



UNIT

Public Relations as Planned Communication

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss the importance of planning in Public Relations
- ✓ Explore various approaches of the planning process in Public Relations

Public Relations as Planned Communications

Planning in Public Relations

Research, planning and effective execution of PR policies are important to achieve successful PR objectives. However, there are exceptional circumstances which require the ad-hoc unplanned approach. According to a recent survey of companies in the UK, the most successful British companies tend to have about 70% of PR planned ahead of time and the remaining 30% is devoted to dealing with unexpected events and crisis management. PR programmes need to be well-defined and planned to accomplish their objectives. Planning will not be effective in meeting the objectives if the whole programme is not well thought out. A good plan needs the right people, the right communication medium, the right message delivered at the right time and at a competitive cost to guarantee success.

Why Planning is Important

PR programmes need to be well-planned to provide the right conditions for creative problem-solving by encouraging systematic thinking and analyses.

Reasons for planning PR activities include the following:

- Planning focuses effort by giving priority to important work and eliminating unnecessary and low-priority work
- Planning ensures effectiveness by guiding the planner to focus on the objectives
- Planning considers the long-term view by factoring in all future requirements into the plan
- Planning promotes planners to be more proactive
- Planning helps to resolve conflicts because it provides the opportunity to reflect on potential conflicts and to resolve them at the early phase of the programme
- Planning PR activities reduces mishaps and provide the means of preparing for eventualities and putting in place measures to deal with future problems by having contingency plans
- Planning is a way to show value for money because it provide proof of records of achievement to help win future contracts or the confidence of stakeholders

Reasons why practitioners are not willing to plan ahead:

- Lack of time due long periods required to develop the plans and also because it may interrupt work-in-progress
- Plans become outdated too soon due to the fast-changing business and communication environment
- Planning encourages lofty managerial expectations because there are a multitude of factors that the planner cannot control to achieve all objectives

- Plans of PR programmes can be too rigid and do not promote creativity nor provide wider choice of manoeuvrability. In other words, communication response to PR issues has to be flexible to guarantee success
- Plans do not enhance creativity because they are usually based on formulae and tend to be one-way approach to tackling issues
- Plans are more idealistic and not realistic. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of issues requiring the intervention of the PR practitioner makes it unrealistic to plan to cover all eventualities. The reality is that planners need to have leeway to adjust to changing dynamics of issues as they unfold.

Systems Context of Planning

The open systems' model of PR was presented by Cutlip, et al. (200). The model shows how various systems are interconnected during the planning phase. In the open model, inputs are taken from the public and translated into aims and objectives of the organisation in devising a PR programme to improve relations with the public. The closed system model, however, does not consider inputs from the public when formulating the aims and objectives of the PR programme.

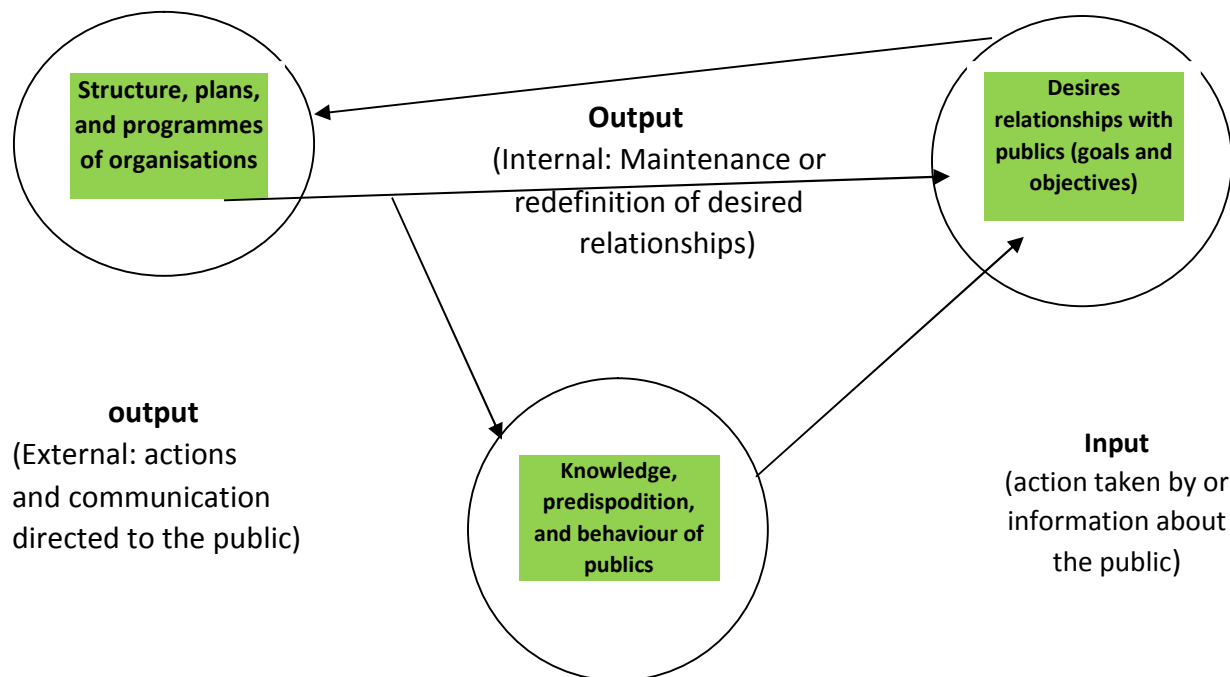


FIGURE 4.1 Open systems model of public relations (source: Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations*, 8th Edition)

Scope of Public Relations Planning

PR planning may take the long-term or short term view. A typical example of a long term approach is the “Full Stop Campaign” carried out to prevent incidence of child abuse in the UK. Short-term planning may involve events such as press conferences or launching of a new service. According to Windahl, planning programmes are best interpreted in a wider context to encompass both formal and informal communications. In Windahl’s view, informal communication may be planned and involve interaction with different publics. The informal communication is designed to promote cooperation between opinion formers or stakeholders and organisations by building relationships around a specific objective via interpersonal communication.

Planners may work on a variety of projects which may be large or small. Large projects may involve government PR executives promoting participation in EU elections or PR executives working for multinational organisations to promote brand identity and reputation worldwide. Smaller projects usually involve OR practitioners working on the local community and activist who are protesting about an issue they have identified in the community.

Communication activities may originate from the top management or from the bottom (employees) of the organisation.

In this unit, we will adopt the systematic planning approach as discussed previously and elaborate on some types of planning approach to use for PR programmes.

Approaches to the Planning Process

PR planners are guided certain key principles so arrive at a well organised and structured plan (Figure 4.2). There are six basic questions that planners need to ask in the course of the planning process:

- What is the problem or what issues need to be research? (i.e. researching the issue)
- What is the plan hoping to achieve? (The objectives)
- Who the organisations talk to? (Which public to develop a relationship with)
- What should be communicated (What message to send to the target public)
- How should the message be communicated? (Medium to use for communication)
- How can success be measured? (How to obtain feedback to evaluate effectiveness of the programme)

All good planning process require following a sequence of steps to device strategic plans for managing an organisation or carrying out a PR programme. This is also known as “Management by Objectives” (MBO) which is made up of the following steps:

- Setting objectives and targets
- Managers of various departments giving their approval to the objective and performance criteria
- Reviewing and appraising results (Mullins 1989, 254)

Most PR practitioners are given objectives by their managers before issues crop up, but it is much better to analyse situations requiring PR activities before coming up with suitable objectives. For instance, if a manager sets an objective to campaign for a legislation to be abolished, it would be prudent to examine this objective to see if it will be acceptable to all other stakeholders concerned. The objective to overturn the legislature may be due to unfavourable financial constraint it might impose on the company and its shareholders. But careful research may reveal that the legislature may be acceptable to the shareholder and other stakeholders. Given the turn of events, it would therefore, be wise to let go of this proposal to oppose the legislature since majority of the stakeholder are in support of it.

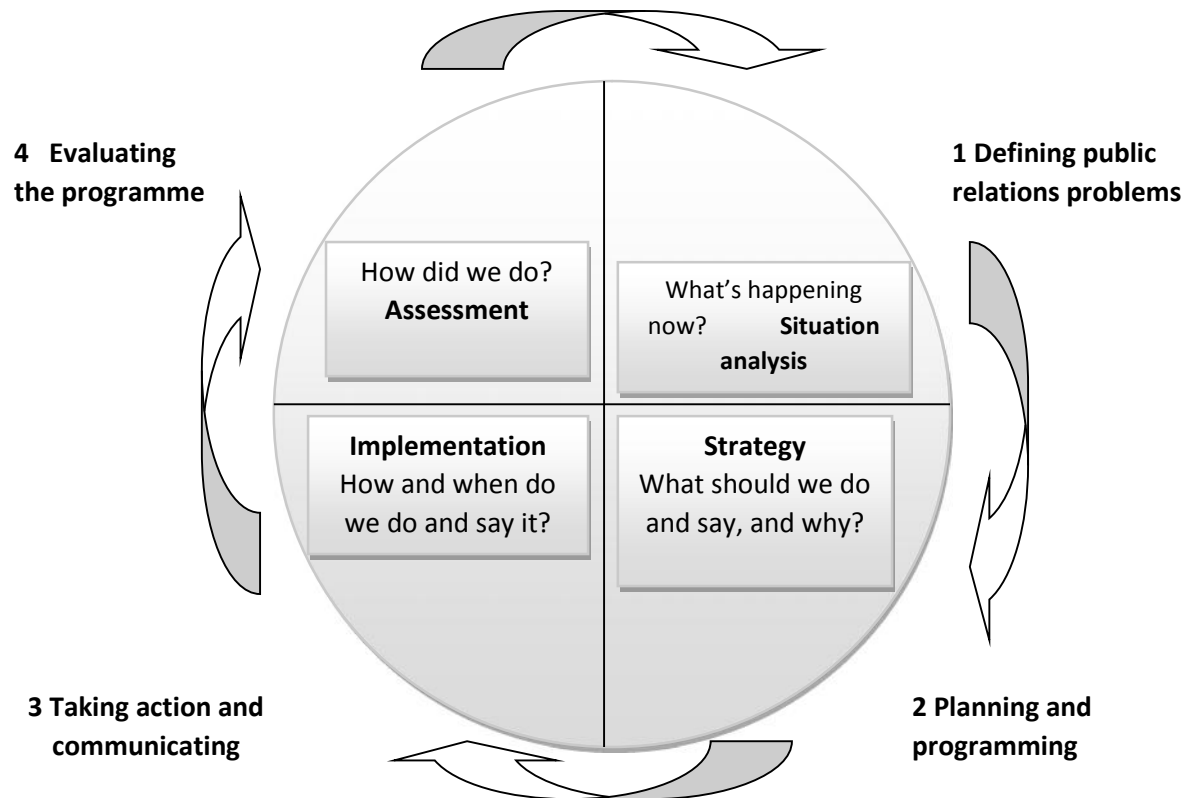


FIGURE 4.2 Cutlip and colleagues' planning model (*source*: Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations, 8th Edition*, © 2000. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.)

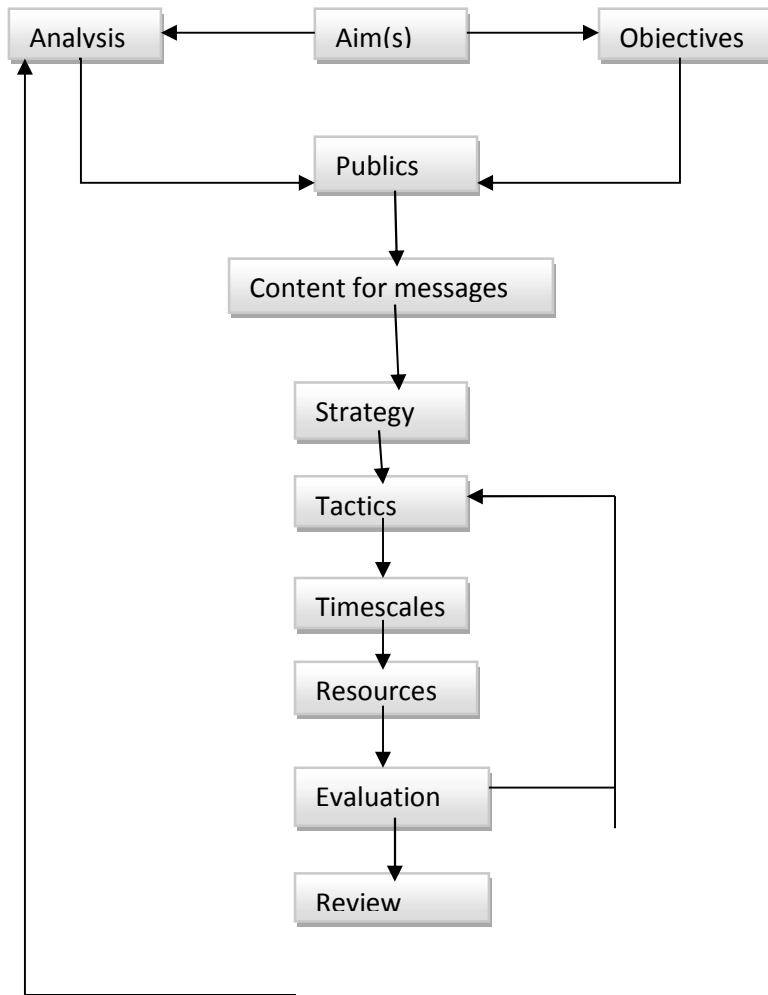


FIGURE 4.3 Gregory's planning model (source: Gregory 2000: 44)

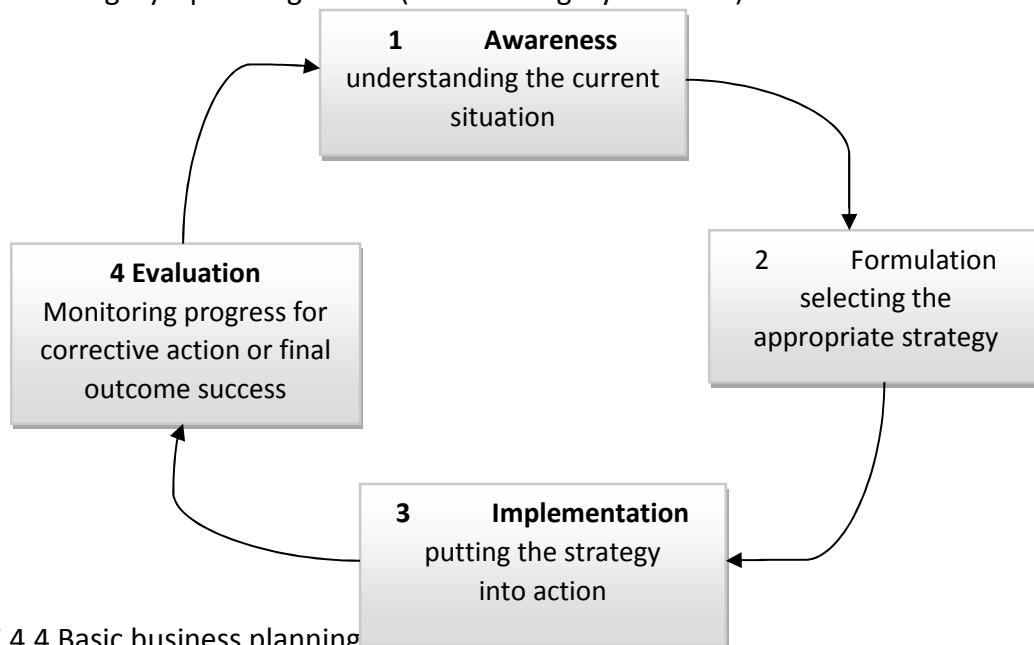


FIGURE 4.4 Basic business planning

Analysis

This is the foremost and preliminary step that the planners need to follow. It involves identification of issues or problems which forms the basis of the whole programme. This helps in having a clear motive for undertaking the programme. With the problem identified, it becomes much easy to find the right means of tackling it quickly.

Analysing the Environment

Analysis of the environment to identify issues which affects the operation of the organisation also has to be undertaken. This is also known as environmental scanning. These issues may actually be strategic business issues but they may cause companies to take certain actions which invariably require dealing with communication issues. PR practitioner need to consider environmental issues by maintaining environmental scanning files for the organisation to promptly identify and deal with future risks coming from the internal and external environments. This will help the organisation to quickly adapt its strategies and device contingency plans to take these potential issues from the environment. Pressure groups have a knack of spotting issues quite early and are able to influence public debate. So, by quickly spotting potential issues before these pressure groups, organisations can contribute meaningfully to debates about the issue and bring about the outcome they desire.

Question that you need to ask when undertaking this type of analysis include the following:

The main questions to be asked when undertaking this kind of analysis are:

- What are the environmental factors that affect this organisation (identified from the EPISTLE analysis)?
- Which ones are of most importance now?
- Which will become the most important in the next four years?

These questions help to come up with a list of issues likely to influence the operations of the organisation. These issues may differ depending on the country of operation, the conditions of operation and the type of industry.

PR should identify how issues are interrelated and how one issue affects the other. For example, modern technology has changed the lifestyle of many people which is evident of the effect of technology on social aspect of life. It is also important to identify and address the effect of long-term issues on the organisation. Notice that external environmental issues are out of the control of organisations. We now turn our attention to those issues over which the organisation has greater control. SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) Analysis is used to undertake evaluation of the internal environment of organisations. The strength and weakness are easily controlled and can be changed. The opportunity and threat are, however, external factors that cannot be controlled. These four elements may be viewed as mirror images in the quadrants of figure 4.6.

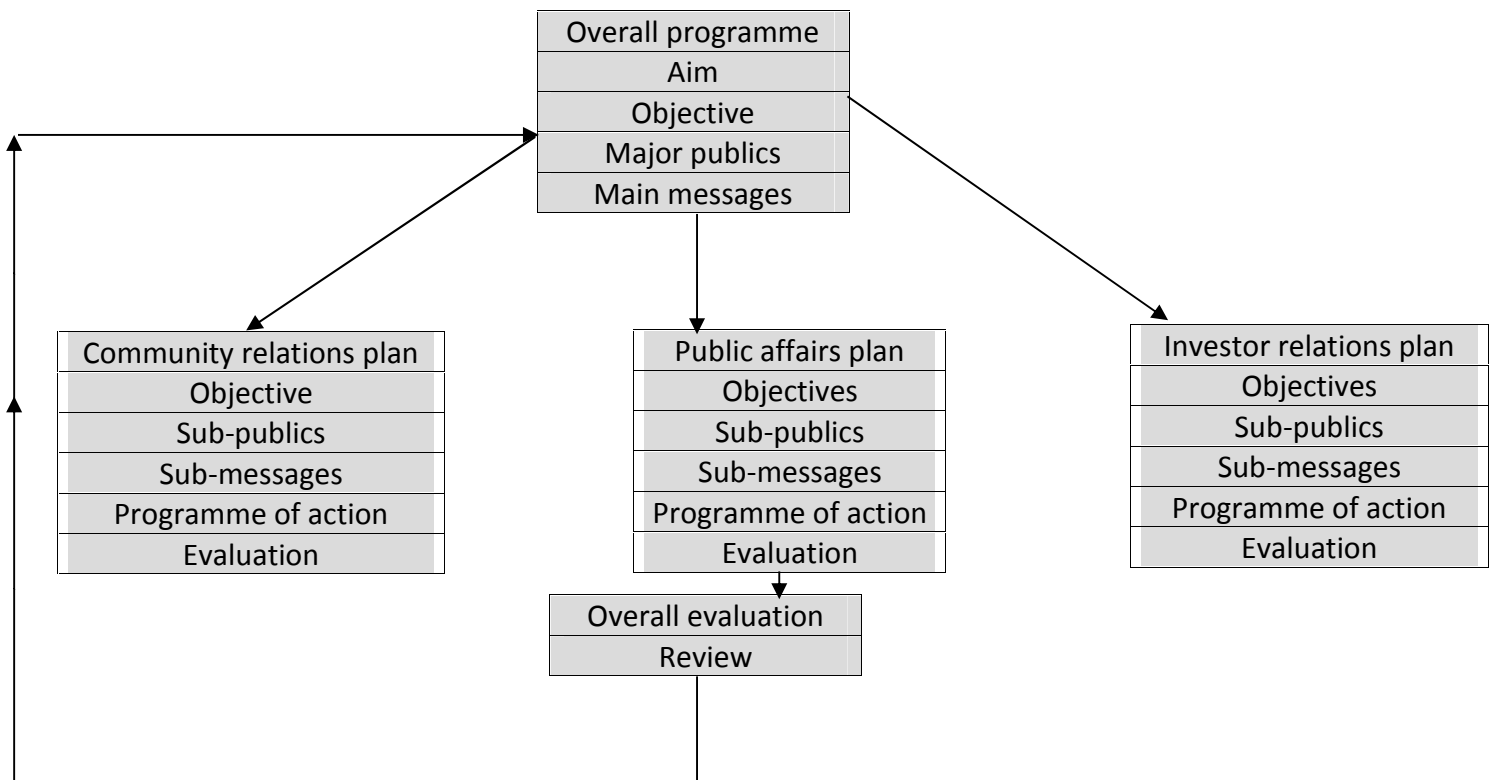


FIGURE 4.5 Framework for multi-project public relations plans (*source: adapted from Gregory 2000: 46*)

Strengths Good capital reserves Leading-edge products Loyal customer base Good reputation for service delivery Committed employees	Weaknesses Risk averse in investment Limited product line Ageing customer base Bureaucratic Limited skills base
Opportunities New market opportunities in Russia Potential to acquire competitors Tax breaks if offices relocated	Threats Potential political instability Danger of being overstretched Loss of loyal employee base

FIGURE 4.6 Example of SWOT analysis

Analysing Publics

Both formal and informal research approach may be used to analyse the public for their opinion on issues. According to Cutlip, et al. (2000), the informal research method involves using:

- Personal contacts at public meeting with stakeholders or community groups at events
- Key informants such as experts, politicians, and editors

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Using Communication Theory: An Introduction to Planned Communication, (2009 2nd Eddition), By Sven Windahl, Benno Signitzer, Jean T Olson*
- ✓ *Strategic Planning for Public Relations, (2013, 4th Eddition), By Ronald D. Smith*