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Chapter 3

Models and Approaches to Public Relations

Although there were ancient public relations—as far in the past as ancient Greece—modern-day public relations in the United States began with a group of revolutionaries mounting a public relations campaign to turn public opinion in favor of independence from England and King George. The revolutionaries effectively used words and actions to mount a successful activist campaign leading to the Revolutionary War. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, published in 1776, gave rise to the sentiment that England’s governance under King George III was unjust. The subsequent *Declaration of Independence* and outward acts of protest were largely influenced by the rhetorical arguments found in Paine’s pamphlet, which has been called the most influential tract of the American Revolution. Slogans, such as *Don’t Tread on Me*, and use of printed materials, such as Colonial newspapers, were key message tactics used to sway opinion in favor of a revolution and a war for independence. Following the independence, *The Federalist Papers* were used to ratify the United States Constitution. These 85 essays were, according to the assessment of Grunig and Hunt, exemplary forms of effective public relations. Grunig and Hunt (1984).

These founding fathers of the United States used public relations to build the public consensus necessary for a budding nation to form a new kind of government and establish the human rights necessary for the nation to survive.

3.1 The Historical Development of Modern Public Relations

Modern public relations in the United States can also be traced back to less illustrious beginnings than the creation of a new democratic republic. Cutlip (1995). P. T. Barnum, of circus fame, made his mark by originating and employing many publicity or press agency tactics to generate attention for his shows and attractions. Barnum was famous for coining the phrase, “There’s no such thing as bad publicity.” Grunig and Hunt (1984), p. 28. He was even known to pen letters to the editor under an assumed name outing some of his attractions as hoaxes just to generate publicity and keep a story alive. Unfortunately, Barnum’s ethics left much to be desired.

One-Way Communication Models: Publicity and Dissemination of Information

Barnum thought that honesty was not the domain of a press agent, and infamously stated, “The public be fooled.” Grunig and Hunt (1984), p. 29. Drove of press agents followed in Barnum’s tracks, in efforts to get free space in the news for their clients, ranging from Hollywood figures to private interests, such as railroads, and also politicians. This approach to public relations was termed **press agency**¹ by Grunig and Hunt because of its reliance on generating publicity with little regard for truth. For modern-day examples, we have to look only to the entertainment publicity surrounding a new film release, or the product publicity around a new energy drink or a new technological gadget. Publicity and press agency are synonymous terms meaning simply to generate attention through the use of media.

1. A type of public relations in which press agents attempt to generate publicity for their clients with little regard to the truth; it is based on a simple one-way dissemination of information. Historically, it is the first type of public relations. Contrast with *public information*.

2. An approach to public relations in which public relations specialists use objective and factual information to educate the public about their clients. It is used especially in government reporting, quarterly earnings statements, and reports. Based on a one-way dissemination of information, it is simply intended to inform. Contrast with *press agency*.

The next historical phase resulted in a new model of public relations that Grunig and Hunt termed **public information**². In this approach to public relations, a former journalist works as a writer representing clients, issuing news releases to media outlets in the same style as journalistic writing. The idea of the public relations specialist acting as a counselor to management, as opposed to a simple practitioner of press agency tactics, was born. The pioneering public information *counselor* was a man named Ivy Ledbetter Lee, who revolutionized public relations practice at the time with the idea of telling the truth. Lee studied at Harvard Law School, but went on to find a job as a journalist. After working as a successful journalist for a number of years, Ivy Lee realized that he had a real ability for explaining complicated topics to people, and had the idea of being a new kind of press agent. Rather than tricking the public, Lee saw his role as one of educating the public about truthful facts and supplying all possible information to the media. Ivy Lee opened the third public relations agency in the United States in 1904, representing clients such as the Pennsylvania Railroad, the Rockefeller family, and

the Anthracite Coal Roads and Mine Company. Grunig and Hunt (1984), p. 32. Lee became the first public relations practitioner to issue a code of ethics in 1906, based on his declaration that “the public be informed”—to replace railroad tycoon Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt’s infamous statement, “The public be damned.” Hiebert (1966), p. 54. Ivy Lee ushered in a more respectable form of public relations that is objective and factual. His public information approach is still in use today, especially in government reporting, quarterly earnings statements, and similar reports intended simply to inform.

Both the press agency and public information models of public relations are based on writing and technical skill with images, words, Web sites, and media relations. These concepts are based on a one-way dissemination of information. They are not management-based models because strategic management is based on research. Research is what makes management a strategic pursuit based on knowledge and data that comprise two-way communication, as opposed to a simple one-way dissemination of information based on assumptions.

Two-Way Communication Models: Strategic Management of Public Relations

The next two models of public relations are based on research. Using research to gather public opinion data led scholars to label these models two-way rather than one-way because they more resemble a conversation than a simple dissemination of information. Grunig and Hunt termed the two management models *asymmetrical* and *symmetrical*.

The **asymmetrical model**³ was pioneered between 1920 and 1950 by Edward Bernays, nephew of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and is based on the principles of behavioral psychology. Public relations research seeks to determine what publics know and understand or believe about the client organization, issues of importance, and so on. Then, in the asymmetrical model, once these beliefs are learned through polling and other means, they are incorporated into the public relations messages distributed by the organization. It is called asymmetrical because it is imbalanced in favor of the communicator; the communicator undergoes no real change, but simply uses the ideas she knows will resonate in communicating with publics with the purpose of persuading them on some issue or topic. For example, if I am a politician running for reelection and my research identifies tax cuts as an important topic with publics, then I include the importance of tax cuts in my next campaign speech. Research is a key component of this model, as it seeks to persuade publics to adopt the attitudes and beliefs that are favorable to the organization based on the collection of data about their existent beliefs.

3. A research-based, two-way model of communication in which the imbalance of information favors the communicator. The public's beliefs about an organization or issue of importance is incorporated into the public relations messages distributed by the organization. The information presented seeks to persuade the public to adopt the attitudes and beliefs that are favorable to the organization.

The **symmetrical model**⁴ was also pioneered by Edward Bernays and several prominent public relations practitioners and educators between about 1960 to 1980. It seeks also to use research on public opinion just as the asymmetrical model does. However, it does not use research with the intent to persuade, but to build mutual understanding between both publics and organizations. Organizations are open to changing their internal policies and practices in this model based on what they learn from their publics. It is a collaborative approach to building understanding, and, although not perfectly balanced, it is a *moving equilibrium* in which both sides in the communication process have an opportunity to have input and change an issue. To revise this example, after research identifying tax cuts as an issue, a symmetrical politician would actually incorporate tax cuts into her belief system and offer ideas supporting those beliefs on the campaign trail.

In modern public relations, we often see a mixing of the public relations models among multiple tactics or communication tools within one public relations campaign. It is best to think of the models as theoretical constructs that, in implementation, become combined through the mixed motives of public relations. In most cases, public relations professionals not only want to aid their employer or client but also to assist the publics outside the organization to access and understand the inner workings of the firm. This **mixed-motive approach**⁵ is based on the real-world contingencies that impact public relations decisions, and the desire to facilitate communication on both sides of an issue, both for organizations and for publics.

4. A research-based, two-way model of public relations in which research is used not with the intent to persuade but to build mutual understanding between publics and organizations. It is a collaborative approach to building understanding in which organizations are open to changing internal policy based on what they learn from the public.

5. An approach to public relations that facilitates communication on both sides of an issue, both for organizations and for publics. In this approach, public relations professionals not only want to aid their employer or client, but also to assist the publics outside the organization to access and understand the inner workings of the firm.

Summary of the Models of Public Relations

In summary, the historical development of the field showed four distinct models of public relations, as identified by Grunig and Hunt. With this brief background in the history of public relations, you likely know enough about the models now to begin employing each in your public relations management. All are still in use in public relations practice today, and these terms are used in the academic literature and in public relations management. The one-way models are not based on social scientific research but on a simple dissemination of information. The two-way models are based on research, which is what makes them the two-way management model. In order of their development, the models are as follows:

- **Press agency.** One-way (information) dissemination focusing on publicity for persuasion/attention.
- **Public information.** One-way (information) dissemination providing information.
- **Two-way asymmetrical.** Two-way (research), which is imbalanced in favor of persuading publics to support the organizations' interests.

- **Two-way symmetrical.** Two-way (research), which is more balanced in terms of creating mutual understanding; moving equilibrium.

Due to the *mixed-motives* inherent in the public relations process, public relations professionals will most likely use a combination of these models in public relations management. These models suggest an overall philosophy of public relations, while situations require different approaches. Therefore, it is also useful to have public relations strategies that reflect a contingency of varying approaches, as discussed later in this volume.

3.2 The Subfunctions of Public Relations

Before we delve deeper into the profession, we would like to introduce you to the subfunctions or specialties within public relations. Think of the public relations function as a large umbrella profession encompassing many subfunctions. Those subfunctions are often independent units within an organization, sometimes reporting to public relations and sometimes reporting to other organizational units such as legal, marketing, or human resources. Learning the subfunctions and the lexicon of terminology associated with this function is crucial to understanding how to manage an integrated and effective public relations function. The following subfunctions will be discussed in more detail later in this volume.

Although there are many subfunctions that make up public relations, most people would identify two major types, corporate and agency. **Corporate**⁶, or “in-house,” is a part of the organization or business. It functions to create relationships between an organization and its various publics. The second type of subfunction is associated with the **public relations agency**⁷; its purpose is to assist organizations in a specific area of expertise.

Typical Corporate Public Relations Subfunctions

6. An in-house type of public relations that functions to create relationships between an organization and its various publics.
7. A type of company whose purpose is to assist an organization in a specific area of expertise. Generally, a public relations agency will assist an organization in promoting goodwill between itself and the public.
8. A forward-thinking function of corporate public relations that is responsible for identifying and solving problems, and also for identifying trends, industry changes, and other potential issues that could impact an organization. It is one of the most important subfunctions of public relations.

It is important to note that each subfunction may differ according to organizational structure and size, as we discuss in [Chapter 5 "Organizational Factors for Excellent Public Relations"](#), “Organizational Factors Contributing to Excellent Public Relations.” Sometimes the public relations subfunctions overlap and one department (or even one person) is responsible for many or all of these activities. Large organizations, particularly those with multiple locations doing business internationally, will sometimes have multiple units covering just one of these subspecialties in public relations. Oftentimes the public relations function is structured with a separate department handling each of the responsibilities.

Issues Management

Issues management⁸ is arguably the most important subfunction of public relations. Issues management is the forward-thinking, problem-solving, management-level function responsible for identifying problems, trends, industry changes, and other potential issues that could impact the organization. Issues management requires a formidable knowledge of research, environmental monitoring, the organization’s industry and business model, and management strategy.

Media Relations

The **media relations**⁹ subfunction is likely the most visible portion of public relations that an organization conducts because it deals directly with external media. The media relations subfunction is a largely technical function, meaning it is based on the technical skill of producing public relations materials, or outputs. **Outputs**¹⁰ are often related to tactics, and examples of tactics include news releases, podcasts, brochures, video news releases for the broadcast media, direct mail pieces, photographs, Web sites, press kits, and social media (digital media).

Community Relations

As the name implies, the **community relations**¹¹ subfunction is responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with an organization's communities. Normally this territory implies a physical community, as in the borders of manufacturing facilities with their residential neighbors.

Philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Oftentimes the functions of strategically donating funds or services and a corporate social responsibility endeavor are part of the public relations department's efforts. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 requires corporations to hold to a code of ethics and to report on their socially responsible conduct. The public relations subfunction responsible for this reporting usually is called the CSR unit or department and often is combined with or managed by community relations.

Financial and Investor Relations

Many managers do not realize that public relations is the function responsible for writing an organization's annual report, quarterly earnings statements, and communicating with investors and market analysts. This type of public relations normally requires experience with accounting and financial reporting.

Marketing Communications

Marketing communications¹² is also known as integrated marketing communications or integrated communications. Publicity and product promotion targeting the specific public consumers is the focus of this subfunction. Public relations strategies and tactics are used primarily through a press agency model meant to increase awareness and persuade consumers to try or buy a certain product.

9. A largely technical function of corporate public relations, it is based on the technical skill of producing public relations materials called *outputs*. It is often the most visible portion of an organization's public relations because it deals with external media.

10. An organization's actions and messages, such as news releases and podcasts, that result from adapting to environmental changes. Outputs are related to tactics.

11. A subfunction of corporate public relations responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with an organization's communities. It often includes oversight of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

12. A subfunction of corporate public relations that involves publicity and product promotion, targeting specific public consumers. Also known as *integrated marketing communications* and *integrated communications*.

Government Relations and Public Affairs, Including Lobbying

The public affairs of an organization are the issues of interest to a citizenry or community about which an organization must communicate. Government relations handles maintaining relationships with both regulatory agencies and appointed and elected officials.

Internal Relations

Maintaining an effective and satisfied workforce is the job of **internal relations**¹³. Public relations professionals who specialize in internal relations have the primary responsibilities of communicating with *intraorganizational* publics, executives, management, administrative staff, and labor.

Typical Public Relations Agency Subfunctions

In addition to the general media relations activities offered by many public relations agencies, seven specializations or subfunctions commonly exist.

Crisis Management

13. The branch of corporate public relations that works with intraorganizational personnel in order to maintain an effective and satisfied workforce.

14. A type of public relations that involves planning for and reacting to emergency situations and risk management.

15. A type of public relations that typically communicates and maintains relationships with legislators, press secretaries, and other governmental officials.

16. A public relations subfunction that is responsible for maintaining good relationships with members of an organization or group that share common goals and require membership. Examples include alumni and activist groups.

Crisis management¹⁴ involves both planning for and reacting to emergency situations. Organizations have a need for quick response plans and fast and accurate information provided to the news media that public relations agencies specializing in crisis or risk management often provide and implement in the case of a crisis.

Lobbying

As an adjunct to the government relations or public affairs unit of the corporation, an external **lobbying**¹⁵ firm may also be hired. Lobbyists normally have expertise with the industry for which they are hired to communicate, and maintain relationships with legislators, press secretaries, and other governmental officials. They often provide educational documents, policy analysis, and research to those in government on behalf of clients.

Member Relations

The public relations subfunction known as **member relations**¹⁶, as the name implies, is responsible for maintaining good relationships with members of an organization. These members may be alumni, donors, members of activist or

support groups, or virtually any group distinguished by a commonality and requiring membership.

Development and Fund-Raising

The public relations subfunction of **development fund-raising**¹⁷ often overlaps with member relations in that it seeks to build support, particularly in the form of financial donations or government grants.

Polling and Research

Polling and research are carried out to such an extent within public relations that specialized firms exist to conduct these activities full time, usually on a contract or retainer basis. It should be noted, however, that very large organizations often have their own research “departments” within one or more public relations subfunctions.

Sports, Entertainment, and Travel Public Relations

Specialized forms of public relations exist as public relations subfunctions for each of these very large industries.

Advertising

Although advertising is a separate profession from public relations, it is usually employed as part of a public relations campaign.

17. A public relations subfunction that is responsible for building financial support in the form of donations or government grants.

3.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided the basic knowledge of public relations models and subfunctions (both corporate and agency) necessary to understand and expand your knowledge of this vast and ever-changing profession. The models and subfunctions are those that generally comprise public relations, although they do vary by industry. The organization size, type, amount of government regulation, and even the organization's competition will determine whether it has all or some of these subfunctions present in-house, outsources them as needed, or relies on public relations agencies. Normally an organization will have a majority of the subfunctions on this list. They may be structured as part of the public relations department, or as independent units reporting to it, to another function, or to senior management.

Knowing the terminology related to the subfunctions helps to identify different forms of public relations and combinations of these efforts in practice. In order to achieve the most with public relations initiatives, it is important to know which subfunctions must exist, which work well with one another, and which need independence or autonomy. Further in the book, we will apply this knowledge to examine the structuring of the public relations department and subfunctions. We will examine how organizational structure has an impact on the models of public relations employed and the subfunctions that exist in practice.