

# SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION AND PR MANAGEMENT WITHIN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

**Assistant Prof. Dr. Cosmin IRIMIEȘ,  
Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca**

## *Abstract*

The article presents a very brief description of what public relations in general and what making public relations in a state institution means. We all agree that besides regulations, beliefs and personal or social values, public institutions are determining for our lives. Unfortunately domestic public institutions lack positive reputation in collective perception and one of the most important reasons is the improper communication. This is why public managers need to know at least basic things about public relations, crisis communication, organizational culture and strategic planning.

**Keywords: public relations, communication, strategy, management, crisis, organizational culture**

The title of the present research, „Successful Communication and PR Management within Public Institutions”, may seem simple, but it covers a wide area with extremely numerous aspects. Some may consider it too general a subject to be studied in a single research paper.

Unfortunately most domestic public institutions lack positive reputation in collective perception. Why is that? Some of the causes may be the excessive bureaucracy or the out-of-date legislation, but the most important reason is the improper communication between citizens and the institutions meant to represent them. This causes disappointment, frustration, disrespect, lack of trust and so on.

For instance, we all know that the success of a governmental program depends not only on specific actions performed by the executive body, but also on the way the institution succeeds in communicating with the receptors of its actions. A good but little known or explained action turns into inefficient by being applied wrong.

This is why the meaning, rules and tools of efficient public relations and communication process must be perfectly known and applied by PR specialists in public institutions, who must also master values and procedures, the organizational culture and so on.

Thus, the essential role of public relations is to increase the mutual trust between an organization (especially a public institution) and its public. The most important means of action within the field of public relations is the free, symmetric and bilateral change of information.

Central public institutions must get closer to the citizens and must have permanent contact with them. As a consequence, public administration must be wide open to communication, to dialogue. It must respect and take into consideration the citizen's opinions and to satisfy his/her requests “as soon and as well as possible” and to have specialized personnel for each field of activity. Only this way the strengthening of democracy at local

level becomes possible and can allow the practice of civil rights, the fulfillment of duties by the citizens, as well as the achievement of general interest.

Most of the time people talk about public relations without knowing or understanding the exact meaning of the term. For the nowadays society public relations are essential as they open the way to communication and human understanding. This activity implies, besides a strong professional experience and dedication, research and analysis, strategic design, programming, communications and feedback from the public it addresses to.

Basic, PR specialists work on two different and very well defined levels: client advisors and multiple task clerks/ civil servants.

The person working in this field must be first of all extremely flexible, adaptable, he/she must have experience in high level oral and written communication, he/she must have the ability to design projects, events and campaigns, to take care of the public image, to manage the relationship with the media, to advise, to evaluate situations, to seize and analyze problems, to react to different situations and to take immediate and sometimes radical decisions.

The public relations activity of any organization should be conducted according to a very clear strategy that should meet specific objectives. The organization must, thus, establish first the objectives, then design a strategy to establish both the timeline and the means to achieve the former established objectives. Starting from here, the PR and communication activity must definitely take two levels: internal and external<sup>1</sup> and the PR specialist must be a perfect communicator both to the external public of the institution / organization, and to the internal one, so as the latter itself to turn into a PR agent.

According to a classical definition<sup>2</sup> given by the International Association of Public Relations, PR are „a deliberate, planned effort, are both the art and the science of analyzing trends, of anticipating effects, of counseling the management of the organizational structure and of applying specific action plans, that serve both the interests of the institutions and the public interest”.

So, we have some key-words to define the concept of public relations:

- Deliberate – public relations activity is deliberate and designed to influence public perception, to achieve agreement and appreciation, to offer information and to receive feedback;
- Planned – public relations activity is well organized: solutions are looked for and found, logistic is well planned, everything goes on as scheduled, based on research and systematic analysis;
- Achievement – efficient public relations activity is based on a person’s or organization’s strategy and achievements. The more public oriented these achievements are, the higher the efficiency is;
- Bidirectional communication – public relations activity implies not only broadcasting information, but also receiving feedback from the public;

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<sup>1</sup> Marușca, L., *Locul și rolul relațiilor publice în cadrul reprezentanțelor diplomatice*, Revista Transilvană de Administrație Publică, nr. 1(19) / 2007, Ed. Accent, Cluj-Napoca, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Cutlip, Scott, M., Center, Allen, H., Broom, Glen, M., *Effective Public Relations*, Editura Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2001

- Management – we can talk about a good management of an organization only when the public relations activity is seen and used as a natural part of the decision making process.

An essential transformation of the perception of the public relations activity has been seen during the last 10 years. We are talking here not only about conceptual changes, but also about changes regarding the new competences of the PR specialists.

J.E. Grunig and T. Hunt described in „*Managing Public Relations*”<sup>3</sup> (1984) the evolution of the public relations. According to their research, public relations have evolved from propaganda to public information, from persuasion to mutual understanding. Public relations, seen as an activity performed for a few decades by organizations, institutions and political parties, imply cultivating personal contacts, in a constant and systematic way, with the media, with authority representatives, with formal and informal group leaders in order to achieve appraisal and support from present or future stakeholders. This definition is usually found in books and manuals of communications and public relations.

Rex F. Harlow, one of the most famous specialists in public relations coordinated in 1975 a comprehensive research on the concepts that define public relations. In „*Building a Public Relations Definition*”<sup>4</sup> one can find a set of conclusions of his research, including one regarding the concept of public relations. According to this, public relations represent the distinctive managerial task that establishes and maintains mutual communicational limits, mutual agreement and acceptance and the cooperation between an organization and its public. Public relations also imply problem solving management, helping managers to be informed on public perception, to respond to public necessities and requests and to anticipate the trends of its environment. Public relations are a set of specific knowledge, skills and methods, representing the managerial task that deals with interaction among organizations and public.

Public relations activity is performed by specialists that aim to serve public interest always being conscious of the great influence public opinion has on the decision-making process. Besides their role as counselors for the members of the organization regarding internal and/or external communication, PR specialists aim to create and maintain a positive image of the organization and when the situation requires it they suggest a change in the organization’s attitude according to its social responsibilities and needs.

International Public Relations Association also says that „public relations are a permanent and organized management activity through which an organization aims to achieve and maintain understanding, apprehension and support from actual or potential stakeholders”.

To summarize, public relations mean: "understanding, apprehension and support" and are equally sustained by the members and by the public of any organization.

So far, nothing wrong. We agree with every single theory. After a more thorough and comprehensive analysis we find them a little overrated though and we feel the need for a new approach.

Many well known specialists, both American and European, are nowadays trying to establish a new approach of the concept of public relations. It is a natural tendency taking into account the growth that this broad field has lately achieved. One can see a growing

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<sup>3</sup> Grunig, J., Hunt, T., *Managing public relations*, Ed. Rinehart & Winston, New-York, 1984

<sup>4</sup> Harlow, R., *Building a Public Relations Definition*, Public Relations Review, nr. 2, 1976

interdependence of the public relations activity with the social, economic cultural close environment. One cannot talk about a real public relations activity without an economic or social adequate support or without a healthy social and economic foundation. Coming back to the recent approaches of the public relations activity<sup>5</sup> and its evolution we can try to structure it and to see that all changes have taken place on 3 distinctive levels:

- a) At theoretical and conceptual level, where public relations activity and communication are defined according to economic and organizational theory;
- b) Regarding the role of public relations and of communication specialists that recently play a strategic and operational role within their organizations;
- c) At the level of abilities and skills, either managerial or professional, where PR specialists become irreplaceable just like their professional development.

At theoretical and conceptual level we can discuss about all these changes taking into account the following aspects/benchmarks:

- a) They affect the importance of developing the relationships with different partners/ clients/ stakeholders; the importance of these relationships is valued and sustained by organizational and economic theories, by marketing and management; they are structural components of organizations, and the organization is defined as a network of relationships that work for defining and achieving mutual obligations;
- b) They progressively affect the connections of communication with ethical solid values, meaning that we are talking about corporate social responsibility; in order for a communication to be successful, it always appeals to ethical values. Several studies (Deal&Kenedy, Peters&Waterman) show that the success of any organization is tightly connected to the involvement and the attachment of all members to its culture and values, and communication plays a very important, even determining role in this aspect;
- c) They affect the output and results of the process of communication that gives great importance to maintaining and strengthening the organization's reputation. The creation of organizational image does not represent the center of the system anymore, its place having already been taken by the process of strengthening the reputation. According to the general definition given by most specialists, image is the outer form of objects visually perceived. Meanwhile, reputation can be analyzed in terms regarding ethics and quality of actions. The Image is based on external, superficial aspects, while the reputation is based on much more consistent and profound elements.

The image can influence one person's or community's decision<sup>6</sup>, meaning that the image of an organization must be regarded and managed just like any other real estate. There are situations when the image of an organization is more valuable than the whole heritage of that specific company/ organization. We can say that the image is the perception of attitudes, opinions or biases regarding one person or one community or the public perception on the specific organization.

Beyond these theoretical approaches, the image of an organization can be achieved only by applying a specific policy depending, on one hand, on the decision making system of

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<sup>5</sup> Invernizzi, E., *Manuale di relazioni pubbliche – Le tecniche e i servizi di base*, Mc. Graw-Hill, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Bocoș, Cornelia, *Rolul imaginii asupra mentalității colective*, revista „Societate și Cultură”, nr. 11, 1992

the organization's leader and, on the other hand, on the activity performed by employees. This policy can be put into practice by a set of well-planned actions and public relations activities whose role is to create, change or strengthen the image of an organization:

- Developing a highly competitive management at organizational level – in terms of PR, this means “making good things and strongly assess it”;
- Developing a strategy whose main aim is to gain the trust, apprehension and support of the organization's own employees – it is necessary that all employees consider themselves important to the overall activity of the organization and take on its philosophy;
- Organizing campaigns in order to promote the organization's products, actions and activity – in order to have public credibility, the organization has to let the public opinion know that its goods/ services/ activities are of high quality, extremely important and unquestionably indispensable;
- Hiring a well trained personnel and firing the employees that harm the organization – the personnel of any organization plays an essential role promoting the image of an the organization;
- Establishing a very good relationship with the media – any company/ organization that aims to be well known/ famous has to determine the media to go along its strategy and actions.

The image of an organization is the sum of its different images as M.H. Westphalen<sup>7</sup> used to say. An image, good or bad, evolves. It changes according to the public.

Identifying the differences of mentality existing within an institution is a preliminary stage in all speeches and an essential stage in the process of elaborating any PR and communication strategy. In order for this to be done properly, one must take three compulsory steps:

- a) Listing – a typology of potential stakeholders (personnel, clients, producers, sales persons, stockholders, competition, public administration, politicians, the public, the media)
- b) Labeling – each of the targeted public sector is analyzed according to: features (number of persons, age, sex, geographical positioning, studies etc.), expectations (interest poles, sources of disappointment, concerns), relations (broadcasting systems – media, specialized organizations, unions, professional association -, contact opportunities {cocktails, expositions, etc.}). Analytique documents are created and continuously updated.
- c) Hierarchy – the public of the organization is categorized and divided, main and secondary targets are established. This action is determined by each one's choice of communication: the message, the techniques of communication (press campaigns, donations, reunions etc.) and budgetary allocations.

Within any organization one may face 3 different types of image: the real (objective) image, the image gained (subjective image – the public perception of the organization) and the desired, pursued image (the way the organization/ institution should be seen).

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<sup>7</sup> Westphalen, M. H., *Le Communicator, Le guide de la communication d'entreprise*, Dunod, Paris, 2002

Former studies used to state that any communication and PR strategy should respect 3 principles in order to be successful:

- authenticity – it must be based on a real and authentic concept, linked to the institution and to its outcomes;
- adaptability – the concept must be continuously adaptable, energetic and strong;
- seduction – the public doesn't expect only declarations, it wants to be charmed;

All these aspects were presented to us and sustained at the beginning of this century. Some of these premises are not adequate anymore though. They don't match present reality and are not able to solve crisis situations for example. This means we need a new dimension and a new approach of the public relations activity. We need to view this area in a different way than we usually did until nowadays and we need to link it to the economic, social, cultural reality.

As a preliminary conclusion, we can assess that image represents more an external than interior dimension; a structure one can build on persuasive and propagandistic constructions, strategies that present the reality in a positive manner even if the reality were different.

As a consequence, we need to gradually abandon the concept of "image" or that of "image construction" and to replace it with the concept of "reputation".

It is true that reputation takes time and can be lost in a moment, once damaged it is hard to repair, but this is exactly where public relations, public campaigns and publicity play a major role. Actually, reputation is based on the organization's behavior and actions and also on its real history.

The role of public relations and communication specialists is essential in establishing and strengthening the reputation of an institution / organization.

A relation cannot get strong and consolidated with the sole help of communication and PR campaigns, unless it is based on real things also. In Italy for instance, in 1994, 33% of the companies/ organizations had at least one employee responsible for communication and public relations. The percentage grew up to 93% in 2004 when around 55% of big corporations (public or private) had a whole department of Public Relations<sup>8</sup>. By using the example of Italy instead of that of the USA or Great Britain, countries with long lasting tradition in public relation, I tried to point out the acceptance of the importance of public relations in a European country that cannot be in any way seen as a promoter of public relations.

Until now, PR departments of different organizations / institutions usually performed basic PR activities, especially those concerning the managing the relation with the media, organizing events and, in some cases, public affairs. Lately, the public relations activity has gained new approaches and is defined as highly specialized services: crisis communication, corporate social responsibility communication, financial communication (usually seen as part

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<sup>8</sup> Beard, Mike, *Running a Public Relations Department*, The Institute of PR, Kogan Page US, 2006

of the marketing and/ or commerce departments), internal communication (seen as part of the human resources department)<sup>9</sup>.

One can easily notice the increasing role, functions and specialization of communication and public relations activity in a way that we witness qualitative and quantitative transformations, an impressive growth of the number and responsibility of people working in the field of public relations. Together with this growth, one can notice new requirements of strategic and organizational leadership.

A Public Relations Department or structure within a public organization should perform/ offer general and specific services. There are situations when the Public Relations Department has different departments/ ramifications formally situated outside or it integrated within other structures or departments: for instance, within the financial department, within the marketing or human resources department. As a consequence, we can talk about a change of role with regard to communication and public relations specialists. We can talk about new competences, new skills and knowledge and we can talk about taking on new roles.

Again in Italy of the year 2000 a law concerning the relationship between public institutions and the public opinion was promoted, a specific Office for Public Relations being established. More than that, 3 main roles of communication specialists within specific departments of public relations and communication are very well established: the concept of spokesperson, the Office of Public Relations and the Press Bureau.

The recent tendencies point out 4 main roles of the public relations specialist:

1. technique and specialized role: this person performs specific traditional activities of public relations and communication: managing the relationship with the media, organizing events, finding donors and collecting donations, all of these getting more and more complex and important. Besides all these, there are nowadays some activities highly specialized: crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, financial communication and internal communication.

2. strategic role – this person is deeply involved in defining, designing and elaborating the development strategy of the organization or institution, a strategy that includes, among others, elements linked to communication and public relation: communication (listening) activities oriented to the clients or the public; analysis of values, expectations and opinions expressed by stakeholders, each of these bearing as final purpose the gain of success.

3. advisory and educational role – this person gives specialized advice both to his/ her own staff and to the other employees of the organization or institution;

4. managing role – this person coordinates the communication and public relations activity with the help of other departments too: the audit and control department, planning instruments, monitoring structures.

As a conclusion, we can say with no fear of being wrong that we witness a growth in importance of the activity of public relation, as well as an achievement of new skills and abilities by the specialist in communication and public relations.

We also witness the change and expansion of the role and professional skills and abilities of the specialists in public relations.

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<sup>9</sup> Invernizzi, E., *Manuale di relazioni pubbliche – Le tecniche e i servizi di base*, Mc. Graw-Hill, 2005

In a very synthetic way we can stress out that the specialist in communication and public relations is capable of influencing through his/ her skills and his/ her strategic thinking role the strategy, behaviors and actions of the institution/ organization they represent.

The PR and communication specialist is capable, through his/ her managerial, consultative and educational role, of managing the complex network of connections within and outside the institution/ organization and of broadcasting key messages.

The PR and communication specialist is capable, through his/ her technical and specialized role, of strengthening and give value to the key messages of the organization/ institution.

The PR specialist must use all his work and skills to strengthening and improving the reputation of the institution/ organization he/ she works for.

As I have already stated, public relations have been usually perceived as propaganda, persuasion, mutual understanding and apprehension, information broadcast. Nowadays specialists try to formulate two new concepts<sup>10</sup>:

1. The concept of „core PR” – traditional public relations activity, made up of methods and techniques of influencing the audience or the public opinion and based more on external communication.
2. The concept of „extended PR” – this concept includes all „core PR” activities + internal communication + financial communication + marketing communication.
3. The concept of „corporate communication” – generally used in big private corporations (especially by economists).

As an overall conclusion:

The PR activity consists of:

- Basic, general services + specific and specialized activities/ services + managerial activity.
- Basic, general services: the relationship with the media + event organizing;
- Specific and specialized services: public affair + crisis communication + financial communication + corporate social responsibility communication + internal communication;
- Managerial activity: represents the whole package of services used both for the design and management of the public relations activity and for the evaluation and further usage of outcomes and results.

Thus, communication must be strategic and carefully designed. Organizing the communication activity within a public institution/ organization must be a well structured and planned activity resulted from the organization's/ institution's overall policy, according to the managerial strategy.

The main task/ role of the public relations must be that of teaching organizations/ institutions how to behave, how to interact as this is precisely the outcome planned for any activity of public communication.

Communication represents the main connection, the main link between people or may show off the experience, skills and knowledge. The capacity of an individual or a group to interact with and to relate to other similar or different groups by using communication

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<sup>10</sup> Invernizzi, E., *Manuale di relazioni pubbliche – Le tecniche e i servizi di base*, Mc. Graw-Hill, 2005



processes and actions is natural born a talent of the whole human nature of human species. Communication is, thus, the process that allows people, institutions, people and institutions to connect, interconnect and interact with each other, to establish linkages similar to invisible ridges of information. It is hard to define and weigh the power of communication and of spoken and written words as this process has always been as important as the air we breathe.

Human communication may be verbal, non-verbal, interpersonal or intrapersonal. The interpersonal communication may be a direct or indirect process when it is performed with the help of a certain technical means (media, phone, tv. etc) in this situation the communication helped by a single technical means (telephone, internet) is very different from the public (mass) communication (where many other institutions and persons specialized in communication come along with the technical support).

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