

The importance and role of public relations



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“ The art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders and implementing planned programs of action, which will serve both the organization and the public interest.” (Asch and Solomon 1946)

Public relations aim primarily to provide a communication between an organization and its users. It is one of the most important business functions as for any organization. It is essential to continually check its reputation in the market that it caters. Moreover, with the present climate of global extensions that majority of the modern day businesses practice, it is essential that the organization keeps touch with what it wants to portray to the consumers so that expectations from the organization is likewise.

Public Relation is used to build rapport with employees, customers, investors, voters or the general public. Almost any organization that indulges itself in being portrayed in the public environment employs some level of public relations.

Public relations is not limited to simply increasing awareness about an organization. It deals with other complex functions of checking and monitoring the reactions of its actions (Ahluwalia et al 2000). This illustrates what the organization reflects to its market hence aiding in deciding the next course of action as and when required.

Publicity is one of the major tools for Public relations. Most; if not all, PR campaigns invest heavily for publicity. Publicity involves spreading of information for a product, person, service, cause or organization to gain public awareness. Publicity helps in effective PR planning and is one of the most viral methods adopted by any PR for an organisation. In present times, professionals commonly use technology as their main tool to get across their messages to target audiences (Collins et al, 1975).

Traditionally, one of the oldest tools used by public relations professionals is a press/media kit. It is usually a collection of promotional materials for the purpose of circulation. These provide information about an event, organization, business, or even a person. Information also includes, fact sheets, press releases (or media releases), media alerts, brochures, newsletters, photographs with captions, copies of any media clips, and social mediums. In recent times, most organizations may have a website with a link which usually updates the message that is required to be communicated for the purpose of communication. Online version of such news is one of the essentials that is adopted in recent times. Other widely-used tools include brochures, newsletters and annual reports. (Basuroy et al 2003)

In the recent times, technological uses of social networks, blogs, and even internet radio public relations professionals facilitate to directly send messages through their respective mediums. Methods are used to find out the reaction of the audience in the current market. Inquiring into the favorable appeals of the target audiences extensively include the use of surveys, conducting research or even focus groups. Various tactics are undertaken to attract target audiences by using the information gathered. This is then directed as a message to them using tools such as social or other popular mediums. (Burrough and Bryan, 2006)

Increasingly, companies are utilizing interactive social networking options, such as media blogs, Twitter and Facebook, as tools in promotion for the PR campaigns. This can be credited to the fact that unlike the traditional tools, social media outlets enable the organization to engage in two-way communication, and receive relatively quicker feedbacks hence efficiently aiding in making accurate decisions.

Reciprocal nature of communications

Extracted from Effective Public Relations by Cutlip(2010)

The above figure illustrates, communication is a reciprocal process of exchanging signals to inform, instruct, or persuade, based on shared meanings and conditioned by the communicators relationship and the social context. (Godes, 2004)

NEGATIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS:

Negative Public relation occurs under circumstances and situation when the message sent across to the public by the organization is seen not coherent

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to what it portrays. It may be expressed as that process which threatens the reputation and corporate identity of an organization due to improbable actions that leads to unlikely situations and circumstances. (Eliasberg et al 1997)

However, this phenomenon can be either intentional i: e. (by an external source such as a competitor) or unintentional (inadequate research of an expected reaction or poor internal communications). (Hueng et al, 1982)

Owing to the nature of this report, the researcher has chosen to consider only the unfavorable public relations for this study and thus Black public relations shall only be mentioned once. Thereafter, steps to deal only with unfavorable public relations shall be included for further part of this work.

Intentional Negative Public Relations

It indicates in context to incidences which are carried about by third party source with intention to tarnish the reputation of a targeted organization, these kind of intentional negative PR strategies are also known as Black Public Relations (James and Caryn 2006).

It involves gathering information using high level of industrial espionage and competitive intelligence to uncover the targeted company secrets that are unfavorable to the organizations stakeholders (Hueng et al, 1982). The only objective of such practices is to strategically disturb the channels and messages of communication between the organization and its shareholders. This kind of negative public relation is an unethical business practice yet it is been widely used against business rivals. (Grossmen et al 1984)

Unintentional Negative PR / Unfavorable Public relations.

This is an occurrence under circumstances when an organization is facing a public challenge to its reputation.

Generally these challenges may come in the following forms:-

An investigation from a government agency.

A criminal allegation.

A media inquiry.

A shareholders lawsuit

A violation of environmental regulations

Finally a violation in a number of other scenarios involving the legal, ethical and / or financial factors (Godes et al 2004).

The above are challenges that an organization faces which may lead to an unfavorable Public relations situation for an organization. However, most of them can be contained almost immediately if handled with urgency.

Generally, source of a negative Public relation is born out of mismanaged crises situation in an organization. Crisis communication is of utmost importance to contain any such unlikely circumstances. If efficiently handled, crisis communication can become the best defense against any issue turning into a fully blown catastrophe.

An illustration to explain the above can be found in the case of Johnson & Johnson. In 1982, after cyanide was discovered in some capsules of a J&J

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product Tylenol, J and J immediately announced a recall of an estimated stock of about a hundred million in circulation in its domestic market of the United States and other foreign market (Berger, 2005). This decision of Johnson & Johnson, to cooperate fully with the media, earned it lots of praises for its business principle of being socially responsible. The resultant was that the company received additional positive press coverage when it subsequently introduced its new tamper-resistant packaging. Similarly In March 2005, a woman bit into a finger while eating chili at Wendy's. Wendy's responded promptly and shut down that location. This was followed by carefully discarding all the other chilli that was dated as the controversial stock. The location was reopened only after a thorough investigation of the rest of the stocks. This crisis could have damaged Wendy's image, but owing to it responding properly and appropriately, very little damage was observed to their image (Berger, 2005).

These are two of the few examples which illustrate efficient crisis management procedures despite not being in control the negative PR at the initial stages of the crisis. Johnson & Johnson was able to gain positive publicity for the prompt decision making and was thus able to contain the situation before it went out of proportion.

Conversely, many other organisations have shown lack in managing a crisis situation and have suffered for the same.

Source Perrier is an example of such an organization that was unable to overcome negative publicity when its top management displayed poor crisis-management. Traces of benzene were found in the company's bottled water

in 1990, however the company assured the public that it was only contained to bottles in North America. During the same time, scientists found traces of benzene in its bottled water which was being sold in Europe. This time, the management blamed it upon a contaminated filtering system and reassured that it was being tackled with utmost urgency. Nevertheless, media had then sampled the brand's water from all its prevalent markets and discovered that the situation had been persistent for a longer period of time and that the benzene-laced product had been selling all around the world. The media questioned Perrier's integrity and concern for public safety, and the company lost its dominant position in the marketplace; it has been unable to rebuild its reputation (Bogart and Dave 2001).

The available literature on the source of negative PR is not coherently conclusive as different researchers have differences in the scope and width with regard to their view about the causes of unavoidable PR. Lerbinger (1997), attributes two causes: i.e. management failure and environmental forces. He categorizes the two into "eight categories of crisis situations which are as follows:

Natural- for example Asian Tsunami which affected everything alike: i.e. nations, government, corporations, businesses and so on.

Technological- Mercedes A class had design faults thus had to roll over

Confrontation- Shell Oil wanted to sink an oil platform into the North Sea and thus its petrol stations faced a consumer boycott.

Malevolence-product tampering by private citizens, as in the case of Tylenol capsules of Johnson and Johnson

Skewed Management- Barings Bank went out of business when the bank management was accused of turning a blind eye towards rogue trader Nick Leason.

Deception

Management misconduct- Enron Power

Business and economic- Economic turmoil affecting businesses, hence organizations unable to live to the promise." (Lerbinger 1997)

FEARN-BANKS FIVE STAGE OF CRISIS

STAGE 1

Detection

The organization is watching for warning signs

STAGE 2

Preparation/prevention

The organization takes notes of the warning signs and prepares plans proactively to avoid crisis, or reactive one to cope with the crisis if it is come.

STAGE 3

Containment

Taking Steps to limit the length of the crisis or its effects.

STAGE 4

Recovery

At this step, efforts are made to get back to normal operational conditions or effectiveness of an organization

STAGE 5

Learning

This is when the Organization reflects and evaluates the experience to consider the negative impacts for the organization and any possible benefits for the future.

Fearn- Banks(2006), are amongst the school of thoughts that attribute Negative Public relation wholly to mismanaged crisis situation. In the table above, are the five stages of a business crises outlined that explain the steps to be ensured during different stages of a crisis. If attended to, the crisis management should be efficient and thus save the organization any unwanted harm to its reputation

The most important efficient way of dealing with unfavorable public relation can be found in practicing crisis communication (Lerbinger 1997). Crisis communication aims at assisting an organisation to sustain continuity in the critical business processes. These business processes can be any information flowing during critical situations, natural calamities or event driven circumstances.

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The most commonly known five steps that must be ensured in situations threatening the PR of an organization may be best explained as the following

Firstly, the corporation in crisis should be prompt and act accordingly. This can be achieved by addressing the public immediately following the discovery of the situation.

Secondly, the corporation in question must maintain honesty as it is obliged to be completely truthful no matter what the consequences from the public may be.

Thirdly, the corporation should be informative. This would require them to provide facts that are coherent with the situation and restrain speculation under any circumstance. The other reason for this step is to also assure that the public does not create its own rumor as rumors might cause more damage to the organization as compared to the already worsened circumstance (Lerbinger 1997).

Next, it is important to be socially concerned and illustrate efforts of improvement to the public. This would reflect on the business as being socially responsible hence improving chances of faster recovery from the damage incurred.

Finally, maintaining two-way relationships. It is very essential as the corporation gets response from the public hence increasing the chances of being accepted to do business with. More so, as this kind of communication shall project to the corporation directly about what is expected from them in

the near future. These steps are essential in order to manage any crucial PR circumstances (Norton et al 2007).

Quick response is the key to any negative publicity. Efficient and effective crisis communication strategy diagnosed in a premeditated manner can provide most of the solutions to problems relating to negative publicity. In this global and dynamic business world, technology can be effectively harnessed for communicating to the people about a rapid response to the issue. Not only can this save the organizational reputation but also it can prevent any unlikely circumstances. Ensuring a co-ordinated response provides a stronger foundation to tackle tricky situations and in turn can result into a potential advantage to a range of potentially crippling scenarios. A well thought out and executed plan shall reflect strongly upon the management of the organisation hence, bringing some more goodwill amongst the users. Timing of responding is a critical factor as the longer the lag, higher the chances of a considerable loss to company revenue and reputation (Reinstein et al 2005).

“ An Effective crisis communication strategy will typically consider achieving most of the following objectives:

Maintain connectivity

Be readily accessible to the news media

Show empathy for the people involved

Allow distributed access

Streamline communication processes

Maintain information security

Ensure uninterrupted audit trails

Deliver high volume communications

Support multi-channel communications

Remove dependencies on paper based processes” (Norton et al 2007)

Crisis communication can play a significant role by transforming an unexpected situation into a competitive gain. The only essential requirement is respond accordingly and immediately to the urgent situation.

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt at understanding the concept of Public relations and investigates into the causes and sources of negative Public relations. In a theoretical context, literature on negative Public relation shows a very distorted view amongst the researchers as it lacks clarity in its core concept of whether is it a result of mis communicated Public message or is it a concept of deliberately damaging a organizations reputation owing to competition rivalry.

However, all of these views are coherent on the thought that quick response to the critical situations can effectively deal with the arising unfavourable circumstances. Efficient and effective crisis communication strategy diagnosed in a premeditated manner can provide most of the solutions to problems relating to negative publicity. Source of a negative Public relation

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Public relation also deals with complex functions of checking and monitoring the reactions of its actions as this illustrates what the organization reflects to its market. Thus regular contact with the public over the underlying issues provides better deciding power for the next course of action as and when required.

Technology needs to be exploited the most in critical situations, in this modern day of vast technological choice, communication with the public is easier and cheaper than in the past Thus along with the prior mentioned five steps technological advantages should be used at it optimum to properly manage a crisis can as well as the six types of responses continue to be at the foundation of any crisis public relations.