

THAKUR COLLEGE OF SCIENCE & COMMERCE

Autonomous

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Introduction: The role of public relations cannot be stressed enough, particularly in the context of the globalized world. Not only is it becoming increasingly complex, sophisticated and demanding, but its contribution in respect of communication to any organization is being duly recognized. In India it is gaining prominence and, though it is just one of the tools of marketing, more and more marketing agencies are carving full-fledged separate public relations divisions. In addition, many stand-alone public relations organizations, big and small, are being established every year. The fact that, apart from corporates, celebrities, socialites, film and sports stars, and political parties too are turning to them for image building and image make-overs, is testimony to their growing demand. PR as a practice can trace its origin to the pre world-war times in England. In U.S.A. it was vigorously practised to face the challenges when the first railway lines were built, and the project faced ugly opposition when accidents occurred, and when private land needed to be acquired. Bernay, popularly considered one of its earliest and strongest practitioners, defended it as an effort —to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution through —information, persuasion and adjustment. The British IPR (Institute of Public Relations) was established in 1948, while Dartnell's Handbook was published in 1956 in U.S.A. However, it was only in 1961, when it was formally adopted in Venice as the International Code of Conduct for Public Relations, that it came to be officially established, legitimized and practised formally world-wide.

Definition: —Public Relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort of an organization to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. Public Relations, thus, is not merely the starting point of any business venture, but a constant effort in building and retaining good will and credibility, intangibles that go a long way in forming the perception about an organization. It is much more than mere crisis management, damage control or just another marketing tool. It forms an important link between the top management and various publics or audiences, both internal and external. PR professionals thus need to be multitasking, and play multifarious roles as good communicators to maintain mutual regard and understanding between an organization and its various stakeholders.

Functions of PR: As communicators they can ascertain the very pulse of the public, and their perceptions can inform and influence policy decisions of an organization, be it for finance, marketing, community, government or environment purposes. They are therefore able to play a vital role as advisors to the management on diverse aspects. In this capacity they can help shape company policy. The public relations division can act as the image makers for the organization or the individual and, by adopting the right medium and appropriate content, can influence public opinion. A good assessment of people's culture specifics enable it to devise suitable strategies in determining an organization goal. The ability to communicate qualifies it to act as intermediary with lobbyists or to itself lobby for organizations with people,

governments or international bodies to secure deals. Though event management is being carved as a special niche, this is essentially what a PR professional routinely handles. Events would include diverse programmes like musical extravaganzas or book launches. But organizing conferences, meetings, symposia or exhibitions are again traditionally a PR professional responsibility. Crisis management is synonymous with PR. But more important is the ability to keep the antennae up and alert and pre-empt problems. PROs (Public relations officers) therefore have to act as sirens that warn of impending trouble. When a crisis occurs, they are the first ones sought to defuse the situation, or restrict and control damage. They have to act as spokespersons for the organization. In rendering first-aid in a crisis situation, they often help by deflecting public attention from an unpleasant and unsavoury occurrence towards a positive and beneficial one. They have, therefore, been regarded as doing a white washing exercise. Be that as it may, they are credited with achieving a turnaround in public perception and restoring the shine to a tarnished image. PROs are the natural and first choice as spokespersons for an organization and need to routinely interact with the media, the government or other agencies. By virtue of handling both external as well as internal audiences their role overlaps with that of the HRD. In challenging times of strikes, go-slow motions, lock-ups, mergers and/or acquisitions, they are ideally suited in addressing and occasionally redressing the concerns of the employees of an organization.

Tools of PR: The principal and basic tools of PROs are the spoken word, the written word and the image. The nature and the need of the audience determine the form or the medium.

PR and External Communication: The PROs have a wide range of tools at their command to be used according to the needs of the audience they require to address. External Public Relations: The Publics [The external audience] of an organization may comprise its dealers, customers, transporters, trade association members, competitors, or government bodies that it needs to interact with in the course of its day-to-day business, its investors, other financial bodies as well as opinion makers and the public at large. One of the best ways, therefore, to reach such a wide spectrum of audience is through mass media. Though the TV is one of the most effective means, its prohibitive cost makes it a deterrent for most except the financially sound companies. But there is other cost-effective means. These could be the press, (the newspapers normally publish a press release of an event without charge), staging an open house by inviting its various stakeholders to visit the company at its office or plant, sponsoring events and displaying the company name and logo prominently, or by conducting or participating in fairs and expositions. Companies which have the financial means also go in for films, or documentaries of public interest, highlighting the company role or association with the project. The widening of technology has offered one more means, the web page, which, however, needs constant updating, as failure to do so reflects badly on the organisation's ability to keep abreast with the times.

Media Planning: The best means of outreach to the public is through the newspapers, the television, and now the radio which is seeing a re-birth through the FM channels. Issuing press hand-outs before a press conference or press releases about an organisation forthcoming events is important. It is important to bear in mind that a press release must be clear, accurate, brief and objective. With the television and the radio being expensive media forms, their use would be limited, reserved for only extreme cases of crises when an organizations view point would need to be expressed. As the press is one of the most effective tools of mass communication, it is vital that a PRO maintain an up to-date list of sub-editors to whom the press release would

be addressed. It is also necessary to do a discreet follow up. One should ensure that the press release is in the form of a newspaper report with all relevant and complete information included.

Example:

In addition to the press or other media, some of the other forms of interface with the external stakeholders are exhibitions, fairs, and open-house days, documentary films, as also organizing sweepstakes, competitions and community programmes.

THE PROGRESSIVE ACADEMY

25, M. G. ROAD,

NASIK.

From: Ms. S. Dixit, Date:

Chief, Information Desk,

To: Mr. Subi Johnson For immediate release

Sub-editor,

Edu Info Times.

New President at the Progressive Academy.

Mr. S. D. Raghavan, M. Com, C.A., C. S., LLM, has taken over the reins of the management of the Progressive Academy as President from the outgoing President Ms. S. V. Taksale who is migrating to Canada. Mr. Raghavan has been associated with the Progressive Academy since 1985 and has held several important positions with distinction. He has also served as advisor to other institutions and is a member on the Boards of both educational and non-government organizations. He intends to share his plans for enhancement and expansion with parents, students and staff in his inaugural address at the Annual Function.

Organising press coverage for important events in the organisation, getting senior executives to contribute articles to leading newspapers, participating in debates on TV channels is part of the image-building exercise of PRD. The Internet is the latest and most modern medium to be harnessed by the PR Department to help in its job. The web is an interactive medium with the widest reach, as the term world-wide appropriately suggests. Hence, not only is the web page an important tool in publicising the company, its profile, its achievements and its plans, but it becomes the ideal medium to be in touch with public sentiment, its perception and reaction to a company's policy or event.

Customer Relations: Customer Complaints, Corporate Social Responsibility:

Answering customer queries, handling customer complaints with sensitivity and promptness, providing vital information to common public is the job of the Customer Relations Officer. PR tries to reach out to a vast number of customers by paying prompt attention to customer grievances. Growing number of Business Processing Units bear testimony to the fact that attending to customers is of vital importance to survive the competition. With the recent enactment of the RTI Act, and a general rise in consumer awareness, the management of

consumer complaints becomes an important part of the PR department. Often, companies or service providers, in a bid to retain goodwill, may even offer some adjustment, in terms of discount coupons or free coupons, to compensate for the shortfall and retain goodwill.

Here is an example:

Shangri-La Resort,

Madh Island,

Malad-W,

Mumbai.

Nov 18, 2008.

Mr. Ravi Pant,

25, Emerald Heights,

GK, New Delhi.

Dear Sir,

We have been honoured to have you as a regular patron for the past many years. We were, therefore, highly distressed to learn from your letter that you were subjected to discourteous behaviour at the reception desk after an unconscionable delay by the pick-up van, upon your arrival at the airport. We assure you, Sir that we made immediate enquiry, as such a complaint by our valued and longstanding customer demanded top priority. We learnt that the unforeseen delay was caused by a minor mishap that had taken place enroute, which however, we deeply regret that one of our regular customers was put to inconvenience. As an offer of goodwill we wish to offer you a complimentary lunch voucher for two at the prestigious _Nizam's_ at Greater Kailash, New Delhi. We assure you, Sir, of our continued impeccable service and hope to receive you again on your next visit to Mumbai.

Sincerely Yours,

Rajiv Krishnan.

(Manager, P.R.)

b) There is a lot of buzz in the current corporate scenario about CSR or Corporate Social Responsibility. There is a growing awareness and expectation that a company that prospers and does well financially should ideally attempt to give back to society in some form or the other. Accomplishing, as well as advertising this, becomes the sole responsibility of the PRD [Public Relations Department]. For example, a pharmaceutical company may organize photographic exhibitions at public sites, such as railway stations, explaining through visuals and commentary about the scourge of AIDS and methods of prevention. Or about blindness, and the preventive measures that can be adopted.

Organising Conferences, Seminars, and Workshops: PRD undertakes this exercise in order to take a leadership position in scholarship, and innovation among organizations dealing in similar ventures. To bring leading thinkers and people of eminence together, and make their

research available to professionals, forms the core part of this exercise. Conferences are held to create linkages and establish networks.

Fairs, Exhibitions and Shows: Organising such events on one's own, or participating in such events, is yet another PR activity. This exercise helps an organization to gain maximum visibility and reach out to cross-sections of the society. Showcasing one's products, interacting with competitors and establishing one's position become important objectives of this exercise.

Conducting Opinion Polls and Obtaining Customer Feedback through Questionnaires: A good relationship with those whom one interacts with and who are not part of the company is very essential. Companies work, not only towards portraying a good image to the world at large, but also, from time to time, attempt a feedback on the public perception of the company. For example, Reliance Energy, Jet Airways, ICICI and HDFC banks have a regular feedback form in which questions like, —Were you satisfied with the time taken to attend to your query?— are included.

Open House: This is an occasion when members of the public, or family and friends of employees, can visit the plant or factory and be given a conducted tour that explains the functioning of various departments of the company. Indian Navy celebrates Navy Week in the first week of December and organizes conducted tours of some of its warships for the benefit of common public. The purpose of such an exercise is to entertain and inform.

Trade Events such as organizing seminars or expert talks by eminent professionals are yet another way for companies to establish and maintain good relations in society. For example, when the new budget is announced, it is common practice for financial and tax-related companies to organize talks by eminent financial experts for both, the general public or the tax professionals of their association.

Films are another popular way of reaching out to the public. These can be in the form of relevant documentaries or on the company's profile and its contribution to society. The commissioning of films, however, is an expensive affair and it is only companies which have deep pockets that can go in for such a medium.

Sponsorship is a very popular means of both publicity and good PR. It is assumed that a company would sponsor only those events or programmes that are in line with their policies and thinking. The Souvenirs produced by non-profit making associations or NGOs, for example, are a means to raise funds through advertisements. Sponsorship not only provides high visibility but also, through financial help, enables the execution of programmes and helps garner goodwill for the company. College competitive events, television programmes, sports events, or social projects such as health awareness drives become an excellent means to the company to build a good rapport with society.

Internal PR: The internal audience of an organization comprises its employees at various levels. The PROs can effectively use tools such as the in-house journal or magazine or the notice boards. Featuring articles, photographs, news and views, competitions, quizzes and tidbits about a company's events, achievements, employees' promotions, wedding details, births and deaths announcements, etc., help to lend a personal touch and go a long way in creating inclusiveness and a sense of bonding and belonging. Apart from these, organizing picnics, get-togethers for employees with their families, or off-site programmes, film screenings or annual sports day or other competitive activities, are other ways of creating and maintaining good

relations with employees. Providing congenial work and recreation places is very essential too. Creative use of imagination and availability of funds can result in innovative measures of maintaining good and harmonious relations with the staff. The Internal Audience of an organization comprises its employees at various levels. It is of paramount importance to maintain cordial and congenial relations with the employees for, in the final analysis, it is they who are the actual people who help the organization achieve its goals.

The functions of Internal PR are to:

- Motivate the employees and boost their morale
- Create fraternal feeling
- Ensure free flow of communication in order to earn the trust of the employees.
- The Print Medium is the first, easiest and simplest tool. It can be used in a variety of ways. Bulletins are used to give the employees news about the latest developments.
- In-house journals and magazines or periodical booklets are also a popular means. These usually contain a message from the management, and an editorial focus in on the latest events or products. In addition, to make them more interactive and participative, they may include articles by employees, news about them such as marriages or births and deaths, or other relevant and significant events such as the company's victory in competitive matches and games, or news that concerns them, like promotions or notes of appreciation.
- Films, both documentary and entertainment, are a good way of engaging with the employees. When these are followed by discussions, they afford an ideal platform for interacting with them in an informal setting and strengthening the employee-management bond. They could serve the additional purpose of instruction or training.
- Open House is a wonderful device for image building with the employees and their families. This achieves the purpose of instilling a sense of involvement with and commitment to the company. Picnics with employees also serve a similar objective.
- Off-site training programmes are becoming another popular way for companies to achieve their dual objective of providing both training and entertainment to their employees in an informal setting. Conferences, whether internal or external, become a wonderful PR exercise to motivate the employees, to up-date their knowledge and, indirectly, benefit the company.
- Exhibitions and Competitions form yet another form of instructing, encouraging and, thereby, motivating employees.
- Documentation of Press Clippings: becomes an important tool for an organization to keep track of the image it enjoys in public, just as the opinion poll findings reveal the perception of external or internal audiences about itself. Large companies, in fact, have well trained and specific employees, who regularly cut out the articles that include a mention of them, and maintain a master copy, as well as respective ones for the various departments. This enables an organization to refer to them to ascertain public opinion or the perceptions of various stakeholders before finalising a policy decision.
- Implementation of programmes: like Advice and Counselling, or Suggestion Schemes help in strengthening the bond between the management and employees. The importance of congenial working conditions cannot be stressed enough in motivating employees and encouraging them to give of their best. It has been remarked, and rightly so, that, while the modern workplace seems to resemble more and more a place of relaxation, sport, which is seeing increasing competition, is becoming more and more of a hard job!

Qualifications for a PRO: From the preceding detailed description of the job profile of PROs it is evident that they have to be primarily and essentially good communicators. This implies that they not only be able to read, write and speak one or more languages, but also possess soft skills in dealing with people tactfully. They may be called upon to write and often edit written work. They need to groom juniors and train them to take on greater responsibility. In dealing with the internal employees, they need to address their problems. This implies that they have to be good listeners too. Redressing grievances, settling disputes, organizing or re-organizing the workforce, and motivating them, call for developing empathy and understanding. As PROs deal also with the image, the ability to wield the camera for photography or films is a great asset. In fact photo journalism and documentary film making are very useful tools in communicating an organization's plans and progress. Modern technology, which has shown a dramatic progress, has further empowered and facilitated communication with video cams, cameras with mobile phones, and computers, which enable not only power point presentations but also video-conferencing and film making. Since they are called upon to interact with media persons, whether print or audio-visual, i.e., the press or the T.V., it is imperative that they be confident as speakers. In fact, organisations appoint one person as their official spokesperson. These spokespersons need to be senior, experienced, tactful, with a cool temperament in order to field difficult and often tricky questions posed by media persons intending to extract inadvertent, hasty and spontaneous replies that could be used, out of context, to damage an organization's image. Appointing just one spokesperson who alone is authorized to speak for the organization ensures that there is but one uniform response and not multiple ones that could be misconstrued. This prized ability to speak judiciously and be able to impact the public at large is what earns the PROs the tag of —engineers of public opinion, which, though perhaps not flattering, speaks of the immense influence they can wield.

In conclusion, one could say that PROs of the present day have indeed come a long way from the time of their original, humble practice to occupy a pre-eminent position, particularly in the context of a globalised economy. But one also needs to bear in mind that in times of a downturn, they are the first victims on the chopping block, the first to be fired, as their job profile is not so skill specific as to be considered indispensable. But in times of crisis they, by conveying the right kind of information, at the right place and at the right time, can convert the resentment and ire of the public to sympathy for the organization. They dispel ignorance and provide the correct details. They can wean the public from apathy and an uncaring attitude to an interested and committed one. They can help dislodge prejudice and bring a turnaround to a better understanding. Thus, they can achieve the enviable feat of effecting a significant shift by transforming a negative perception about an organization to a positive one. Little wonder, then, that more and more institutes are offering a full-fledged course in this interesting and challenging professional opportunity, enabling a growing number of youngsters with requisite skills to avail of a demanding but satisfying job option.