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PR is an invaluable management function

Public relations professionals should be a valued addition to management.

Many districts and administrators know that this is an important role on the team, but they may not know how to support the position to be most effective. This is an overview of the public relations role to help improve understanding of what your PR staff member should be doing and what is not within their area of responsibility.

Public relations builds relationships of trust between an organization and the people it serves. In turn, the organization relies on the feedback of its audience. This helps to determine organizational successes and failures.

I'll draw an example from my current role. I help build relationships with diverse groups of people our organization serves in alignment with common values by monitoring our communication successes and needs. My main focus last school year was employee relations and external relations. I framed stories around common interests of the school employees and families. Sometimes this included a subtle explanation of how our district fits into the region. Our school district had created messages to align with the statewide effort to showcase school employees and families working together to serve students during the pandemic. It was my job to find, produce and package these stories. I was tasked to ensure message alignment with the statewide initiative all districts were asked to emulate.

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Public relations essentials

Most people think of press releases (a tactic) and publicity (a function) when they think of public relations. Press releases and publicity are aspects of public relations work. However, there are many other functions within the scope of public relations as a management function. As a high-level leadership team, you can rely on your PR pro to provide ethically-driven, highly researched counsel about your internal and external publics.

Additionally, the strategic planning process is the bedrock of PR work. It will align communications with the core values of the business, organization or agency. All while providing a public service to its stakeholders who may not otherwise have a platform to express opinions. Those opinions are rich in feedback for the organization to access for return on expectation.

Informing and inspiring leadership

Your public relations professional will be able to provide central aid to leadership. They will advise on how to prevent and solve problems. They can offer strategic advice based on research. They can reveal systems gaps and present strategies to close them. PR pros will evaluate messaging and programming impact on stakeholders. Additionally, PR pros will align all communications to organizational values.



(Over)

All planning and decision-making begins and ends with research and evaluation. Identifying a public relations problem or opportunity? You'll need to check the research before planning and implementation. Research is programmatic and a continuous process of assessing and reassessing the position of the organization's communications and programs. This is done in relation to outcome measures that its publics help determine.

Strategic feedback loop

There are different types of data to help inform policy change, communication and programming goals, strategies and objectives in PR. Primary or formal research can be qualitative or quantitative, so long as you collect the data yourself. Informal or secondary research is info already published in articles, books, data reports, databases and the web. Informal research can be used to prevent a potential issue or threat, help with situational analysis, and to determine general opinions. Public relations heavily relies on qualitative research because so much of PR is centered on engagement with audiences, determining their perceptions and gaining their trust.

An example of primary research I worked on was when I assisted in producing data reports for school districts, so they could apply for statewide funds via the Student Success Act. School districts connected with culturally-specific partners and conducted listening sessions to learn the needs, concerns and opinions of students, families and staff. A survey with scaled ranking, multiple choice and open-ended questions were also sent to the audiences in their preferred language. My coworker and I analyzed the quantitative data: demographics, what respondents valued, what needed improvement, et al. We also grouped all the qualitative data according to emerging themes. Once we aggregated the data, we co-wrote a data report for the school districts to include in their funding applications. The funding source therein is based on passed legislation, which ties in another PR function: government affairs.

Knowing your audiences and their cultural diversity

Public relations involves a two-way flow of communication between the organization and its audiences. Examples of audiences are clients, employees, shareholders, partners, government officials.

It helps research, strategies and programming to know your audiences and their common interests. You can use a variety of characteristics to determine your audience depending on your purpose: demographics, themes, shared opinions, reputation, decision-making roles. In order to build and maintain relationships with your audiences, you first have to know more about who they are. What do they think and feel? What do they value? This is one reason why building and maintaining relationships is such an important aspect of the PR pro's responsibilities.

Knowing the cultural diversity of your audiences is a sound equitable practice that should influence your policies, research, programming and evaluation methods. Why? Because different cultures communicate in different ways and in different languages. If you don't have an understanding of the cultural backgrounds and lives of your audience, your messaging and programming may unintentionally cause harm, insult or offend your audiences. And you may not know until you make a mistake. Why make a mistake that can be avoided with some research and analysis?

Ask yourself these questions:

- What steps have you taken to learn more about the cultures of your audiences?
- Do you track demographics?

- Do you have communications that reflect your workforce and stakeholder diversity?
- Do you provide multiple language resources?
- Have you adopted an equity lens?

Public relations advocates for public interest and provides a platform for fair representation of perspectives, which is one of the key ethical values of public relations.

Ethics and law

All public relations decisions are ethically driven. According to the PR Society of America, some key values of PR are advocacy of public interest, honesty, transparency, expertise, independence and objectivity, loyalty and fairness.

PR pros are dedicated to the highest ethical standards. Whether it's in regards to offering culturally specific platforms for feedback, accountability for objective advising, or being respectful for the variety of opinions coming from the organization, media or audience. It can sometimes be as complex as reporting fraud. Or as simple as adjusting diction to show respect and care for public interest. An example of the latter is when we had a death at one of our education sites. I overheard an agency representative refer to it as "an overdose." Our agency includes healthcare and mental health advocacy and care. I was fresh out of a behavioral health lecture about stigma in addiction treatment. The power of language was cited as a tool to undo deeply embedded stigmas around addiction struggles. I gently informed the director that there is contention around the term "overdose" in the mental health community. The preferred term is "drug-related death." The director thanked me profusely then, and later, for advocating for our publics. Families, staff and partners were all impacted by the incident, plus it was in the media. My counsel may have prevented a potential PR issue.

Preventing and managing disaster

Living and working in communications during 2020, in the face of a pandemic, social unrest and natural disasters, such as fires and floods, many PR pros have become experts in crisis communications overnight by necessity. Crisis comms requires having a team to assess and respond to the crisis. Some of the best training in this area is offered for free online via FEMA. It's worth having not only PR pros trained in this area, but also directors in risk management, business or management services, human resources and facilities — as well as select support staff.

So, what can you expect from your PR advisor? Trusted counsel to inform and inspire leadership. All program and communications advising stems from a feedback loop of research and evaluation. Relationships are foundational to all programming and messages. All decisions are ethically aligned. Ability to identify, prevent and manage crises with responsible and effective strategies.

Resources

- *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, Eleventh Editions by Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron and Bryan H. Reber
- *Primer of Public Relations Research*, Third Edition by Don W. Stacks
- *Effective Public Relations*, Eleventh Edition by Glen M. Broom and Bey-Ling Sha
- **Mastering Public Relations:** https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_mastering-public-relations/
- **PRSA:** www.prsa.org/about/prsa-code-of-ethics