The Practice of PUBLIC RELATIONS

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All three approaches, R-A-C-E, R-O-S-I-E, and R-P-I-E, echo one of the most widely repeated definitions of public relations, developed by the late Denny Griswold, who founded a public relations newsletter.

> *Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.*[14]

The key words in this definition are *management* and *action*. Public relations, if it is to serve the organization properly, must report to top management. Public relations must serve as an honest broker to management, unimpeded by any other group. For public relations to work, its advice to management must be unfiltered, uncensored, and unexpurgated. This is often easier said than done because many public relations departments report through marketing, advertising, or even legal departments.

Nor can public relations take place without appropriate action. As noted, no amount of communications—regardless of its persuasive content—can save an organization whose performance is substandard. In other words, if the action is flawed or the performance rotten, no amount of communicating or backtracking or post facto posturing will change the reality.

The process of public relations, then, as Professor Melvin Sharpe put it, "harmonizes long-term relationships among individuals and organizations in society."[15] To "harmonize," Professor Sharpe applied five principles to the public relations process:

- Honest communication for credibility
- Openness and consistency of actions for confidence
- Fairness of actions for reciprocity and goodwill
- Continuous two-way communication to prevent alienation and to build relationships
- Environmental research and evaluation to determine the actions or adjustments needed for social harmony

And if that doesn't yet give you a feel for what precisely the practice of public relations is, then consider public relations Professor Janice Sherline Jenny's description as *"the management of communications between an organization and all entities that have a direct or indirect relationship with the organization, i.e., its publics."*

No matter what definition one may choose to explain the practice, few would argue that the goal of effective public relations is to harmonize internal and external relationships so that an organization can enjoy not only the goodwill of all of its publics but also stability and long life.

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- **Internal and external.** Internal publics are inside the organization: supervisors, clerks, managers, stockholders, and the board of directors. External publics are those not directly connected with the organization: the press, government, educators, customers, suppliers, and the community.
- **Primary, secondary, and marginal.** Primary publics can most help—or hinder—the organization's efforts. Secondary publics are less important, and marginal publics are the least important of all. For example, members of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, who regulate banks, would be the primary public for a bank awaiting a regulatory ruling, whereas legislators and the general public would be secondary. On the other hand, to the investing public, interest rate pronouncements of the same Federal Reserve Board are of primary importance.
- **Traditional and future.** Employees and current customers are traditional publics; students and potential customers are future ones. No organization can afford to become complacent in dealing with its changing publics. Today, a firm's publics range is more inclusive of different minorities, genders, and senior citizens.
- **Proponents, opponents, and the uncommitted.** An institution must deal differently with those who support it and those who oppose it. For supporters, communications that reinforce beliefs may be in order. But changing the opinions of skeptics calls for strong, persuasive communications. Often, particularly in politics, the uncommitted public is crucial. Many a campaign has been decided because the swing vote was won over by one of the candidates.

It's true that management must always speak with one voice, but its communication inflection, delivery, and emphasis should be sensitive to all constituent publics.

Public Relations Functions

There is a fundamental difference between the functions of public relations and the functions of marketing and advertising. Marketing and advertising promote a product or a service. Public relations promotes an entire organization.

Modern public relations is all about managing relationships, crafting strategic stories, conveying expertise and solving organizational problems through strategic communications.

The functions associated with modern public relations work are numerous. Among them are the following:

- **Writing**—the fundamental public relations skill, with written vehicles from news releases to speeches and from brochures to advertisements falling within the field's purview.
- **Media relations**—dealing with the press is another frontline public relations function.

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- **Social media interface**—creating what often is the organization's principle interface with the public: its Web site, as well as creating links with social media options, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and all the rest. Also important is monitoring the World Wide Web and responding, when appropriate, to organizational challenge.
- **Planning**—of public relations programs, special events, media events, management functions, and the like.
- **Counseling**—in dealing with management and its interactions with key publics.
- **Researching**—of attitudes and opinions that influence behavior and beliefs.
- **Publicity**—the marketing-related function, most commonly misunderstood as the "only" function of public relations, generating positive publicity for a client or employer.
- **Marketing communications**—other marketing-related functions, such as promoting products, creating collateral marketing material, sales literature, meeting displays, and promotions.
- **Community relations**—positively putting forth the organization's messages and image within the community.
- **Consumer relations**—interfacing with consumers through written and verbal communications.
- **Employee relations**—communicating with the all-important internal publics of the organization, those managers and employees who work for the firm.
- **Government affairs**—dealing with legislators, regulators, and local, state, and federal officials—all of those who have governmental interface with the organization.
- **Investor relations**—for public companies, communicating with stockholders and those who advise them.
- **Special publics relations**—dealing with those publics uniquely critical to particular organizations, from African Americans to women to Asians to senior citizens.
- **Public affairs and issues**—dealing with public policy and its impact on the organization, as well as identifying and addressing issues of consequence that affect the firm.
- **Crisis communications**—dealing with key constituent publics when the organization is under siege for any number of urgent situations that threaten credibility.

This is but a partial list of what public relations practitioners do. In sum, the public relations practitioner is manager/orchestrator/producer/director/writer/arranger and all-around general communications counsel to management. It is for this reason, then, that the process works best when the public relations director reports directly to the CEO.

3 The Sin of "Spin"

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