

Public Relations

The formal practice of what today is called public relations is less than 100 years old. Yet during its relatively brief history, public relations has been defined in many widely differing ways. Not surprisingly, the earliest definitions emphasized the roles of press agency and publicity since these were major elements from which modern public relations grew.

Later as public relations was recognized and employed by more organizations, definitions began to include:

- the need for research prior to initiating actions, careful planning and thorough evaluation or measurement of results.
- a continuing, systematic process instead of a one-time or single activity.
- multiple audiences or publics.
- its role as an essential function of management.
- public participation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and accommodation as important tools.
- the need, in most instances, for long-term commitment.

Many of these definitions were quite lengthy, so much so that they tended more to describe what public relations does than what it is. In 1988, in an attempt to solve this dilemma the governing body of the Public Relations Society of America -its Assembly -formally adopted a definition of public relations which has become most accepted and widely used:

"Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other."

In this definition, the essential functions of research, planning, communications dialogue and evaluation are implied. Key words are "organization" rather than the limiting implication of "company" or "business", and "publics" which recognizes that all organizations have multiple publics from which they must earn consent and support

What it Does

Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.

Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, schools, colleges, and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders, and other institutions, and with society at large.

The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.

As a management function, public relations encompasses the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.

- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action, and communications, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.
- Researching, conducting, and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations, and other programs.
- Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy. Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities-in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above.

Examples of the knowledge that may be required in the professional practice of public relations include communication arts, psychology, social psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and the principles of management and ethics. Technical knowledge and skills are required for opinion research, public issues analysis, media relations, direct mail, institutional advertising, publications, film/video productions, special events, speeches, and presentations.

In helping to define and implement policy, the public relations practitioner uses a variety of professional communications skills and plays an integrative role both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment.

How it Can Help

The publicity and promotional aspect paves the way for the sale of products or services, so much so that some companies have placed sales quotas on their product publicity people.

Internal motivation is a vital factor which affects the bottom line by building morale, enhancing productivity and creating team spirit. It also helps recruit qualified people and retain them.

Public relations provides an early warning system by avoiding disruptions which may occur when a single surprise issue or unplanned-for social/political change arises.

Public relations provides an organization with new opportunities because the people involved in public relations interact with more internal and external audiences than anyone else in the organization. Public relations people have a conning tower from which to identify new markets, new products, new methods.

Public relations helps to protect the present position when an organization is under attack. For instance, Proctor and Gamble did not suffer declining sales, morale or stock values during the tampon debacle largely because of their expert public relations handling of the problem -communicating the company's position.

Public relations helps to overcome executive isolation, something that can affect every organization sooner or later. An inescapable assignment of every public relations practitioner is opening the eyes and ears of management to what's really happening "out there."

Public relations helps organizations manage change, something they must do to stay competitive and efficient. But since change is threatening and often resisted, smooth transition through a necessary change guided by public relations professionals is a real dollar-saver.

The phrase "double bottom line" was coined to explain the relationship between an organization and its social responsibility. It's now well understood and accepted that social responsibility does have a traceable effect on economic success for every type organization. The leading role in "social accountancy" is usually played by public relations staff.

Public Relations Today

Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Often, it is a term used to describe both, a way of looking at an organization's performance and a program of activities.

The public relations function takes many forms in different organizations, including public information, investor relations, public affairs, corporate communications, employee relations, marketing or product publicity, and consumer service or customer relations.

Basic to all public relations, however, is communicating. Well-planned, effectively handled communications are increasingly seen as essential to the success and even existence of organizations and causes in today's changing world. Every organization-government, business, labor, professional, trade, health, cultural, financial, recreational, educational and public service depends on people. Their attitudes, attention, understanding, and motivation can be critical to the success or failure of an organization or idea.

Public relations, at its best, not only tells an organization's "story" to its publics, but also helps shape the organization and the way it performs. Through research, measurement and evaluation, public relations professionals determine the concerns and expectations of the organization's publics and explain them to management. A responsible and effective public relations program is based on the understanding and support of its publics.

Public Relations Elements

Counseling - Providing advice to the management of an organization concerning policies, relationships and communications; in effect, "what to do."

Research - Determining attitudes and behaviors of publics and their causes in order to plan, implement and measure activities to influence or change the attitudes and behavior.

Media Relations - Relating with communications media in seeking publicity or responding to their interest in an organization.

Employee/Member Relations - Responding to concerns and informing and motivating an organization's employees or members, its retirees and their families.

Community Relations - Continuing, planned and active participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both an organization and the community.

Public Affairs - Developing effective involvement in public policy, and helping an organization adapt to public expectations; a term also used by military services and some government agencies to describe their public relations activities.

Government Affairs - Relating directly with legislatures and regulatory agencies on behalf of an organization, usually as a central element of a public affairs program; often called "lobbying."

Issues Management - Identifying and addressing issues of public interest in which an organization is, or should be, concerned.

Financial Relations - Creating and maintaining investor confidence and building positive relationships with the financial community; also called investor or shareholder relations.

Industry Relations - Relating with trade associations and other firms in an organization's industry.

Development/Fund Raising - Demonstrating the need for and encouraging an organization's members, friends, supporters and others to voluntarily contribute to support it.

Multicultural Affairs - Relating with individuals and groups in minorities.

Special Events - Stimulating an interest in a person, product or organization by means of a focused "happening;" also, activities designed to enable an organization to listen to and interact with its publics.

Marketing Communications - Combination of activities designed to sell a product, service or idea, including advertising, collateral materials, publicity, promotion, packaging, point-of-sale display, trade shows and special events.

Responsibilities Of A Public Relations Professional

Most public relations positions involve one or more of these functions:

Programming - This involves analyzing problems and opportunities, defining goals, identifying the publics (or groups of people whose support or understanding is needed), and recommending and planning activities. It may include budgeting and assignment of responsibilities to the appropriate people, including non-public relations personnel. For example, an organization's president or CEO is often a key figure in public relations activities.

Cultivating Relationships - Successful public relations professionals develop skills in gathering information from management, colleagues in their organizations and external sources. Continually evaluating what they learn, practitioners formulate recommendations and gain approval for them from their managements. Many public relations activities require working with, and sometimes through, other organizational units such as personnel, legal and marketing staffs. The public relations professional who learns to be persuasive with others will be most effective.

Writing And Editing - Since the public relations professional is often trying to reach large groups of people, an important tool is the printed word. Examples of its use are found in reports, news releases, brochures, speeches, video, scripts, trade magazine articles, product information and technical materials, employee publications, newsletters, shareholder reports, and other management communications directed to both organization personnel and external groups. A sound, clear style of writing is a must for public relations work.

Information - Establishing systems for the dissemination of material to appropriate newspaper, broadcast, general and trade publication editors, and communicating with them to enlist their interest in publishing an organization's news and features are regular public relations activities. This requires knowledge of how newspapers and other media operate, the areas of specialization publications, and the interest of individual editors. (Competition is keen for the attention of editors and broadcasters who have a limited amount of space and time at their disposal.) As a seasoned practitioner put it, "You have to get the right editor of the right publication with the right story at the right time. "

Although ideas are accepted on the basis of news and other readership values, an ability to develop relationships of mutual respect and cooperation with the news media can be useful to both the practitioners and the media.

Production - Various publications, special reports, videos, and multimedia programs are important ways of communicating. The public relations professional need not be an expert in art, layout, typography, and photography, but background knowledge of the techniques of preparation is needed for intelligent planning and supervision of their use.

Special Events - News conferences, convention exhibits, new facility and anniversary celebrations, contest and award programs, tours and special meetings are only a few of the special events used to gain attention and acceptance of groups of people. They involve careful planning and coordination, attention to detail, preparation of special booklets, publicity materials and reports.

Speaking - Public relations work often requires skill in face-to-face communication - finding appropriate platforms, the preparation of speeches for others and the delivery of speeches. The person who can effectively address individuals and groups will enjoy an advantage over those whose facility of expression is limited to writing.

Research And Evaluation - An important activity undertaken by public relations practitioners is fact-gathering. This can be highly personal, through interviews, review of library materials and informal conversations. It also can involve the use of survey techniques and firms specializing in designing and conducting opinion research.

After a program is completed, the public relations professional studies its results and evaluates the program's planning, implementation, and effectiveness. More and more, managements expect research and evaluation from their public relations advisers or staffs.

The Typical Day At Work

Public relations offices are busy places; work schedules are irregular and frequently interrupted. The junior employee may answer calls for information from the press and public, work on invitation lists and details for a press conference, escort visitors and clients, help with research, write brochures, deliver releases to editorial offices, and compile media distribution lists.

Employees will brief their management on upcoming meetings, help write reports, speeches, presentations and letters, research case histories, help produce displays and other audiovisual materials, proofread copy, select photographs for publication, arrange for holiday and other remembrances, conduct surveys and tabulate questionnaires, and work with letter shops and printers.

Public relations programs operate against deadlines. Under such high-pressure conditions, nine-to-five schedules go out the window. Public relations executives are not tied to their desks for long periods. Meetings, community functions, business lunches, travel assignments, special speaking and writing commitments, and unscheduled work on "crisis" situations often mean long hours.

Personal Qualifications And Preparation

Because public relations covers many kinds of tasks, there is no single set of "ideal" qualifications. Most people think of public relations executives as highly articulate and imaginative individuals. Yet, public relations executives themselves stress judgement as the most important single qualification needed in their field.

The public relations practitioner is a "counselor whose advice and services are often sought when an organization faces the prospect of trouble. Therefore, it is important to develop the capacity to think analytically under pressure, to draw out necessary information, and to express persuasive practical solutions. Other qualities needed by the public relations work include:

Imagination, for coping with present problems and anticipating future ones; Communication skills, with demonstrable competence in writing; Personal confidence, for successful face-to-face contacts with individuals and groups; Sensitivity to other people (simply to "like People" will not help a candidate get a job); both diplomacy and a more-than-ordinary ability to place oneself in the shoes of another are important in public relations work;

Organizing and planning ability, applied to oneself and others; as with many other occupations, managerial skills are invaluable for successfully climbing the public relations ladder.

Work Experience

Many of today's senior public relations professionals began their careers as journalists. For the majority with this background, public relations work represented a change of career objectives. A number of graduates still seek out journalism jobs, but as a specific stepping stone to public relations. With the growth of college training for public relations, it is possible that the importance of a journalism apprenticeship will diminish.

But, there remains something to be said about a journalism background. The experience gained in writing, personal contact and other aspects of work for metropolitan or smaller newspapers, general or trade magazines and broadcasting media is still deemed important by a majority of public relations employers.

To a far lesser extent, experience in general business, marketing, advertising and selling is considered useful for public relations work.

Sometimes work in specialized fields-such as finance, engineering, medicine and public or educational administration-can provide valuable background for a particular public relations position.

Outside activities-freelance writing, community organization work, election and fund campaigning, public speaking-are often looked upon favorably as supporting experience.

Internships with public relations counseling firms, corporate departments or nonprofit organizations are extremely valuable for people still attending school. Professionally supervised, internships provide bona fide, hands-on public relations experience. The most valuable internships are those involving assignments of one or more of the following duties: writing, layout, and editing for external or internal publications, promotional material, and brochures; news gathering; news release and feature writing; research and report writing; preparing local media lists; designing audiovisual presentations; helping to arrange or to take part in special events; and assisting in fundraising programs. Graduates with one or more such internships have an edge in the entry-level job market.