



Public Relations and Communication

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Why Planning is Important
- ✓ Approaches to the Planning Process
- ✓ Evaluating the Project Constraints
- ✓ Creating the Project Schedule

Public Relations and Communication

Planning in Public Relations

Introduction

Successful public relations programmes do not just happen. They are the result of sound research, meticulous planning and careful implementation. This does not rule out the unplanned or the reactive, but these are exceptions.

Recent research among Britain's 'most admired companies' shows that up to 70% of their communication activity is pre-planned. The majority of the remaining time is spent making the most of unexpected opportunities and reacting to events such as a major media story, and some time is spent in crisis management. But once these incidents are dealt with, the planned approach is resumed. Planning will not make a poorly conceived programme successful in achieving its objectives, but planning makes it more likely that a programme will be well conceived in the first place. By ensuring that plans are targeted at the right people, use the right channels of communication and say the appropriate things at the right time, all within agreed timescales and budget, the foundations for success are laid.

Why Planning is Important

Planning for public relations programmes provides a framework that can stimulate thinking; it acts as a prompt for problem solving and it releases creativity while ensuring it is focused and purposeful.

There are a number of very practical reasons for planning public relations activity:

- Planning focuses effort – by eliminating unnecessary and low-priority work.
- Planning improves effectiveness – by ensuring the planner works to achieve agreed objectives from the outset.
- Planning encourages the long-term view – by requiring the planner to look to the organisation's future needs, preparing it for change and helping it manage future risks.
- Planning assists pro-activity – setting the agenda means planners can be proactive and 'on the front foot'.
- Planning reconciles conflicts – putting together a comprehensive public relations plan means that potential difficulties and conflicts have to be thought through in the planning stage.
- Planning minimises mishaps – thinking through potential scenarios means that most eventualities can be covered and contingency plans put in place.
- Planning demonstrates value for money – planners can show they have achieved programme objectives within budget and past achievements also help the planner argue for future resourcing.

So why doesn't everyone plan everything? The following suggests why practitioners are sometimes reluctant to plan, despite the arguments outlined above:

- Lack of time – planning is time consuming and ongoing work cannot be suspended while it is done.
- Plans are out of date as soon as they are written – business and particularly communication is conducted in an ever-changing and dynamic environment, so planning has little point.
- Planning raises unrealistic managerial expectations – too many factors that are outside the planner’s control to guarantee results.
- Plans are too rigid and stifle the impromptu and opportunistic – flexibility of response is a crucial strength of the communication function.
- Plans are a block to creativity – the approach is formulaic and encourages formulaic activities.
- Plans always reflect the ideal, not the real – it makes it appear that communication work can be tightly controlled and all ambiguities ‘planned out’. The reality of doing public relations work, say some practitioners, is not like that.

Systems Context of Planning

Cutlip et al. (2000) present an open systems model of public relations that clearly identifies how all these systems characteristics map on to the planning process (see Figure 10.1). So, for example, ‘input’ refers to actions taken by, or information about, publics. These inputs in turn are transformed into goals (aims) and objectives that underpin the desired relationships with publics. By contrast, a ‘closed system’ approach might neglect to take account of information about publics and thus the planner might formulate aims and objectives in isolation.

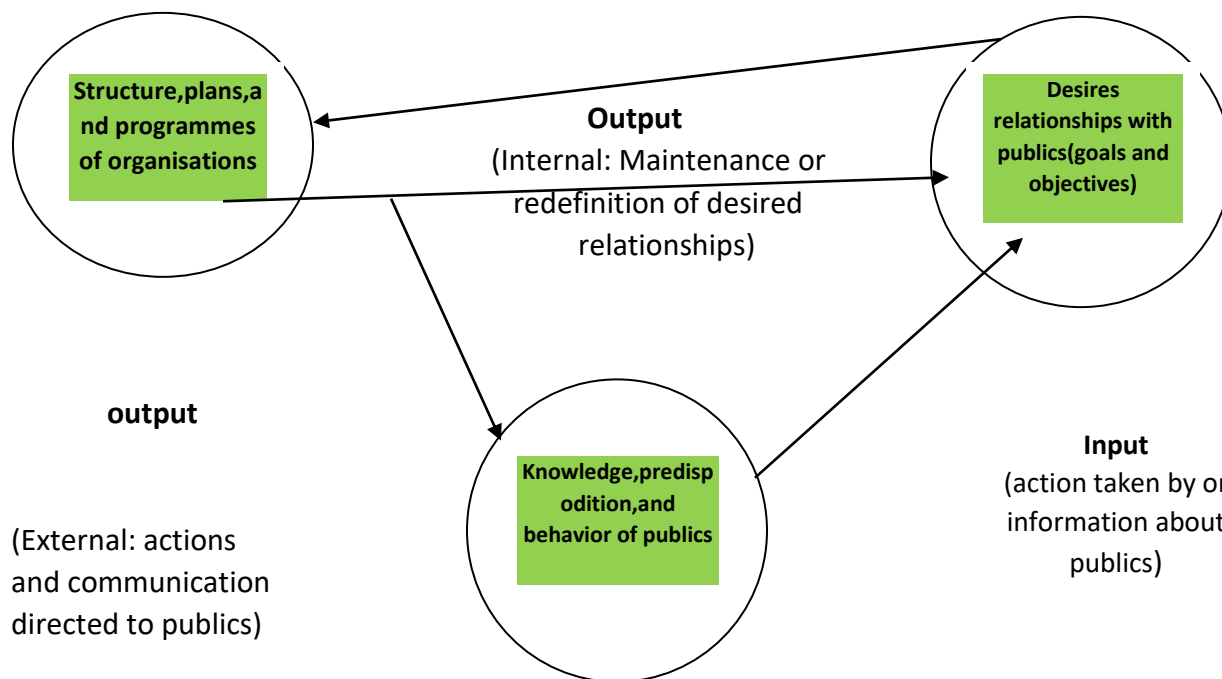


FIGURE 1.1 Open systems model of public relations (source: Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations, 8th Edition*)

Scope of Public Relations Planning

Systematic planning can be applied to public relations activity over a period of several years, such as the Full Stop campaign to prevent child abuse conducted by the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, or to short-focused campaigns, such as the launch of a new service, or even to a single activity, such as a press conference.

When discussing the role of the communication planner, Windahl et al. (1992) embrace a wider interpretation of planning programmes or 'campaigns'. Informal communication, which is initiated to begin a dialogue for its own sake, is legitimate and may be 'planned'. It will have a purpose and will involve different publics. For example, key opinion formers may be invited by a university to a hospitality event such as an annual dinner. This occasion may not have a specific planned outcome other than a belief that interpersonal communication is in itself a valuable process which helps people work together in a more cooperative way. This dialogue helps build relationships and a sense of community around the university.

Furthermore, the type of work that planners undertake can be extremely varied. Some planners work for large organisations on large communication projects.

For example, government communicators may work on nationwide initiatives such as the one to encourage healthy eating in schools or voting in EU elections, while those working for large corporations may work on global corporate identity initiatives. However, some planners work on quite small projects, for example running an open day for a local charity or volunteering to work with local communities and activists to protest about a local road scheme.

Windahl et al. (1992) also point out that communication initiatives can start at the bottom of an organisation as well as the top. For example, a small department may begin a series of sporting events to build informal communications in the team which eventually widens out into a company-wide and company-supported programme of activities.

This unit takes the systemic approach to planning, outlined earlier, as its basis. The next step therefore is to examine some of the existing planning approaches.

Approaches to the Planning Process

The planning process is ordered and enables the public relations planner to structure their approach around certain key aspects (see Figure 4.2). It is helpful to see it as answering six basic questions:

- What is the problem? (Researching the issue.)
- What does the plan seek to achieve? (What are the objectives?)
- Who should be talked to? (With which publics should a relationship be developed?)

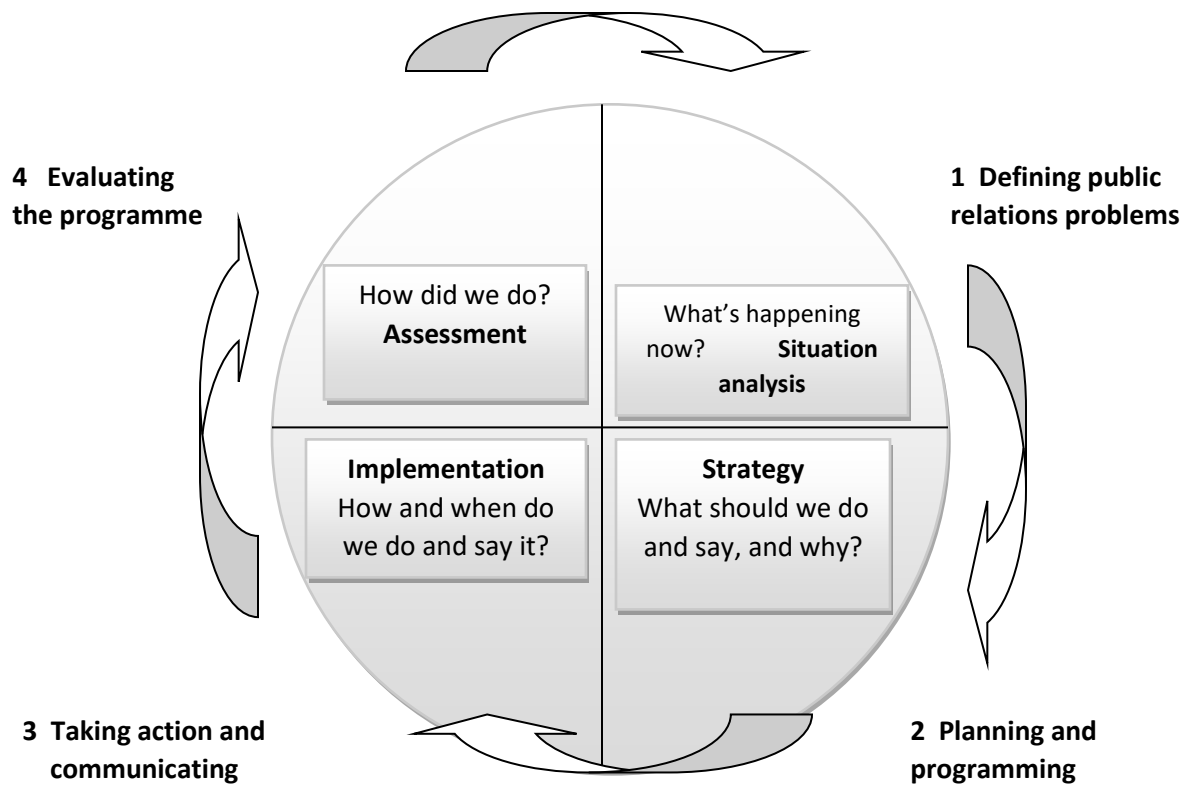
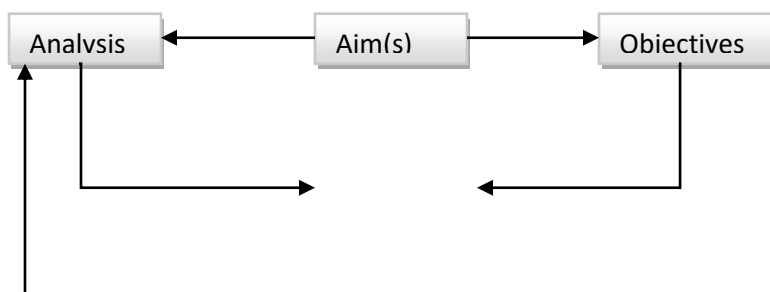


FIGURE 1.2 Cutlip and colleagues' planning model (source: Cutlip, Scott M., Center, Allen H., Broom, Glen M., *Effective Public Relations, 8th Edition*, © 2000. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.)

- What should be said? (What is the content or message?)
- How should the message be communicated? (What channels should be used for dissemination?)
- How is success to be judged? (How will the work be evaluated against the objectives?)

All planning processes follow a basic sequence, whether they are for the strategic management of an organisation or for public relations (see Figure 4.4 and Think about 4.2). The approach advocated here is known as 'management by objectives' (MBO), which means:

- setting objectives and targets
- participation by individual managers in agreeing unit (i.e. department) objectives and criteria of performance
- review and appraisal of results (Mullins 1989: 254).



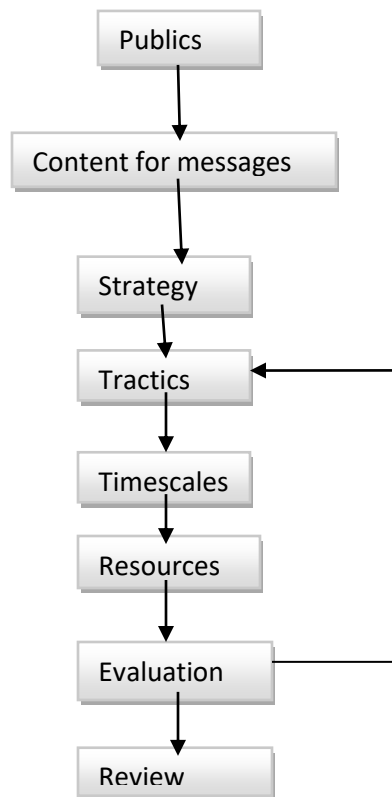


FIGURE 1.3 Gregory's planning model (source: Gregory 2000: 44)

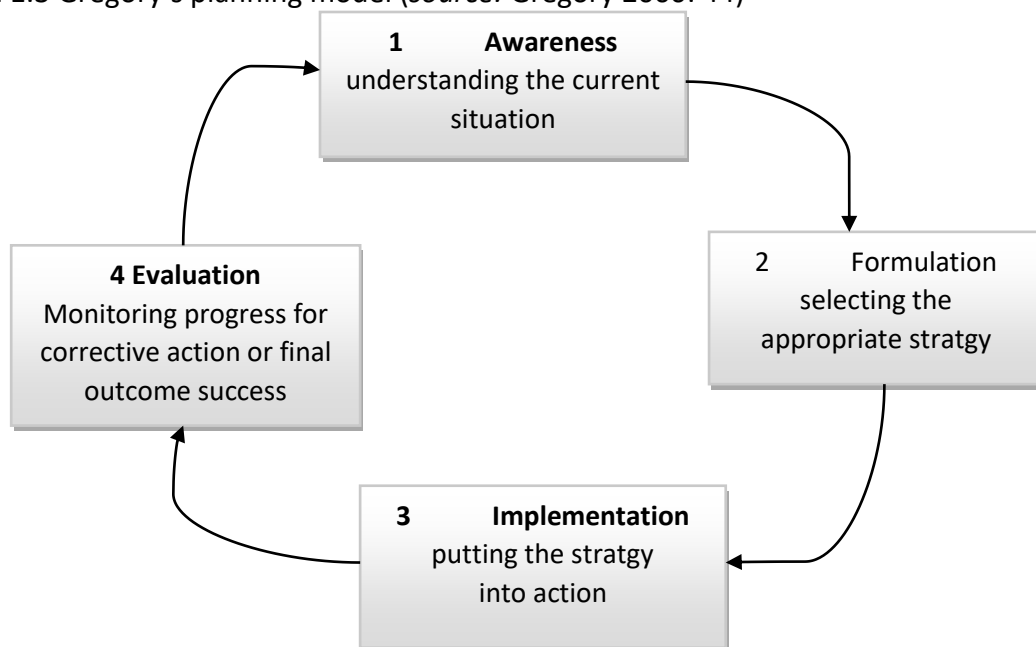


FIGURE 1.4 Basic business planning model

Although, ideally, the public relations practitioner would undertake analysis of the situation before determining objectives, in practice they are often given objectives by their managers. Such an objective

might be to help overturn proposed legislation. In these circumstances it is still vital that the objectives themselves are scrutinised to see if they are appropriate. For example, an organisation may wish to resist the introduction of a stringent piece of environmental legislation because it will be expensive to implement and thereby affect shareholder dividends. However, on investigation, the public relations practitioner may discover that: stakeholders are very much in favour of the legislation; competitor companies will support it; and the company will be out of line if it persists. In this situation the public relations practitioner may recommend that the proposed campaign is abandoned.

Analysis

Analysis is the first step of the planning process. The point of analysis, sometimes called 'situation analysis' is to identify the issues or specific problems on which to base the programme. Without identifying the key issues the programme will not have a clear rationale. For example, if the core issue identified for action is that the organisation is seen to be unfriendly towards family carers, there is no point in aiming a recruitment campaign at potential employees such as women without addressing the reasons why the organisation is not an employer of choice for them.

Analysing the Environment

This analysis of the external and internal environment is called 'environmental monitoring' by Lerbinger (1972), a phase that is now generally called 'environmental scanning' in the public relations literature (e.g. Gruning et al. 2002).

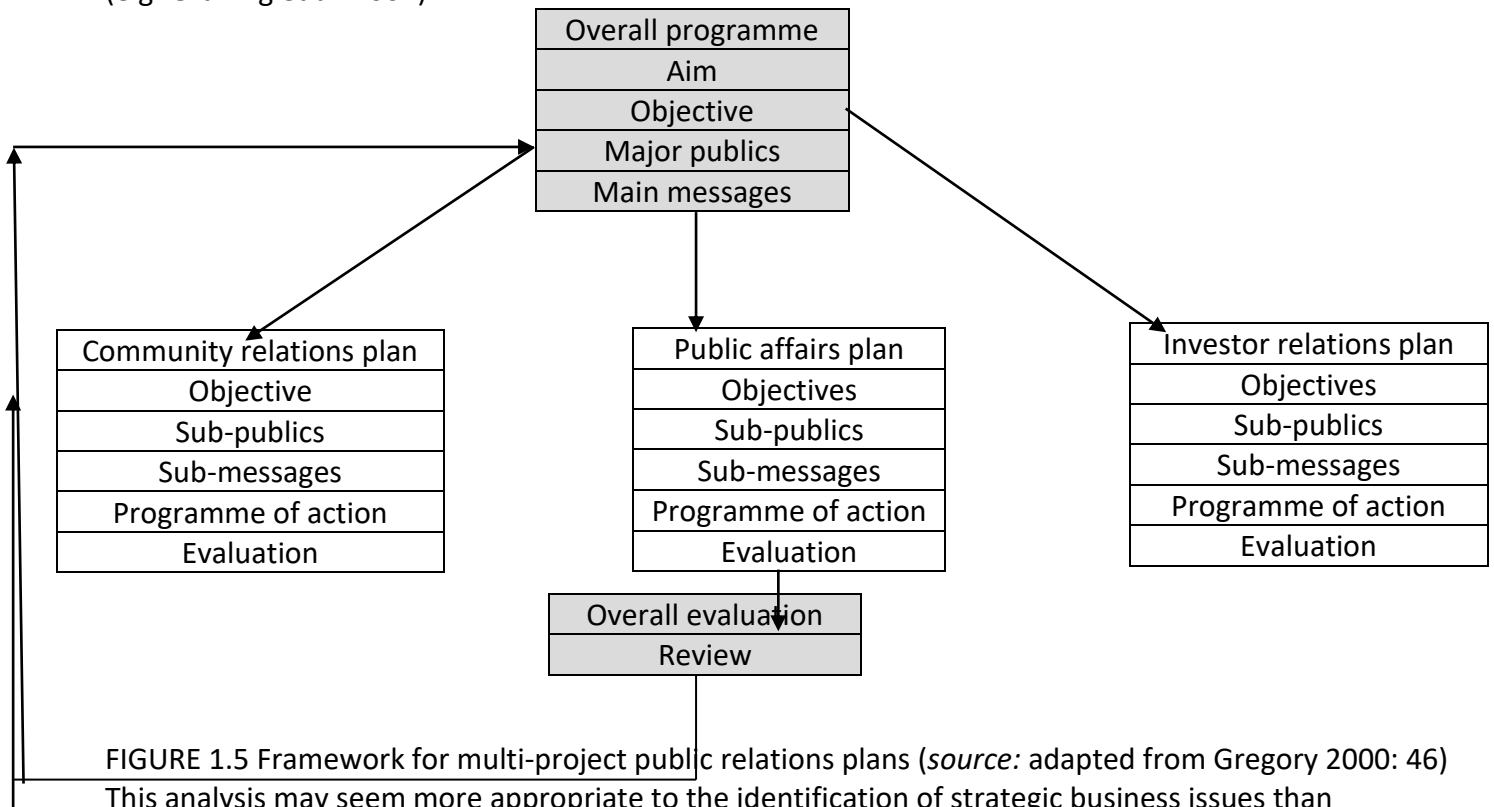


FIGURE 1.5 Framework for multi-project public relations plans (source: adapted from Gregory 2000: 46)

This analysis may seem more appropriate to the identification of strategic business issues than communication issues. However, public relations practitioners need to be alert to the wider

environmental issues because it is these that will force some sort of action from the organisation. Action always has communication implications. Indeed, one of the major contributions that public relations can make is to maintain an environmental scanning brief on behalf of their organisation. This ‘early warning’ of issues allows organisations to manage future risks and is a key strategic input at senior management level. In the light of these emerging issues, organizations can make adjustments to their own strategy and actions to align themselves to new realities.

Furthermore, issue spotting helps organizations contribute sensibly to public debate at an early stage and hence influence the outcome. Pressure groups, for example, will spot issues early to influence public debate. In one case, the intervention of environmental and human rights activists at a formative stage in the debate led to the stalling of plans to build dams in disputed areas in India.

The main questions to be asked when undertaking this kind of analysis are:

- What are the environmental factors that affect this organisation (identified from the EPISTLE analysis)?
- Which ones are of most importance now?
- Which will become the most important in the next four years?

From this it will be possible to derive a list of the main issues that will affect the organisation. These will differ depending on the country, the industry sector and the particular circumstances the organisation operates in.

It is important to identify whether some of these issues are linked. For example, social and technological changes are often connected: the lifestyle of many people has been transformed by mobile phone technology. As well as current issues, it is vital to identify the long-term forces for change. For example, concerns about obesity in developed economies will have a profound effect on the drinks, confectionary and fast food industries in the coming decade. Many organisations, from governments to financial and leisure companies, will need to respond to changing demographics that will see the average age of the population rising in many developed countries, with profound effects on the nature of health, welfare and educational provision and on the taxation system that supports them.

Having identified the broader environmental issues that affect the organisation and over which it

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Good capital reserves Leading-edge products Loyal customer base Good reputation for service delivery Committed employees</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Risk averse in investment Limited product line Ageing customer base Bureaucratic Limited skills base</p>
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Threats</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">New market opportunities in Russia</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Potential to acquire competitors</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tax breaks if offices relocated</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Potential political instability</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Danger of being overstretched</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Loss of loyal employee base</p>
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FIGURE 4.6 Example of SWOT analysis

has little control, it is then necessary to look at the organisation itself and those things over which it has greater control. A classic way to undertake this internal analysis is to use a technique called SWOT. The first two elements, strengths and weaknesses are particular to the organisation and can usually be changed by it, although all organisations are to a certain extent captive to their own history and culture. However, it is in the organisation's power to address its strengths and weaknesses. The third and fourth, opportunities and threats, are generally external and can be derived from wider environmental analysis but are usually related to those factors that have a direct impact on it. The four elements of SWOT can be seen as mirror segments in a quadrant. An example of a SWOT analysis is given in Figure 4.6.

Analysing Publics

Having analysed the environment and the organisation and identified the key issues, it is then essential to look at the organisation's publics and discover what their attitudes are towards the organisation itself, to the wider issues identified by the EPISTLE and SWOT processes or to the particular issue that management have asked the public relations department to address.

Cutlip et al. (2000) suggest that research can be informal or formal. Informal or exploratory research methods may involve the use of any of the following:

- Personal contacts – these could be at public meetings (e.g. for shareholders or community) or trade shows.
- Key informants – these can be experts, editors, journalists, politicians.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, (2009) By James E. Grunig*
- ✓ *Public Relations and Communication Management: Current Trends and Emerging, (2013) edited by Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, Ansgar Zerfass, Jeong-Nam Kim*
- ✓ *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation edited by Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Vercic*