

Public Relations: An Alternative Communication Strategy for Achieving Competitive Advantage in Business Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the concept of communication strategies used in business organisations. The article explores the relevant literature that underpins the concept of public relations in terms of its objectives. It reviews the various PR methods and techniques that could be used to achieve competitive advantage in business organisations. The findings of the article show that because of the increasing competition in the marketplace, organisations need to design the most effective and efficient communication programme possible to build relationships with customers in order to achieve competitive advantage. The recommendation is that organisations should build customer relationships, using a series of interactions between individuals and the organisation. This will produce more sales and profits than focusing on sales transactions alone. Thus, this article emphasised how organisations can successfully integrate brand messages, media, and marketing communication functions to help create, retain, and grow brand image that will achieve competitive advantage.

INTRODUCTION

The growing over capacity and intense competition in the production of goods and services coupled with complexity in consumer's lifestyle make effective marketing communications the best option for organisations to

remain competitive (Duncan, 2002). Organisations need to undertake effective advertising and other forms of promotional activities in order to convince their target consumers that their particular goods or services are the best. Similarly, the image an organisation forms will determine the importance consumers attribute to it in terms of buying products and services from that organisation. A company's name has come to be much more than a matter of pride. It is a point of differentiation that influences customers. In today's market place, quality and price differentiation between products and services are becoming increasingly blurred. Competing organisations use the same computer assisted designs and manufacturing programmes. Government regulatory bodies, pressure groups and consumers themselves are forcing companies to adhere to the same ingredients, health and safety rules and labelling standards. The corporate reputation and the image of a company have become the most powerful differentiation factor in the face of this ferociously competitive environment. It is therefore very common to see companies and organisations with very good public image doing better in terms of market shares and profitability compared to those with bad public image.

It is not only that, as companies and organisations compete in an increasingly competitive market place, managers look for alternative methods of differentiation and ways to stand out from the crowd. Organisations operate in a more consumer-driven market place where consumers have greater access to variety of information. As a result, a more open, simple and cost effective way of communicative approach is being adopted by many organisations. Public relation has therefore become very important in current business management. Thus, in order to maintain a good public image, organisations must invest a lot of resources in public relation activities.

It is in the light of this that public relations as a marketing promotional strategy has become very important in many organisations. The aim of this article is therefore to examine the broader theoretical framework of public relations as a marketing communication strategy and how the concept can be effectively and efficiently be exploited to enhance the reputation of organisations in order to achieve a competitive advantage.

THE MEANING OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

This part of the article focuses on the theoretical body of knowledge as contributed by marketing scholars on public relations. In terms of definition, public relations (PR) have been defined in many widely differing ways. The earliest definitions emphasized the roles of press agencies since these were the major elements from which modern public relations grew. The press agent was used to create newsworthy stories and events to attract the media.

It then attempted to attract public notice more than to build public understanding. Here, publicity was their major strategy (Broom, et al., 2000). Later, as public relations was recognized and employed by more organizations, definitions began to include the need for research prior to initiating actions, careful planning and thorough evaluation or measurement of results, a continuing systematic process instead of a one-time or single activity and multiple audiences. Others include the role as an essential function of management, public participation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and accommodation as important tools and the need, in most instances, for long-term commitment.

Many of these definitions tended to describe what public relations do instead of what it is. In an attempt to solve this problem, the governing body of the Public Relations Society of America formally adopted a definition of public relations which has become most accepted and widely used: "public relation helps an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other". In this definition, the essential functions of research, planning, communications dialogue and evaluation are implied. Keywords are "organization" rather than the limiting implication of "company" or "business", and "publics" which recognizes that all organisations have multiple publics from which they must earn consent and support.

Fill (2002) defines public relations, as a management of communications and relationships to establish goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public. As a management activity, it attempts to shape attitudes and opinions. These publics are the organisation's target audience, which include customers, employees, shareholders, trade bodies, supplies, and government (Simkin et al., 1992). From this definition, it can be seen that PR is an organisational activity involved with fostering goodwill between a company and its various publics.

PR efforts are aimed at various corporate constituencies. It involves relations with all of the organisation's relevant publics with the aim of promoting a favourable public image of the organisation. It should be noted, however, that most public relations activities do not involve marketing in itself but rather deal with general management concerns. This more encompassing aspect of public relations can be called "general PR". The marketing oriented aspect of public relations is called Marketing Public Relations or MPR. The management of communication and relationships to establish goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public is vital to organisation's success (Jobber 2001).

The Institute of Public Relations (IPR) defines PR as 'the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics'. This IPR's definition stresses very important elements of PR noting that it must be planned, it must be sustained, and its main thrust is aimed at establishing and maintaining

goodwill and mutual understanding. These are aspirations to which all fair-minded people would subscribe, but how to achieve these desirable goals requires a thorough familiarity with principles of public relations. It also requires a sound experience in translating theories into successful practice (Black 1995). In 1978, the world assembly of PR Association in Mexico agreed what is now known as the "Mexican Statement". To them, PR practices is the art and science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders and implementing planned programmes of action that will serve both the organisation and the public interest (Needham and Dransfield 1993). Public relations is also seen as the management function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and proceedings of individuals or organisations with the public interest, and plans and executes programmes of action to earn public understanding, acceptance and develop and maintain good relationships with them (Broom et al 1999).

Chealeer (2003) defines PR as 'a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; help management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; define and emphasis the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; help management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends and use research and ethical communication technique as its principal tool' (Chealeer, 2003). Public relations comprises a set of practical skills and strategies design to enhance the reputation of an organisation, help strengthen its relationships with its public and enable it deal with crises from a position of strength (Moi, 2001). Public relations involve a variety of programmes designed to promote or protect a company's image or its individual products (Kotler, 2003).

Cox and Brittain (2000) define public relation as a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain understanding between an organisation and its publics. Public relation is a management activity, planned effort to shape and affect the attitudes and behaviour of the public. These activities are an attempt to earn the understanding and the goodwill of the organisation's customers, employees, and resellers, as well as government officials, and others. Public relation as a marketing function is a natural extension of the marketing concept, which says essentially that every decision in the organisation should be made on the basis of its positive impact on customers. In order to create good public relations, that philosophy is extended to include the organisation's larger public, not just its customers. Good public relation, like all marketing activity, puts the interest of the public first in matters relating to the conduct of the organisation and its businesses (Markin, 1982).

Public relations help an organisation and its public adapt mutually to each other. The PR functions can take many forms in different organisation including public information, investor relations, public affairs, corporate communications, employee's relations, marketing or product publicity, consumer services and relations. Basic to all public relation, however is communications. PR at its best does not only tell an organisation's story to its publics, but also help shape the organisation and the way it performs. Through research, measurement and evaluation, PR professional determine the concerns and expectations of the organisations public and explain them to management. Responsible and effective PR programmes are based on the understanding and support of its publics. Generally, public relations as an important mass promotion technique is aimed at building good relations with the company's various publics, building favourable publicity, obtaining favourable publicity, building up good corporate image and reducing the effects of unfavourable rumours, stories and events. Well-organised, efficient and effectively planned PR programmes are now seen as essential to the success and even existence of modern businesses and organisations.

THE PUBLICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Publics are those people, internally and externally, with whom an organisation communicates (Luick and Ziegler 1968). In other words, it refers to the various groups with which a focus organisation interacts. A public is any group that has an actual or potential interest in or impact on a company's ability to achieve its objective (Kotler, 2003). Smith, (1994) sees the organisation's public as the range of different groups on which an organisation depends. Almost every organisation, whether public or private, depends on customers or supporters and needs to communicate with them on a regular basis. These customers or supporters are the publics. Each organisation has its own special publics with whom it has to communicate internally and externally. Although the publics of one organisation may differ from one to another, it is possible to identify ten publics from which other publics may be derived. These ten basic publics are the community, potential employees, employees, suppliers of services and material. The rest are investors, consumers, trade unions, the media, opinion leaders and Government bodies.

Objectives of public relations

Public relations can achieve different objectives. First, it can help to foster prestige and reputation that can help the company to sell more products, attract and keep customers, good employees and promote favourable community and government relationships. Public relations can also be used to promote products and services. It can be used to handle social and environmental issues to the mutual benefit of all parties concerned. Public

relations can help develop goodwill of consumers, employees, suppliers and distributors. It can be used to influence the opinions of public officials and politicians so that they feel that the organisation operates in the interest of the general public. In addition to the above, public relations can be used to handle unfavourable publicity by responding quickly, accurately and effectively to negative publicity of an organisation.

Apart from the above, PR can have the objective of maintaining and improving brand recognition, acceptance, maintaining vitality and to improve market share. Another objective the public relations is to educate and inform the public in order to create and increase knowledge and understanding about the organisation and its operations. By using this education, PR is able to achieve a change in attitude relating to apathy to interest, hostility to acceptance, ignorance of knowledge and prejudice to acceptance (Cron and Kerin 1987). Others include creation of competitive differences, improve promotional efficiency and to reach new areas or segments of the population. Public relations can have the objective of attracting and keeping employees. It does so by creating and maintaining respectability in the eyes of the public so that the best employees are attracted to work for the company or the organisation. PR can help build awareness, credibility and hold down promotion cost because PR cost less than direct-mail and media advertising (Kotler, 2003).

The qualities of a good PR agent

Some organisations employ their own public relation officers to deal with the media, provide information in the form of handouts and to represent their organisation at press conferences. Others use PR agencies to fulfil these functions. It is to be noted that PR does not involve paid advertising, which is a separate activity. While an advertising agent will plan and advertise campaign, charging a percentage of the money spent, PR agencies charge a flat fee plus expenses will seek to promote their principal by persuading news papers to feature them in articles, TV and radio personalities to interview them or otherwise feature them in their programmes.

In order to be effective, a PR agency should possess certain qualities to be efficient. Some of these qualities include (I) ability to communicate information clearly; (ii) ability to get on with all kinds of people; (iii) ability to organise relevant materials; (IV) ability to integrate personality both in professional and private life; (v) ability to be creative and imaginative; and (VI) ability to find out and have access to relevant materials and information.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The range of public relations methods and techniques available to an organisation are varied and immense. Subject to the objectives served in the PR campaign, its scale and target audience, a number of methods and

techniques can be used. Different organisations use different permutations in order to communicate effectively with public. This section provides the outline of the more commonly used methods and techniques.

Publicity

Baverstock (2002) defines publicity simply as making public: keeping the name of the product, services or what ever is being promoted in the minds of the public. Being a major component of public relations, publicity is also seen as the communication about a product, service or organisation by placing information about it in the media without paying for the time or space directly (Simkin, et al., 2001). Jobber, (2001) looks at publicity as a communication in news story form about an organisation, its products or both that is transmitted through a mass medium at no charge although the publicity activities will incur production and personal cost.

Among the key roles that publicity department play are to respond to request from the media, supply the media with information on events and occurrences relevant to the organisation and to stimulate the media to carry the information and viewpoint of the organisation concerned across its target audiences. The relative advantages of publicity include greater credibility and leadership, more information content, cost benefit, speed and flexibility as well as its potential impact. The main demerits of publicity have been the uncertainty of media take-up and potential message distortion, lack of repetition and time control. For maximum benefits, organisation should create and maintain systematic continuous publicity programmes. A single individual or department within the organisation or from its advertising department agency or PR consultancy should be responsible for managing these programmes.

Media relations

Media relations involve PR practitioners taking news about the organisation to editors, taking editors to the news, creating relevant news stories and managing the news. These personal contacts with editors help to build good relationships with the media, which undoubtedly benefit the organisation greatly. Not only that, there is a regular supply of news items to these editors as part of a deliberate, plan and sustainable publicity effort.

Press conference

Press conferences are used when a major event has occurred and where a press release cannot convey the appropriate tone or detail required by the organisation. Politicians mainly use press conferences, but organisations in crisis can find the use of this form of communication very helpful. Editors, journalists and feature writers are mostly invited to such events. Because press conferences do give opportunity for two- way exchange through

questions and answers between the individuals and organisations concerned as well as the media, matters of particular interest are explained thoroughly.

News releases

A news release is an item circulated to the media in the hope of getting it placed in the publication. It is the mainstay of publicity and if published, can be of considerable value as editorial matter is seen and read by more people even than advertising in the same magazine or newspaper (Baverstock, 2002). Through news releases, organisations are able to make products, services and related activities known to the public. This eventually helps achieve the aim of generating interest in organisation's activities. These are newsworthy programmes written by the PR department of an organisation detailing its products or services and other activities for immediate publication or airing by print, broadcast media or distribution via the Internet site. As inexpensive as they are, these materials provide the organisation with tremendous access to many audiences and target groups.

EXTERNAL PUBLICATION

This relates to educational publicity materials produced for the use of the organisation. These external publications include annual reports, leaflets, audio-visual presentations and many other materials that could be successfully placed to support the organisation's objectives. These carefully planned and prepared materials provide different less usual ways of reaching the public and the consumers.

Managed events

Managed events are special programmes organised by a focus organisation to reach its chosen audience directly. These events include conferences, displays, lectures, shopping centre events, open days, public visit to facilitate contacts, seminars etc. It could be used to generate interest, attention and sales of organisation's products and services.

Sponsorships

These are activities that contribute to the life of the local community. Sponsorship may be more than patronage, altruism or benefaction. It can indeed help others while simultaneously achieving specific defined communication objectives. Some sponsors see sponsorship as a form of enlightened self-interest, where a worthy activity is supported with cash and consideration in return for satisfying specific marketing or corporate objectives (Smith and Taylor 2004). Sponsoring local fun runs and children's play areas, making contributions to local community centres and the disabled are typical sponsorship activities. Through these activities, the organisations attempt to become more involved with the local community as good

employers and good members of the community. This helps to develop good will and awareness in the community.

Lobbying

The representation of certain organisations or industries within government is an important form of public relations work. While legislation is being prepared, lobbyists provide a flow of information to their organisations to keep them informed about events. While doing so, they also ensure that the views of the organisation are heard in order that legislations can be shaped appropriately, limiting any potential damage that new legislation might bring. Lobbyists seek to persuade and negotiate with its stakeholders in government on matters of opportunity and or threat.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS

So many crises have been endured in the last decade or so that management has recognised the desperate need to be organised to handle calamities especially regarding media relations. A well-earned reputation can vanish in seconds and with the satellite TV and services like those of Cable News, a tragedy can be brought into millions of home worldwide within seconds. Many of these disasters have been the result of human beings being unable to cope with the demands or fault on high technology as in the case of the British Midland air crash on the M1. It should be noted that every crisis is of a major proportion and the variety of the calamities is enormous so that no organisation can afford to take chances. Crises can occur over strikes, fire accidents, take over bids, new legislations, scandals, death and resignations, the effects of recession and countless other causes.

There is no organisation that is risk free. Crisis management public relations have therefore become very important in modern companies and organisations. What therefore is crisis management PR? Jefkins (1998) defines crisis management PR as the organisation of a small crisis management team which has manual instruction and conducts rehearsals in readiness to deal with any crisis should one occur, especially in handling the media.

Planning for crisis

A crisis management plan is necessary because news and information is travelling faster than before. Companies must be able to quickly answer questions and allegations about looming crisis (Fifield, 1998). There are more examples of companies and organisations getting crisis management wrong than doing it right. When crisis strikes, most companies and organisations are unprepared and poorly handle the situation. Organisations might try stonewalling, toughing it out or pretending the crisis will pass, but they only make the situation worse. Organisations who waste valuable time at the

beginning of a crisis stonewalling can expect to see a loss in revenue and plummeting stock prices.

When crisis strikes, an organisation's most important asset, reputation is at stake. It is useless to conceal the truth from the public because eventually, someone will blow the whistle. Crisis management is therefore vital for every organisation. Step by step tactical plans are therefore needed in anticipation of crises should one occur. Clark (1997) suggests some tactical plans for managing crisis. Organisations must develop a plan that begins with a corporate statement. The statement should outline the organisation's crisis management approaches that should have decision based. Again, organisations should try to build a strong reputation, as organisations will be able to survive a crisis better if they have a good reputation. Besides, organisations should create a crisis management team that can deal with crisis should one occur, establish crisis centre and create a network alert system. A network alerts system will help the organisation stops a crisis before it hits the public.

Crisis management has three sequential objectives. The first is to prevent a crisis. If a crisis does arise, then the crisis management team must begin by answering two questions: what is the crisis, and how did it start? The second objective of crisis management is to modify the negative effects on the company's products or services. Thirdly, ensure that the actions taken by the organisation provide a platform for the company's future. It is very important for organisations to note the need to respond immediately should crisis occur. The media does not care about the corporate interest of any organisation, as they will break the story as the crises unfold. Public relations staff must therefore be sensitive to journalists needs for information and provides ground for two-way communication between journalists and the organisation should it become necessary.

THE MAIN ISSUES

One will not be far from right to say that the role of public relations in achieving competitive advantage in organisations is immersed. It helps to establish a favourable links through which organisations and businesses get to their stakeholders. There is clear evidence that companies with a more positive reputation appear to project their core mission and identity in a more systematic and consistent fashion than companies with lower reputation. These organisations try to impart significantly more information, not only about their products, but also about a range of issues relating to their operations. Good corporate reputation is seen as a vital driver of successful organisational relationships with clients, which can have a significant impact on business performance of an organisation. Good corporate image can be seen as an important asset that generates goodwill and as such must be maintained. This is true because corporate image is very fragile and

extremely difficult to repair. It can be said with certainty that businesses and organisations known for being extraordinary and having well managed reputation will continue to gain the confidence of consumers and eventually achieve competitive advantage. Public relation as a tool in achieving organisation's objectives needs to be exploited by management in order to help achieve competitive advantage also.

CONCLUSION

The need for modern companies and organisations to take strategic stand on public relations cannot be overemphasised. This is due to the fact that organisation's reputation and even continuous existence can depend to a large extent on the degree to which it's targeted public support its goals and policies. An organisation that succeeds without effective PR can be linked to a salesman, a politician, a lawyer or any other professional persuader succeeding without a personality. The personality of the organisation, demonstrated through the attitudes it adopts, is a critical factor in its success or failure. It can be more important than the price of the products it offers or in the case of charity the worthiness of its cause. The creation of this personality is what PR is about. The corporate personality is what the organisation is, reflects what it believes in, and determines where it is heading, But above all, the personality agreed by the management is the central factor in building corporate reputation and perhaps the most satisfactory practical definition of PR is that it is the management of corporate reputation (Haywood 1990). Understanding how public relations builds and enhances a good image is a right strategic approach in achieving competitive advantage through differentiation in modern businesses and organisations. Thus, PR is a marketing strategy that can yield tremendous results if implemented correctly.

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