



General Industrial Series

Effective Communication and Public Relations

1. Introduction

The shifting of management focus towards 'stakeholders' rather than 'shareholders' has led to the change in business communication and public relations. Public relations which is defined to be the strategic management function in most cases is now focused on building and maintaining an impeccable corporate reputation.

Until relatively recently in many countries environmental issues rated little more than an afterthought as governments looked for ways to compete in the global market and provide sufficient food and healthcare.

Today enlightened governments are anxious that industry does not repeat the mistakes made by the most developed countries and are working towards sustainable economic growth and environmental management.

At the same time both governments and industries are increasingly attentive to the image problems that can arise if environmental considerations are ignored.

2. Communication Principles

Truth and honesty should be the foundation on which any public relations policy operates. Honesty begets trust and we cannot expect to create and maintain a successful relationship with the international community, national governments, the press and the public if we do not have their trust. As effective communicators, we build this trust by providing an open line through which we can give and receive information.

Presenting all the facts from the beginning and answering questions honestly and openly can protect an organization from misperceptions, misunderstandings and bad publicity at a later date.

Communication should be fair, without damaging anyone and yet sympathetic to sensitive issues. In all instances, on both practical and legal grounds, effective public relations means not lying to or defaming anyone. Modern business demands high standards of social responsibility as well as "green and clean" technologies.

Know the subject, be clear, confident and precise, but avoid industry jargon. Take the opportunity to inform and educate the target audience about your position and above all be Positive.

Nevertheless, always be realistic, promote, investigate, reassure, listen, inform, but do not promise something that cannot or might not be delivered.



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3. The Ten Golden Rules of Public Relations

- 3.1 Plan ahead, set out the long-term goals of the organization and determine the image you wish to convey to others.
- 3.2 Assign responsibility for Public Relations matters with clear objectives and accountability. Do not assume that in a crisis someone will know what to do and how to do it.
- 3.3 Nominate the spokesperson for all or each of the various likely issues, so that everybody knows and understands their role.
- 3.4 Be proactive, not reactive. Don't work in a vacuum and behave like a "cuttle fish" only reacting when you are attacked and about to be eaten alive. Today assume that in our business there is always the potential for criticism. Use "early warning radar" to gather information and seek out likely problems. At the same time don't hesitate to broadcast the outstanding achievements of the organization, especially in the areas of quality, care and concern.
- 3.5 Instigate outreach programs to the community, the schools, local authorities and welfare organizations. Assist these groups with fund raising and expert resourcing to meet special needs.
- 3.6 Don't hesitate to report achievements, for good environmental performance, new product lines and most important involve others so that there is a wide range of activities to broadcast.
- 3.7 Join the Industry Organizations applicable to your business sector. These organizations provide an invaluable legal and advocacy service to their respective sectors ensuring that your interests are represented at the high est levels both nationally and internationally.
- 3.8 Have procedures in place to respond to any complaint or crisis in a timely manner.
- 3.9 To facilitate an effective response to any situation, good or bad, maintain an up to date media database so that the "shakers and movers" can be contact ed easily.
- 3.10 Above all in the normal course of business make time to meet with commu nity and government leaders, media professionals and employees. Do this without an agenda and use the time to listen and get to know the people that are important messengers. The time will come when you need their help and it is important when that time comes that they know you are a person they can trust.



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4. Dynamic Strategy

Business strategy sets out the goals for and the direction of the organization for say three, five or twenty years. The factors that determine the success of any business strategy can largely be managed internally and the best strategies will be those that are immune to outside influences.

Unfortunately good Public Relations is subject to so many external factors outside the control of a business that a dynamic PR strategy is required to maintain the image that fits the cooperate objectives.

A "Dynamic PR Strategy" is one that maintains the organizations "Goals and Objectives" whilst effecting change in public understanding and perception. Such an "open systems" approach maintains the desired relationships with the target public groups on the basis of a reciprocal "output-feedback-adjustment" model.

In practice this means that within an organization's structure, what ever that might be, future plans and implementation programs are determined. The resulting goals and objectives are briefed directly to those within the organization so that everyone's responsibilities and internal roles during the implementation phase of the plan are clearly understood. Within the context of an organization's goals and objectives will be a set of desirable relationships. Employees, for example, need to identify with the Company's objectives and feel motivated by the challenge to meet the organization's goals. Shareholders, on the other hand need to feel reassured that the their financial investment is secure.

External communication to the target stakeholder groups is more difficult. Direct communication is not always possible and the only recourse is to use a multi-media approach consisting of personal contacts, newsgroups, industry associations and community networks. The information given to the stakeholder groups does not need to motivate them in the same manner as employees, but it is important to gain their support for your activities.

It is imperative that you seek feedback from any such exercise, particularly where external communication is involved. Find out how your objectives and goals were received and most importantly, how they are perceived. Ascertain from this vital feedback whether the organization's implementation programs in support of the overall objectives require modifications or changes to improve public perception. These adjustments to the Public Relations program, if designed correctly, should induce a change in behavior of the stakeholders. If, however, when the "feedback" is checked the desired change in behavior is not apparent, then go through the process again.

The objectives and goals of the organization have not changed, only the PR program. Time devoted to this process ensuring that the stakeholder response is what is desired will inevitably pay dividends in the long term and may avoid a crisis.

Furthermore following this PR process, as the business evolves so will the PR program. Good PR responds to change and the dynamic approach will ensure that your organization's goals and objectives are shared throughout the company and supported by the stakeholders.



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5. Feedback

Feedback is the most vital ingredient in a dynamic approach to public relations.

When testing communications and public perceptions look examine four criteria:

- 5.1 Agreement. Ascertain the extent of agreement or disagreement and in the case of disagreement the issues that need to be addressed in order to close the gap.
- 5.2 Understanding. Was the message that you wanted delivered understood by the target groups or do you need to repeat the communication in a different way.
- 5.3 Congruency. Find out how closely the thoughts and ideas of the target groups mirror yours and what areas of common interest are shared.
- 5.4 Accuracy. Even if the message was understood it is important to confirm that the information contained in any communication was delivered correctly and has been recorded and reported accurately.

These simple tests will enhance your appreciation of the perceptions of the various target groups and guide you increasingly towards the right PR approach to each real or potential threat.

6. Public Relations Policy

- Determine the desired image.
- Is there something special about your organization?
- Is your process environmentally friendly?
- Do you care about your employees and the community?
- What do you do to ensure that your products are recycled?
- Ensure that your policy has a purpose.
- Select the appropriate Media.

Select the appropriate media to use and the right appeals to make. Don't expect automatic media coverage of an event simply because you write or telephone the correct media contact. Get to know the editors of your local newspaper and radio/television stations, or whoever it is that assigns reporters. Find out what is considered to be newsworthy and discuss your ideas, such reporting new appointments or promotions, a change of location or news of expansion, but above all success stories that appeal to your target audience.

Promote the "excellence" of your organization. If your company is a world leader in a particular field or you are proud of its quality products, then provide your contacts with a fact sheet highlighting those achievements and the names of those involved.

Participate in community events. Take responsibility for certain special projects or fund-raising efforts. Above all support education, medical services and environmental improvements.



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7. Public Relations will not.....

Poor public relations is the application of reactive activities and crisis management that are void of planned long term professional public relations and only focused on short term goals. These activities may look and sound good, but generally the results will not have a lasting effect.

Effective Public Relations requires putting policies into place that will demonstrate clearly that the organization has concern for its employees, the environment, suppliers, external populations, clients or consumers.

So, consider what public relations will not do!

- X It will not make up for deficiencies in your product, operations or customer service.
- X It is not the forum or a substitute for corporate planning.
- X It should be noted that contrary to popular misconception public relations will not solve serious ethical problems or create a positive image of a company that is poorly managed.

8. Complaints

Complaints are always important to the person or the group lodging the grievance and can lead to serious public relations problems if not handled correctly. The following guidelines provide a framework to minimize the risk of your public relations image being compromised.

Always assume that all complaints are genuine and treat them with respect. Study or listen to any complaint carefully and allow time, during this period, for any personal anger to diffuse.

Probe the complaint to ascertain the facts of the case, the chronology of events and also determine whether or not there are any social or emotional factors involved.

At all times be positive and helpful. For example if something is damaged either offer a replacement or a temporary substitute until the article in question can be replaced or repaired. If a complaint is made against a certain individual, then reassure the aggrieved person that the matter will be thoroughly investigated and all the facts will be established.

Above all, process complaints quickly and provide regular feedback, even when there is nothing to report. If the feedback is verbal always follow up with written confirmation.

Finally maintain a record of all complaints and log the actions taken to remedy the problem.



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9. Crisis Check List

In times of Crisis have the Public Relations Policy and Procedures, including a statement of mandate, values, programs and leadership, ready and with you at all times.

Crisis communications action plan detailing event sequences and options for various potential crisis scenarios.

The names and contact numbers of all key company, government, community and media people. The list should outline individual roles and responsibilities.

Up to date Company information fact sheets with data and statistics about business activities and every major project with potential crisis situations, such as minutes, reports, clippings - all indexed and portable.

Maintain a real time contact log. You might have a dozen or more government officials, reporters and community leaders on the go at once. It is essential that each contact is tracked separately. Know who contacted you, when, about what, how to contact them, what was said, what action is required and whether a "follow up" is necessary. If necessary record all telephone conversations, but be sure to advise callers that their telephone conversations will be recorded.

10. Dealing with a Crisis

When a potential crisis is likely to break research the situation, obtain and most importantly confirm facts, dates, events and list those people involved.

Analyze the situation and assess the impact of the crisis on the Public Relations image.

Do not proceed any further until you understand the problems, otherwise the media will destroy you.

Determine the root cause or causes of the problem and decide the appropriate remediation.

Devise a strategy that will deliver the desired outcome. Bear in mind that the strategy might be painful, costly and embarrassing.

Bearing this in mind select the appropriate media and delivery mechanisms with some care. For example if you need to apologize to someone, then meet the aggrieved person first before you meet the media. Individual will be upset if you do not confront them personally.

In a controlled exercise implement the agreed program to address the crisis.

Measure the impact of your efforts for quality, recall or retention of the program. Ascertain how the communication was perceived. Determine changes in levels of awareness, knowledge, understanding, preference, attitudes, opinions and behaviors.



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11. Give Yourself Time

Whatever you do, don't PANIC. Give yourself Time!

- *Time to Think*

If you have prepared a communications and public relations policy you will have a number of contingency plans designed to deal with a range of potential crisis. Assess the impact of the situation and select the right contingency measures to deal with the crisis.

- *Time to Plan*

Ensure that all the resources you need are at your disposal, if not start to mobilize them as a matter of urgency. Go over your contingency measures to check that they will deal with the crisis in hand and appoint one person with full authority to implement plan.

- *Time to React*

Allowing time to think and check contingency plans will pay dividends in the field of Public Relations, but once you have assessed the likely impact of a potential crisis, and prepared your initial position, respond quickly and as decisively as possible. Finally always be prepared for a long campaign.

12. Summary

Masking a problem is not a solution. It may seem like one at the time, and it may actually provide a temporary reprieve during a crisis. The truth will, however, prevail and surface when you least expect it, thereby leaving you inadequately prepared to deal with it.

When culpability is high, damage control inherently builds barriers around facts and information becomes selective, even secretive. This attitude enlightens nobody and only defers the inevitable release of all the facts.

If you are honest and deal with the crisis in a just and timely manner your PR Image will not only remain intact, but may be enhanced.

Effective communication promotes:

- * Positive Stakeholder Relations
- * Good relations with Government and local authorities
- * Support from local Communities
- * Understanding from the Enforcement Agencies
- * Appreciation from Non Government Organizations (NGO's)
- * Employee satisfaction and loyalty