendly.

- Advertising is usually commercial time or space bought in specific media to control the time, place and message. However when nonprofits use advertising, the time or space may be donated by a medium, but what is lost is control over use and timing.

- Marketing is directed toward consumers of a service or product. the American Marketing Association (AMA)

defined marketing as an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders. The AMA includes in that definition activities (ideas and services) of non-profit organizations, as well as those sold for profit.

- Integrated marketing communications (IMC) began developing in the 1990s and emerged from what had been called Marketing/PR. Then IMC began to focus on branding to give instant recognition for a product or company. IMC, talked about “relationship building,” which sounded a lot like what PR was doing. Although some PR people accepted the development as IMC other PR people agreed only that organizations should unify all communications to “speak with one voice”: what they called integrated communication. As a result. IC and IMC terms began showing up in name changes for firms and in curriculum changes in some colleges and universities.

- Merchandising is concerned with presentation. Its focus is the packaging for a product, idea or perhaps even a political candidate. Technology has changed merchandising in the diversity of delivery: compact disc (CD) or fax, in addition to audiocassette or print, plus the direct response of online purchasing and cable-television shopping channels. Merchandising experts are strong in the application of graphics. All of these are important elements in the “toolbox” of solutions to reaching publics. But public relations is something greater than just this collection of activities.

#### 4. The function of PR in Business and Society

Traditionally, three functions have been ascribed to public relations. According to one point of view public relations serves to control publics, by directing what people think or do in order to satisfy the needs or desires of an institution. According to a second point of view, PR’s function is to respond to publics reacting to developments, problems or the initiatives of others. According to a third point of view, the function of public relations is to achieve mutually beneficial relationships among all the publics, by fostering harmonious interchanges among an institution’s various publics including such groups as employees, consumers, suppliers and producers .

The current era of professionalism has seen practitioners beginning to control PR’s development, use and practice. James E. Grunig, who edited “Excellence in Public, Relations and Communication Management”, has defined public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig, 1992).

Some of the PR works describe practitioner behavior primarily in terms of the external environment of public opinion, but internal environments (such as open or closed

communication systems) also can affect practitioner behavior. In fact, some research indicates that PR practitioners who work in participative environments (where employees make job-related suggestions and generally take a more active role in determining their work environment) see themselves as less constrained than those who work in authoritarian environments where employee input is strongly discouraged. It may be that the self-described technician doesn’t have the option of being a manager because of authoritarian top management and a closed communication environment.

Although it is recognized that the task of transforming an organization from authoritative to participative might not be included in a PR person’s job description, it is noted that accomplishing such a change origin be among the most significant contributions a practitioner could make. In any case, it is suggested that public relations persons would do well to seek out participative environments and to avoid authoritative environments.

At the same time most public relations practitioners accept the idea of there being distinct technician and manager roles due to the variety of activities that public relations incorporates

#### 5. The Value of Public Relations:

The lack of consistency in PR practice is due to its rapid growth and its need to develop within the cultural, religious, socioeconomic and political context in which it is being practiced. The reason for its growth globally, though, is because it does have value to governments, commercial entities and nonprofit organizations.

- **Public relations can represent the needs, interests and desires of the organization’s various publics to management and then back from management to them, explaining management’s perspectives. It opens a dialogue between an organization and the public’s it affects. The dialogue can encourage mutual adjustments between an organization and the society it serves.**

- **Public relations focus of society in the broadest sense and should work in the greater interest of society, rather than die harrow interests of the or-ganization it serves.**

- **In working toward the best interest of society, public relations has the opportunity to improve cooperation of an organization with its publics and perhaps avoid any arbitrary or coercive action on the part of government**

- **PR provides useful information to people about various aspects of their lives.**

■ **Although PR people cannot be a conscience to an organization whose leadership has none, then role is in raise issues and concerns and remind management of ethical responsibilities.**

■ **PR helps management formulate, advocate and teach objectives that are sounder.**

■ **The principles of public relations reflect the basic cooperative natures of people, and thus PR people earn their reputation as problem solvers.**

■ **Being socially responsible means upholding these obligations.**

### **5. PR as Counsel for Social Responsibility:**

Management must be responsible and responsive to its publics; otherwise, it will have to combat a hostile environment. Unfortunately, the pattern of action has often been just the opposite, according to many social scientists who identified the following “normal” pattern of business response to social issues: (1) Ignore the problem. (2) If publicity calls widespread attention to the problem, admit its existence but present business as a victim (3) When the public takes the problem to lawmakers, lobby, testify in legislative hearings and advertise to get opinion leaders to believe that the proposed solutions constitute government interference in the private economy. (4) After new regulations are final, announce that business can live with the new law.

All large institutions, not only businesses, are challenged these days: governments, schools and colleges, professional sports, churches, health care groups, fundraising groups and even the news media. With the prevalence of such crises in public confidence, the role of the PR practitioner becomes critical.

Nevertheless, the use of public relations talent worldwide is increasing daily, and education for public relations continues to grow steadily in the USA and elsewhere. More universities throughout the world have begun adding public relations courses.

Public relations practitioners have been both facilitated and challenged in their responsibilities by today’s communication technology and people’s creative use of this technology. MP3 Players, iPod Nanos, mobile phones (called “cell phones” in the USA) virtually everyone’s reliance on the Internet and the World Wide Web in their day-to-day activities; and quick acceptance of a host of rapidly evolving communication technology that most people wouldn’t have dreamed even a few years previously have basically changed both how people communicate and how they live (Allen Center, 2008).

### **6. Restructuring PR Roles**

The role of the public relations professional as counsel to management has increased. Monitoring issues and anticipating what problems to avoid have taken precedence over problem solving. Although problem solving certainly still is in demand, it now is seen as solving problems with various individuals or publics to avoid conflict or a crisis.

With so much emphasis on economics, investor relations in publicly held companies have grown beyond what the name implies. Investor relations practitioners are expected to maintain a steady flow of information on the state of the organization to regulators, banks, securities analysts and the financial as well as trade press. They are counted on to work with the internal and external auditors and the board’s audit committee to protect the economic reputation of the company. Because reputation and risk are closely connected, they also must work with corporate risk managers. Furthermore, because employees are also investors, investor relations practitioners are expected to alert this internal public first to any economic issues that might have an impact on the company. Of course, they are legally bound to alert the entire investment community, which really means everybody, if there is something material that affects stock values.

Given the importance of any profit or nonprofit organization’s reputation, increasingly public relations practitioners are being required to either earn law degrees or to learn enough about the law to recognize a potential problem. Also, with many cases being tried now in the court of public opinion before going to court, public relations practitioners are the ones who must work with lawyers to present the organization’s position to its publics. These practitioners often carry the title “vice president of corporate communication.” Restructuring also has occurred in the areas of tactics and techniques. A promotion, a news release or an adv. can cause serious damage if practitioners are not culturally literate and sensitive. They have to know how messages, art, music and other symbols are likely to affect not only intended publics, but also unintended recipients such as people in other countries.

Another problem can occur if all messages from the organization are not consonant. The result of these concerns has been further integration of organizations communications. Internationally, integration is more likely because public relations and advertising have been used by the public sector. One of the most significant areas of public relations growth abroad has been public affairs. This is largely in the context of communication by a government. Reputation management has also become both a focus and a specialization of public relations, with an emerging literature, and with some corporations even establishing a position of chief reputation officer.

### **7. Changes in PR Practices**

Most practitioners are working across time zones and borders daily. Much of their work is through electronic communication, especially email. The difficulty is that email messages often are sent without the care that goes into crafting a printed message. Spelling, grammar and punctuation sometimes get less attention than they should. Slang that may not be understood correctly gets incorporated. Perhaps more important, the tone of the communication is not always considered. In the rush to communicate, anticipation of the recipient's reaction may be overlooked. Public relations practitioners always have been spokespeople for their organizations, but now what they say and how they say it goes around the globe in real time. What people see and hear in their own contexts, not necessarily that of the organization, is critical to their assessment of the organization.

### Conclusion

Finally Changes in the environment for public relations can shift the emphasis from one activity to another over time. Recently, advances in technology—such as significant differences in the way the news media operate—have driven many of these shifts. Another result of these advances has been increased globalization, affecting both internal and external communication and significantly altering the way crises are handled. Now all crises get global attention, which creates considerable urgency for appropriate organizational responses.

Public relations people nowadays are developing specialties much more than in the past because of the increasing complexity of many fields. Health care is one; science is another. Companies look for public relations people who have a background sufficient to understand what that company does well enough to interpret and explain it clearly to anyone at any time. When a crisis occurs or an issue arises, there's no time to learn the background needed to put a response into context.

Therefore for PR now social responsibility and ethics became inextricably tied to an organization's reputation. Credibility is critical. Increasingly, publics want to bear an explanation from the top. So public relations practitioners who have been involved in giving media training to management now find it imperative to be sure the "boss" is good under fire in both words and gestures that will be seen around the world.

So, if you see a need for PR practitioners to be flexible in meeting these demands, you have gotten the message. Some people are just not emotionally suited for the field. Although flexibility always has been an issue, the global workplace has made it imperative.

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