



UNIT-1

Introduction to Public Relations

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Define the term 'Public Relations'
- ✓ Discuss the nature and scope of Public Relations

Unit 1

Introduction to Public Relations

The Public Relations Environment

Public Relations (PR) is a concept which explores various ways of promoting effective relationship between different functional groups of people within communities or societies. It involves communicating the intentions of a particular entity to other groups or institutions that have an interest in the activities of the entity who is communicating his views or opinion. The relationship building could be between an organisation and its employees or the organisation and the public whose make up could be as diverse as one could imagine.

A PR consultant's service is required as an adviser or mediator between the organisation and the external public whose needs shape the goals of the organisation. PR involves understanding the values and attitudes of the public to help management frames adequate policies which are in line with acceptable public perception. Although PR is unique to each organisation, the principles employed each organisation may be fundamentally similar.

PR involves a range of functions such as:

- The ability to anticipate and sample public opinion, attitudes, and values in order to analyse and interpret the implications of the results on the functioning of an organisation
- Providing management with good advice for decision-making
- Providing excellent communication to improve relationships and avoiding negative public opinion on activities of the organisation being represented by a PR practitioner
- Engaging in programmes of research and evaluation and communicating the aims of an organisation to help the public have a better understanding of what it wants to achieve. PR undertakes programmes such as fund-raising, marketing, government relations, conferences, press releases, press conferences etc., to help in building strong relationships with the public
- Undertaking programmes through careful planning and implementation to influence public policy
- Recruiting, training and developing staff to perform some important PR functions listed above
- Using knowledge from sociology, psychology, communication skills, and other skills such as media relations, advertising, speech writing, and presentations

Different definitions of PR abound from diverse groups of interested parties because PR is still a developing discipline. In some instances, the definitions include a wide range of functions for PR to

perform but on other occasions the definitions only contained few functions for the practitioner to undertake.

A study by Harlow (1976) unearthed 472 different definitions which he summarised as follows:

'Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principle tools.'

Definitions of Public Relations

According to the *Webster's New International Dictionary*, PR can be defined as:

- 'The promotion of rapport and goodwill between a firm or institution and other persons, special publics or the community at large, through the distribution of interpretative material/development of neighbourly interchange, and the assessment of publics'.
- "the degree of understanding and goodwill achieved between an individual, organisation, or institution and the public".
- "the art or science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill".

Other popular definitions of PR include the following:

1. Scot Cutlip and Allen H. Carter:

"Public Relations is the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance, based upon mutually satisfactory two-way communication".

UK's Institute of Public Relations:

"the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public".

2. Sam Black:

"the fundamental purpose of Public Relations practice is to establish a two-way flow of mutual understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information".

3. Edward L. Bernays:

"the attempt by information, persuasion and adjustment to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution."

4. International Conference of Public Relation (Mexico City, 1978):

This definition given at the Mexican conference is just apt to succinctly define what PR is all about: that PR involves significant planning and research to critically assess the situation requiring PR initiative, the result of which should lead to PR advising management on what course of action to take with regards to the situation, and that whatever action is taken should ultimately benefit both the organisation undertaking the PR and the interest of the public.

Simpler Definitions

D.S. Mehta gives a simpler definition of PR as “an attempt through information, persuasion, adjustment, and contacts, to seek support for some activities, causes, movements, institutions, products, or services.”

Analysis of Definitions

The various definitions of PR share many similarities in terms of the following functions:

- PR is planned and executed on behalf of management of organisations
- PR has to do with promoting relationship between an organisation and a specific public or stakeholder
- PR involves assessing the attitude and opinions of the public under consideration
- PR involves policies, procedures and action taken by organisations for the benefit of the public as well as the organisation
- PR requires good two-way communication between the organisations and the public

Nature and Scope of Public Relations

From the many definitions of PR, it is clear that PR is basically the quest to establish favourable communication link between two entities with the aim of helping the entities understand each other. The link could be between an individual or organisation and the public. The objective is to explain the opinion or aims of the individual or the organisation to the public. Feedback from the public is valuable to helping shape an organisation’s response to a problem or a policy put forth by the individual or the organisation. PR’s ultimate goal is to enhance the relationship between the organisation and the public to maintain peaceful coexistence.

PR seeks to fulfil three main objectives:

1. Attract attention to issues
2. Win the confidence of the public
3. Get the public to understand events based on facts and not on rumours or speculations

Understanding the above objectives of PR should ultimately lead to persuading the public to accept a particular point of view and/or take certain actions or steps.

Critical to achieving these objectives is the need to understand the position of management as well as knowing what management wants to do in terms of:

- i. The message it wants to transmit
- ii. The recipient of the message
- iii. How the message should be delivered
- iv. The purpose to the message

The above components of communication highlight the 'who', 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions that a good PR programme should answer in order to obtain effective results.

An excellent PR programme should include the following:

- Comprehensive understanding or knowledge of the organisation, its aims and objectives
- Communication of thoughts and actions of the organisation to the public or stakeholders
- Obtaining feedback on the message delivered and evaluating the effectiveness thereof

Elements in Public Relations

PR consists of four main elements:

- i. Two-way communication
- ii. Mutual understanding
- iii. Caring for public opinion
- iv. Social responsibility of the organisation to the public

i. **Two-way communication**

Establishing a two-way communication between an organisation and public is one of the pillars of PR. This involves sending messages to specific target groups and receiving feedback and determining the effectiveness of the message. It is important to improve on already-established communication links using effective PR tools to promote existing cordial relationships. If there are obstacles to free flow of two-way communication, then these have to be resolved sensibly to restore favourable communication links. It is also important to bear in mind that frequent and accurate dissemination of information from management to employees and the public will prevent a lot of potential problems from taking root.

ii. **Mutual Understanding**

All PR policies should include and examine internal and external activities in relations to the company and the public respectively. Examining internal activities requires an understanding of the organisation's current reputation while external activities underscores the need to understand the public needs and keep them informed on actions or achievements of the organisation. It is often the case that public and private expectations are in conflict with each

other. For instance, in the manufacturing industry, private interest from the employees seek to maximize wage payment while at same time public entities in the form of government, tax agencies, shareholders and consumers tend to solicit for higher taxes and profits and lower prices respectively. PR seeks to establish suitable two-way communication between the conflicting parties and interests to resolve the conflicts in the best possible way through communication channels.

iii. **Caring for Public Opinion**

Identifying and understanding public opinion or public sentiment is important for PR policy framers because it can make or break an organisation. Having respect for what the public thinks and acting in a manner which considers their feeling is a sure means to showing an organisation cares about what the public feels. Understanding the sentiments or interest of the public leads to making effective PR policies which rely on informed public opinion by communicating the right information to the public to establish mutually beneficial relationships between stakeholders, wholesalers, suppliers, and organisations using the two-way communication channel.

iv. **Social Responsibility**

PR practices tend to reconcile the public and the organisation's interests and to promote healthy relationship between the two parties. By deploying PR, organisations show concern for the needs of the public when the public's opinion is included in the decision-making process. However, there are some organisations which do not seem to care about the welfare of the public or stakeholders and as a result they tend to encounter unnecessary problems at some point in time when they step on the public's toes.

Scope of Public Relations Practice

Some functions of PR includes the following:

- Undertaking publicity campaigns to promote products and services for organisations
- Publishing house journals for employees
- Producing general meeting reports
- Advertising
- Producing pamphlets and booklets
- Undertaking community work or corporate donations to the community
- Public-speaking
- Radio and TV programmes
- Direct mail
- Exhibitions, tours, conferences and open house programmes
- Providing employees with training in customer relations
- Answering question from the media and public bodies including issuing press release

- Making films, documentaries and films
- Formulating company policies
- Interacting with legislators and government officials
- Writing correspondence for organisations
- Providing sales training
- Promotion events
- Arranging for special events, parties
- Personal calls

It is important to remember that PR functionalities differ from one organisation to the next. In other words, PR function of each organisation is unique because each organisation is unique.

Role of Public Relations

For institutions to function effectively and efficiently, they need to develop good relationships with diverse groups in society. Institutions need to improve their relationship with groups such as employers, shareholders, consumers and the local community.

The key to successful PR is communication. Communication is made up of three main components which are described below:

i. What you want to say

The message is focus of every communication. The message must be crafted to convey exactly what you intended to communicate and must not be ambiguous. It may be directed at consumers, or the public about a product or service or to inform employees about the latest development in an organisation's operation. It is important for management or the individual wishing to secure the services of a PR practitioner to determine beforehand the exact message to deliver. Messages must be framed in such a manner to attract attention instantly.

ii. The Public You Want to Reach

Determine who exactly you would like your message to reach. This involves undertaking research to identify the target group. Identify critical groups of people such as local authorities or MPs who can influence your business. Try to develop good investor relationship with the financial establishments as this will improve your standing or reputation with them and fetch your juicy process in the event of a takeover or when seeking for financial backing from them

iii. How to get the message across

Decide on the ideal medium to convey your messages. This is when an experienced and highly skilled PR practitioner can make a big difference in selecting the right option and the right package for delivering the message.

Limitations of Public Relations

PR is effective in accomplishing its goals provided there is an accompanying high performance on the part of the organisation. It is not a tool to resolve all problems facing an organisation neither should it be used as a propaganda machine. PR is successful when good ethics and values are respected by the practitioner. It is best to ensure that a PR campaign takes cognisance of public interests and it should be sustained for the long term to win the public sympathy.

Public Relations – Publics

We have already extensively defined PR. We would now like to consider the term ‘publics’ as used in PR programmes or texts. PR and ‘publics’ are interdependent and one cannot exist without the other. Publics refer to a group of people who are united by a common purpose or ideology or interest.

Publics may be classified as internal or external. Internal publics are stakeholders who have close affiliation with an organisation. They include management, stockholders, marketing personnel, employees and sales representative. External publics on the other hand refer to stakeholders who have vested interest in the activities of an organisation but function outside the domain of the organisation. Examples of internal publics include suppliers, investors, the media, government departments, the local community, customers, and investors.

Nature of Organisation and its Public

The nature of an organisation determines or defines its peculiar publics. Some distinguishing features of the nature of organisations and their publics include the following:

- i. Different organisations with similar goals and purposes tend to have similar publics. An example is having different newspapers of a country which depend on patronage by readers and advertisers-in this case, the newspaper organisations would both have the reader and advertisers as their publics.
- ii. Organisations may have similar objectives such as educating people but each may cater for different publics. For example, one organisation (school) may be co-educational, another for girls only and yet another for just boys.
- iii. Whenever the nature and purpose of an organisation changes, its goals also change and consequently its public would also change. For example a textile factory which used to manufacture textiles and has switched to retailing would experience a change in its public.
- iv. Some publics are hidden and only emerge when some issues that concern them crops up. These have to be quickly identified and tackled before they become serious problem for the organisation. For instance, a governmental policy to introduce taxes for paper overnight may affect paper merchants who supply paper to booksellers, who in turn supply schools with books. The hidden problem in this case is the paper merchant who has been affected by this policies and so he/she may feel aggrieved by the effect of the new tax policy.

Identification of Publics

Publics are diverse, dynamic and “infinite in number”. Large numbers of publics exist including sub-groups within these publics who have diverse needs and wants. This scenario presents a complex paradigm of conflicting interests that have to be resolved by the PR manager. It is incumbent on the PR manager to conduct the necessary research to identify the various interests of each group and suggest ways in which they can all be satisfied. In sampling the opinions of publics, both major and minor groups’ opinion should be considered. The duty of the PR manager is to act as the agent for communicating the organisation’s opinion to the public and also to receive feedback from the public. The PR manager also advises the management on communication issues and he/she is expected to provide the channel for a two-way communication mode between the public and the organisation.

The Process of Communication

We can define communication as the ‘art and science of sending information conveying thoughts, ideas, concepts or feelings between people and involves a sender and a receiver. The sender transmits the message and the usually receives some form of feedback in response to the message from the receiver’. We can deduce, from the beginning, that communication involve a least five elements, namely:

- The sender of the message
- Context of the information
- The information or message to be sent
- The medium for transmitting the information (e.g. TV, internet, radio, print media etc.)
- The receiver of the message
- The feedback(i.e. the response of the receiver to the message which has been sent back to the sender)

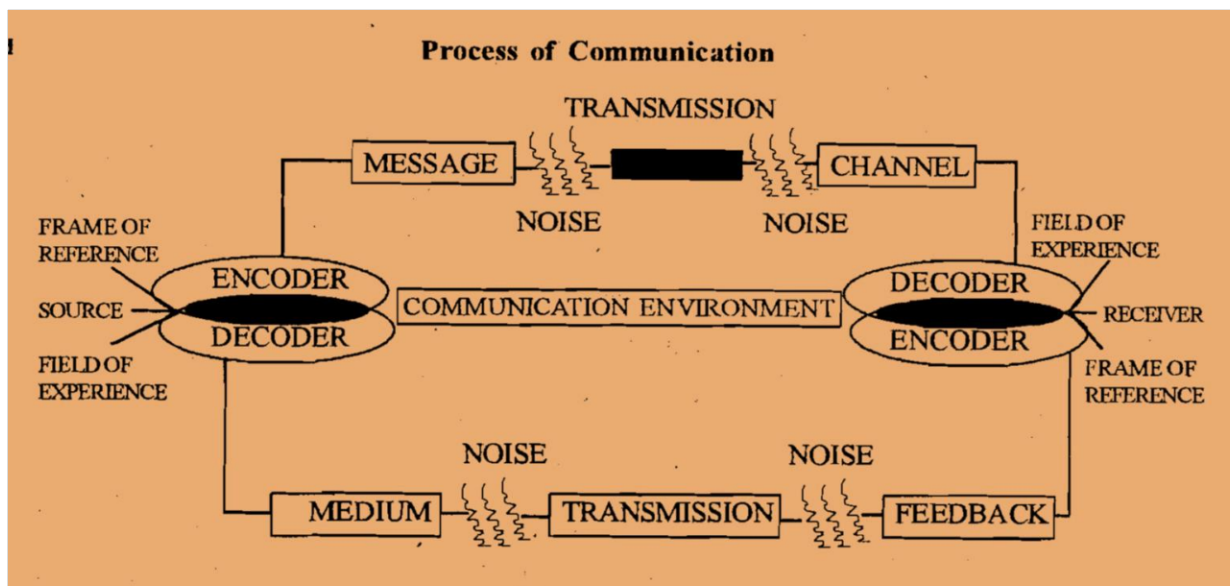


Fig. 1.1

The Public Relations Process

The PR process involves undertaking research study to obtain public views on issues relating to the operation of an institution and analysing the results of the study to gain an understanding of factors that affect people's thought or behaviour towards the institution.

The PR process comprises of four stages to accomplish its ultimate aim of obtaining the goodwill of the public.

These include:

- i. Carrying out research to sample public opinion, i.e. undertaking fact-finding missions
- ii. Effective planning involving formulating policies and setting objectives
- iii. Communication which involves disseminating information
- iv. Receiving feedback, analysing feedback, and adjusting policies or actions accordingly

Benefits of Public Relations

The primary benefits derived from public relations are:

- PR helps organisations and the public to discuss their unique interest and find ways to resolve conflicts (when they exist) and bring about mutual understanding between the two parties and acceptance
- Promotes an organisation's goods and services by building a good reputation based on outstanding performance
- PR promotes mutual understanding and promote smooth relationship
- It is a means to showcase an organisation's capability and attract new talents to work for the company
- PR keeps people informed about issues that affect them
- It makes organisations socially responsible to the community and improves relations
- PR can be used to counter public misconceptions by providing them with accurate information
- PR enhances loyalty and confidence of employees

PR is usually practiced in the daily lives of people as well as established businesses. The main difference between private and business PR practice is that PR for business is more refined and professional.

What Public Relations People Do?

People who work in PR have wide range of roles and different titles such "public relations /corporate communications consultant, executive, manager, director, officer, advisor, counsellor among others".

They work for diverse groups of organisations. The 3 main categories of work for PR personnel for include:

PUBLIC RELATIONS

- In-house (practitioners may work for private or public organisations)
- Consultancy (practitioners work for one or more clients for a fee)
- Freelance (practitioner is self-employed and may work for in-house or consultancies when the need arises but this is usually a short-term contract)

The above categories share similar function with slight differences such as:

- For in-house type, one gets to know the organisation more intimately with opportunity to work on a wide range of PR activities in a diverse range of industries with key players such as MPs or decision-makers
- Consultancy work may involve working on diverse projects and specialist fields such as finance, public affairs, or technology

TABLE 1.1 Examples of what public relations people do (source: Fawkes 2004)

| Public Relations Activity | Explanation | Examples |
|---|--|--|
| Internal communication | Communicating with employees | In-house newsletter, suggestion boxes |
| Corporate PR | Communicating on behalf of whole organisation, not goods or services | Annual report, conferences, ethical statements, visual identity, images |
| Media relations | Communicating with journalists, specialists, editors from local, national, international and trade media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and web-based communication | Press releases, photocalls, video news releases, off-the-record briefings, press events. |
| Business to business | Communicating with other organisations, e.g. suppliers, retailers | Exhibitions, trade events, newsletters. |
| Public affairs | Communicating with opinion formers, e.g. local/national politicians, monitoring political environment | Presentations, briefings, private meetings, public speeches. |
| Community relations/ corporate social responsibility | Communicating with local community, elected representative, head teachers, etc | Exhibitions, presentations, letters, meetings, sports activities and other sponsorship. |
| Investor relations | Communicating with financial organisations/individuals | Newsletters, briefings, events. |
| Strategic communication | Identification and analysis of situations, problem and solutions | Researching, planning and executing a campaign to improve |

PUBLIC RELATIONS

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Issues management | to further organisational goals Monitoring political, social, economic and technological | ethical reputation of organisation Considering effect of US economy and presidential |
| Crisis management | Communicating clear messages in fast changing situation or emergency | Dealing with media after major rail crash on behalf of police, hospital or local authority |
| Copywriting | Writing for different audiences to high standards of literacy | Press releases, newsletters, web pages, annual reports |
| Publications management | Overseeing print/media processes often using new technology | |

Further Reading:

- ✓ *A Modern Guide to Public Relations: Unveiling the Mystery of PR, (2021), By Amy Rosenberg*
- ✓ *Public Relation Theory: Capabilities and Competencies, (2020), Jae-Hua Shin, Robert Lawrence Heath*
- ✓ *DIY PR: Why Hire a Publicist: When you can do it yourself?, (2020), Nikkia McClain*