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## Chapter 2

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### What Is Public Relations?

Public relations is a conduit, a facilitator, and a manager of communication, conducting research, defining problems, and creating meaning by fostering communication among many groups in society. The United Parcel Service (UPS) case illustrated the importance of this communication, both in financial terms—the strike cost UPS about \$750 million—and in terms of reputation with strategic publics.

Public relations is a strategic conversation. As you might imagine, it is an ephemeral and wide-ranging field, often misperceived, and because of the lack of message control inherent in public relations, it is difficult to master. Public relations is even difficult to define. Is it spin or truth telling? Either way, the public relations function is prevalent and growing; the fragmentation of media and growth of multiple message sources means that public relations is on the ascent while traditional forms of mass communication (such as newspapers) are on the decline.

You can find public relations in virtually every industry, government, and nonprofit organization. Its broad scope makes it impossible to understand without some attention to the taxonomy of this diverse and dynamic profession. Learning the lexicon of public relations in this chapter will help you master the discipline and help your study move quicker in subsequent reading.

Corporate and agency public relations differ. These concepts are discussed in detail in a later chapter, along with nonprofit public relations and government relations or public affairs. For the purposes of an overview, we can define corporate public relations as being an in-house public relations department within a for-profit organization of any size. On the other hand, public relations agencies are hired consultants that normally work on an hourly basis for specific campaigns or goals of the organization that hires them. It is not uncommon for a large corporation to have both an in-house corporate public relations department and an external public relations agency that consults on specific issues. As their names imply, nonprofit public relations refers to not-for-profit organizations, foundations, and other issue- or cause-related groups. Government relations or public affairs is the branch of public relations that specializes in managing relationships with governmental officials and regulatory agencies.

## 2.1 Defining Public Relations

Among the many competing definitions of public relations, J. Grunig and Hunt's is the most widely cited definition of public relations: Public relations is "the management of communication between an organization and its publics." Grunig and Hunt (1984), p. 4. Emphasis in original. One reason this definition is so successful is its parsimony, or using few words to convey much information. It also lays down the foundation of the profession squarely within management, as opposed to the competing approaches of journalism or the promotion-based approach of marketing and advertising that focuses primarily on consumers. The component parts of Grunig and Hunt's famous definition of public relations are as follows:

- **Management**<sup>1</sup>. The body of knowledge on how best to coordinate the activities of an enterprise to achieve effectiveness.
- **Communication**<sup>2</sup>. Not only sending a message to a receiver but also understanding the messages of others through listening and dialogue.
- **Organization**<sup>3</sup>. Any group organized with a common purpose; in most cases, it is a business, a corporation, a governmental agency, or a nonprofit group.
- **Publics**<sup>4</sup>. Any group(s) of people held together by a common interest. They differ from audiences in that they often self-organize and do not have to attune to messages; publics differ from stakeholders in that they do not necessarily have a financial stake tying them to specific goals or consequences of the organization. Targeted audiences, on the other hand, are publics who receive a specifically targeted message that is tailored to their interests.

1. The body of knowledge on how best to coordinate the activities of an enterprise to achieve effectiveness.
2. The process of not only sending a message to a receiver but also understanding the messages of others through listening and dialogue.
3. Any group organized with a common purpose; in most cases, it is a business, a corporation, a governmental agency, or a nonprofit group.
4. Any group(s) of people held together by a common interest. They often self-organize and do not have to attune to an organization's messages.

As "the management of communication between an organization and its publics," public relations has radically departed from its historical roots in publicity and journalism to become a management discipline—that is, one based on research and strategy.

## 2.2 The Function of Public Relations

In 1982, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) adopted the following definition of public relations that helps identify its purpose: “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.” Public Relations Society of America (2009b). In its “Official Statement on Public Relations,” PRSA goes on to clarify the function of public relations:

- Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.
- Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, schools, colleges and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and other institutions, and with society at large.
- The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action. Public Relations Society of America (2009a).

As such, the public relations *field* has grown to encompass the building of important relationships between an organization and its key publics through its actions and its communication. This perspective defines the field as a management function and offers insight into the roles and responsibilities of public relations professionals. The PRSA definition, however, is not perfect: A main weakness of that definition is that it requires public relations “to bring private and public policies into harmony.” Public Relations Society of America (2009b). In reality, we know that the relationships an organization has with all of its publics cannot always be harmonious. Further, that definition obligates us to act in the best interest of both the organization and its publics, which could be logically impossible if those interests are diametrically opposed. A few examples would be class action litigation, boycotts, and oppositional research and lobbying; despite the negative nature of those relationships, they still require public relations management and communication.

The unique management function of public relations is critical to the success of any organization that engages people in its operation, whether they are shareholders, employees, or customers. Although many people think of publicity as the sole purpose of public relations, this text will help you understand that publicity is a subfunction of the overall purpose of public relations and should not be confused with the broader function.

## 2.3 Naming the Public Relations Function

A plethora of terms has come to be associated with modern-day public relations practice. Because of the disreputable beginnings of public relations that we will briefly discuss next, it is often the case that organizations will choose to name their public relations function by another moniker. These various terms create much confusion about the responsibilities of public relations versus overlapping or competing organizational functions. The term corporate communication is the most common synonym for public relations in practice today, Bowen et al. (2006). followed by marketing communication and public affairs. We view the term corporate communication as a synonym for public relations, although some scholars argue that corporate communication only applies to for-profit organizations. However, we view **corporate communication**<sup>5</sup> as a *goal-oriented communication process that can be applied not only in the business world but also in the world of nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations, educational foundations, activist groups, faith-based organizations, and so on*. The term public relations often leads to confusion between the media relations function, public affairs, corporate communication, and marketing promotions, leading many organizations to prefer the term corporate communication.

5. A goal-oriented communication process that can be applied not only in the business world but also in the world of nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations, educational foundations, activist groups, faith-based organizations, and other groups. Generally synonymous to the term *public relations*, it is also referred to as *strategic public relations* and *strategic communication management*.
6. A plan or method employed toward the accomplishment of a specific goal or goals.
7. A goal-oriented communication process more commonly referred to as *corporate communication*. May also be referred to as *strategic communication management*.
8. A goal-oriented communication process more commonly referred to as *corporate communication*. May also be referred to as *strategic public relations*.

We believe that the key component of effective public relations or corporate communication is an element of **strategy**<sup>6</sup>. Many scholars prefer to use the phrase **strategic public relations**<sup>7</sup> to differentiate it from the often misunderstood general term public relations, or “PR,” which can be linked to manipulation or “spin” in the minds of lay publics. **Strategic communication management**<sup>8</sup>, strategic public relations, and corporate communication are synonyms for the concept displayed in the preceding definitions. To scholars in the area, public relations is seen as the larger profession and an umbrella term, comprising many smaller subfunctions, such as media relations or public affairs or investor relations. The subfunctions of public relations will be delineated later in this chapter. Academics tend to use the term public relations, whereas professionals tend to prefer the term corporate communication. Do not be distracted by the name debate and the myriad of synonyms possible. Whatever name you prefer or encounter, a strong body of knowledge in the field, based on academic study and professional practice, has solidified the importance of the concepts supporting the strategic communication function that we will discuss in this text.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to the purpose of public relations. Although the public relations function goes by many different names, it is essential to understand that it is a unique management function that contributes to an organization's success through its focus on developing and maintaining relationships with key publics. Those publics are generally employees, financial stakeholders or shareholders, communities, governments at many levels, and the media. It is also important not to confuse the overall purpose of public relations with its subfunctions, such as publicity and media relations. These subfunctions will be defined in the next chapter and covered in more detail in Chapter 10 "The Practice of Public Relations".