

REITERATING THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: A SYNOPTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper explicates public relations by different scholars, as well as highlights the historical background of public relations. The study demonstrates that public relations are the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. Additionally, it is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public. This paper also reveals counselling, research media relations, publicity employee/member relations as some of the components of public relations. Historically, public relations evolved from the basic need to build and improve human relationships which existed immediately God created Adam and Eve.

Keywords: Public relations; management function; relationship; organization; planned and sustained efforts; history of public relations.

Introduction and background

Cutlip et al. (1994) defines public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends”. This definition clearly underlines the fact that public relations are a two-way process between an organization and its identified publics that is meant to benefit both parties. In other words, mutual understanding requires by definition, two-way communication. Additionally, the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) defines public relations as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics” (Ajala, 1993).

This definition suggests that public relation is not a haphazard endeavour. It is a process that is deliberately planned to achieve a given goal or objective, which is mutual understanding between an organization and its publics and must be planned. “*Sustained effort*” means that a process does not end until it has achieved its objectives. This means that as a public relations officer, you must always endeavour to carry out plans to a logical end, despite any difficulties you may encounter in the process. Another definition of public relations is given by a Frank Jefkins British author: who says that “public relations consist of all forms of planned communication both inward and outward between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving objectives concerning mutual understanding”. In this definition “inward and outward communication” consists of a two-way communication that involves the organization and its internal and external publics. Harlow (1981) provides an excellent and exhaustive definition of public relations as “a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics, involves the management of problems or issues, helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public, defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest, helps the management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools. From these various definitions, the key and important terms for formulating a good public relation are:

Deliberate

A public relations event or action is intentional (Black, 1989). It is designed to influence or gain, understanding as well as providing information so as to gain feedback or reaction from the people or groups affected by the activity. The public needs information to be carried long in what the organization is doing, particularly as it concerns their interest. For instance a major market leader must create good image and reputation which public relation information provides.

Planned

Public relations activities are organized in a systematic sequence, which is expected to culminate in solutions to identified problems. The problem must be analyzed by systematic research. You should note that effective public relations is planned in advance it is proactive and not reactive.

Process

Public relations is a process. Effective public relations must be viewed as continuing process of a series of organized actions, activities, changes or functions expected to bring about a successful end result. On the other hand, public relations is not a one-time affair, engaged only occasionally as a fire brigade method or remedial action. You should note that preventive public relations is a continuous process of discovering problems or opportunities, solving the problems when they are small instead of when they are full blown.

Effective public relations are not communicating promises alone.

It is based on the practices, performances, good deeds and past record of the organization. No amount of good public relations will generate acceptance or patronage for an organization with bad image or that is not responsive to public interest. According to Ogunsanya, (1991) "the best public relations campaign in the world can't build trust while reality is destroying it. In other words, reality limits what public relations can accomplish.

Mutual interest

Public relations should be mutually beneficial to the organization as well as the publics. The primary reason for establishing any public relations activity should be to serve the public interest and not benefit the organization. Good public relations align the interests of the organization with the desires and interests of the public.

PR and Advertising

While advertising makes the product known, PR is to build an image for the products. PR can be used in promoting the product. Nobody will buy a bad product twice and part of making the product good and acceptable is the work of the public relations officer. Advertising is basically commercial; advertising is paid for communicating to get publicity for the product or services. PR although also paid for, but with little investment in order to get publicity. Advertising therefore is a marketing tool and a means of achieving communication. Advertising helps to introduce a new product, to sustain an established product and to create flow of traffic for a retail outlet, to secure sales leads, demarcate a service and to promote a public cause. A public relations professional uses advertising for corporate institutional purpose. He uses the expertise of the advertising agency for copy writing purposes and for media placement.

PR and Propaganda

When public relations is misused, people equate it with propaganda. One of the most common misconceptions is to think that public relations, means propaganda, the manipulation of people's minds by shady character (the Hidden Persuaders). PR and propaganda are widely different while PR's objective is to achieve consent true dialogue, complete openness, understanding and collection of information through ethical fact finding methods respected worldwide, the objective of propaganda is to build a movement, direct information to a people already brainwashed, use and accept monologue, obscure facts or gives half-truths; promote a following whether or not the people understand the issue at stake. Propagandists obtain information through questionable means.

Components of Public Relations

Public relations have divergent parts. According to the Public Relations Society of America as documented in (Daramola, 2003) the components of public relations include the following:

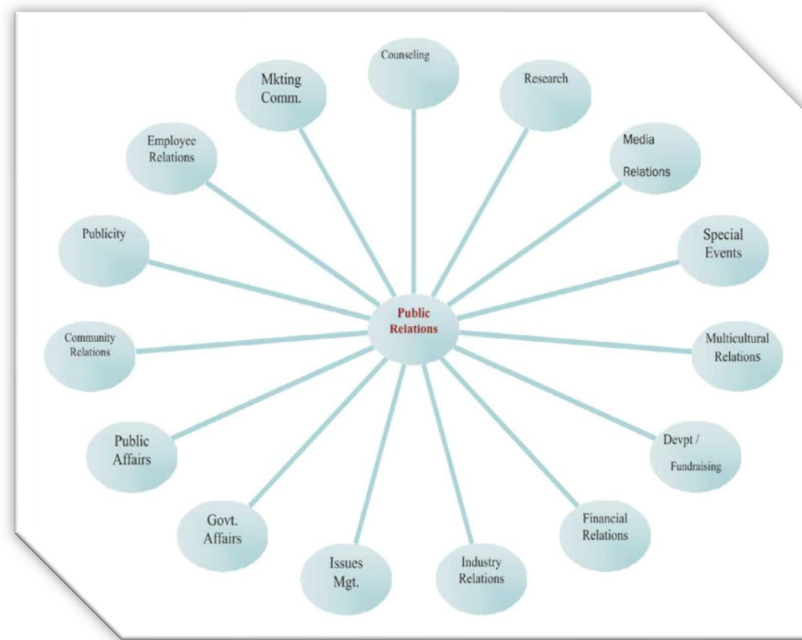


Figure 1: Components of public relations: Adapted from Public Relations Society of America

Counselling

Advising organizations about how to understand and mobilize the public as well as interpret themselves. This will reduce criticisms and hostility from the press and pressure groups in society.

Research

Determining attitudes and behaviours of publics through research in order to plan public relations strategies. Such research can be used to (1) generate mutual understanding or (2) influence and persuade publics.

Media Relations

Working with the mass media in seeking publicity or responding to their interest in the organisation. This involves working with the members of the press to maximize the free publicity that can be obtained for a newsworthy corporate event so as to create public knowledge and understanding and respond to press enquiries as it relates to their organization

Publicity

Disseminating planned messages through selected media to further the organisation's interest.

Employee/Member Relations

Building better relationships between employees and management, especially in complex organizations where the lines of communication between management and workers become stressful as the workforce of a company expands

Community Relations

Planned activity with a community to maintain an environment that benefits both the organisation and the community.

Public Affairs

Developing effective involvement in public policy and helping an organization adapt to public expectations. The term is also used by government agencies to describe their public relations activities and by many corporations as an umbrella term to describe multiple public relations activities.

Government Relations

Lobbying government agencies such as the legislature and regulatory agency on behalf of the organization.

Issues management

Identifying and addressing issues of public concern that affect the organisation.

Financial Relations

Also known as Investor Relations or Shareholder Relations. It involves creating and maintaining investor confidence and building good relationships with the financial community.

Industry Relations

Relating with other firms in the industry of an organization and with trade associations.

Development/Fund-Raising

Demonstrating the need for and encouraging the public to support an organisation, primarily through financial contributions.

Multicultural Relations/Workplace Diversity

Relating with individuals and groups in various cultural settings.

Special Events

This is used to stimulate interest in a product, person or organization through activities designed to interact with public through staged events.

Marketing Communications

Combination of activities designed to sell a product, service, or idea. These activities may include advertising, collateral materials, publicity, promotion, direct mail, trade shows, and special events.

Misconceptions of public relations

In Nigeria as well as in other parts of the world, the profession of public relations has been subjected to wrong perception of what a public relations person actually does. To make matters worse, some of the practitioners themselves do not have a clear idea of what public relations actually is. This situation has created credibility problems for the profession in general and the practitioners in particular. Investigators (Daramola 2003; Seitel, 2001; Nwosu, 1997) outlined some of the misconceptions of public relations to include:

- Public relations is not about bribery.
- Public relations is based on moral principles and as such it is not 'arranging' pretty ladies for international visitors to government houses or to chief executives of companies, clients, board members, etc. If there is any profession where morality should be held in high regards, it is in public relations because it enhances public confidence in the profession. However, a lot of persons and companies assume that public relations is equivalent to a fine appearance, an attractive face or glamorous front. For this reason, such people and institutions maintain a strict dress code or policy. While a good cover is essential a good book cannot be judged by its cover
- Public relations is not magic, enchantment or paranormal. For this reason all its activities are based on scientifically provable and empirical methods. Public relations is based on high performance, quality performance, quality and credibility in terms of products, service, policies and practice.

- Public relations is not only about organising parties and other social events. However, annual parties such as yearly staging of grand get-togethers, Annual Dealers Dinner, Staff Children, Christmas Fun Fair, Employees New Year or end of year party is another popular method of generating goodwill and friendship among both internal and external publics of an organization. No doubt, public relations do activities of this nature, but not in the sense of making it its only preoccupation.
- Public relations is not about employing pretty ladies lacking in morals and principles to woo men into acting against their wishes.
- **Free Gifts:** Many company executives in Nigeria in particular and around the world in general, believe in projecting their organizations as charitable and benevolent through the giving of free annual gifts such as Christians hampers and Sallah rams. Effective public relations do not begin and end with gifts.
- Public relations is not about lying and selling falsehood about your organization and product (Osuji, 1990). Equally, it is not about denying every statement that does not favour your organization. Public relations is about telling the truth and not prevaricating or what an Israeli government spokesman once described as “Strategic Ambiguity” (neither denying, nor admitting).

Origins of public relations

Public relations evolved from the basic need to build and improve human relationships which existed immediately God created Adam and Eve (Harlow 1981). Public relations are essential to human existence and communal living (Daramola, 2003). Although modern public relations evolved in the 20th century it has ancient roots. In virtually every great society through history, the leaders understood the importance of influencing public opinion through persuasion. Seitel (2001) recalls that archaeologists found a farm bulletin in Iraq that told farmers of 1800 B.C. the latest techniques of harvesting, sowing and irrigating. The aim of the persuasion was that the more food farmers grew, the better the citizenry are and the wealthier the country became. This was planned persuasion to reach a specific public for a particular purpose, in other words, public relations. As Edward Bernays has observed, ‘the three main elements of public relations which are informing people, persuading people and integrating people with people are practically as old as society.

The force of public relations was visible in ancient Rome. This can be deduced from the common phrase, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God). Julius Caesar, one of the greatest of the Roman emperors, is said to be a particularly master in the persuasive technique. When faced with an upcoming battle, Caesar would rally public support through assorted publications and staged events (typical of modern public relations techniques). In ancient Greece, a high premium was placed on communication skills. The best speakers were generally elected to leadership positions. Greek politicians enlisted the aid of sophists (individuals with rhetorical prowess) to help fight verbal wars. This can be likened to the lobbyists of today who attempt to influence legislation through effective communication techniques. Cutlip et al (1994) state that rudimentary elements of public relations appear in descriptions of the king’s spies in India. Apart from espionage the duties of the Spies included keeping the king in touch with public opinion, championing the king in public and spreading rumours favourable to the government. Equally, public relations was used many centuries ago in England where the kings maintained Lords Chancellor as ‘keepers of the king’s conscience’, as there was an acknowledge need for a third party to facilitate communication and adjustment between the government and the people.

The spread of Christianity in the middle ages could be linked to the use of public relations in modern times. Under the leadership of Pope Gregory XV, the Catholic Church established a college of propaganda to help propagate the faith. The committee of cardinals known as Congregation de Propaganda Fide (the congregation for the propagation of faith). The church simply wanted to inform the public about the advantages of Catholicism. This was the origin of propaganda and it has been suggested that the roots of public relations lie in the development of propaganda (Osuji, 1990).

Efforts to communicate with the force of public opinion go back to antiquity, only the tools, degree of specialization breadth of knowledge, and intensity of effort are relatively new. In the words of Cutlip et al. (1994) public relations has existed since the dawn of mankind. From crude methods in primitive society, PR has followed trends in civilization advancement in culture has resulted in more sophisticated method of PR.

Conclusion

This paper explicates public relations by different scholars, as well as highlights the historical background of public relations. The study demonstrates that public relations are the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.

Additionally, it is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public. This paper also reveals counselling, research media relations, publicity employee/member relations as some of the components of public relations. Historically, public relations evolved from the basic need to build and improve human relationships which existed immediately God created Adam and Eve.

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