

Public relations

Introduction

The Institute of Public Relations states that “public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics”, though increasingly recognises the need to nurture reputation. According to Wikipedia, “public relations is the art and science of managing communication between an organisation and its key constituents to build, manage and sustain its positive reputation”. It is the term used to describe the issues and messages communicated directly between an organisation and its stakeholders.

The role of PR is to enhance and build a good reputation, and to prevent or mitigate damage to that reputation. Essentially, the objective from public relations is to influence attitudes and behaviour.

Strategic communication for advocacy

Communication is always important, but advocacy needs a strategy – a public relations strategy – that can attract the attention of the target audiences. Plans should be made for internal communication (within the organisation or network) and external communication (with allies and opponents). The strategy must reflect the people with whom you are communicating, about what, and why. Effective communication can influence behaviour and can positively foster relationships with key publics.¹ Any organisation needs to have strategic communication in which:

- The purpose of all communications is clear – sending a clear message is essential, despite the fact that often issues are complex, if you are to succeed in influencing decision-makers and winning public support;
- Target audiences are known, analysed and identified;
- Timing for the communication is planned, in order not to conflict with other events.

It is important to build and maintain personal and organisational relationships with a wide range of people – policy makers, opinion formers, influencers (such as party activist, journalists, etc). However, you need always to be seen as reliable and credible, so everything you say needs to be backed up with factual evidence. You will not be independent in the sense that you are advocating for the interests of your members but you need to be seen to be independent of other associations and not simply acting at their behest. This will ensure that you are taken seriously.

You won’t have the resources to cover everyone, so prioritise your audiences by considering why they could be helpful to your campaign and how they might be able to push forward the debate or, better still, promote your viewpoint.

Whilst it is the message that should be important, often the messenger is perceived to be at least as important. So using spokespeople who are themselves widely respected can make a difference to whether the audiences listen to your viewpoint.

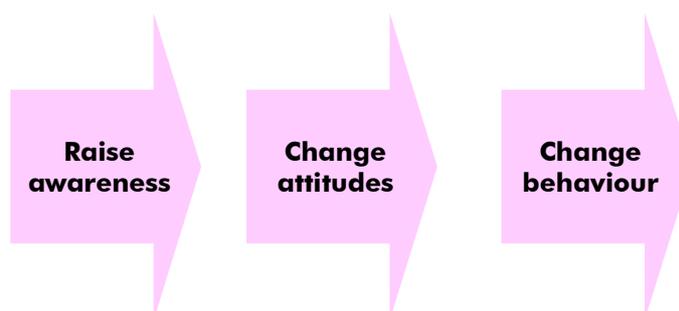
¹ Anne Gregory, “Planning and managing public relations campaigns”, Kogan Page, 2000

You are unlikely to win every battle, so choose them carefully, based on your principles, opportunities and capacity.

The process of public relations

Anne Gregory, in her book on planning and managing public relations campaigns, suggests that public relations objectives should be defined to address one of three levels, though for the purposes of private sector advocacy, it might also be sensible to consider this as a progression. There may be a need to raise awareness, perhaps amongst members or the wider business community, about a specific issue. There will most likely be a need to raise awareness amongst public servants and politicians. There will be a desire to change attitudes amongst key publics so that they become supportive. Most important of all, there is a need to encourage public servants to act.

Figure 1: Steps in public relations



The 'home run', illustrated in figure 2, will help you to think through all the steps required to formulate a PR strategy, to implement a communications plan and then to evaluate the strategy.

The starting point is to be clear about your overall objectives. This will then be reflected in your public relations strategy. If you don't have clear objectives, then it will be very hard to put in place a good communications plan. So, think first about the campaign objectives – say, to persuade the government to change the business licensing requirements. Ask yourself specifically what is it that you want to achieve.

If you have not already done your research and preparation, working on a communications plan will quickly demonstrate that you need good evidence if you are to make a compelling case. Then think about the communication objectives – say, influencing policy makers and regulators so that they understand the gains to the economy that might come from fewer licensing requirements. Think about your different publics. The overall message will need to be the same, but you may need to reach them in different ways. Think too about the message – what is it that you want to say?

What mechanisms will you use to convey your message? Think about the specific PR objectives – say, write a report for the policy makers, seek coverage in the media, build up a coalition for change amongst stakeholders, influence public opinion.

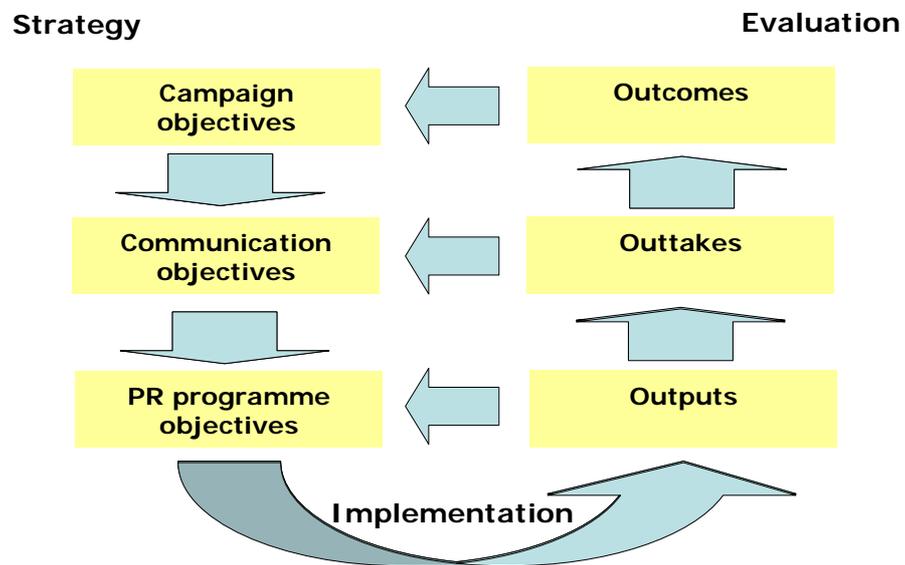
You will need rather more detail than this. And then you have to implement the plan – through stakeholder engagement, media handling, public affairs, etc.

Importantly, you have to monitor and evaluate what happens. Monitoring the outputs – say, one research report, one detailed proposal for changes to policy, 10 press releases issued, 200 column centimetres of newspaper coverage, 20 minutes of radio interviews – is fairly straightforward.

The outcomes give a chance to consider whether you changed opinions. Have you influenced the policy makers and the regulators? Have you changed their attitudes?

Changing attitude is only part of the battle. You want the policy makers and regulators to take action. If they do, then you have achieved your outcomes as well and succeeded with your campaign objectives.

Figure 2: The PR home run



Source: adapted from an original idea by Emma Brazier

How to use PR effectively

The quantity of the organisation's coverage is less important than its quality. Agree on a plan of action, and review progress of the campaign at regular intervals. The following are different avenues for public relations activities. It is important that the PR department or such consultants be always kept informed about the organisation's public actions.

Always stick to the truth – the facts are sure to be uncovered eventually. And if bad news breaks, it is better quickly to admit the reality to everyone – especially yourself.

Also, be cautious that in dealing with PR, your organisation is not perceived to be unduly biased for or against any members through its endorsement of advertising, speeches at product launches, statements to the press, etc.

- Using the print media. Published articles that mention your organisation or products can be more credible to the public than straightforward advertising. Buy and read the newspapers and magazines you want to influence.
- Using radio. The numerous radio programmes at local and national level can be a valuable asset to any public campaign. But first you need to be clear about your message and target audience. Then check on the size and type of audience that the radio will reach. Talk to the most likely radio to get the message across to your target audience.
- Using television. Treat cameras and microphones as if they were friendly people. Accept invitations to appear on TV, so long as you are confident in front of a camera. If you are not, do not easily waste such an opportunity. You could carefully identify another staff or committee member of the organisation who can.
- Talking to journalists. It always pays to cultivate good relations with the press and journalists. When talking to journalists, think before you make a response,

give straightforward answers, and speak with confidence. Remember also, that journalists often need at twist to every story that makes interesting listening or reading. So try to bear that need in mind and give them if you can without stretching the truth, acting out or exaggerating anything. And do always bear in mind that careless statements to the press – with some truthful but juiced up rephrasing by a journalist – is one source of much litigation.

- Using statistics. Readers, TV viewers, and radio listeners are always impressed by statistics. One feature of statistics is that the same data can be presented in a favourable or unfavourable light, depending on how you handle the figures. Always be on the look out in others' data, for opportunity to support your case. Arguments supported by such always sound more credible than when based on your own research or data.
- Monitoring the press and public pronouncements. Others will sometimes create PR opportunities for you, including media coverage that you would not have been able to obtain by yourself. You need to be always ready to take advantage. You should have a specific person within your organisation who monitors the various newspapers and other media for relevant information, including any cases being argued by others either in support or against your organisation's influencing objectives. Whenever such are found, a deliberate decision should be made about how to treat that PR issue - either as an opportunity to strengthen your case, or for damage control.

The media

Media relations

The media is interested in news. So your challenge is to demonstrate that you are making news. The results of surveys are often an excellent hook, because publishing survey results is clearly news. Your most immediate challenge is to grab the interest of, and motivate, the journalists. But the objective is, through media coverage, to inform readers, viewers or listeners.

All journalists have a NEED, so deliver it. They want news that is New, Exciting and Exclusive and hits their Deadline. Tips on writing press releases are provided in a companion factsheet.

Media audits

If you are unknown to the media, it can be quite hard to achieve coverage unless the news is of ground-breaking importance. A starting point can be to undertake a media audit.

Targeted questions can be directed to key media to assess their understanding both of your organisation and the issue(s). You can do this face to face or by telephone. In this way, you can complete a qualitative analysis of the media. But it is also an excellent starting point for identifying good contacts, for building relationships, and for identifying relationships that need to be maintained or strengthened.