THE ROLE OF MEDIA RELATIONS IN CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE: A STUDY ON 15 PUBLIC LISTED COMPANIES IN THE KLANG VALLEY

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by

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My humble gratitude to the Almighty Lord for the successful completion of this thesis.

I lovingly dedicate this piece of work to:

My role model, my mother

My source of inspiration and strength, Balaji

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PERANAN PERHUBUNGAN MEDIA DALAM AMALAN PERHUBUNGAN AWAM KORPORAT: KAJIAN TERHADAP 15 SYARIKAT AWAM YANG TERSENARAI DI LEMBAH KELANG

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini mengemukakan hasil kajian kualitatif tentang sama ada perhubungan media memainkan peranan yang strategik dalam amalan perhubungan awam korporat di Malaysia. Objektif utamanya adalah untuk mengetahui bagaimana perhubungan media dilihat dan digunakan dalam organisasi-organisasi di Malaysia. Lebih khusus lagi, kajian ini diharap dapat menjawab persoalan sama ada fungsi perhubungan media hanya digunakan untuk menjana publisiti atau jika ia turut memainkan peranan yang strategik dalam membina hubungan dengan media demi mencapai matlamat korporat dan daya saing organisasi. Isu-isu ini telah diteliti dalam 15 syarikat awam yang tersenarai merangkumi semua industri di Lembah Kelang. Temu ramah secara mendalam telah dijalankan dengan para peserta yang terdiri daripada para eksekutif kanan yang mengendalikan perhubungan media atau memantau fungsi tersebut dalam bidang kuasa mereka sebagai ketua perhubungan media atau perhubungan awam. Panduan temu ramah berstruktur telah digunakan sebagai instrumen kajian untuk mendapatkan maklum balas peserta. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa dalam syarikat-syarikat awam yang tersenarai, yang dikaji, perhubungan media memainkan peranan yang strategik untuk membina perhubungan dengan media di samping memaklumkan dan mendidik *"stakeholders"* dalam membuat profil dan pengurusan reputasi organisasi yang lebih baik. Justeru, fungsi perhubungan media tidak terhad kepada menjana publisiti untuk produk dan perkhidmatan organisasi sahaja. Pertama, objektif perhubungan media organisasi telah ditetapkan dan fungsinya dirancang mengikut strategi selaras dengan matlamat korporat dan daya saingnya. Kedua, para peserta memainkan peranan pengurusan perhubungan awam secara predominan dan

kebanyakan ketua bahagian perhubungan awam dalam kajian ini berada pada tahap membuat dasar organisasi-organisasi mereka. Hal ini mempunyai kesan positif terhadap perancangan dan pelaksanaan perhubungan media memandangkan fungsi ini dilihat sebagai sebahagian daripada keseluruhan pengurusan organisasi. Ketiga, dalam menjalankan program perhubungan media, kebanyakan peserta menggunakan model *"mixed-motive"* dengan ketara yang dikaitkan dengan amalan perhubungan awam yang cemerlang dan strategik. Pilihan model ini didapati berpadanan dengan budaya dan persekitaran organisasi peserta. Keempat, kebanyakan peserta didapati mempunyai peruntukan perbelanjaan yang tetap untuk menjalankan inisiatif perhubungan media. Mereka juga diharapkan dapat menilai inisiatif mereka untuk memastikan matlamat korporat dan daya saing dicapai dan pulangan pelaburan dapat ditentukan. Secara keseluruhan, para peserta menganggap perhubungan media sebagai satu pelaburan, memandangkan peranannya yang strategik. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa organisasi-organisasi yang melihat hubungan media melebihi peranan promosinya mendapat sepenuh manfaat daripada nilai strategiknya.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents findings from a qualitative investigation of whether media relations plays a strategic role in corporate public relations practice in Malaysia. The primary objective was to discover how media relations was viewed and utilised in Malaysian organisations. More specifically, the research hoped to find out if the media relations function was only used to generate publicity or if it also played a strategic role in relationship building with the media and achieving organisations' corporate and competitive goals. These issues were explored in 15 public listed companies across all industries in the Klang Valley. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants who comprised senior executives handling media relations or overseeing the function in their capacity as head of media relations or public relations. A structured interview guide was used as the research instrument to elicit participants' responses. The findings suggest that in the public listed companies studied, media relations plays a strategic role to build relationships with the media as well as to inform and educate stakeholders in profiling and better managing the organisations' reputations. Hence, the media relations function is not limited to generating publicity for the organisations' products and services. Firstly, organisations' media relations objectives were set and functions strategised in line with their corporate and competitive goals. Secondly, participants predominantly played managerial public relations roles and most of the heads of public relations in the organisations studied were represented at policy-making level. This had a positive impact on media relations planning and execution as the function was seen as part of the big picture. Thirdly, in carrying out their media relations programmes, most participants prominently used the mixed-motive model

which is linked to excellent and strategic public relations practice. The choice of model was found to correspond with participants' organisational culture and environment. Fourthly, most participants were found to have fixed budget allocations to carry out media relations initiatives. They were also expected to evaluate their initiatives to ascertain if corporate and competitive goals were met and there was return-on-investment. Overall, participants viewed media relations as an investment given its strategic role. This research suggests that organisations that see beyond media relations' promotional role fully benefit from its strategic value.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background To The Study

1.1.1 The Strategic Role Of Media Relations

Media relations is the core activity in many public relations jobs (Wilcox, 2005). One of the participants of this study remarked, "Media relations has over the years become an increasingly significant profile and has added value to the business bottom-line". To understand this strong link between the media and public relations, the researcher examined Grunig and Hunt's (1984) view on how public relations originated. According to the authors, in the constant effort to get free space in the media for their clients, press agents or publicists used every possible trick to take advantage of the newspapers and other media. This was called "flacking for space" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 30). Although these press agents frequently got the publicity they sought, the authors indicate that the media and the public have never forgotten the press agentry origins of public relations. Hence, this explains why media relations is considered to be the most traditional, visible and prominent of all public relations functions.

It is also worth taking a look back to see how the need for the business-media relationship came about. According to Argenti (2003, p.101), the expanded media, referred to as "the press" in earlier times, has always had a more antagonistic relationship with business, even in the American context. This, the author states, partly stems from the privacy organisations enjoyed in the early part of this century. However, organisations were later forced to rethink this isolationist approach as a result of increased public and media interest in business due to several controversial events. The public began to realise that business had a tremendous effect on their lives, explains Argenti. It is this shift in attitude, in particular, that the author says had a profound effect on business and its dealings with the media.

Having established that, it is worthwhile understanding why to most business people, the term public relations has become synonymous with "dealing with the press" and "getting publicity", as stated by Seitel (2001, p.324). The author explains that 20th-century public relations got its start as an adjunct to journalism, with former journalists hired to refine the image of well-to-do clients. In fact, in pre-1990, most of the professionals who entered public relations were former journalists but this is no more the case today, says Seitel. Nonetheless, the author underlines that the importance of the media to the practice of public relations cannot be denied.

Similarly, Grunig and Hunt (1984, p.223) state that "relations with the news media are so central to the practice of public relations that many practitioners, especially those guided by the press agentry and public information models of public relations, believe that public relations is nothing more than media relations". As such, the authors indicate that public relations did indeed evolve out of efforts to influence press coverage of organisations and individuals but they point out that today, media relations should be considered only as one of several important public relations programmes aimed at specialised publics.

In line with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) view, Argenti (2003) says that although the old-style public relations function which focused almost exclusively on media relations may be a thing of the past, the subfunction referred to as media relations today is still central to the corporate communication effort. The author explains that most of the corporate communication staff typically reside within this subfunction and the person heading the communications department must be capable of dealing with the media as a spokesperson for the organisation. This was highlighted by a participant of this study when explaining her role. She said, "My role would be more of a strategic management input level and overall coordination rather than very specifically writing, editing and producing, although I do that as well. I'm also the spokesperson".

Describing media relations as one of the most critical areas within any corporate communication function, Argenti (2003) supports this claim by explaining the media's role in an organisation. According to Argenti (2003, p.101), "the media is both a constituency and a conduit through which investors, suppliers, retailers and consumers receive information about and develop images of a company". The author adds that the media's role as disseminator of information to an organisation's key constituencies has gained increasing importance over the years. Given this crucial role, Argenti says that almost every organisation has a media relations department, either manned by a part-time consultant or a large team of professionals.

Argenti (2003) further elaborates that although the media relations subfunction started off as a flakking service for managers in response to requests from news organisations, today the best corporate communications departments actively set the discussion agenda for the organisation in the media. Center and Jackson (2003) link the agenda-setting role to the main power of the media which they say is to provide information and create awareness about products, services, companies and ideas. This, according to them, is vital as the first step in the decision-making process as only when there is knowledge about something, action follows. Moreover, the authors express that media influence is cumulative and long-term, especially when many media cover a subject over the years.

Besides these aspects, Wilcox (2005) states that the media, in all their variety, are cost-effective channels of communication in an information society. Wilcox explains that the media are the multipliers that enable millions of people to receive a message at the same time. On top of this, the author says that media gatekeepers serve as filters of information and though not everyone is happy with their decisions, they are generally perceived as more objective than public relations people who represent a particular client or organisation. According to Wilcox (2005), this is important to public relations

as the media serve as third-party endorsers of information, giving one's information credibility and importance by deciding that it is newsworthy.

Given the credibility factor, there is little doubt that much value is attached to media publicity. According to Seitel (2001), publicity is regarded as more credible than advertising. Therefore, Seitel states that to attract positive publicity, establishing a good working relationship with the media, despite the media's more aggressive and hostile tone, is essential. At this juncture, it is worthwhile looking at the view by Cutlip et al. (2000) that accuracy and fairness in press coverage does not result from journalists' work alone. Instead, the authors suggest that ultimately, the relationship between practitioners and journalists has an impact on the quality of news coverage about organisations. Therefore, they suggest that the sound approach for organisations and practitioners is to view media relations as an investment. As stated by a participant of this study, "We believe this investment is definitely worthy as we're able to call upon the media for favours sometimes and they are actually quite obliging".

The researcher examined several scholars' views on working with the media. Seitel (2001) states that a primary responsibility of a public relations professional vis-à-vis the media, is to help promote the organisation in good times and help defend the organisation in times of attack, which requires a working knowledge of what drives the media. Meanwhile, Hendrix (2001) suggests that the practitioner in media relations must know how each media outlet works. Similarly, Jefkins (1986) says that the skilled public relations practitioner will be a master of the media, knowing what is available, how they differ and how to use them to the best advantage. Jefkins' thoughts explain his critical view that media relations, which is the most visible tip of the public relations iceberg, is often the worst performed public relations task.

Sriramesh (2004) states that most public relations practitioners spend a significant portion of their time on media relations because of the media's ability to generate mass publicity. In addition to benefiting from this, Sriramesh states that practitioners also serve the media by providing them with information subsidies, thus creating a symbiotic relationship. Goodman (1994) too states that the media depends on business for information related to the organisation, and as such, an atmosphere of mutual benefit emerges. In the context of this study, the researcher looks at public relations' dependence on the media and in this regard, the various scholars' views discussed point out how and why media relations plays an important and strategic role.

This section concludes with a quick look at several studies in Asia portraying the role of media relations in organisations' public relations practices, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. The study by Sriramesh et al. (2000) found media relations to be the primary public relations activity in their Japanese and Indian samples, whereby the function was mainly linked to publicity. Similarly, another study by Grunig et al. (1995) found media relations to be the predominant activity of most public relations professionals in India. According to Grunig et al., this was because most defined public relations as publicity and described its purpose as building a positive image of the organisation. Likewise in South Korea, Samsup Jo and Yungwook Kim (2004) state that the primary focus of public relations was to gain publicity through media relations. Therefore, the authors say that media relations was the most dominant public relations function and constituted a major focus of most South Korean organisations.

The three studies mentioned have clearly established media relations' promotional role in public relations practice. The study by Kelly et al. (2002), meanwhile, suggests that from a mere promotional or publicity role, corporate media relations has assumed a more strategic role to inform the public of the truth. The study

has demonstrated the importance given to media relations in Japanese public relations practice, evident in the changing relationship between the media and public relations over 30 years. The study highlighted the results of a survey by the Japan Economic Public Relations Center, announced in 1993, indicating that the people in charge of public relations thought that maintaining good relationships with the mass media was their major responsibility. In addition, the results showed that regardless of the size of the organisations, gaining societal and stockholder understanding of the organisation through the media was the most important activity for the public relations division.

In this context, Kelly et al. (2002, p.271) indicate that "the main purposes of news releases to the media are to provide the society with an accurate understanding of corporate activities and to carry out one's responsibility to inform the public". They (2002, p.271) add that "most corporations and governmental organisations considered these two purposes more important than using media public relations to create a better image of the corporation and to advertise merchandise".

Kelly et al. (2002) underline that publicity is influenced by the power of the media. At this juncture, the authors point out that in order for an organisation to proceed with its business, it is important to provide information about the organisation to the public. In this regard, the authors touch on the reliability of news materials as opposed to advertising and state that it is important for public relations to pay attention to news materials offered to the media as well as have the knowledge and skills to deal competently with interviews. In short, the researcher understands from Kelly et al.'s (2002) study that social perception of the media's role in Japan has had an influence on its public relations and media relations practices.

In summary, most of the studies highlighted in this section found media relations to be primarily a marketing and publicity tool in corporate public relations. It is

only the findings of the study by Kelly et al. (2002) which indicate that the role of media relations seems to be evolving as greater emphasis is placed on its strategic capabilities while at the same time, acknowledging its promotional role. According to Sriramesh et al. (2000), many culture-specific media relations practices are found to shape and greatly influence the relationship between public relations practitioners and the media. They pinpoint that these practices define how media relations is viewed and the role it plays in public relations practice.

This section began with the background on the beginnings of media relations, from how it was initially equated to public relations to eventually being recognised as the basis of the discipline (Hendrix, 2001). Following this, the researcher outlined the significance of media relations before moving on to studies portraying the role of media relations in Asian public relations practices and how the role has evolved from purely promotional to more strategic. With that, in this section, the researcher underlines that media relations plays a strategic role in corporate public relations practice. In the next two chapters, the researcher looks into various aspects that explain the strategic role.

1.1.2 Corporate Public Relations In Malaysia

This study looks at corporate public relations in Malaysia or as explained by Cutlip et al. (2000), public relations in the competitive setting. Hence, the analysis and discussion in this study is purely skewed towards media relations practices in the competitive private sector, particularly public listed companies (PLCs) in Malaysia. According to Sriramesh (2004), in the private sector, public relations serves as a strategic function in increasing the bottom-line and helping the organisation to be a good citizen. In this process, the author explains that the core activities of public relations continue to be media relations.

Syed Arabi's studies in 1977 and 1992 show that "dealing with the press" and "holding press conferences" take the top two positions when it comes to public relations practitioners' functions and responsibilities (Sriramesh, 2004). In line with these findings, Hamdan (1985) states that a local survey on 36 organisations in late 1982 revealed that most practitioners consider media relations as priority in their public relations activities. Therefore, from these findings, the researcher understands that media relations is considered paramount by Malaysian practitioners.

Kiranjit and Shameem's (2002) compilation of exemplary Malaysian public relations cases from the 1990s and beyond show that local organisations have developed strategic media relations programmes as part of their public relations campaigns. These cases provide insights into well planned and successful media relations programmes in various public relations campaigns, ranging from community and consumer relations to image building and crises management exercises.

Though several studies have been carried out on public relations practices in the country, Sriramesh (2004) states that at present, very little empirical evidence exists on the status of public relations in Malaysia and much more research is needed to fill this void. As such, this study addresses this concern and provides a more recent picture of the media relations role in corporate public relations practice.

1.2   Research Problem

There are two widely discussed issues in public relations that can hamper the enhancement of media relations practices and its role in organisations. First of all is managements' apprehension about dealing with the media. According to Ridgway (1996), the senior managements of some organisations tend to view the media relations department as a buffer between the media and themselves. This, the author explains can only lead to trouble as very often, the public relations practitioner is not

qualified to answer detailed and highly technical questions nor have the authority to answer for the organisation on important issues. Such an attitude on the management's part inevitably leads to unnecessary bad press and a lack of cooperation by the media on future occasions, states the author. Therefore, Ridgway (1996) highlights that public relations practitioners must stick to their professional guns in telling senior management what the consequences of their actions in media relations are likely to be.

Several reasons can be traced to explain managements' apprehension when it comes to facing the media. Wilcox and Nolte (1995) highlight the results of a survey which found that the majority of public relations directors who participated thought that sloppy reporting was the major reason for inaccurate stories. Journalists were also faulted for not doing their homework or research before writing a story and hence, not understanding the topics they write about. In addition to this, the authors highlight another survey which found that most business executives have a fear of being misquoted and felt that the knowledge base of business journalists leaves a lot to be desired. The executives said that other problems with the media are tendencies to sensationalise, overemphasise the negative and make simplistic generalisations. Similarly, Bollinger (2003) states that news about business developments sometimes become threats and one cause for such negative coverage could be attributed to a lack of business knowledge and/or experience on the part of journalists.

In handling this problem, Wilcox and Nolte (1995) point out that when dealing with a journalist who is not familiar with the business or industry, practitioners must explain the subject thoroughly and provide background material. The authors indicate that this will help the journalist to do a better job and it also gives practitioners a reasonable chance to ensure that the story will be accurate. Moreover, Mindszenthy (1989) states that there are an increasing number of better educated, better prepared

and better equipped journalists and editors. Therefore, Mindszenthy says that organisations can no longer assume that their plans and decisions are too complex to be understood, scrutinised and explained by the media.

Given that, it is timely to seriously consider Wilcox and Nolte's (1995) suggestion that it is practitioners' responsibility and part of their job to educate top executives on how the media operate and the media's requirements for a fair and objective story. According to Mindszenthy (1989), the media is a very competitive industry though it has a role as moral guardian. Mindszenthy explains that who gets the story first and how it is packaged, are to the business side of the media what the search for the truth is to the responsible journalist. Furthermore, the author states that there is a definite push for more candid financial disclosure. Though organisations do have a legitimate competitive concern about revealing some of the numbers, Mindszenthy states that hiding results by re-juggling numbers will not only be more difficult to accomplish but more susceptible to exposure, especially if the intent is to hide the real financial position.

In the context of having to educate managements on media relations, Bollinger's (2003) view adds another perspective. According to Bollinger, another cause for negative coverage might have to do with the type of information being handed to journalists by other representatives of the organisation and not by public relations practitioners. As such, the author states that sometimes, the wrong thing is said at the wrong time. Adams (1992-93) suggests that management, especially official spokespersons, should be brought into the communication loop and trained to deal with the media. Meanwhile, Grabowski (1992) says that the idea of involving top executives in media relations is a sound one. In fact, Grabowski points out that the heads of all departments should have active roles to play in any media relations plan as it will enable them to better understand and respect what practitioners do.

From these various scholars' views, the researcher sees that public relations practitioners have a challenging role as middle person. In this regard, Cutlip et al. (2000) state that practitioners must have the confidence of both their organisations and the media to be effective in their go-between and mediating roles. Ridgway (1996) states that public relations practitioners should be the means by which the two sides can talk to each other more easily and with more understanding.

In essence, the first issue discussed is about problems that cause managements to be apprehensive about dealing with the media which the researcher believes, has an impact on the role of media relations in corporate public relations practice. The second issue in the analysis of the research problem has also got to do with the perceptual climate between public relations and the media, as in the first issue, but is the flip side of the coin. While practitioners complain that journalists sometimes do not understand the public relations role and general business principles, journalists on the other hand, complain that public relations practitioners do not understand news (Bollinger, 2003). In this regard, Muhamad Rosli (2002) states that practitioners should not 'beg' the media for coverage on their organisations' news that has no news value.

Bollinger (2003) also points out that journalists and editors do not trust public relations practitioners and have a poor attitude towards the profession. In studying this love-hate relationship in the Malaysian environment, Jamilah's (1996) research found that journalists depend on practitioners for information about their organisations but do not acknowledge the importance of practitioners' roles. On the other hand, Jamilah says that practitioners feel they are actually doing journalists a favour by furnishing them with information that facilitates their reporting. Contrary to Jamilah's findings, Sriramesh (2004) states that in Malaysian public relations practice, media personnel are appreciative of the contributions that public relations professionals make by

providing them with news items or in making it possible for them to meet with the policy-makers in the organisation.

Even so, according to Ridgway (1996), a harmonious relationship with the media does not mean that everything will always go smoothly because sometimes, a practitioner's objectives will be in conflict with the media's. The author explains that competent journalists will be probing critically in doing their job and similarly, it is the public relations practitioner's job to present the facts in the most favourable light for the organisation. Similarly, Cutlip et al. (2000) indicate that it is the underlying conflict of interests that makes the practitioner-journalist relationship adversarial.

In analysing this issue, several scholars' views give an insight into some areas of friction between practitioners and journalists. Firstly, Wilcox and Nolte (1995, p.229) point out that "journalists receive hundreds of news releases that are poorly written, contain no news and read like commercial advertisements without the graphics". As such, the authors say it is no wonder that after a while, journalists form the opinion that the majority of public relations practitioners are incompetent given their excessive use of hype and promotion in news releases.

Bollinger (2003) highlights that public relations professionals need to educate journalists and editors about the practice of public relations and assure them that the public relations professional understands news values. Morton (1995) states that news releases should be written for media gatekeepers and not meant to impress employers. Morton also explains that sending reams of news releases with little news value to an extensive number of media that have no use for them, only abuses the media. In this regard, Muhamad Rosli (2002) states that it is unprofessional to issue a news release to all editors without adapting its contents to suit the respective editor's needs.

Secondly, Wilcox and Nolte (1995) point out that journalists resent the use of gimmicks in materials sent to the media. The authors indicate that although these gimmicks are simply meant to separate the news release or press kit from the stack on the recipient's desk, such gimmicks constitute gifts or freebies which the media does not accept, on principle. Hence, Wilcox and Nolte caution public relations practitioners to carefully assess the recipient's potential reaction if thinking about using a gimmick with a news release. Grabowski (1992) points out that it is smarter to send information that is orderly and usable for easy reference by journalists.

Pomerantz (1989-90) says that in an on-going effort to gain ink and air time, public relations practitioners offer media people unsolicited assistance in performing their jobs. Often, this eagerness to assist the media undermines respect and fosters negative perception, explains Pomerantz. In this regard, the author adds that tensions between public relations practitioners and the media are much more a fact of life in the realm of hard news, for instance in the case of journalists covering business, finance and politics, as opposed to those on the soft news side. In the latter, the public relations representative for a food, entertainment or fashion client is often courted by the media and regarded as a valuable ally, according to the author.

Thirdly, a common complaint by journalists and editors is that practitioners lack subject knowledge (Grabowski, 1992; Adams, 1992-93). According to Grabowski, practitioners need to have technical knowledge of their field in order to be taken seriously. Grabowski underlines that to be an effective public relations professional, it is essential to thoroughly know and understand the product or idea being promoted. Adams points out that in risk communication, which is particularly true in media relations, the communications professional must be an expert in his or her area of risk to be credible in the eyes of the journalists covering the organisation. Meanwhile, Howard (2004) states that media relations people should avoid being perceived as

someone intent on withholding information or, just as bad, a person who does not have access to information. In this regard, Howard explains that the only way for media relations people to overcome the skepticism and hostility from journalists is to master the fundamentals on how to assist them as this makes the difference in the long-term relationships with the media.

The fourth problem is the out-dated and stereotype perception that public relations practitioners are "flacks", which according to Wilcox and Nolte (1995, p.229) is a derogatory term for press agents. The authors say that journalists also use the term "spin doctor" and often refer to the activities or policies of organisations as "public relations gimmicks". Spin doctors are said to first get people to accept what they say by telling them what they already know, or want to hear. Then, when they have gained public confidence, they infiltrate their manipulated, dubious or downright misinformation (www.electric-words.com, accessed 18th June 2005).

According to Lowe (1986), there is nothing more hollow or artificial than campaigns based on unsubstantiated claims or worse, false claims. Lowe (1986, p.12) stresses that "public relations is no substitute for action, merit or achievement". This is in contrast with the initial notion of public relations as a flacking service as today, nothing is considered more important in public relations than the truth. Moreover, based on the various scholars' suggestions on working with the media, as discussed, the researcher understands that public relations practitioners must give utmost importance to mutual respect and trust, honesty as well as professionalism in their dealings with the media in order to change the stereotype and negative perceptual climate.

In this regard, it is encouraging to note scholars' suggestions that the stereotype perception may be changing. Argenti (2003) and Seitel (2001) both indicate

that positive relationships are more common today and there seems to be a fairly high level of mutual respect between public relations practitioners and journalists. Argenti points out that since both camps rely on one another to a certain extent, most organisations try to make the best of these relationships.

It has also become a trend for journalists to cross over to public relations and this may be an indication that there is a change in the perceptual climate. Locally, the public relations fraternity has witnessed journalists leaving their profession, from way back in the 1970s, to seek greener pastures in public relations as revealed in Syed Arabi's 1977 study on 186 members of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia or IPRM (Hamdan, 1985). However, this seems to be declining as in 1977, 41% of the respondents reported having a media background whereas in 1992, the number had fallen to 34% (Sriramesh, 2004).

In summary, this section looks at the sentiments surrounding the business-media relationship in the corporate environment. Howard (2004) states that the emphasis in a media relations programme should be on the relations aspect – working to build long term relations with the people who cover an organisation. As such, Howard explains that mastering the fundamentals in order to know how to assist a journalist and his or her supporting cast will make the difference in long-term relationships with the media. Given this rationale, the researcher believes that the two main issues discussed in this section lay the foundation for a mutually beneficial business-media relationship that can help define the role of media relations in corporate public relations practice.

1.3   Research Questions

Based on the research problem identified for this study, namely the perceptual climate between public relations and the media, the researcher proceeded to

investigate what shapes and constitutes the media relations role in organisations given the circumstances. This is in view of the need for a good business-media relationship and a strategic media relations role in corporate public relations practice, as discussed in section 1.1.1. As such, this research was designed to answer the following five research questions:

I.   What are the media relations objectives of the 15 organisations studied?

II.   What are the media relations functions performed in the 15 organisations studied?

III.   What is the most dominant public relations role played by the senior practitioners handling media relations in the 15 organisations studied?

IV.   Which model of public relations is most prominently used in the 15 organisations studied when carrying out their media relations programmes?

V.   What are the factors that distinguish the media relations role in the 15 organisations studied?

1.4   Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to discover how media relations is viewed and utilised in Malaysian organisations, particularly in the corporate setting. In this regard, the researcher's intention was to find out if the media relations function is only used to generate publicity or if it also plays a more strategic role in relationship building with the media and achieving organisations' corporate and competitive goals.

As such, the specific objectives of this research are:

I.   To find out if media relations is mainly considered a publicity tool

II.   To analyse the significance of media relations efforts in cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship with the media

III. To gauge if local practitioners and/or managements consider media relations as a crucial element for business success

IV. To discover the public relations roles played by senior practitioners handling media relations and the models of public relations used in carrying out media relations programmes

V. To identify other factors in the corporate environment which can help define the role of media relations in the organisations studied

1.5 Significance Of Research

This research provides insights into how the media relations role is defined in organisations operating in a competitive setting, particularly in PLCs on the main board of Bursa Malaysia. In this analysis, the factors surrounding and shaping the role of media relations will come to light. This invaluable information will allow students to see how media relations is perceived and the expectations of the function in the corporate world. Equally useful, the findings will serve as a guideline for budding and current practitioners to plan and strategise their media relations efforts, from media relations objectives and activities to budget and evaluation of media relations programmes. Though some internal organisational factors may have been undisclosed to the researcher during the fieldwork, this study nevertheless will provide a better understanding of the corporate way of doing things when it comes to media relations.

Another notable aspect that will surface from this study is managements' perception of media relations as well as their participation in the function. This findings will reveal if media relations operates in isolation or if it is given due importance and hence, jointly discussed at the decision-making level. This will also reflect the public relations role of the media relations heads in the organisations studied and indicate if they have direct access to top management and are represented at policy-making committees. As highlighted by Adams (1995), a media relations strategy should have a

place at the management table and be effectively combined with overall decision-making, though communications efforts alone cannot reverse a trend of public opinion and that publicity itself is never the solution to a public policy problem or opportunity. Adams' view is more related to optimising media relations in public policy planning but nevertheless, his point that media relations should be raised at the management level is worth taking into account.

Thirdly, this research will reveal how local practitioners feel towards members of the media and whether the adversarial relationship between journalists and practitioners, as depicted in the vast literature, does indeed exist in Malaysia. These findings will provide key learning points about the business-media relationship in the corporate environment locally. This will be greatly beneficial as the media is undoubtedly an important stakeholder for practitioners, as pointed out in the discussion in the early part of this chapter.

Finally, this study will add to the limited research on public relations in Malaysia, particularly on the role of media relations. As pointed out by Kiranjit (1997), very little academic study has been done on public relations in Malaysian organisations. Kiranjit adds that there is a dearth of research on public relations management in most developing countries in contrast to the United States, where public relations education and research is more developed. Hence, this study will enrich the knowledge base on public relations practices in Malaysian organisations, in particular on media relations practices.

1.6   Scope Of Research

This research was carried out on 15 PLCs in the Klang Valley, across all industries. The only prerequisite in the selection of these organisations was that they must be listed on the main board of Bursa Malaysia. With that, the researcher assumed

that these organisations have active media relations teams, given the size and nature of their businesses as well as their social obligation towards the public. As such, it is the researcher's hope that the findings of this study would reflect some of the best practices in media relations and thus, allow practitioners to benchmark against these practices.

As for the participants of this study, the researcher requested for interviews with senior executives in charge of media relations in the respective organisations. With that, the sample for this study consists of 15 public relations practitioners who either handle media relations tasks or oversee the function in their capacity as head of media relations or public relations. The research methodology is the qualitative approach whereby the researcher conducted standardised open-ended interviews using an interview guide as the research instrument. The data collected was interpreted and analysed in accordance with qualitative methods.

1.7   Conclusion

This chapter establishes the main proposition of the study that is the strategic role of media relations in corporate public relations practice. The main issues posing a hindrance to this proposition were identified as the research problem and investigated in this study. The research questions and objectives were then developed to guide the study while bearing in mind what the research hopes to achieve or its significance. With that, having introduced the cornerstones of the study, the next chapter moves on to look deeper into the area investigated – public relations and media relations.

CHAPTER 2
PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MEDIA RELATIONS

2.1   Introduction

This chapter looks at several pertinent aspects and concerns of public relations and media relations to provide a better understanding of the key issues investigated in the study. These key issues form some of the measurements used in the analysis of the media relations role. In this chapter, the researcher briefly touches on whether public relations participates in the strategic management process in organisations and the impact on media relations and its role given that this study is focused on corporate public relations practice.

2.2   Definitions Of Public Relations

Different scholars, professionals and groups have defined public relations according to what it does and what it achieves (Kiranjit, 1997). According to Cutlip et al. (2000), hundreds have written definitions attempting to capture the essence of public relations by listing the major activities that make up the practice. The researcher's intention here is to analyse and highlight the pertinent aspects of public relations functions related to this study which are reflected in some of these definitions. Generally, there are two schools of thoughts when it comes to defining public relations. Firstly, the widely recognised view that public relations is a communication function and secondly, several American scholars' view that public relations is a management function (Kiranjit, 1997).

The original definition used by the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR), now known as the Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom, has been adopted by IPRM, according to Sriramesh (2004). This definition points towards the first view as it describes public relations as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish

and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (Sriramesh, 2004, p.217). Grunig and Hunt (1984) state that the BIPR emphasised mutual understanding as an effect in this definition. Macnamara (1996) and Jefkins (1986) too highlight that this definition points out that public relations aims to create mutual understanding and explain that an important element in achieving this is that public relations should be seen as a two-way process.

In this context, Macnamara (1996) explains that professional public relations advisers not only help an organisation package and send out information but are also involved in counselling management on public attitudes, expectations, concerns and needs. He adds that businesses and public sector organisations are finding that they have to come out from behind the veil of silence and secrecy and involve stakeholders in meaningful dialogue. As suggested by Wilcox and Nolte (1995), one definition of public relations is the building of relationships between the organisation and its various publics, including journalists. It is this understanding that has prompted the researcher to study the role of media relations in corporate public relations practice.

Another significant element in the BIPR definition is its emphasis that public relations should be planned (Jefkins, 1986). This emphasis can also be seen in the Mexican Statement which underlines that "public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public's interest" (Jefkins, 1986, p.7). According to Jefkins, the statement begins by stressing that research is necessary in the first instance and its findings must be studied before a public relations programme can be planned. He adds that the statement then brings out the advisory function of public relations which is the most professional aspect.

Based on Jefkins' view, the researcher sees the need for research and planning in media relations for it to play an advisory and strategic role in public relations practice. Therefore, in the context of this study, the researcher analyses if organisations do undertake research in their media relations efforts and this element of research is explained in greater detail in section 2.6 (Refer to p.36). The researcher also notes that Macnamara (1996) and Jefkins (1986) point out that the counselling and advisory role of public relations is akin to professional practice. Hence, in this study, the researcher will examine if the head of media relations in the organisations studied are decision-makers whose views are sought in policy-making as this demonstrates that media relations plays a strategic role and is seen as part of the big picture.

The second view that public relations is a management function is explained by Lages and Simkin (2003) as a change from the traditional view of public relations as mainly a communication activity. Clear examples of this more contemporary view are the definitions by several leading scholars. Grunig and Hunt (1984, p.6) state that public relations is "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics". Meanwhile, Cutlip et al. (2000, p.6) define public relations as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends".

According to Lages and Simkin (2003), these definitions imply that the focus of public relations is the management of an organisation's relationships with its publics through the four-step management process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. They add that in this context, public relations uses communication strategically. Lages and Lages (2005) hold a similar view, referring to modern public relations as the strategic management of communication, aimed at developing relationships between an organisation and its various internal and external publics, and

not only consumers. Lages and Lages add that the search for balance between internal and external realities, by adapting the organisation's mission to the environment, is seen as the key proposition of public relations in the management process.

Having looked at the two schools of thoughts on public relations, the researcher identified one common element. Both stress on mutually beneficial relationships. As such, taking a cue from both sets of definitions, the researcher analyses the significance of media relations efforts in cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship with the media for business success. The researcher also takes into account the need for research and planning in media relations based on the researcher's understanding from the first group of definitions that these two elements are associated with professional practice. With that, these elements were included in the analysis of the role of media relations in organisations' public relations practices.

2.3　Public Relations Terminologies

As in the case of various public relations definitions which point out what the function does, scholars' views indicate that the public relations terminologies used also describe the type of work done. According to Argenti (2003), public relations is the predecessor to the corporate communication function. Argenti explains that this function, which was tactical in most organisations, grew out of necessity to respond to external constituencies and was almost always called either public relations or public affairs.

Meanwhile, Newsom et al. (2000) say that many public relations practitioners use the term public affairs to describe their work but this is misleading. According to the authors, public affairs is actually a highly specialised kind of public relations that involves community relations and governmental relations. They explain that it is a critical part of a public relations programme but it is not the whole programme.

As for corporate communication, Goodman (1994) states that it is the term used to describe a wide variety of management functions related to an organisation's internal and external communications. Goodman explains that depending on the organisation, corporate communications can include such traditional disciplines as public relations, investor relations, employee relations, community relations, advertising, media relations, labour relations, government relations, technical communications, training and employee development, marketing communications and management communications. Simply put, Goodman says that corporate communication is the organisation's total efforts to communicate effectively and profitably. The actions taken by an organisation to achieve this goal depends largely on its character and relationship with its publics, according to Goodman. Therefore, the author says that in practice, corporate communication is a strategic tool for the contemporary organisation to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors.

According to O'Dwyer (2005), the dichotomy in the perception of public relations as a mutually beneficial function for both publics and the management as well as the identification that it is manipulative to the detriment of the publics, has contributed to the diversity of terminology utilised in the United States. O'Dwyer lists examples such as public affairs, public information, community relations, corporate communication, media relations and external relations. He adds that this diversity in terminology is also reflected in Europe where there is no direct translation for the term public relations in many languages, which has led to the profession being defined in terms of communication. Some examples given by O'Dwyer include communication management, integrated communication and strategic communication, amongst many others.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher has highlighted three terminologies – public relations, public affairs and corporate communication – as these