

Chapter 7

PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT IN ORGANISATIONS

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PRACTITIONER PROFILE

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Carolyn's role is to ensure the company's reputation is protected and enhanced, while maximising opportunities to demonstrate IAG's desired leadership position. The role is responsible for corporate affairs, brand integrity, organisational communications and investor relations.

Carolyn says communication professionals are most effective when they understand the operational side of the businesses they work in.

To make a real difference, communicators need to have a seat at the table where decisions are made, and (making a difference) won't happen unless you have a deep understanding of all aspects of the business you work in.

This knowledge allows you to have greater influence on and input into operational decisions which affect reputation. It also helps you educate your internal customers on the value of communication and reputation management.



During the past sixteen years, Carolyn has been the communication and investment marketing advisor on more than fifteen initial public offers and privatisations, and has managed the ongoing investor relations programs for several publicly-listed companies.

CHAPTER AIMS

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- see public relations as a link between organisations and their environments
- use systems theory to guide your understanding and practical application of public relations
- define the roles and key areas of focus for the public relations team within an organisation
- understand the differences between internal and external publics and audiences
- identify and understand how a range of external forces, including conflict, activism, and corporate social responsibility, affect the practice of public relations.

Introduction

Do you turn off the lights when you are not in the room, switch off your computer and television at the wall, keep the airconditioner's temperature at the recommended level of 24 degrees, and offset the carbon footprint of your air travel?

You might take these actions at home, but do you do the same at your workplace? To what extent does your employer require your commitment to more sustainable practices? Communities and stakeholders have high expectations of organisations. Organisations have to consider the way their operations impact the environment and must be responsive to community expectations while, at the same time, managing the business to achieve organisational goals. As a public relations professional, climate change is just one of the external forces or issues that has the potential to affect the health of your organisation.

For some organisations, the need to deal with the climate change issue is more immediate or high profile; for others, the need may be less. Only 22 per cent of Australian businesses with turnovers of more than \$150 million have adopted climate change initiatives (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008). The one industry sector that has taken climate change seriously is the resources sector, with 95 per cent of businesses already taking action. Most businesses are waiting for more information about how to respond to climate change. While you have some luxury to reflect on your personal choices, experts argue that time is up for business. Business has no choice but to join the carbon economy (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008). Investors, customers, and employees expect it. Employees

themselves play a big part in delivering on climate change initiatives by changing work practices and supporting organisational programs, which makes them socially responsive and active on issues management. Compliance is a way to build social capital inside the organisation (Chia & Peters 2008)—a true win–win.

Public relations is uniquely placed to identify and understand the needs and expectations of the organisation's environment such as those related to climate change and filter these through decision-making processes to generate a response or action that meets the combined needs of the organisation and its environment. In the past, it might have been acceptable for public relations to simply create a favourable image of an environmentally aware organisation, but today, publics and audiences are not satisfied with anything less than real action and real outcomes (see Chapter 2). This chapter introduces you to the challenges facing the public relations management role in organisations and the employees' role and position. We start by describing what public relations management is before moving on to what it is informed by and how it works.

The practice of public relations in organisations

Public relations is practised in many different organisational contexts, from inhouse government or public affairs roles to corporate communications roles in small, medium, large, listed, and not-for-profit organisations. Through their communication planning and management, public relations practitioners build and enhance organisational reputation and build and maintain relationships that are important to the organisation and its goals. Most public relations departments are responsible for monitoring and responding to changes in the external environment, including issues, expectations, relationships, and reputation, and at the same time, also contribute to maintaining effective working environments within the organisation through employee communication. Effective employee communication explains organisational priorities and shares organisational information about what is happening so that employees understand and accept the need for change and commit their efforts and ideas to helping the organisation achieve its mission and goals.

In some organisations, the public relations department is also known as the corporate communication department. Corporate communication offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organisation is dependent (Cornelissen 2004: 23).

To be effective at managing reputations and relationships with internal and external stakeholders, students and practitioners of public relations need a guiding theory. In the next section, we apply the systems perspective (introduced in Chapter 3) as a guide to the practice of public relations.

Considering theory: a guide to practice

Whether it is about climate change or planning an anniversary event for an organisation, public relations managers use theory to guide decisions and choices. Theory provides a model for the practice of public relations: ‘All who attempt to solve problems, make recommendations and predict the future, need theories, models, and as a starting point, concepts’ (Skyttner 2001: vi). Over time, the theories you learn, and especially those related to public relations, will mesh with the key learnings and decisions you experience through practice to create your own working theory for public relations. For the student who is new to public relations, this chapter provides a starting point to help you identify, analyse, and resolve public relations problems.

Understanding systems theory

Systems theory provides a framework through which to view organisations and their relationships with the environment. It is firmly established as one of the guiding theories for public relations theory and practice. It is used to explain how public relations helps understand and manage the relationships an organisation has with its stakeholders and publics who make up its environment.

Systems theory developed from the study of biological systems. Following a similar perspective, the seminal public relations text, *Effective Public Relations*, introduced the concept of ecology to public relations in 1952. In the authors’ view, ecology emphasised the need for organisms to adjust and adapt to changes in the environment (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006) as, similar to ecological systems, organisations depend on their environment for support, growth, and, ultimately, survival (Morgan 1998). Ecological environments translate to the social environments of organisations that include governments, competitors, neighbours, customers, employees, the media, and investors.

BOX 7.1 | ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

If we were to adopt a systems approach to examine the Great Barrier Reef, we would see it as a system of many parts—coral and other marine life—that interacts with and depends on other systems, including the river systems throughout northeast Queensland, farming trends, the temperature of the ocean, and even scuba divers. An increase in the water temperature or an influx of toxic chemicals from the river systems has the potential to harm the coral and marine life of the reef. The life and beauty of the Great Barrier Reef depend greatly on its environment.

Defining systems

Whether taking a life science or public relations perspective, the definition of a system remains the same. The public relations literature defines a system as a ‘set of interacting units that endures through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to change pressures from the environment to achieve and maintain goal states’ (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006: 176). In this way, the organisation is seen as a system that exists to create and achieve goals that are beneficial to the organisation and the environment. These goals might include increased profits and sales, support from investors, increased employment, the creation of new products, or a lower carbon footprint.

Organisational systems are not static but rely on a series of exchanges of inputs and outputs between environments and organisations. In organisational systems, inputs are likely to come in the form of resources to an organisation (materials, capital, people, and information). Once received, these inputs are transformed via a range of organisational activities, such as production lines and even boardroom meetings. The transformation process may be affected by the degree of interaction among the different departments within the organisation. Ultimately, the inputs become outputs that include:

- products
- services
- plant closures
- job cuts.

Although each part is important, systems theory takes a holistic view and encourages us to look outside the organisation or organisational department to see the bigger environment (Modaff, Delvine & Butler 2008). The basic premise behind this whole view is that a change to one part affects the whole system.

Types of systems

Within each system there are a number of subsystems that are involved in the transformation process:

- production or technical, which are concerned with transforming inputs into outputs (the production line, for example)
- supportive subsystems that ensure the availability of inputs (the finance or procurement departments, for example)
- maintenance subsystems that focus on maintaining social relations (public relations, for example)
- adaptive subsystems that monitor and respond to the environment (public relations, for example)
- managerial subsystems that coordinate and control the other subsystems (Katz & Kahn 1978).

Public relations is part of the adaptive and maintenance subsystems (Modaff, De Wine & Butler 2008). By understanding what is happening within the environment and how environmental changes might affect organisational goals (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006; Everett 1990; Spicer 1997), public relations can drive adaptation to better suit stakeholder needs.

Qantas is a major Australian airline with a rich tradition and history. One of the key environmental factors affecting all airlines is the rising cost of aviation fuel. Responses to these rising costs include the reduction of available flights and increases in ticket prices. For Qantas, public relations concerns also include damaging media reports about a range of incidents on the ground and in the air. All airlines are affected by safety incidents but what differentiates our reaction to the mass media reporting of Qantas safety incidents and flight delays as opposed to those of Virgin Blue or other carriers? How can public relations be effective in such cases?

Boundary spanning and public relations

Early systems theory (von Bertalanffy 1968) suggested that an organisation and its environment were separated by a boundary through which information and resources flowed. Spanning this boundary was seen as a critical role for public relations professionals, who would provide information to the environment about the organisation and bring information about the environment back to the organisational decision makers. The practitioner monitored the boundary on an ongoing basis, with 'one foot in the organisation and one foot outside' (Grunig & Hunt 1984: 9).

Both these roles continue in today's organisations. Public relations professionals use formal and informal research mechanisms to gather information about key publics and issues and feed them back into the organisation. Knowledge of the attitudes and behaviours of key publics are important to organisations as they plan their goals and strategies. We envisage that Qantas public relations managers are actively engaged in communicating with the public but find that their strategic intent is being tested by ongoing incidents and sustained media interest. In late 2008, for example, Qantas public relations activities involved publicity around the first Qantas A380, which was a planned activity, at around the same time as managing unexpected and certainly unplanned media and public interest in flight delays and safety incidents.

Public relations practitioners undertake an important analytical function in considering the source and value of the information gained, information that may be relevant to the short-term plans of the organisation and therefore acted on in the immediate future, or it may influence its longer-term plans. Forward-looking organisations establish sophisticated databases of information on issues and stakeholders to help them identify issue-specific and sector-wide trends, and inform their long-term planning. By supporting this role, public relations professionals become the eyes and ears of the organisation, staying well connected to key stakeholders to ensure that the

organisation is always well informed of events in its environment. Thus, for example, during pay negotiations, employees may threaten strike action. If an organisation is aware of this threat, it may be able to prevent it or at least be prepared for its consequences. When nurses threaten to strike, their actions may affect the delivery of health care services. While governments and other health care providers may not be able to resolve the nurses' demands around pay and conditions, it can at least prepare for this action and prepare patients for potential disruptions.

The outward flow of information from an organisation, which the public relations practitioner develops and distributes, happens through direct and mediated communication channels such as websites, presentations, media releases, interviews, community meetings, and hotlines. The public relations professional tells and sells the organisation's story, ensuring that all key groups are informed about the organisation's actions. Just as important is the information flow back into the organisation and the opportunities for dialogue and discussion so that views external to the organisation are relayed back to the decision makers and are understood.

A mine manager in a remote location, say, may need to communicate directly with local residents about potential impacts during mine upgrades. Both the mine manager and the public relations professional are likely to be involved:

- both will plan the discussion and agree how to present the information
- the public relations practitioner will prepare communication material, including backgrounders, a PowerPoint presentation, and likely questions and answers
- the mine manager might take the lead in the meeting with local residents, as the person responsible for actions onsite
- the public relations practitioner might help to answer questions, observe reactions and responses, and take notes of key issues raised by the community
- both will be involved in debriefing as the process unfolds.

Straddling the edges of an organisation is not always an easy role as conflicting positions in the environment arise and the strategy of the organisation changes. Just as the idea of a true organisational boundary was considered problematic when it was first suggested (Aldrich & Herker 1977), with more and more organisational partnerships changing the traditional nature of organisation–environment relations it continues to be challenged today. The divide between members and non-members of an organisation is becoming less clear, which is leading to changing roles for public relations practitioners:

- Public–private partnerships see clients and suppliers partner together and are rewarded on the performance of all.
- Activists are sitting on organisational advisory boards helping organisations negotiate difficult issues, whereas earlier they would have tried to use their organisational power to push through their position.

- Community engagement invites communities who are affected by organisational decisions to discuss how decisions will impact them and to offer ideas or jointly plan how to minimise potential impacts.

Public relations professionals are focusing on better understanding of the key drivers of the organisation–environment relations to help navigate this changing setting and provide effective outcomes for their organisations.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

- Find two organisations where you think it would be helpful for an activist to be involved on an advisory board. What issues could the activist help the organisation understand better?
- Find an example of community engagement where community input has modified an organisational decision.

Adjustment and adaptation

Given the critical role that inputs play to a well-functioning system, considerable emphasis is placed within an organisation on gaining the inputs it needs to operate, such as investor funds. The public relations management role establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships that provide inputs to the organisation; however, to secure these inputs, organisations may be required to adjust their policies or actions and adapt to their environment (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006; Witmer 2006). Adaptation results from ‘strategies in the form of organisational and environmental change programs that produce and maintain stability in organisational/environmental relationships’ (Everett 1990: 235). Adjustment may be problematic when an organisation faces conflicting needs within their public and audience groups. Adjusting organisational strategy to favour one group may very well disenfranchise another. Thus, the public relations management role must help the senior decision makers within the organisation to navigate this difficult terrain and use a variety of relationship maintenance strategies to achieve the most positive outcomes possible.

The Qantas example discussed earlier shows that this organisation has needed to increase ticket prices to cover the rising cost of aviation fuel. This decision may be perceived as unpopular by customers yet goes some way to protect the profitability of Qantas and the returns to its shareholders. For another organisation, it may be the decision to cut back on Christmas events due to the financial crisis, which may be unpopular with staff but it is a one way to manage finances. In both cases, some explanation about the reasons behind the actions must be given.

Employee commitment can also be seen as an input to the organisation. Internal communication management is important to help create effective and enthusiastic staff who undertake their roles—the transformation process—and the effectiveness, transparency, and harmony generated internally contributes to how the organisation is perceived by people external to the organisation.

Open and closed systems

Closed systems and public relations

A closed system is isolated from the environment and other systems. Its boundaries are considered impermeable, which discourages the exchange of information with the environment (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006). As a result, closed systems are rarely influenced by their environment. In closed organisations, managers operate as if they are autonomous or unconstrained by environmental forces (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002; Witmer 2006). Closed systems are likely to encounter the system state of entropy or deterioration (Morgan 1998).

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

- Identify an organisation that is not communicating, whose communication is closed rather than open.
- Why do you think its communication lacks transparency?
- How could an inhouse practitioner improve communication to and with the public?
- What would you be interested in knowing about this organisation?

In closed systems, the public relations function has low regard for the environment. Although public relations managers may acknowledge their environment and follow regulatory procedures, they are unlikely to interact with other publics. Instead, public relations departments will adopt a one-way communication perspective without considering environmental input. This type of approach is a functionary one, implemented to preserve the organisation's image (Skinner & Shanklin 1978). Because the organisation is closed to its environment, it is not able to take advantage of opportunities or move quickly to address potential problems. Instead, public relations departments react to crises, and when there is a crisis there is often a cover-up as management denies that there is, or was, a problem (see Chapter 10).

Open systems and public relations

Open systems view the environment as important to survival. Open systems continuously exchange inputs and outputs with the environment through permeable boundaries (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006; Morgan 1998). Organisations actively seek information from their environment, which is received as input into the organisational system. The open systems approach encourages congruency or fit among the different systems and the identification and elimination of any potential dysfunctions (Morgan 1998).

Open organisational systems identify incongruence and respond to environmental pressures that may affect the viability or survival of the organisation (Witmer 2006). Organisational responses can accommodate or counteract changes in the environment (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006). The organisation does not need, nor is it able, to address every change, variation, or expectation of its environment. Instead, organisations and their public relations managers must select and prioritise environmental change pressures.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

An example of an organisation that adjusts to accommodate the needs of its environment is Virgin Blue's carbon offset program. Recognising the importance of climate change and the carbon economy, Virgin Blue, a low-cost airline with a base in Australia, has not only implemented operational changes to minimise greenhouse gas emissions but also offers customers the opportunity to offset the greenhouse gas emissions related to their individual flight. Look at other airlines in Australia and around the world to see if and how they are trying to address climate change.

In open systems, public relations takes on a functional approach that is concerned with two-way communication between the organisation and the environment. This requires resources for organisations to not only monitor their environments and public opinion but also to build and maintain relationships with key organisations and stakeholders within their environment. These relationships are built on trust and a mutual interest in bringing about a solution that meets the needs of all parts of the system.

Public relations in open systems works with the environment to determine what is being said about issues that affect multiple parts of the system. Virgin Blue anticipated the importance of climate change and the carbon economy to its customers and used this information to create a convenient solution for them. Even when conflict arises, open systems public relations is positioned to resolve the situation by working with the environment. In this way, public relations is actively engaged with the environment and not reactive to it.

Expanding the systems perspective

Alternative approaches exist to help us understand an organisation's level of interaction with its environment and the different outcomes that may result. In the public relations literature, Piezcka (2006) provides an extensive review of the equilibrium and homeostatic systems models that can be used to understand organisational relationships. Further detail can also be found in the strategic management literature. More attention is currently being paid to systems complexity, in recognition of the contribution of different perspectives to solving complex problems.

Systems theory is not without its critics. Although it provides a useful way for understanding the relationships between an organisation and its environment, Spicer (1997) believes it ignores issues relating to organisational power that are not addressed during dialogue and exchange. The systems perspective is often criticised for emphasising the pragmatic self-interest of the organisation. Even though an organisational system is open, it is also selective about which parts of the environment it will recognise and accommodate. To address this, Grunig, Grunig & Dozier (2002) contextualised systems theory with other perspectives to better understand organisational effectiveness:

- The strategic constituencies perspective prioritises publics and audiences most critical to the organisation
- The competing values approach contrasts values of effectiveness against efficiency and quality against quantity to help clarify managerial decisions when organisations are going through change
- The goal attainment perspective asserts that effective organisations meet their goals (Robbins 1990, cited in Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002).

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

Review a variety of public relations texts and journal articles to find out about other approaches to public relations. You might like to examine the role of complexity or power. Think of one specific example of how you could apply either one of these approaches to public relations practice.

Another extension of systems theory comes from some of our own research, which integrates the adjustment and adaptation with organisational legitimacy (Patel, Xavier & Broom 2005). Organisational legitimacy is defined as stakeholder perceptions that an organisation is operating in a manner that is consistent with the stakeholder's

moral, regulative, and pragmatic expectations of it (Suchman 1995). Put more simply, organisational legitimacy provides a baseline of social standards for organisations. Mining organisations, for example, have certain regulatory, safety, and moral standards to which they must comply. When a mining organisation's actions meet these standards, they are considered legitimate. Public relations is tasked with acquiring and preserving organisational legitimacy (Waeraas 2007).

The public relations program and team

Now that the theory that informs the public relations management role in organisations has been set out, we can start to explore what it looks like and who is involved.

Excellent public relations programs must operate at organisation, department, and program levels (Grunig 1992), as described in Table 7.1 on the following page. This chapter is concerned with both the organisational and department levels (see also Chapter 9, which deals with how specific public relations strategies are developed and implemented). The organisational level of public relations programs describes the best organisational approach to achieve excellent public relations outcomes for organisations. The department level examines the structure and focus of the public relations function. Department level characteristics will now be explored.

The type of public relations program implemented depends on the type, size, and structure of the organisation (van Leuven 1991), the degree of openness to the environment (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006), and the organisational decision-making structure or dominant coalition (McElreath 1993). A family run hi-fi company would have different public relations needs when compared to those of Panasonic, Merck & Co, Yahoo!, a government department, or your local hospital.

When it comes to organising the public relations or corporate communications function, there are three recommended approaches:

- 1 a centralised department
- 2 multiple communications departments within the organisational structure
- 3 cross-functional coordination with other areas such as marketing (Cornelissen 2004).

For the most part, public relations academics believe that the public relations department should be separate from the marketing function (Grunig 1992) and should coordinate all forms of communication to maximise organisational goals (van Riel 2007). Nowadays, the public relations—marketing mix is becoming more common but the specific contributions of public relations must still be recognised and supported (see Chapter 2).

TABLE 7.1 | Characteristics of excellent public relations programs

I Program level	
1	Managed strategically
II Departmental level	
2	A single or integrated public relations department
3	Separate function from marketing
4	Direct reporting relationship to senior management
5	Two-way symmetrical model
6	Senior public relations person in the managerial role
7	Potential for excellent public relations, as indicated by:
a	Knowledge of symmetrical model
b	Knowledge of managerial role
c	Academic training in public relations
d	Professionalism
8	Equal opportunity for men and women in public relations
III Organisational level	
9	Worldview for public relations in the organisation reflects the two-way symmetrical model
10	Public relations director has power in or with the dominant coalition
11	Participative rather than authoritarian organisational culture
12	Symmetrical system of internal communication
13	Organic rather than mechanical organisational structure
14	Turbulent, complex environment with pressure from activist groups
IV Effects of excellent public relations	
15	Programs meet communication objectives
16	Reduces costs of regulation, pressure and litigation
17	Job satisfaction is high among employees

Source: J E Grunig, 1992: 1–28

Roles and responsibilities

A typical department is likely to be made up of junior and more experienced practitioners who are responsible for implementing the public relations and media relations programs. When needed, organisations can utilise the services of external public relations consultants.

The roles and responsibilities of public relations practitioners are influenced by two forces: the professionalisation of public relations and the nature of the organisational environment. In the early days of the development of professional public relations, internal departments were often managed by former journalists who translated media skills into public relations by promoting a one-way communication model. As public relations education evolved, so too did the role of a public relations professional. This has corresponded with a shift from one-way to two-way communication to the multiway communication central to online and offline communication exchanges. The state of the organisational environment also influences the make-up of the public relations team. More turbulent environments require more senior practitioners to be aware of the dynamic environment and how changes will affect organisational goals (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002). The complexity and changing dynamics of public relations highlighted in Chapter 2 indicate that tensions exist in practice as public relations is constantly changing.

The work of Broom, Dozier, and their colleagues provides the foundation for much of our understanding of public relations roles. In a series of studies, four primary roles were identified and investigated: communication technician, expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem-solving facilitator (Broom 1982; Broom & Smith 1979; Broom & Dozier 1986; Dozier & Broom 1995).

The communication technician is an entry level role for which the practitioner is hired primarily to write or implement activities and, as such, is not part of the decision-making process (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006). An expert prescriber epitomises authority and is charged by management to make decisions relating to public relations, often by themselves and with limited links to the management team (Cutlip et al. 2006).

In contrast to these roles, the communication facilitator and the problem-solving facilitator adopt a more collaborative approach. Communication facilitators operate at the boundary between the organisation and its environment to facilitate exchange and transfer information, while the problem-solving facilitator collaborates with other managers to define and solve problems (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006).

A more common categorisation is that of the public relations technician and the public relations manager (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006).

The public relations technician (whose role equates with the communication technician role outlined above) is responsible for the implementation of public relations activities such as news conferences or events, the production of material such as speeches and news releases, and planning and implementation of projects such as employee involvement in community relations activities.

Defining the responsibilities of a public relations manager has been the focus of a group of researchers from the United Kingdom (Moss, Newman & DeSanto 2005), who found that public relations managers retained some of the technical work and also undertook:

- monitoring and evaluation
- issues management
- policy and strategy advice
- trouble shooting and problem solving.

An area of less emphasis was the management of people (Moss, Newman & De Santo 2005), which suggests that public relations managers focus more on external communication than team management, although the 'disconnect between managers and employees' (Guth & Marsh 2005: 31) points to the need for greater emphasis on internal communication. Guth and Marsh suggest that communication audits are essential 'to measure how well an organization's communications are fulfilling their stated goals' (36), emphasising the importance of public relations internal communication management.

Public relations, the dominant coalition, and links to other departments

Public relations departments operate alongside others, including marketing, human resources, legal, research and development, and operations. These departments are coordinated by a managerial system that is referred to as the dominant coalition. The dominant coalition comprises a range of representatives from the organisation and in some cases, the external environment, who have the power to determine the organisation's mission and goals (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002).

The role of public relations in strategic decision making is determined by proximity and access to management (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2006). The Excellence Study stresses the need for public relations to be part of the dominant coalition (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002). This strategic positioning brings benefits to the organisation and the public relations profession.

Reality is different. There is no doubt that CEOs value the public relations function (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002); however, when asked to decide what roles should be part of the dominant coalition, a major US study found that public relations managers were least likely to be members and the CEO, the chief financial officer, and the chief operating officer were most likely to be included in the dominant coalition (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002).

At a department level, there are three other functions that relate closely to and in some cases compete with public relations for resources and a place in the dominant coalition. The relationship of public relations departments with marketing, legal, and human resource departments will now be examined.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

The concept of dominant coalition is important. Think about how your family unit operates—who makes the decisions and how involved is each family member in the decision making? Do you have family meetings to discuss major events? Investigate five company annual reports and see if you can determine where the public relations function is located in each organisation. Is it represented by a director of communications, or is it part of a cluster of functions, for example, within a corporate services branch?

Public relations and the marketing department

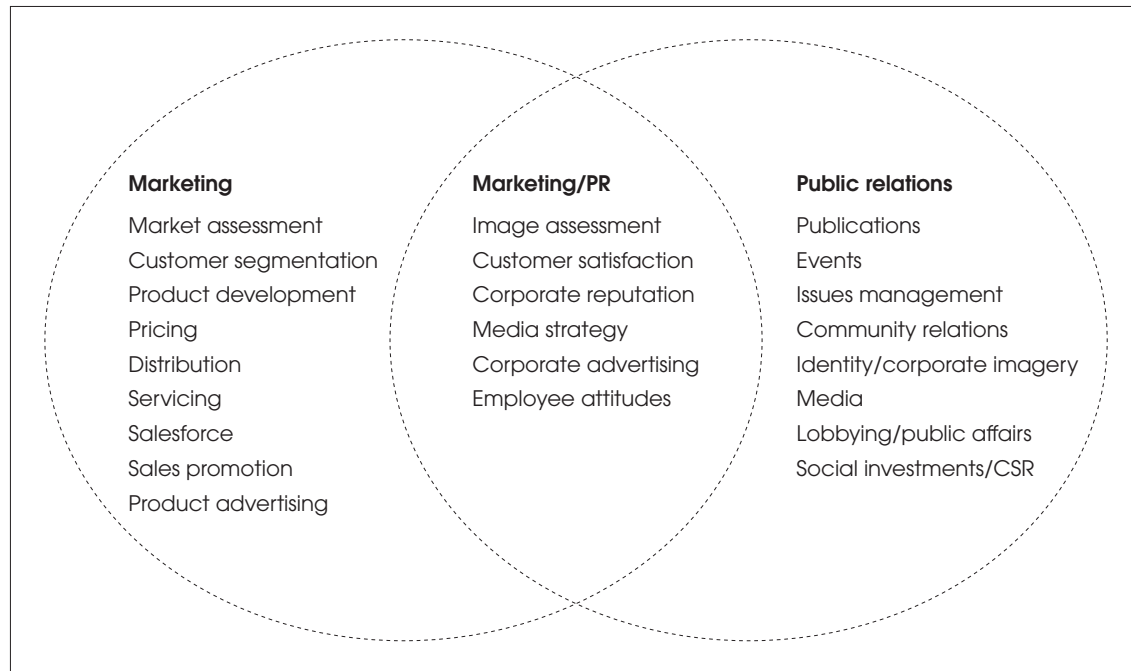
There is common ground between marketing and public relations functions in organisations, and in some organisations the two functions are combined. There is some suggestion that this is a trend within communication management (see Chapter 2). But these natural synergies (Proctor & Kitchen 2002) can create confusion. Thus, while public relations and marketing may take a consumer focus, their relationship with consumers comes from a different base. Marketing depends on consumers to purchase goods or services and deliver a profit through an exchange process, whereas public relations see consumers as one part of a complex environment.

The customer versus non-customer orientation is one of the main points of difference between public relations and marketing. Marketing is primarily a customer or sales-oriented function. Although the integrated marketing communication concept has introduced a focus on non-customer relationships, public relations is the only function that specifically considers non-customer publics and audiences, including employees, government, communities, and shareholders.

Public relations is critical when marketing activities and sales are affected by public opinion or crisis events. In some cases, marketing activities can be the cause of such crisis events.

One example of this is Herron Pharmaceuticals, which was the subject of an extortion attempt in 2000. Although the company eventually recalled its products, it initially did not notify the public or police about this extortion attempt. In the meantime, two consumers, a Brisbane doctor and his son, were hospitalised after consuming paracetamol capsules laced with strychnine. During the crisis, goodwill towards and confidence in the brand were damaged. To resolve this crisis, Herron not only withdrew and destroyed its products but it also reviewed manufacturing processes and security arrangements, and developed new tamper-evident packaging. Public relations, in particular crisis communications, and marketing were required to work together to re-establish the brand that is still part of the market today.

FIGURE 7.1 | Public relations and marketing activities and their overlap



Source: Cornelissen 2004: 40

From a structural point of view, public relations academics argue for a separate and centralised public relations department that optimises organisational goals. In reality, public relations is often merged with the marketing department (van Ruler & de Lange 2003). In some organisations, encroachment is prevalent. Encroachment occurs when non-public relations professionals hold senior positions in public relations (Lauzen 1992). The following activity will help you negotiate the differences between public relations and marketing.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

You are two weeks into your new job as corporate communications manager for a major construction company that is in the process of developing and seeking capital for an innovative design to build a city within a city. You find that there are no plans to include the public relations team in these new developments. There seems to be a marketing frenzy and a focus on marketing the new design.

- What contribution do you think public relations would bring to this project?
- What can you do to ensure that public relations planning is central to the new city developments?

Public relations and the legal department

The relationship between the public relations department and legal counsel in organisations is mirrored by the tension between the courts of public opinion and the law. While public relations is motivated by open and two-way communication to build relationships and win votes in the court of public opinion, this openness is sometimes seen as a liability (Fitzpatrick & Rubin 1995).

A legal solution to a problem may be a preferred route for some members of society, and while this is not at the levels seen overseas, public relations practitioners may find themselves sitting around the table during issues or crisis management discussions arguing with lawyers about the amount of disclosure that should be given. Lawsuits affect organisational reputations and require public relations managers and lawyers to be part of the strategic decision-making process (Jin & Kelsay 2008, in press).

As a result, it is important for public relations practitioners and lawyers to work together (Lerbinger 2006). Research has shown that lawyers have an accurate view of public relations managers but the converse is not true (Reber, Cropp & Cameron 2001). Common ground between the two professions is that both are important in crisis situations and both should be involved early (Reber, Cropp & Cameron 2001).

Public relations practitioners should apply relationship building strategies to better understand lawyers (Reber, Cropp & Cameron 2001) and the law (Fitzpatrick 1996). Practitioners are encouraged to meet regularly with lawyers to discuss and plan for legal issues that have the potential to affect the organisation (Heath & Coombs 2006; McElreath 1993). Practitioners should also gain an understanding of the different laws or rules that may affect their practice. Public relations practitioners should possess a basic understanding of state, territory, and federal laws relating to their organisation and its industry, rules or codes of conduct of professional associations, privacy, copyright and trademark law, trade practices law, employee rights, and corporate disclosure rules, among others.

Often, companies are reluctant to reveal too much information during legal proceedings. During a crisis, most decisions about the release of information are made collaboratively, with legal counsel in the leadership role (Fitzpatrick 1996), yet it is just as important to manage the court of public opinion. While traditional advocacy strategies might use the media, an effective strategy during litigation is the internet. Reber, Cropp & Cameron (2006) found websites to be a useful dissemination tool for celebrities such as Martha Stewart and Michael Jackson, who both went through major public trials.

Public relations and the human resources department

Unified by a joint interest in employees, the relationship between public relations and human resources departments is important in organisational systems.

Like legal departments, public relations and human resource departments must have strong working relationships during day-to-day operations and crisis situations. Although

structural and personnel changes such as job cuts, plant closures, or organisational restructures are accepted organisational behaviours, they still impact the share market and the morale of employees. At an operational level, research into employee benefit programs that are used to recruit and retain employees shows that there are opportunities for collaboration to determine appropriate methods and channels of communication (Freitag & Picherit-Duthler 2004).

When you consider the relationship between public relations and marketing, legal, and human resource departments, all have a role in building and maintaining organisational reputation. Another unifying force is organisational change. Active management of issues generally requires the input of different areas of expertise throughout the organisation. Project teams are often drawn together to coordinate multidisciplinary perspectives and knowledge to focus on a specific project of importance to the organisation. It is important for all departments to build working relationships in good times and bad.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

Imagine you are part of a project team that is preparing a bid to construct a new highway. You will be providing the communication and community engagement component. Other people around the table include road construction specialists, engineers, environmental consultants, experts in noise control, landscape designers, and financial controllers. Each has a role to play.

- Identify the objectives you might aim to achieve in relation to this project.

The practice of public relations in organisations

Publics and audiences

All public relations managers deal with a multiplicity of publics and audiences inside and outside the organisation. Publics and audiences exist because they interact with or are affected by the organisation in some way, or they may develop around an issue, problem, or opportunity (Grunig & Repper 1992). Long-term ongoing public relations programs are developed to maintain the dialogue and communication with publics and audiences such as communities, investors, neighbours, and employees. New programs will be developed to support new initiatives and projects, and may require contact to be established with publics and audiences the organisation has never previously needed to communicate with. Public relations managers try to track the formation of publics as well as their subsequent activities to ensure that the organisation–public relationship can be

built from the start. Part of the boundary-spanning role is identifying the emergence of new publics as well as monitoring existing publics.

Public relations programming often starts with the development of a publics or audience map for the organisation, that is, a list of the people who are aligned to or have a stake in the organisation. Edward Freeman (1984) suggests that the manager starts with the typical groups, including owners, customers, competitors, media, employees, suppliers, government, and special interest groups. From here the public relations manager can expand the list to best match their particular organisation and industry sector. The map contains broad categories of people or groups that affect or are affected by an organisation. To be useful to the public relations manager, this map needs to be refined to identify key publics.

Esman (1972) identified four types of organisational linkages that can help public relations managers track their publics:

- 1 *Enabling linkages* are those that have the authority and resources, such as regulators and owners, to enable the organisation to exist.
- 2 *Functional linkages* provide input to the organisation and consume its outputs. These include groups such as employees, suppliers, consumers, and clients.
- 3 *Normative linkages* are those with peer organisations, such as industry associations and professional groups.
- 4 *Diffused linkages* are those with an interest in the organisation but are not part of a formal relationship, such as the media, activists, and community members. Public relations managers need to be aware that groups with a diffused linkage may influence the groups in the other categories on certain issues, particularly if their environmental power grows. In some circumstances their position may change to one with a formal link.

Having identified the key publics and audiences, public relations managers need to analyse the map to consider alignment with and opposition to the organisation's position on particular issues and within different groups. The food manufacturer who wants to introduce a new line of snack products for children, for example, will need to be aware of publics and audiences, such as health authorities who are concerned with childhood obesity and the promotion of products that lead to it in children. It will also want to attract the attention of retailers and ensure retailer support to stock the product. It is difficult to identify any issue or initiative that will not lead to divided opinion, so the public relations manager knows that they will have to consider the needs of different publics and audiences as organisational strategy is mapped.

The public relations manager also knows that publics are not static. Publics and the environment are constantly changing, so environmental scanning processes need to constantly update the organisational databases.

Public relations managers can also use J Grunig's (1989) situational theory of individual communication behaviour to track publics and audiences. The status of publics as latent, active, or aware, or the separate category of non-public provide useful information to the public relations manager when planning their communication campaigns and in monitoring the effect on publics of organisational actions.

At a broad level, public relations departments divide publics and public relations practice into two broad areas: internal and external relations. Internal relations is responsible for employee relations and issues; external relations is concerned with the range of stakeholders external to the organisation.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

Organisational leaders make difficult decisions that can create conflict between internal and external relationships. When a listed company decides to close a manufacturing plant in Victoria, it must manage the reactions of employees as well as communicate the significance of this decision to shareholders or investors.

- Who should the organisation treat as most important?
- How should the organisation manage these competing interests?

Internal relations

Internal communication is the public relations specialty dedicated to the building and maintenance of relationships with and among employees. Employees are important and satisfactory employee–employer relationships lead to higher productivity, fewer errors and work stoppages, and less absenteeism (Center et al. 2008).

Some of the key issues that affect this relationship are inadequate communication, the extent of alignment with organisational values and culture, change to industrial relations legislation, unions, globalisation, job cuts or structural changes, and perceived inequities of salary and retirement packages for organisational leaders compared to entry level workers (Lattimore et al. 2006; Seitel 2007). Organisations need to be mindful of these issues and ensure that they are addressed.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture is central to employee relations. Culture is made up of the 'shared values, symbols, meanings, beliefs, assumptions and expectations that organise and integrate a group of people who work together' (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002: 482). The public relations literature talks about two types of culture, authoritarian and participative.

In authoritarian cultures, decision making is centralised and communication is structured, formalised, and largely one-way (Grunig et al. 2002). Participative cultures encourage employees to be part of decision making and share in achievements with communication that emphasises both dialogue and feedback (Grunig et al. 2000). Consider the similarities here with open and closed systems, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Culture is often developed by organisational founders or leaders (Lattimore et al. 2006) and internalised by organisational members. The management literature identifies three different cultures related to different roles in organisations: operators, engineers, and executives (Schein 1996). Sometimes these cultures conflict, as demonstrated in the following operator–executive example:

[W]hen the operator culture attempts to improve effectiveness by building learning capacity, which requires time and resources, the executives disallow the proposed activities on the grounds that the financial returns cannot be demonstrated or that too many exceptions are involved that would undermine the control system (Schein 1996: 238).

Public relations is one of the departments that can resolve this conflict. Public relations can facilitate and provide opportunities for interaction within organisations and encourage innovation and creativity (Lattimore et al. 2006). Other tools practitioners can use include reinforcement of organisational mission and vision statements, and modelling of appropriate behaviour.

Understanding employees and their information needs

As an internal communications specialist, it is important to understand employees and their information needs. It is also important to understand the differences between employees and external publics. According to Ni (2007), employees are different based on the way their relationship begins with an organisation. Employees enter into relationships to get paid, to gain experience, and to have further career experiences (Ni 2007). Despite these common elements, the position of the employee in the organisation also affects how they evaluate organisational relationships.

Chia and Peters (2008) found that employees are becoming social capital investors because they are taking a key role in growing the organisation's internal and external relationships and participating in community programs such as volunteering for Riding for the Disabled, revegetating the coastline, and supporting the homeless, among many others. This suggests that employees can bring a great deal to the organisation, that they build organisational reputation and relationships, and they become an integral part of a public relations internal and external communication management program.

Because not all employees are the same (Tench & Yeomans 2006) it is not useful to group them together as one public. Employees can be segmented by role or position as well as by their involvement and level of participation in particular issues. Depending on the situation, employees can also become activists.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

In a study of change within a US college, Nance McCown (2007) showed how employees responded to perceived communication gaps by adopting strategies of activists such as defining grievances, rallying and collaborating with other employee groups, engaging in rumours, and using the news media to pressure the organisation. In this example, what steps or actions would you recommend to the organisation?

Here is some advice. A clear set of rules for effective employee relations is provided by Center et al. (2008):

- Tell employees first.
- Tell bad and good news together.
- Be timely.
- Inform employees on subjects important to them.
- Use media trusted by employees.

Adopting some of these steps may prevent employees from becoming activist publics. In response to the situation described above, the college management invited employee participation in the change program and implemented mechanisms for ongoing employee participation (McCown 2007).

The information needs of employees remain fairly constant (Center et al. 2008), in that the top five subjects of most interest to employees are:

- 1 the organisation's future plans
- 2 job advancement opportunities
- 3 instructional information about role or duties
- 4 information about improvements in productivity
- 5 new policies and practices (Center et al. 2008).

To ensure an open systems approach, internal communications should respect employees, provide opportunities for the exchange of honest feedback, recognise and encourage employees, and maintain employee wellbeing and safety (Lattimore et al. 2006; Seitel 2007).

Employee communication channels

There is a range of communication channels that operates within organisations. Some of these are formal and led by public relations or organisational leaders; others, such as the grapevine or rumour mill, are created by employees themselves.

In choosing communication channels, public relations practitioners should consider how they build or maintain trust. Trust is built through the provision of information

and trust in the source. Some of the trusted information sources in employee communications are the immediate supervisor, executives, and the organisational policy handbook (Center et al. 2008; Ni 2007). Other formal communication channels include the intranet, print publications, such as internal newsletters, bulletin boards, and face-to-face interactions in team or small group meetings. The least trusted media sources in employee relations are the grapevine and the mass media (Center et al. 2008). Always recognise the importance of the relational context, which means that discussion and dialogue are better for communication than intranets and online communication, which are impersonal.

Despite being less trustworthy, the grapevine or rumour mill is a potent communication channel that can emerge during times of change or uncertainty (Cutlip et al. 2006; DiFonzo & Bordia 2000; Seitel 2007). In some organisations, rumours appear during most weeks and relate to job security, job satisfaction, personnel changes, gossip, stock market performance, product or service quality, and organisational reputation (DiFonzo & Bordia 2000). Rumours lower morale, increase bad press, reduce trust, and increase employee stress (DiFonzo & Bordia 2000). Rumours are a normal part of organisations so employee relations specialists such as the public relations practitioner should be alert to their effects and plan to address them (DiFonzo & Bordia 2000).

Strategies to address rumours include:

- reinforcement of values and procedures used to guide any organisational changes
- establishment of regular communication updates
- explanation of decision-making processes
- acknowledgement or confirmation of rumour to increase trust (DiFonzo & Bordia 2000).

As with every type of public relations practice, it is important to identify the right channel and distribution method for the right audience. In today's increasingly flexible workplace, employees work onsite, offsite in client offices, or from home, or from offices in different parts of the country or in other countries, where English may not be the employees' first language. The challenges of communicating to everyone at the same time and with equal effectiveness must be met by the public relations practitioner.

External relations: contemporary challenges

Other chapters in this book, as well as specialist books, explain and describe the external relations functions of organisations including events, community relations, and media relations. In this chapter, we examine how corporate social responsibility, conflict, and engagement present contemporary challenges to the external relations function in public relations management.

Corporate social responsibility

Since the mid 1980s in Australia, growing demand for business to deliver more than financial returns has led to the emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Cornelissen 2004). Through CSR, organisations focus on the social, ecological, and financial contributions or impacts they make through their operations. Australian research has shown that CSR was integrated into organisations through philanthropy and respect for the natural environment (Johnston & Beatson 2006). This research also found that social responsibility was emphasised over financial performance.

CSR presents a challenge and an opportunity to the theory and practice of public relations. A longitudinal study of the Australian banking industry showed that as the environment moved to embrace CSR, banks shifted public relations practices from a one-way influence perspective to a two-way perspective (Bartlett, Tywoniak & Hatcher 2007). As climate change, community relations, and other issues relating to CSR shape the community's expectations of organisations, public relations will have a role in ensuring that organisations respond. This is a specialist area in public relations (see Chapter 9).

Conflict

Conflict is an accepted part of organisational and environmental relationships. Organisational environments are typically dynamic and turbulent and filled with active publics and activist groups (Grunig et al. 2002). An activist public is 'a group of two or more individuals who organise to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force' (Grunig et al. 2002: 446). While some activist groups, such as Greenpeace and Voiceless, have long histories and focus around high-profile issues such as the environment or animal welfare, in recent times, activists have become involved in many other issues that impact organisational action. Examples include activists who have targeted organisations such as James Hardie Industries NV for compensation as well as more open disclosure on organisational decision making (see Chapters 8 and 10).

Activists' level of involvement in organisational issues varies according to their interest in the issue (Center & Jackson 2003; Cutlip et al. 2006; Grunig 1992a). When activist publics disagree with organisations, they have the potential to constrain organisational operations (Anderson 1992). Activist publics can either work with recognised authorities, such as government, to affect a target organisation's operations (Grunig 1992), or resist dominant power structures, including government (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002). The methods of activist publics often mirror the methods of public relations experts and are becoming more focused around technology-led communication (see discussion on new media in Chapter 12). Managing these conflict areas requires public relations practitioners to not only be aware of their organisational environments but accept the sophistication of activists within their environment.

Community engagement

An extension of the boundary-spanner role discussed earlier is the practice of community engagement, sometimes known as public participation or community consultation. Community engagement practices are used in a variety of public and private projects and are designed to ensure that a diverse range of publics and audiences have input to proposed actions and policies that may affect them. They also play a major role in the reputational legacy of participants after the major projects are complete. Throughout this scholarly text, examples of community engagement indicate its growing importance within public relations relationship management; in this chapter, the open systems approach allows for a context where communities and organisations can jointly discuss and plan projects where they have common interests and interdependent objectives.

Kim Johnston (2007) proposes that a relational perspective to community engagement be considered as it provides a framework through which to accommodate diversity. Engagement relationship strategies incorporate research, information sharing, consultation, and participation processes; and recognise the continuum of practice from advocacy and power-holding positions through to collaborative, power-sharing strategies (see the IAP2 Spectrum, Chapter 5). On major road upgrades, for example, project managers need to identify the major publics or audiences who might have an interest in the project, including:

- affected residents whose houses may be affected by the noise of construction and the possible shifts of land surrounding their houses
- road users who may experience delays during major works
- businesses that may suffer loss of revenue if customers find it difficult to access their business premises.

The engagement relationship strategies used with each of these publics or audiences may be different to each other and may also vary over time as different parts of the project are completed: at times, the project managers may be able to negotiate with business owners to minimise disruptions by changing the scheduled working hours or days, whereas at other times, both parties may find it impossible to negotiate a workable outcome and the project manager may use an information strategy to ensure that the stakeholders are updated on the decisions made.

Community engagement is closest to the community involvement dimension of Hallahan's (2005) three dimensions of community building. Modern organisations are also participating more in the community nurturing and organising dimensions, which place more emphasis on the community's needs over the organisation's and may build more sustainable, rich relationships for the longer term. Development of community capacity and social capital is often a goal of community relations.

Community relations develop organisations' social capital by establishing relationships and partnering with not-for-profit organisations, for example, so that all partners benefit.

Chia and Peters (2008) found that the partnership between credit unions and the charitable organisation, the Smith Family, to support young carers, provided benefits for both: the credit unions benefited through the volunteering opportunities for staff and the long-term relationships developed with young carers enabled them to continue their education and develop a career.

The community engagement role is a rewarding one but one that is being challenged in tight financial markets where a focus on profit seems to be challenging credit unions' progress in this area. Chia and Peters (2008) contend though that community engagement is central to organisational development because organisations are community members.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

Think about what is happening in your local community or nearest city. Explore three organisations that have a strong interest in community. How are they involved with the community? What relationships are they prioritising? What is the return on their investment?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The public relations management role in organisations is grounded in systems theory.
- To achieve organisational goals, internal public relations practitioners must be aware of the relationships between the public relations function and other corporate functions.
- An important role is to build relationships with employees, with specific regard to communication channels and organisational culture.
- There is a need to build and maintain relationships with external publics, who have the potential to affect organisations during times of stability and change.
- Community engagement and corporate social responsibility are strong trends in current public relations practice.
- Contemporary challenges to the public relations management role are driven by changing expectations of publics and audiences.
- As operating environments change and new issues emerge, the public relations role will continue to change and to focus more on active involvement in organisational decision making and relational development at all levels.

CASE STUDY**PREPARING EMPLOYEES FOR CHANGE**

Moving house is often a logistical challenge for a family, so imagine trying to move approximately 2000 employees to new premises. This challenge, coupled with the requirement to change the way in which employees use their work environment was the task facing Suncorp. The program required two years of planning and implementation as part of a national workplace change program.

Suncorp, one of Australia and New Zealand's leading diversified financial service providers, realised that if it was to achieve its corporate goals in an increasingly demanding environment, it needed to provide employees with effective work spaces to enable them to achieve at the very highest levels. A review of its office space, however, found that a significant proportion of existing work spaces did not allow for new ways of working, which were required to promote greater collaboration and increase productivity. To address this issue, Suncorp initiated a National Workplace Change Program with the first project being the relocation of a significant number of its Brisbane CBD workforce to Brisbane Square, a new office tower in the heart of the city. Employees were moved from small group-based environments to a 22 000sqm open plan tenancy with inter-connecting staircases designed to improve collaboration and team work across and within business groups.

This was a significant change for many employees and the company realised that communication would play a critical role in preparing its employees for the move, by:

- promoting the far-reaching behavioural changes required to achieve its long-term goals
- maintaining business continuity during the move
- creating a communication blueprint for future sites.

Suncorp appointed Synchronous Communication to develop and implement a robust communication strategy to support this significant corporate initiative.

Significant research was used to inform the communication strategy. Research commissioned by Suncorp on new workplace designs and cultural aspirations was reviewed to identify potential issues and challenges. Briefings with key stakeholders focused on areas such as maintaining business continuity while preparing employees for the move as well as the aspirational targets of promoting the collaborative and sharing behaviours the new workplace was designed to foster.

Target publics for the program included:

- the employees who would be relocating
- the workplace champions
- senior and line management
- internal support departments such as human resources.

Unlike many external communication programs, all of these publics were known to Suncorp and could be communicated with through corporate channels.

To provide a context for the communication program, the positioning statement 'Outside the Square' was used to focus the program and help internal audiences 'tune in' to program-specific communication.

Six specific stages of the change journey were identified to guide the communication program: announce, engage and excite, align and champion, signal and promote, celebrate and embrace, and reinforce and sustain.

Each stage used different tactics to promote the key messages and desired behaviours with a strong focus on visual and participatory mediums to attract interest. For example, one of the key change and communication tools was a stage-based display centre with full scale fit-out prototypes of a typical work area. The display was used extensively throughout the program to give employees a first-hand experience of what the new workspace would look like and how it would support the way they work. Other tactics included specially designed videos for each stage, a dedicated intranet, site tours, more than 200 employee briefings, newsletters, workplace guides, welcome kits and celebratory events to mark key milestones. While much of the program was designed to create a sense of excitement and achievement, it also dealt directly with employee concerns, recognising the overall wariness to change and the challenges the new open plan workspace would bring. By working with employees, these issues were identified and collaborative solutions designed and implemented.

Overall, the program was highly successful: all relocations occurred on schedule and all employees were able to work without issue from day one in the new premises. Post-relocation research highlighted that collaboration had increased and employees and managers across all groups were embracing the new way of working. Employees recognised the importance of the communication program in achieving this output with 70 per cent rating the program as excellent. The overall strategy has now been adopted for all future Suncorp workplace change projects.

FURTHER READING

Center, A H, Jackson, P, Smith, S & Stansberry, F R 2008, *Public Relations Practices: Managerial Case Studies and Problems*, 7th edn, Pearson, Upper Saddle River.

WEBSITE RESOURCES

PricewaterhouseCoopers, at www.pwc.com/extweb/service.nsf/docid/0c334e23eb5d6b3aca2572e9001c5edc.

Suncorp, at www.suncorp.com.au.

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