



Introduction to Public Relations

Learning Outcomes

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

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

Introduction to Public Relations

The Public Relations Environment

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 counsellor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.

As a management function, public relations encompasses the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.
- Counselling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action, and
- Communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.
- Researching, conducting, and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programmes of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations, and other programmes.
- Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.
- Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities — in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above.
- Examples of the knowledge that may be required in the professional practice of public relations include communication arts, psychology, social psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and the principles of management and ethics. Technical knowledge and skills are required for opinion research, public-issues analysis, media relations, direct mail, institutional advertising, publications, film/video productions, special events, speeches, and presentations.

In helping to define and implement policy, the public relations practitioner uses a variety of professional communication skills and plays an integrative role both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment.

Public relations (PR), is used in a huge range of industries and in each one slightly different skills and competencies have emerged among practitioners. As a result, there is no one universally agreed definition of PR (Grunig 1992; L'Etang 1996; White and Mazur 1996; Moloney 2000). The likelihood is that if you ask three practitioners and three academics to define PR, all six answers will be different in some way. In part, this is because the profession is still young.

Harlow (1976) found 472 different definitions of PR coined between 1900 and 1976. He built his own definition from these findings, offering:

'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 principal tools.' (Harlow 1976: 36)

Definitions of Public Relations

Attempts at defining the concept of Public Relations have resulted in people primarily referring to one or a few elements, or describing only a few of the many functions that "Public Relations" performs. Let us first clarify the meaning and definition of the term "Public Relations".

We will take up a few of the major definitions given by eminent persons in the field.

Examine the dictionary meaning of PR: In its threefold definition of the term, the third edition of Webster's New International Dictionary describes Public Relations 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, organization or institution and the publics".
- "the art or science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill".

Now, look at some well known definitions of Public Relations.

An important definition of Public Relations was given by two public relations' professionals, Scot M.Cutlip and Allen H. Center, authors of the famous book "Effective Public Relations". They say:

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

The Institute of Public Relations in the UK devoted prolonged attention to evolving a comprehensive definition of Public Relations. Their exercise yielded a definition, which now generally finds favour with Public Relations practitioners in many parts of the world. According to the Institute, Public Relations is defined as:

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

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

Edward L. Bernays, the doyen of Public Relations in USA, defines it as "the attempt by information, persuasion and adjustment to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution."

An interesting and modern definition of Public Relations is the Mexican statement made at an International Conference of Public Relations institutions held in Mexico City in 1978.

“Public Relations practice is the art of social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation and the public interest”.

This is a very helpful and practical definition. First of all, it introduces the need for research, to audit or assess the situation, and to consider the implications of what is discovered. Second, it stresses the advisory role of Public Relations, its service to management. Third, it shows that Public Relations programmes must be planned. Finally, it states that PR action must not only benefit its sponsors, but must also be in public interest, that is it should be socially responsible.

Simpler Definitions

D.S. Mehta defines Public Relations "as an attempt, through information, persuasion, adjustment, and contacts, to seek support for some activity, cause, movement, institution, product or service.

Analysis of Definitions

Having gone through these definitions, you will find that though they may differ in their emphasis on certain elements, they have a great deal in common. Let us see what Public Relations is as seen in these definitions:

- A planned effort or management function.
- The relationship between an organisation and its publics.

- Evaluation of public attitudes and opinions.
- An organisation's policies, procedures, and actions as they relate to its publics.
- Steps taken to ensure that these policies, procedures and actions are in the public interest-and socially responsible.
- Execution of an action and/or communication programme.
- Development of rapport, goodwill, understanding and acceptance through a two way communication. This analysis should be helpful to you in identifying the purpose, functions and the scope of Public Relations itself.

To avoid confusion in terminology it would be better to differentiate Public Relations from other elements or functions that it performs.

Nature and Scope of Public Relations

Public Relations as a process serves a number of functions. While the definitions may vary, the nature of Public Relations indicates that it is essentially a task promoting rapport and goodwill between a person, firm or institution and the community at large through dissemination of information. It seeks to earn support, mobilise or solicit favour for an idea, a cause, or a problem, for an institution or an individual. It uses a two-way communication in dealing with public opinion. First, it assesses the attitudes of the public towards the organisation. Next, it executes communication programmes to gain public understanding and acceptance of the management's point of view. Public Relations aims to bring about harmonious and mutually advantageous adjustment between an organisation and the community through dissemination of ideas and also by providing feedback from the public to the management. It also evaluates public attitudes, identifies policies that interest public and executes the programme of communication.

Good public relations implies a sound moral base, i. e. communication must be sincere and based on facts. This may be expressed as striving for three objectives:

- To attract attention;
- To win belief; and
- To impart understanding.

These steps are taken to reach to a goal: to convince people that they should adopt a certain attitude or pursue a certain course of action.

To perform this feat, public relations must begin at the heart of the organisation it serves- the management. It must find the answer to these three questions:

- What is the message that the management wants to impart?
- To whom?

- How'?

And a fourth question is added to these three: What is the purpose?

Without knowing what, whom, who and why, a public relation programme can serve no purpose. A purposeful Public Relations programme should:

1. Understand the organisation's nature and purpose thoroughly;
2. Communicate this understanding to others, i.e. the publics;
3. Observe and evaluate the effects of the communication.

Elements in Public Relations

Briefly, Public Relation involves four major elements. They are inter-related and overlapping. In fact, one tends to lead the other, these are:

- i. Two-way communication;
- ii. Mutual Understanding
- iii. Caring for Public Opinion
- iv. Social Responsibility.

i. **Two-Way Communication**

Public Relations philosophy puts great emphasis on the need for two-way communication. It is now fairly well accepted that feedback is important. How does one get it? The foremost objective in any public relations programme, therefore, is to improve existing channels of communication and to establish two-way flow of information. However, this is not as easy as it sounds! Even if you have a strong desire to communicate, there may be great difficulties in achieving success because of the barriers in communication process.

Most of the problems in organisations stem from the lack of communication. Managements are constantly advised to give prompt and regular information to employees and the public.

ii. **Mutual Understanding**

A Public Relations policy for any organisation, for example, should include both inward activity and intelligence to assess the policies and behaviour of the management, to see whether action is necessary to improve the organisation's image; and outward activity to inform the public about its achievement. You may be curious about one point where does the question of 'mutual interest arise? In any public relationship there are at least two parties involved. First, there is the organisation which has something to promote, often in competition with others. Second, there are the "publics" to which the organisation directs its efforts. Thus, there are two interests to be met: The private interest and the public interest, generally, these interests are often in conflict.

Each party interprets the public interest in terms of its own self-interest. Let us take an example of a manufacturing industry. It is exposed to pressures from different sides. The consumer wants to pay the lowest price for the goods he needs, the worker wants the highest wage of salary for producing goods, the stock holder wants the maximum dividend or profit for his investment, the government wants you to pay the sales and excise taxes on the goods you are selling, each group has its own interests. Resolving these conflicts of interests is the essential part of public relations because satisfying these interests is essential to the enduring success of the organization. This can only be done by achieving “mutual understanding” between the organization and all these interests. For this; two-way communication is necessary by providing information to the people and seeking “public interest through an informed “public opinion”.

iii. **Caring for Public Opinion**

Public opinion has been described as the “Source spring” of Public Relations. Abraham Lincoln once said: “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail without it nothing can succeed”. Public relations practice requires understanding and unwavering faith in the wisdom of an informed public opinion. Public relations provide the necessary information to various public interest groups, in the interest of the organizations. Satisfying the public interest to the “mutual advantage of all parties in conflict, is a basic requirement of sound public relations. Arriving at this definition of mutual interest requires satisfactory two-way communication as a pre-requisite to achieving goodwill.

As mentioned earlier, public opinion affects an organization at many levels; official bodies, contact with stockholders, relations with distributors, wholesalers, reactions of buyers or consumers; and internal relations with employees. In all these fields there is a need for constant attempt to establish and maintain mutual understanding to avoid any possible cause of conflict.

iv. **Social Responsibility**

The social responsibility of any organization stems from what has been discussed earlier that all organizations work for the stakeholders with the main aim of serving their interests. Some organizations, though earning profit form society, do not show their concern for the welfare of people and society at large and therefore they end up having problems. Public Relations seeks to adjust itself to the needs and aspirations of the community, it serves and identifies the interests of the organization with that of the community.

Scope of Public Relations Practice

Public relations’ is an "umbrella" term covering many types of functions that it performs. Followings are some of the functions performed by public relations

- Creating publicity for the organisation, its products and services

- Employee publications like a house journal
- General Body meeting reports
- Preparation of booklets, pamphlets
- Advertising
- Community work, corporate donations
- Public - speaking
- Radio and TV programmes
- Direct mail
- Arranging, exhibitions, Tours, Open Houses
- Training employees in customer relations
- Answering queries from media and public; issuing of press releases
- Making films, documentaries, video
- Company policy formulation
- Interesting with legislators and government
- Company correspondence
- Personal calls
- Sales training
- Promotion
- Attending and arranging of special events, parties, etc.

But one thing should be borne in mind. No two Public Relations practitioner's programmes or functions are exactly the same. They differ from organisation to organisation and person to person.

Role of Public Relations

There are wide variety of institutions that serve a society such as businesses, trade unions, Government agencies, voluntary agencies, foundations, and hospitals, educational and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or "publics" such as employees, members, consumers, local communities, shareholders, other institutions and with society at large.

"Public Relations is the communication and interpretation of ideas and information to the public's of an institution: the communication and interpretation of information, ideas, and opinions from those publics to the institution in the effort to bring the two into harmonious adjustment".

Simply put, public relations is all about communication. The three key elements to the communications process, as follows.

What do you want to say?

The message is crucial. There is no point in using PR techniques for the sake of it. Your message may be to inform customers about a new product, or shareholders about planned activities; to tell employees about a factory closure or suppliers about a change in distribution patterns. Before putting pen to paper, or calling on the services of the PRO, establish what message, what 'angle' you want to try to put across. Bear in mind that it should be 'newsy' or controversial to stand a reasonable chance of making any impression or being taken up by the media.

Who Are You Trying To Reach?

Clearly this must depend on the message you are trying to put across. But don't forget that there are many distinct and separate target groups that you should seek to influence. There are obvious ones such as your customers, but even this target group needs to be broken down into smaller targets: housewives on estates, to take one extreme, or customers for left-handed screwdrivers, to take another.

Then there are the not-so-obvious groups such as civil servants, MPs or local authorities, all of whom can make a major impact on your business. Increasingly important is informing the financial community of what is happening. Good investor relations can help keep your share price up and be of crucial importance during takeover bids, either when you are on the defensive or the attack.

How can you get your message across?

This is where good PR comes into its own. PROs who are professional know which medium to aim for: trade or national press, or radio and television. They can also suggest when it will be more effective to use sponsorship, exhibitions, direct mail, or a combination of several, to do the job.

Limitations of Public Relations

Public Relations undoubtedly is an effective way to achieve smooth relationships with the public, safeguard reputations, promote sales and build a corporate image. However, it should not be seen as a solution for all ills. It is to be borne in mind that Public Relations can help to achieve recognition only when there is a matching performance. It is not propaganda. It cannot afford to disregard ethics, truth or public good. It is not hollow publicity effort directed at achieving sales. It is not also a fire alarm service that can help reverse a crisis because goodwill cannot be established overnight. Hence, Public Relations is a sustained long term sincere effort, which along with genuine performance and concern can earn public goodwill.

Public Relations – Publics

Public Relation and "Publics" are inseparable. Without publics there cannot be any Public Relations. What does the term "Publics" mean?

Simply put " public may be defined as any group of people tied together, however loosely by some common bond or interest or concern", for example, the shareholders of a company.

Publics are divided into two categories – External and Internal.

External Publics are those outside an organisation that have some relationship to the organisation and can have widespread impact on its functioning, like government officials, the media, relatives, suppliers, customers, competitors, investors, bankers, local community organizations.

Internal Publics are those which an organisation most closely relates to - such as the management, stockholders, employees, dealers, sales representatives and other marketing personnel.

Nature of Organisation and its Publics

As mentioned earlier, the nature of an organisation usually dictates its publics and one can draw some major distinctions applied to the nature of organisations and its publics.

- 1) Organisations with similar goals and purposes have similar publics. For instance, the daily newspapers in the country sustain themselves by attracting readers and advertisers; hence, reading and advertising publics are basic publics for daily newspapers.
- 2) The unique nature of an organisation can often make its publics different from organisations which seem similar to it. For instance all colleges exist for the purpose of educating students, but some colleges admit only women.
- 3) As organisations change in nature and purpose, so do their publics. For instance, if a textiles manufacturing firm switches over to readymade garments, the nature of its publics also changes.
- 4) It should also be noted that there are publics within the publics and many of them are hidden from you. These are in a dormant state. When issues arise that could affect them, these dormant publics begin to rise and get organised. They may cause innumerable problems if their presence is not detected and steps are not taken to handle them. For instance, booksellers are the immediate public for a college. But the people who supply paper to these book-sellers form a latent public (hidden from view). Suddenly, due to government policy, there may be a crisis in the paper industry. These paper merchants may then create problems for the book-sellers and therefore for the college indirectly.

Identification of Publics

Publics are diverse, ever changing and virtually infinite in number. Also, the multiplicity of publics can cause internal conflicts, as different publics have different interests and needs. This may cause conflicts, these conflicts cannot be easily resolved. For instance, the employees as a public are interested in knowing more about an organisation, its personnel policies, wage policies, incentives for the work force etc. The customers want to know the product range, quality of products, prices, after sales service, etc.

The Public Relations practitioner must carefully identify the interests of different groups and their relevancy to a particular project. In order to communicate appropriate messages effectively the Public Relations practitioner will have to undertake research to find out who these publics really are, what they

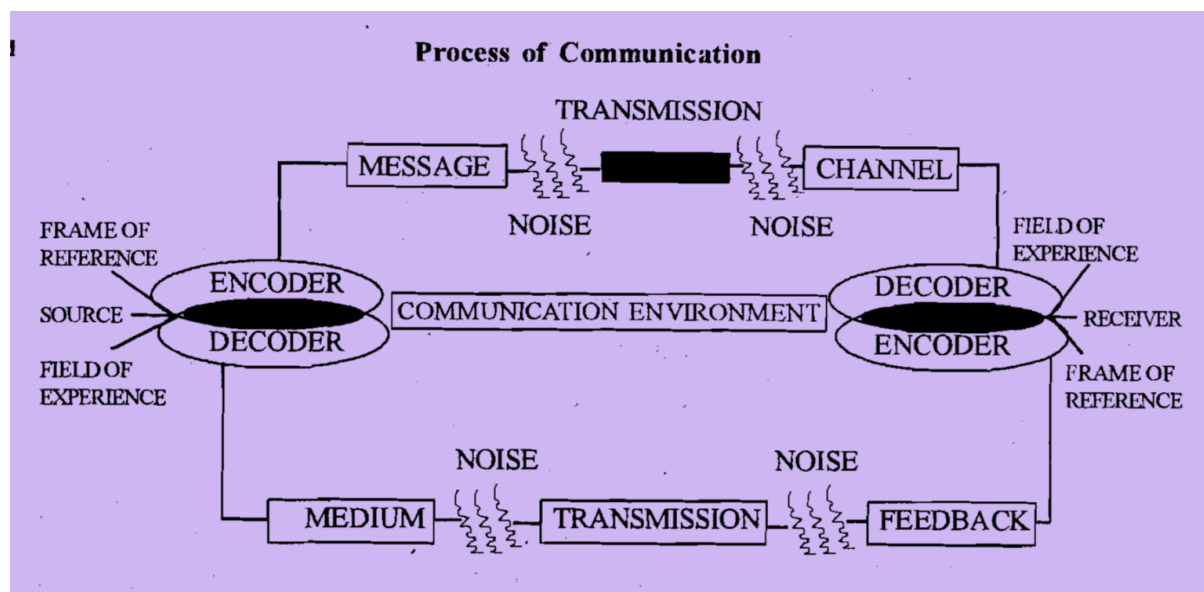
think, and what they want,. Also, Public Relations should not assign importance to major public alone. While it must determine the majority opinion it should also consider the view point of the smaller or minor publics. Sometimes, the Public Relations practitioner has to study the psychographics – the emotional and behavioural characteristics that define each group. Psychographics generally show how one public may be similar to another in interest or actions.

The identification and segmentation of publics is an important step for effective and meaningful communication in Public Relations.

The Process of Communication

From what you have learnt till now, it must be clear that Public Relations practice is the continuing effort for creating harmonious adjustment between an organisation and the various interests it serves. This can be achieved through two-way communication resulting in mutual understanding of each other's interests. In this process the Public Relations practitioner plays the role of communicator, catalyst and counsellor.

Before we go any further let us take a look at the "Process of Communication" and the concept of "Two-way Communication".



Communication is the art and science of sending or transmitting message, information, ideas, emotions from one person to another and obtaining a feedback (reaction) of the message sent. This means that the act of "communication" involves at least these five elements:

- a) Source / Communicator (the sender of information)
- b) Context
- c) Message (use of symbols, like words, gestures)
- d) Channel (a medium of transmission like voice, radio) etc.

- e) Receiver (one who receives and comprehends the message)
- f) Feedback (Response of the receiver to the message, transmitted back to the sender, through medium).

The Public Relations Process

Having understood the process of communication and the role of two-way communication, we shall now briefly look at the "Process of Public Relations".

Public Relations today involves complete analysis and understanding of all the factors that influence people's attitudes towards an organisation. This is achieved through what has been popularly called "Public Relation's Four-stage Process". It consists of the following stages:

- I) Fact-finding - research analysis of opinion, environment.
- II) Planning - policy formulation, programming, goal setting.
- III) Communication - implementing planned communication activities, execution.
- IV) Evaluation - feedback and adjustment/course modification.

Benefits of Public Relations

The primary benefits derived from public relations are:

- Public Relations is a means for the public to have its desires and interests felt by the institutions. It also speaks to the public on behalf of the organisations to help create public acceptance and recognition.
- It helps promotion of a company's goods or services and builds up 'positive image'.
- Public Relations is a means to achieve mutual adjustment between institutions and groups, establishing smoother relationships that benefit the organisation.
- It can help to attract talented personnel for the organisation.
- Public Relations is an essential element in the communication system that enables individuals to be informed on many aspects of subjects that affect their lives.
- Public Relations personnel can help activate the organisation's social conscience and thus foster the goodwill in community.
- It can help overcome public misconceptions about the organisation by circulating correct information.
- It can help to earn the loyalty of employees by showing interest in their welfare. Thus it may prevent labour problems and would help to solve any disputes smoothly.

Public Relations, consciously practised, is a universal activity. It functions in all aspects of life. Each of us, basically practice principles of public relations in major areas for seeking the acceptance, co-operation, or affection of others. Public Relations professionals only practice it in a more professional manner.

What Public Relations People Do?

Lots of people work in PR and in a range of roles. There is a huge variety of job titles in trade or national newspapers, including public relations/corporate communications consultant, executive, manager, director, officer, advisor, counsellor, etc.

Actually there are three simple categories of where people work in public relations:

1. In-house (employed by an organisation, whether a public or private company or a public body, charity or non-governmental organisation, NGO).
2. Consultancy (agency where practitioners work for one or more different clients for a fee).
3. Freelance practitioner (where an individual works for himself and is employed by in-house departments or consultancies on a short-term contract basis either for a specific project or to fill in during peaks in demand or because staff absence requires additional resource).

While much of the work is the same across these categories, there are key differences:

- In-house: get to know one organisation in depth, work across wide range of PR activities, from writing/editing house journal to arranging visits by or to MPs/opinion formers, etc., get to know a sector or industry well, e.g. music, motoring.
- Consultancy: work across many accounts, variety of clients, changing environment, may work in specialist area such as technology, finance or public affairs.

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 to further organisational goals	Researching, planning and executing a campaign to improve ethical reputation of organisation
Issues management	Monitoring political, social, economic and technological environment	Considering effect of US economy and presidential campaign on UK organisation
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:

- ✓ *Introduction to Public Relations and Advertising, (2000), By D F du Plessis*
- ✓ *Public Relations: An Introduction, (2000), By Shirley Harrison*