



Public Relations Process

Learning Outcomes

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

Public Relations Process

Introduction

The way each organisation manages structures and undertakes its public relations activity is unique; that is because every organisation is unique. A single-issue pressure group has a focused purpose and its range of target publics is often very specific. A large government department, such as the UK's Department of Health, touches the lives of every citizen in a variety of ways, from prenatal ultrasound scanning to childhood and adult illnesses, through to terminal care. Some business enterprises operate in tiny niche markets in one country while others operate in numerous markets on a global scale.

Public relations is used by some organisations in a very narrow way, typically to support sales and marketing activity. An example is a small business promoting its menus, prices and opening hours to students through the local media. Other organisations use public relations in a whole host of ways, for example, a large retailer such as Wal-Mart will develop relationship programmes with financial analysts, government officials and politicians, the local community, employees, consumers and suppliers.

Sometimes public relations is a stand-alone function; sometimes it is located within marketing or human resources. A number of large enterprises now have their senior public relations person on the board with all other communication disciplines, including marketing reporting to them.

Public relations also operates under a number of guises: corporate communication, corporate affairs, public affairs, communication management, public relations, reputation management . . . the list seems to expand almost every year.

This unit examines the range of factors that influence the way public relations is managed and organised in different types of organisations. It also points to some current societal and regulatory developments which will affect the way public relations is conducted in the future – a future that is full of opportunity and growth.

Importance of Context

Organisations do not exist in isolation. Business history is littered with companies that did not spot changing industry trends quickly enough and adapt Olivetti used to make superb typewriters, but where is it now? Other companies such as Nike and McDonald's have been held to account by activist groups over their production activities in the developing world; activism is now a part of modern life in developed societies.

Public relations means what the words imply. It is about the relationships organisations have with various publics, both internal and external. Those publics comprise people who are, in turn, affected by developments and trends in society. The environment in which organisations operate is dynamic. Society is changing: new issues and trends arise, some of them very quickly. For example, corporate social responsibility was not such a well-recognised issue for many large organisations even 10 years ago.

Similarly, organisations themselves are changing. The workforce is different – for example, there are more women and part-time workers – and attitudes are different. Because people are empowered in

their lives outside work, for example, in having more choices about where they live and the lifestyles they lead, they are no longer willing to remain disempowered at work. Furthermore, organizations are much more accountable to external publics who want to know what they stand for, how they conduct themselves and the impact they have on society and the environment.

Given the critical role that public relations has in ‘establishing and maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics’ it is clear that careful consideration has to be given to both the external and internal contexts in which it operates. This will, of course, vary between different organisations, depending on the nature of their business, their size, their sphere of operation and their culture.

External Environment

The external environment is vitally important for organizations because it determines the future. Smart organisations constantly scan the external environment to identify emerging issues. Having spotted these issues early, precious time is bought for the organisation to adjust itself to those issues, to engage with them and to influence their development. The external environment can be divided into two main areas: the ‘macro’ and the ‘task’ environment.

Macro Environment

This environment might be described as containing the ‘big picture’ issues over which the organisation has no control. These are the issues that emerge from the actions of governments, economic and societal trends and from scientific and technological developments. Sometimes called the ‘remote’ or ‘societal’ environment, the macro environment originates beyond, usually irrespective of, any single organisation’s operating situation (Steyn and Puth 2000).

<p style="text-align: center;">Political</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Employment legislation Trade legislation Change of government Political alliances between nations</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Economic</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Interest rates Levels of employment Value of the currency Energy costs</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Social</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Lifestyle changes Social attitudes Demographic changes Purchasing habits</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Technological</p> <p style="text-align: center;">New technologies Access to technology Cost of research and development Impact of new technologies on work practices</p>

FIGURE 1.1 Example of a PEST analysis

To make sense of this, environmental analysts examine the macro environment under a series of headings. The most well-known analytical tool is PEST, which segments the overall environment into four topic areas:

1. Political,
2. Economic,
3. Social and
4. Technological.

Figure 3.1 presents some examples of subjects that could come under each of these areas. What is important about these subjects is the impact they might have on existing relationships or what they reveal about the need to develop a relationship.

Clearly, different organisations will be impacted in different ways by these macro issues. An arms manufacturer will be very susceptible to political shifts (e.g. arms export bans to particular countries) and a clothes manufacturer needs to be acutely aware of social trends (e.g. consumer preferences based on changing lifestyles). However, a careful eye needs to be kept on all areas because they will affect the longer term issues that organisations, and therefore public relations, will need to address.

It is important to understand trends emerging from the political, economic, technological and social environments and how these various trends interact with each other. While there are literally hundreds of issues and trends in the wider environment, it is worth picking out a few for special mention. The themes of globalisation, information, pluralism and consumerism/individualism and, of course, the news media, are selected here because of their relevance to public relations.

Globalisation

Public relations people who work for global organizations will understand the need to communicate across timelines, cultures, languages and different communication delivery systems. But even if the organisation is local, what it does may have global impacts and attract global attention. A local clothes store may buy stock from an intermediary who is supplied by a manufacturer who damages the environment in a developing country.

Organisations also need to be sensitive about what they put on their website for national audiences, as websites may be accessed by people from other cultures who may take great offence at what is said – for example, encouragement to drink alcohol may offend cultures where alcohol is frowned on.

Information and Information Technology

This is connected to the theme of globalisation. The fact that information can be sent and accessed immediately across time and geographical boundaries brings great opportunities, but also can provide threats for the professional communicator. Activists can organize quickly and misinformation can spread worldwide at the click of a mouse. Contrariwise, organisations can engage with stakeholders in innovative ways. They can provide information instantly and research topics thoroughly without relying

on physical information resources such as reference libraries. All this bring pressures for organisations and communicators that need to be geared for action 24/7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week).

It also needs to be remembered that there are still many communities that do not have access to these technologies, which also need to be catered for.

Pluralism

It is thought that a plural (diverse) society offers the most favourable conditions for democracy and protection against totalitarianism. Within a highly industrialised and urbanised society such as in Britain, for example, the merging of values and ideals, together with understanding and accepting different cultures and alternative views, are taken as a sign of advancing civilisation. But at the same time it increases uncertainty and insecurity as people question religious beliefs and authority norms. Counter to this, the rise of nationalism, fundamentalism and activism can pose a threat to these liberalizing forces. Stepping among and around the tensions involved is a great challenge for professional communicators. They have to assert or defend a particular position without offending anyone. They have to consider their role in conflict resolution and dialogue, especially if one party refuses to accept any compromise. For example, reconciling pro- and anti-abortion lobbyists can be seen as a major challenge.

Consumerism and Individualism

In consumer societies, people know their rights. Expectations are rising all the time and many organizations feel under pressure by the demands placed on them. Similarly, some would say that in an attempt to replace the old certainties, people in developed societies are becoming ever more consumerist and very individualistic. In place of church and community, they are seeking to associate with like-minded others in pursuance of their own tastes and values. The number of pressure groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), special interest associations and clubs of all kinds, many supported by the new technologies that facilitate global affiliations, is growing.

Professional communicators have to deal with knowledgeable, assertive individuals and groups. For example, in Britain, the parents' lobby for healthier school dinners (given prominence by the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver) encouraged by Prime Minister Tony Blair he made election promises to improve food quality in schools.

News Media

The news media, comprising newspapers and broadcast channels, have been revolutionised over the last few years. Global news businesses owned by powerful groups and individuals, often with their own political agendas, are setting the political backdrop and leading public opinion in a way that simply was not the case in the last century. Furthermore, the demand for 24/7 news, along with the increasing amounts of space that journalists have to cover without a matching increase in personnel, means that the media are becoming increasingly dependent on sources with their own biases – often public relations professionals. An environment where 'Privation of the media' is becoming more prevalent could be regarded as advantageous for the public relations industry.

Task Environment

Apart from the links to the macro external environment, organisations are also affected by things closer to home, termed the 'task environment'. These factors are more within their control and usually relate to groups of individuals (publics) who have quite definable characteristics, such as customers or shareholders. Esman (1972) has divided those publics into four categories that are characterised by their relationship with an organisation (see Figure 3.2).

The following may help to explain how these linkages work:

- *Enabling* linkages connect the organisation to those who have the power and resources to allow it to exist.
- *Functional* linkages either provide some kind of input to the organisation or consume its outputs.
- *Normative* linkages are to peer organisations.
- *Diffused* linkages are to those who have no formal relationship with the organisation, but may take an interest in it.

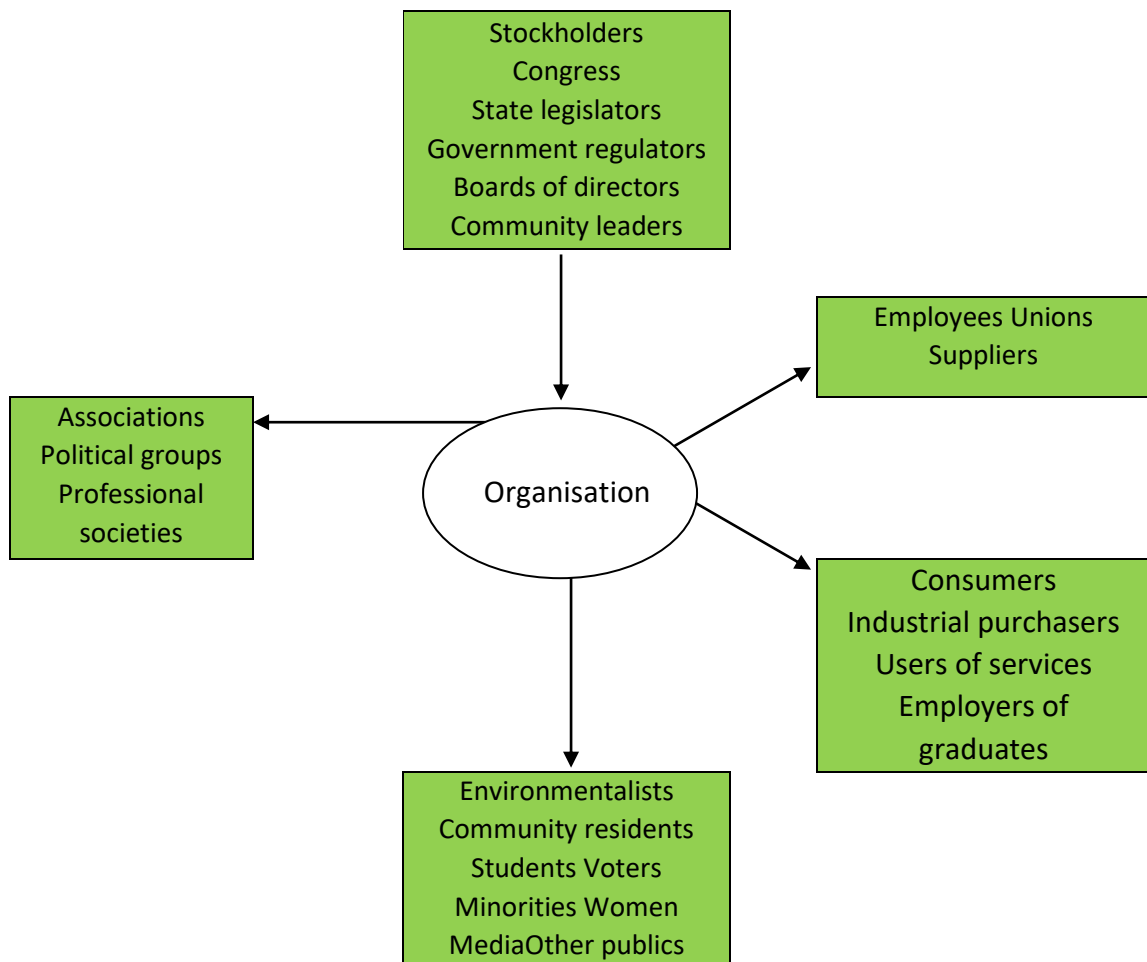


FIGURE 1.2 Esman's organisational relationship linkages (*source: Grunig and Hunt 1984: 141*)

Internal Environment

As well as being profoundly affected by external factors, the way communication is organised is shaped by the nature of the enterprise itself and the type of operation it undertakes. The kind of enterprise will determine the balance of public relations activities and their relative priority. Here are just some of the factors that should be considered.

Sector

If the organisation is located in a stable, well-established industry sector such as furniture manufacturing, it is likely that pre-planned and sustained public relations activity can be maintained. Fast growing and turbulent sectors such as IT will require quick, *reactive*, as well as proactive, programmes. That is not to say that activity should not be planned, but an inbuilt capability to react to the fast moving market is a key requirement.

Different sectors require different types of programme. The emphasis in the confectionary sector is likely to be in marketing communication, whereas local authority work is more likely to focus on community involvement. Furthermore, work for a government department, indeed any work for the public or not-for-profit sector, requires communication professionals to be aware of the need for accountability to the public who pay taxes. Work in the private sector means that shareholders and the profit motive are significant and this creates different priorities for communication.

Size

Small organisations usually have small, multifunctional public relations departments. Public relations services could even be totally outsourced to a public relations consultancy. It may be, that public relations is only part of the responsibilities of a single individual, such as a sales, marketing or general office manager. Such individuals may be part of the management team and their activities will be seen as critical to the success of the organisation.

Large organisations may well have large public relations departments with several public relations specialists taking on a whole raft of activities. They may or may not work in standalone public relations departments and they may or may not be part of management.

Stage of Organisational Development

Public relations activity is often dictated by the stage of development that the organisation has reached. When the organisation is at *start-up* stage, most suppliers, customers and employees will be well known. Thus public relations effort is often face to face and the emphasis is on growth. Hence marketing communications, which is aimed at supporting the sales of goods and services will be very important.

When companies reach maturity, it is probable that they will undertake the full range of public relations activity.

Culture

One of the most significant influences in determining how the public relations function is organised is the culture of an organisation. There are many definitions of *organisational culture* but a commonly articulated view is that it is 'the set of conscious and unconscious beliefs and values, and the patterns of behaviour (including language and symbol use) that provide identity and form a framework of meaning for a group of people'. Culture, in other words, is a shorthand term for ways in which people think and behave within an organisation. Leaders of organisations, too, can make a difference, in that they can attempt to define and shape *corporate culture* – how they want people to think and behave. Leaders, in turn, will be affected by their *national cultures*, which will have specific characteristics – for example, strong individualism has been identified as a characteristic of American culture. No value judgements are being made here – the culture is driven by the nature of the organisation and the job of work that needs to be done. Business enterprises have to make money in a competitive environment. Their public relations functions will tend to be proactive, seeking to exploit competitive advantage and supporting the profit making activities in the firm.

Public sector organisations are characterised by a service mission. They are usually social enterprises concerned with supporting the lives of citizens. Making money is not their priority, although they need to demonstrate that they spend it wisely in the service of the community. They react to the requirements of their publics and act in predictable, dependable ways. Their public relations departments are often concerned with providing information or engaging their publics in dialogue, therefore a systematized and interactive mode of operation is appropriate.

Table 3.3 Example of how public relations activity may be structured at various stages of the organizational.

	Startup	Growth	Maturity	Decline
Public relations orientation	Marketing communication	Marketing communication Internal communication	Marketing communication Community relations Internal communication Financial public relations Public affairs	Marketing communication Investor relations Internal communication
Examples of public relations activity	Face to face <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings • Presentations • Social events Printed literature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product/service brochures • Corporate brochure • Business cards Website Media relations	Merchandise Joint promotions Media relations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News releases • Press conferences • Facility visits • Features • Exclusives Internal communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefings • Notice boards 	Corporate social responsibility programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • educational support • charity giving • employee volunteering • community projects Investor relations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • city analysts 	Chris management Mergers and acquisitions Internal communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with HR to handle layoffs and redundancies or new working arrangements Marketing

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News releases • Press conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • briefings • shareholder liaison • financial press <p>Issues management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government lobbying <p>Internal communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intranet • employees conferences • news letters • project groups 	<p>communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • customer relation <p>Supplier relations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retention
Staffing	Public relations undertaken as part of marketing duties	Public relations specialist or consultancy	Public relations department and consultancy if required	Special public relations staff and specialist consultancies

Note: this chart is progressive: all the activities undertaken at an earlier stage in the lifecycle will also be undertaken at a later stage.

System Theory

Systems theory describes organisations as a set of subsystems that affect each other and jointly interact with the external environment. Organisations have to adjust and adapt as they change from within and as the environment changes. They form part of a social system that consists of individuals or groups (publics) such as suppliers, local communities, employees, customers and governments who all interact with it. Public relations is there to develop and maintain good relationships with these publics, to help the organisation achieve its objectives.

So which subsystem does public relations fit into? When considering this question Grunig and Hunt (1984) have turned to the work of organisational theorists who describe organisations as having typically five subsystems (see Figure 3.3).

The following may help explain Figure 3.3:

- *Production subsystems produce the products or services of an organisation.*
- *Maintenance subsystems work throughout the organisation encouraging employees to work together – human resources, for example.*
- *Disposal subsystems encompass the marketing and distribution of products and services.*
- *Adaptive subsystems help the organisation adjust to its changing environment, such as the strategic planning role.*
- *Management subsystems control and direct all the other subsystems and manage any conflicting demands that they might have. They also negotiate between the requirements of the environment (for example, demand for a particular product) and the survival needs of the organisation (supply of that product). Usually the board and senior management of the organisation undertake this responsibility.*

Taking a systems perspective, it can be seen that public relations professionals have a *boundary-spanning* role. They work at the boundaries within organisations, working with all the internal subsystems by helping them to communicate internally. They also help these subsystems with their external communication by both providing expert advice on what and how to communicate and by helping them with implementation. For example, public relations may work closely with marketing (disposal subsystem) on product support and with senior management (management subsystem) on investor relations.

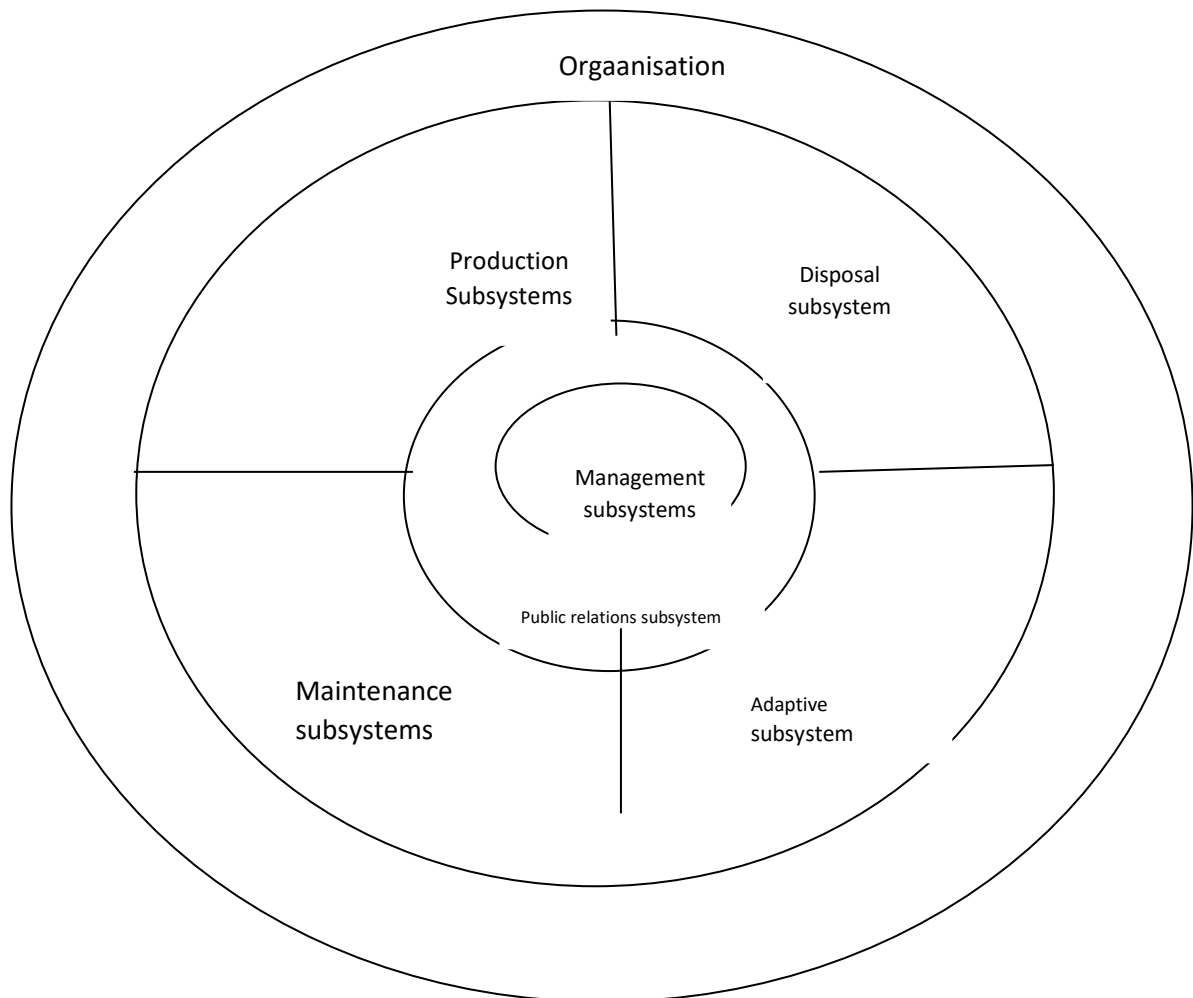


FIGURE 1.3 Organisational subsystems (*source: Grunig and Hunt 1984: 9*)

Location of Public Relations in Organisations

Apart from all the external and internal considerations just discussed, the location of public relations within an organisation depends on a variety of other factors: the position of the most senior practitioner; the tasks allocated to the function; and how it is situated in relation to other functions.

Position of the Senior Practitioner

The position of the *senior public relations practitioner* provides a good indication of how the function is regarded within organisations. Grunig and Hunt (1984) say that public relations can be seen as valued when the function is within the 'dominant coalition' – in other words, the group of people who determine 'what the organisation's goals should be'. Certainly, an aspiration of public relations professionals over many decades has been to obtain a place on the board of organisations. Undoubtedly progress has been made towards this goal. Now all the UK's FTSE100 companies have public relations departments (CIPR 2004) and there are indications that more senior practitioners are being appointed to board positions (CIPR/DTI 2003; Gregory and Edwards 2004).

Board level and senior advisor communicators will usually take a research-based approach to public relations. They will know their public's views and be well informed of all the issues likely to affect the organisation. Their role will be to counsel and advise senior managers. They will also know the business intimately and be good at business as well as at communication.

Public Relations Roles

Research undertaken by US researchers Broom and Smith (1979) and Dozier and Broom (1995) identifies two dominant public relations roles:

- The communication manager, who plans and manages public relations programmes, advises management, makes communication policy decisions and oversees their implementation.
- The communication technician, who is not involved in organisational decision making, but who implements public relations programmes such as writing press releases, organising events, producing web content. Technicians usually do not get too involved in research or evaluation: they are the 'doers'.

The communication manager role itself divides into three identifiable types:

- The expert prescriber, who researches and defines public relations problems, develops programmes to tackle these problems and then implements them, sometimes with the assistance of others.
- The communication facilitator, who acts as communication broker, maintaining two-way communication between an organisation and its publics, liaising, interpreting and mediating.
- The problem-solving process facilitator, who helps others solve their communication problems, acts as a counsellor/adviser on the planning and implementation of programmes. This role can be fulfilled by specialist consultancies as well as the in-house person.

Two other roles, sitting between the manager and technician are also noted:

- Media relations role, a highly skilled job requiring profound knowledge and understanding of the media. This is not just about the dissemination of messages, but a crucial function where the needs of the media are met in a sophisticated way. This is a role often fulfilled by a senior journalist who has made the crossover to public relations.
- Communication and liaison role, meaning the individual who represents the organisation at events and meetings and creates opportunities for management to communicate with internal and external publics.

The classification into manager and technician roles does not mean that lines are fixed. Most public relations professionals perform a mix of manager and technician work, but the point is that one role will tend to predominate. Entry-level practitioners are normally entrusted with technical tasks at the initial stages of their career. As practitioners become more experienced they may move on to the manager role.

Of course, there is enormous variety within these roles. A technician employed for their writing skills may be involved in a range of work, such as writing press releases, speech writing, writing for the web, or may be involved in just one job, for example producing the house journal.

The communication manager may be responsible for the full public relations programme or, if they work for a large corporate organisation, they may be responsible for one specialist area such as government or investor relations.

Public Relations Tasks

Van Riel (1995) divides corporate communication, as he labels it, into three areas:

- *Management communication* is communication by management aimed at developing a shared vision, establishing and maintaining trust in the leadership, managing change and empowering and motivating employees. Van Riel regards management communication as the responsibility of all managers. They may have a communication expert to help them with developing effective communication, but he warns against the danger of thinking that hiring an expert absolves management of its overall responsibility.
- *Marketing communication* is aimed at supporting the sale of goods and/or services. This will include advertising, sales promotion, direct mail, personal selling and market-oriented public relations – or publicity, as he calls it. Typically this includes media relations and events. Since Van Riel wrote his book, new media marketing has emerged as a major force and public relations professionals are often involved in this.
- *Organisational communication* is a host of communication activities usually at a corporate level, not all of which will be necessarily located in the public relations department, which include public affairs, environmental communication, investor relations, labour market communication, corporate advertising, internal communication and public relations.

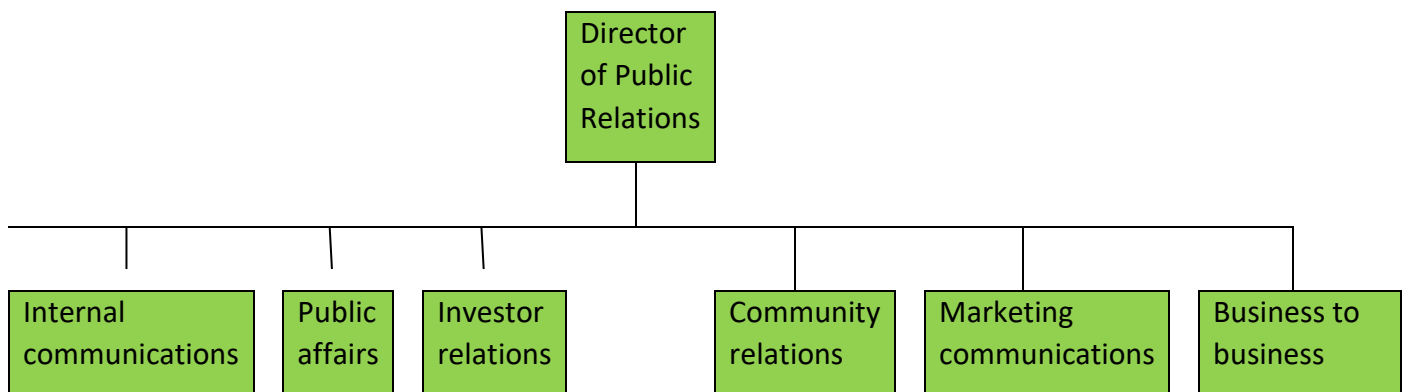


FIGURE 3.4 Public relations department structured in functions

Such a division along *functional* lines is often reflected in the structure of public relations departments. Figure 3.4 shows a typical functional structure. In such a structure an individual or group will look after all the activities falling within the area, whether these are media relations, sponsorship, events or individual relationships.

Marketing

The relationship between public relations and marketing can be a fractious one. For decades there have been non productive arguments about whether public relations is a part of marketing or vice versa. There are misconceptions on both sides.

For many marketing people public relations is all about getting free ‘publicity’ in the media to support the promotion of products and services to consumers. However, public relations, is much more than that: it is about building relationships with numerous stakeholders, using a whole range of channels and techniques. As the idea of organisations as networks of stake holding communities’ gains credence in the business world . there is growing recognition that public relations, with its particular skills in relationship building, has a role far beyond marketing communication.

<p>Writing and Editing</p> <p>Print and broadcast news releases, feature stories, newsletters, correspondence, website/online media, shareholder/annual reports, speeches, brochures, AV scripts, advertisements, product and technical materials</p> <p>Media Relations and Placement</p> <p>Contacting news media, magazines, supplements, trade publications and freelancers to get them to publish material about the organisation. Responding to media requests</p>	<p>Special Events</p> <p>Arranging and managing news conferences, conventions, openings, ceremonies, anniversaries, fund-raising events, visiting dignitaries, contests, awards, facility visits</p> <p>Speaking</p> <p>Gaining speaking platforms, coaching others, speaking to groups</p> <p>Production</p> <p>Of multimedia, artwork, typography, photography, layout, DTP, AV, either personally or by other specialists</p>
--	---

<p>Research</p> <p>Gathering information about public opinion trends, issues, political climate, legislation, media coverage, special interest groups and other concerns relating to stakeholders.</p> <p>Online searches. Designing research, surveys and hiring research firms</p> <p>Management and Administration</p> <p>Programming and planning with other managers, determining needs, prioritising, defining publics, setting goals, and objectives, developing strategy and tactics, administering personal budgets and managing programmes</p>	<p>Training</p> <p>Media training and public appearance, preparation for others, coaching others in writing and communication skills. Helping introduce change in culture, policy, structure and process</p> <p>Contact</p> <p>Liaising with media, community, internal and external groups. Listening, negotiating, managing conflict, mediating, meeting and entertaining guests and visitors</p> <p>Counselling</p> <p>Advising management on social, political and regulatory environments, crisis avoidance and management, working with others on issues management</p>
--	--

FIGURE 3.5 Cutlip and colleagues' categorisation of public relations work (source: Cutlip, Scott, M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations*, 8th Edition, © 2000,

However, marketing has some way to go in adjusting its basic philosophy. Marketing assumes that there is a 'profit' in any exchange relationship – the organisation comes out as the net beneficiary. The notion of relationships being of value in themselves is one of the key tenets of public relations and is a point of major difference between the disciplines. However, as the two functions develop it is inevitable that the distinction between them will blur. Indeed, many organisations now have a single communication

function integrating all aspects of the organisation's communication, often headed by a board-level director who can be either a marketing or a public relations professional – sometimes both.

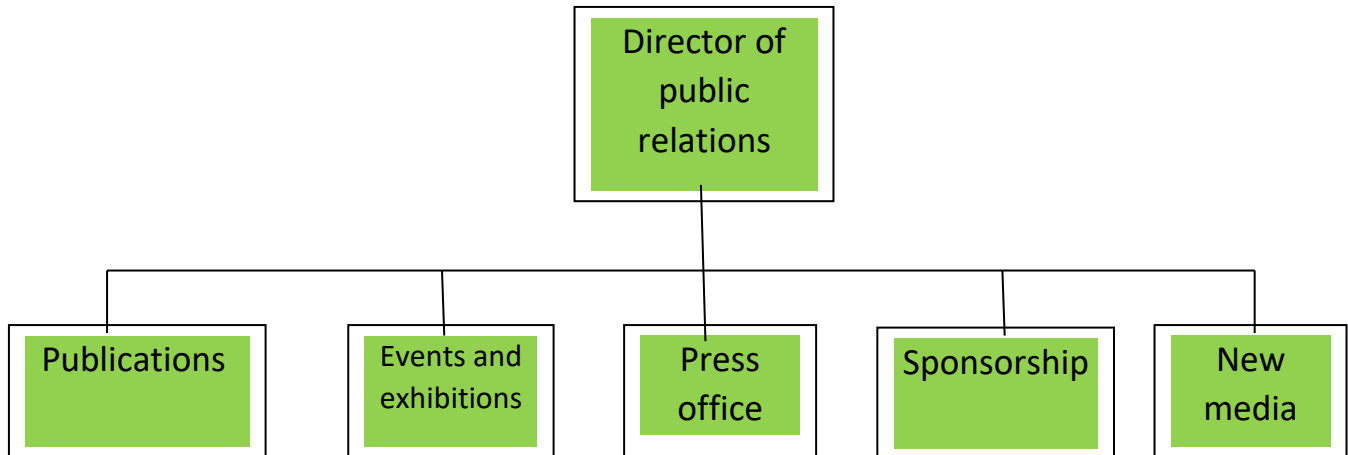


FIGURE 3.6 Public relations department structured by tasks

Human Resources or Personnel

Human resources is sometimes the host department for internal communication. Irrespective of its physical location, public relations' involvement in strategic communication objectives, together with its knowledge of communication techniques and content, are good reasons for close collaboration.

Human resources and public relations departments both regard employees as one of their most important stakeholders. Recruiting and retaining employees is being increasingly recognised by CEOs as vitally important (Hill and Knowlton 2003) because as 'knowledge' becomes the differentiator adding value to organisations, the collective 'knowledge' of its workforce becomes increasingly precious.

Legal

Organisations in crisis or under threat turn to their legal departments for advice. Lawyers are naturally cautious and their instinct is to keep quiet and say nothing that might incriminate an individual or make the organisation liable in any way. However, today's organisation is held to account for what it does not say and do as well as for what it actually says and does. Stakeholders value transparency and honesty. It is imperative therefore that lawyers and public relations professionals work closely together, each contributing their particular knowledge and skills to manage issues, crises and risks.

Battles for ascendancy among specialist functions are essentially futile. What matters is that the interests of the organisation and its publics are well served. That is best done by fellow professionals working together to fulfil that common aim.

Future of the Public Relations Department

It is worth pointing out a number of developments that are likely to impact on the structure of the public relations function of the future and may enhance the role of public relations within organisations.

Regulatory Issues

New legislation is on the horizon. Reforms to company law in Britain will require companies to report on a range of non-financial factors, such as the company's interactions with stakeholders, their treatment of employees and their environmental policies, in their annual report. The EU Directive on Information and Consultation, which demands that larger companies consult with employees on a range of issues, provides public relations with large opportunities. Public relations professionals are ideally positioned to collect the data for these activities and to report on them.

Risk Management and Stakeholder Interest

Risk management, along with reputation management, is becoming more important to CEOs (Murray and White 2004). Risk management is intimately bound up in relationship building with important stakeholders.

Technology

As technology develops, practitioners will need to become more skilful at using it with many more specialist technician roles being created to exploit new ways of communicating with stakeholders. At the same time, the impact of these new technologies will need deeper consideration at a strategic level. For example, how will organisations manage the requirement for on-demand, tailored information from potentially millions of stakeholders on a global basis 24/7, 365 days a year?

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Evaluating Public Relations: A Best Practice Guide to Public Relations*, (2005), By Tom Watson, Paul Noble
- ✓ *Effective Public Relations and Media Strategy*, (2009), By C.V. NARASIMHA REDDI
- ✓ *Cases in Public Relations Management: The Rise of Social Media and Activism*, (2010), By Patricia Swann