



UNIT-1

Introduction to Public Relations

Learning Outcomes

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

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Unit 1

Introduction to Public Relations

The field of public relations has changed dramatically due to the presence and evolution of the Internet. It used to be that the company could issue a press release, arrange for a press conference, and speak directly to journalists who would pass their message along. In turn, the public would receive these releases by reading them in a newspaper, watching the television news, or listening to the radio. That's no longer the case. Changes in the way we seek and receive our information mean that the company can virtually think a thought and have it released to the media within minutes, whether they wanted it to be that way or not.

The proliferation of social media and common use of tools such as cellphones mean that messages can be released from a company and “go viral” almost instantly. One of the challenges for public relations is that the goal is to create a very well-crafted message before it gets out among the public, but to do that can be very difficult.

Not that long ago, when newspapers gave us most of the news we needed, the paper could print a story and then later print a retraction. These days, things are very different. News gets carried by social media at a rapid pace, and in so many directions, that a retraction may go nowhere at all, while the original – albeit erroneous – story goes as far as it can. If someone within the company learns something new, they can literally share it with all of their friends in mere moments. As a result, it becomes even more important that we spread news that is worthy of being shared, and sends the message that we intended.

Naturally, many companies do a really good job with their public relations. They have dedicated communicators on staff who understand their own jobs and who create a message that reflects the organization's brand and mission. They will also carefully craft a message that can be effectively and efficiently released through social media and be picked up virally while spreading the image of the company that they want to share.

What Public Relations Is All About

Public relations, often referred to as PR, is the methodology that companies use to help spread their messages, usually through advertising and marketing efforts. It is also a term we use to refer to the communications strategy that a company uses. With the increased acceptance and reliance on the internet, PR is positioned to work with every department in an organization, assisting the leadership in managing their messages.

A person who works in PR can be referred to by different terms, including PR Specialist, PR Consultant, Communications Consultant, and PR Manager.

There are three major influences that are contributing to a raised profile for PR consultants: fragmentation, saturation, and reputation.

Fragmentation

When people got most of their news from a newspaper or television, it was a straightforward exercise to find your audience. To get their attention, a smartly designed advertising campaign could capture your target's attention and perhaps even gain you some press coverage. Nowadays, more people than ever actually get their news and entertainment through the internet, and there are so many "channels" available that it can be very difficult to find, and capture the attention of, your target audience. There are people who do not listen to local radio, watch local TV news, or read newspapers at all, because they prefer to get their information from other sources.

Saturation

As consumers we are inundated with messages to such a level that we tune them out because there is just no way to absorb the number of ads to which we are exposed. This makes the PR job even more difficult because you must find a way to stand out and establish your products or services effectively.

Reputation

Your company is open to more scrutiny than ever, as the Internet provides an easy way for your customers – and adversaries – to talk about you via short messages, blogs, chat rooms, and forums. And they really do talk, so it's essential that you are aware of, and able to mitigate, any damage if things go awry.

You may have already figured out that traditional advertising is no longer the best (or only) way for you to distribute your messages. As fragmentation, saturation, and reputation become more prevalent, they also point us toward the need to strategic application of PR in order to get our message past, and in front of, the competition.

What it Means to Get Strategic

If old-style PR included advertising in print, television, and radio media, but those methods are no long as pertinent as they were, how do we get heard? We have to be strategic and think about the bigger picture, instead of being tactical and following an outdated process.

For example, as I wrote this course I was delighted to watch two colleagues launch their new book. At one time, they would have had a book launch party in a local bookstore, they may have asked a couple of prominent people to write book reviews to appear in the paper prior to the release of the book, and their publisher would have provided them with a marketing campaign budget.

Instead, the authors created a PR strategy around the book. They developed a website with a URL that is the same as the title of the book, talked about how great their publisher was (even though there had been no advance or marketing budget provided), spoke anywhere they could, attended trade shows, and

held writing classes for other aspiring authors. They developed a social media strategy that included having everyone they knew participating in sharing and forwarding messages. Their blogs, and the blogging that other people were doing, also helped to promote the book. They also volunteered to appear on the local breakfast television newscast. One added bonus of that breakfast television spot was that in the hour leading up to their “spot,” the news anchor and program hosts mentioned the title of the book and a little blurb at least four times!

The cost of this publicity program was far less than taking out a full page ad in the newspaper (which in medium to large markets can be up to \$50,000 for ad design and advertising fees), and they certainly got people talking about the book. On its first day, the book reached the Amazon bestseller’s list, and it sold out by day two.

Building Your PR Plan

Defining Reality

Plan, plan, plan, and then the execution is easy, right? We’re used to project planning principles in a lot of our work, and public relations is no exception. It takes skill to create eloquent press releases and to reach your target market, but it takes greater skill and strategy to get the results that you are looking for. Before you get started, you’ll need to get a very good understanding of what’s happening within your organization, your industry, and among the competition.

You’ve also got to do something important in order to create a good public relations strategy. You’ve got to create a strong foundation, in the same way that the foundation is what supports a new house. You need to ask yourself the following questions, in order, and before you dive in and implement your PR plan!

- How do we make money (where does our revenue come from)?
- Who are the customers who generate most of our revenue?
- Who is our target customer and what is it they want from us?
- Who among our stakeholders are making decisions about our products or services?
- Who is our competition, and what are they up to in terms of positioning and promotions?
- How do we currently differentiate ourselves from the competition?
- How is the marketplace changing toward our products or services (growing, shrinking, maintaining)?
- What are our business objectives for the next three, six, nine, and twelve months? What is our plan beyond that?
- What are the results of our analysis of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities?
- What are the pertinent details of our current business, strategic, and marketing plans in place?
- Are we prepared (and in what ways) for any kind of crisis intervention?
- What are the implications for PR and communications as we look forward?

Overall, your PR plan will include the following phases:

- Defining reality
- Defining the goal
- Choosing your strategy and tactics
- Implementing your plan
- Evaluating and reviewing the plan

Defining the Goal

Once you have completed your research and defined reality from the previous section, you are ready to look at your goals. Keeping two or three clear goals in mind means that you can create a campaign that has the ability to get you the results you need, because you are directing your efforts at what is required.

Each time you undertake a PR campaign, you need to be very clear on the goals you are striving for. Be clear on the fact that advertising and PR are not the same thing. Advertising is the way your company promotes a product, offers a deal, and tries to get the attention of consumers. PR goes further than that, using strategies that are built on solid communication skills to engage more customers and employees in the mission and vision of the organization. Where advertising can be used to describe features and benefits of your products or services, PR can offer client testimonials and add an authoritative appeal to spreading the news of that same product. (People will not believe what a company says about their product anywhere near as quickly as they will tolerate the onslaught of messages that come from satisfied customers and actual users.)

PR can provide several functions, including:

- Strengthening your brand
- Increasing the demand for your products or services
- Generating trust with customers and employees
- Shifting public perceptions about what you make and sell
- Helping position your company as a leader in the marketplace

You need to decide beforehand to which function(s) your campaign will appeal. In doing so, you're going to connect with the stakeholders in your company, which is good, because you also need their support and full buy-in to the program if you are going to get what you need out of it.

One mistake that newly minted PR specialists make is that they want to push their own agenda forward. They are confident that they know what the company needs and how to get it, and they think that their way is the only way to get something done. But you have to temper that knowledge and enthusiasm and direct it appropriately. You may know all of these things, but pushing your agenda may just raise the ire of the very people you need support from. Instead, set your agenda aside. Ask your stakeholders what they expect, what needs are unmet from previous campaigns, and what they see as priorities. This will

help you to establish a trusting relationship with stakeholders, especially when they realize that you really have set your personal agenda aside, and you are listening to their needs.

People you may need to approach for this level of support may include:

- CEO
- Executive team
- Board of directors
- Internal PR/communications team, and any external providers involved
- Sales and marketing team(s)

And don't forget your front-line ambassadors: every single employee!

Selecting Your Strategy and Tactics

We know that using tactics will get us a certain distance, but that PR programs become more successful with higher results and better market penetration when they are built on strategy.

Strategy includes plans for:

- Attracting stakeholder support
- Building your PR team (internal or external)
- Understanding your target customer/audience
- Leveraging trends/technology
- Have a compelling message
- Build relationships
- Use feedback wisely
- Measure and monetize results
- Developing a relevant program

Tactics are the specifics of how you will get your messages heard:

- Inviting stakeholders to a meeting
- Hiring staff or contracting a PR firm
- Meeting customers at an event
- Writing a press release, article, or blog post
- Calling a reporter to give them news about your company
- Posting messages and looking for traffic in social media

The Plan

Whether you are building a PR plan for a small product launch or looking at your next 12 months, you've got to create a plan that you can follow. Using the information that you've already learned, we're

confident that you can create a strategy for your public relations program, and so the next step is to create a plan for something specific. These are the steps you will follow:

- Outline the reality
- Define the goals
- Describe your strategy
- Set up a tactics list
- Define benchmarks
- Implement the plan
- Work in some flexibility
- Evaluate, review, and repeat

We'll discuss each step below.

Outline the Reality

Be very clear on what your situation is, who you support / stakeholders are, what your budget is, what the limitations are. This is aided if you complete a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, although you do not do one general SWOT analysis for each PR plan you launch as you may have typically experimented with in the past: you have to do one for each aspect of your plan.

Define the Goals for This Plan

What are you trying to achieve? Are you building a broader reach for a particular product or service? Is your priority in improving the company image? How about attracting staff who can align with the company values and will stick around for a while?

Describe Your Strategy

You should be able to speak about your strategy to stakeholders in a way that they immediately know what it is, how they are involved, and what the outcomes are.

Set Up a Tactics List

This is the list of how you will reach your goals. You can include things like press releases, articles, interviews, press conferences, and much more here.

Define Benchmarks

This is your to-do list, and the order that you will set up your communications. It should be something that other members of your team can refer to keep themselves on track, and includes the dates and measurements that you will utilize. In your absence or in case of a crisis, your team will refer to this list to help mitigate any damages, so it's essential that you keep it up to date.

Implement the Plan

Do what you have said you will do, on time, and within budget. This helps you reach your goals (celebrate!) and builds trust within your organization and with your customer base that you do what you say you will do.

Work in Some Flexibility

There are things that we cannot predict that will surface. Your competition could beat you to market with a similar product to the one you are about release; you could be faced with a recall of your product; workers can go on strike anywhere along the production or distribution chain; transportation or distribution can fail. Create a contingency plan so that you are available and capable to handle anything unexpected.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Public Relations, By Edward L. Bernays, (2013)*
- ✓ *Introduction to Public Relations , By D F du Plessis, (2000)*