

MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Public Relations

Introduction

One of the fastest growing and best paying areas of communications is the area of public relations. In fact, some of you may have a vague notion that you'd like to work in public relations. You may have little idea what that means, though. "I like to work with people," "I am good at planning parties," are just a couple of the things you hear from people who think the work is easy as well as high paying. Well, I guess it CAN be easy and fun if you know what you are doing. But to be one of those raking in big money you've got to REALLY know your stuff.

One of the reasons public relations is growing is because more and more clients are recognizing the value of improving relations with customers and others, but don't know how to do that AND run their businesses.

But the lack of a clear definition of what public relations is, or a clear understanding of what is involved, is the reason so many who work in public relations either are not successful or well paid.

People often try to define public relations not by what it is, but by the types of activities that public relations practitioners perform. They use words like publicity, news releases, planning events. That is like trying to define how to run a football team by describing yesterday's football game. It moves you the right direction, but misses so many subtleties.

Defining public relations

So what is public relations? One educator collected up to 500 definitions before giving up. You can also find more about public relations at aboutpublicrelations.net.

There is no simple definition, but we can learn common elements by looking at some of the definitions. First, a look at some simplistic definitions.

- PR stands for Performance and then Recognition This suggests the right order. To improve relations with the public you must first perform, then you may be recognized. Too many folks wait until there is a crisis in relationships and then try to gain positive recognition. Positive recognition under negative circumstances is a result of earlier performance.
- Doing good and getting credit for it Okay, this gets to the heart of it quickly. If you do something well, you want credit for it. But notice that you still must do something well or good.
- Getting good publicity for your employer This is a classic definition. As a public relations practitioner you are expected to garner good publicity for your employer. The problem with this definition, however, is that it neglects the importance of other elements we'll look at below.
- Press agent And some people see public relations specialists simply as publicists who write news releases and interact with the media. While these are key elements, there is so much

more to public relations than this. If writing news releases is your main responsibility you will be on the lower rungs of pay in the profession. But if you can't perform these functions you are not likely to be promoted to the higher levels.

A better look at public relations comes from the more complex definitions used by major public relations associations.

- Public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics
- Public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programs of action which serve both the organization's and the public's interest.

Notice the key elements of these definitions. First, public relations is deliberate, not something you stumble into. This requires a high degree of understanding of sociology, psychology and how systems work. The public relations practitioner must be highly educated. A bachelor's degree will earn you a comfortable living, but to rise to the top you are looking at a master's degree, minimum.

Second, public relations is a planned and sustained effort. Performance must precede recognition. And doing something good once in a while is not enough. Good public relations is the result of complex planning and performance over a period of time. The planned effort requires knowledge and analysis of trends.

Third, public relations must have its proper place in the organization. Too often it is relegated to lower level employee or mid-management. If a practitioner is to properly counsel the leaders of companies, the practitioner must enjoy a position of high management, say the vice president level.

Public vs. public

A fourth element was introduced in both of those definitions that the practitioner must understand: publics. Some in the field say there are two uses of the word public that must be understood. There is the capital P Public, which is the common use of the word. Here we're talking about the Public in general.

The small p public is the smaller, definable groups that make up the more general Public. The practitioner must define these smaller groups, both internal and external, and fashion the message to meet the needs of each group. Let's create an example. Let's say that you are the head of the journalism department at Cerritos College. You want to do well at your job. Who are the publics you must please. There are students, administrators, student government, other teachers, high school teachers (you want to recruit their students), university teachers (you want your students to succeed if they transfer), and the media. You've also got family members, professional organizations, vendors you work with and employees you supervise. You relate to all in similar but different ways because different results are important to each of these groups.

There are internal publics and external publics. In the example above, the internal publics would be those within the organization: the students, administrators, student government, other teachers, employees, etc. External publics would be those outside the organization: high school teachers, university teachers, professional organizations, family and media.

Components of public relations

As important as definitions of public relations might be, they are not enough. There is a reason why most people try to define it by the visible practices. Some of those practices are listed below.

1. Counseling -- This is an often forgotten element. I think it is key to true public relations.
2. Research -- Do you know how to conduct the proper research and then analyze trends? Much of your education will be designed to help you achieve this skill.
3. Media relations -- An important public is the media. To work effectively with newspapers, radio, TV and others you've got to understand how they operate. While in school spend some time on a student publication or broadcast station.
4. Publicity -- Publicity is a main activity. You have to understand what is newsworthy and how to communicate. Writing and speaking skills are mandatory.
5. Employee-member relations -- You need to know how to communicate with diverse groups within the organization. What forms of communication will work and what motivates employees or members of your organization.
6. Community relations -- You need to know how to communicate with diverse groups within the community. Who makes up your community and what forms of communication will work and what motivates them?
7. Public affairs -- You must understand public issues and be aware of what is in the news. Read newspapers and watch and listen to broadcast news regularly. Be a news junkie and strive to understand what is going on in the world around you.
8. Government affairs -- You will be working with governmental and regulatory organizations. Again, you've got to understand their motivations and what forms of communication are the most effective. Public relations practitioners often are lobbyists.
9. Issues management -- You've got to be able to dissect complex issues, several at a time, and be able to counsel management how to deal with them.
10. Industry relations -- Companies have to relate to others in their industry. You are in competition, but you also want to model good practices. You may have to learn all about asbestos if you are hired by an asbestos company, even if that is not what you studied in school.
11. Fund raising -- A lot of practitioners are required to be involved fund raising. If you work for a non-profit organization, it may be one of your main duties. What motivates people to give money to causes? Even practitioners in for-profit industries are called on to raise money for special projects or causes from time to time.
12. Multicultural relations/Workplace diversity -- This is a double-edged activity. You must be able to work with and diverse publics, but you also must counsel your employer to employ a

workforce that represents your community.

13. Special events -- One of the fun activities of public relations is planning and running special events to attract publicity for your employer. It may be party of bigwigs or it may be a product unveiling.

Public relations careers

Those who think they want to pursue a career in public relations should be aware that there ARE public relations jobs you can get without much education. In fact, the fact that you have taken even one journalism class might lead some to think that you might be the best person to handle public relations for Uncle Bob's auto shop. And that might be a fair assessment. But if you want public relations as a career you should consider at least a bachelor's degree if not a master's degree. In any case, besides a good liberal arts education, some things you should focus on include:

- Writing skills-- Learn to write in a manner that communicates a message. And learning to write in the fashion of the media you will be working with is a good idea. A beginning newswriting class followed by a semester on a student publication or student broadcast station that requires you to formally formulate news stories will do that.
- Desktop publishing skills -- Learn something about design as well as computer software designed to create documents: newsletters, flyers, newspapers, brochures, etc. Learning a bit about multimedia might be smart, too. Cerritos offers several opportunities, as do other colleges. Cerritos' Art 198 (desktop publishing) or Journalism 105 (Newspaper Production) are just a couple of examples.
- Internet skills-- Learn Internet skills. Know more than how to access a web page or send e-mail. You should know how to create a web page and should know how to communicate news via the Internet. It may become the most important way for public relations practitioners to communicate their messages in the future. Also learn to do quick and effective research on the Internet and how to evaluate the veracity of information you find there.
- Photography skills-- Learn to communicate effectively visually. A beginning photography course, a photojournalism course or an introduction to visual communication course would be the least you should take. Learning more about photography, especially digital photography, and how to use image manipulation software, such as Photoshop, is also recommended.
- Critical thinking skills -- Take any course and as many courses as possible, or put yourself into situations to exercise critical thinking skills. Courses that help you investigate and evaluate how and why things work the way they do are perhaps the most important ones you can take. Those courses that simply give you knowledge are important, but the ones that challenge you to think are the ones that will prepare you best to succeed in public relations.

What I've left out

I've only scratched the surface of public relations. We could spend an entire semester studying it and not cover all we need to. As you read through the textbook chapter on public relations pay particular attention to the history and development of public relations as well as the professionalism of public relations.

Reading Assignment

You should be reading the chapter on public relations in your textbook to get more information about public relations.

Exercise

Define the difference between "Public" and "public."

Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

J100x - YourLastName - Public Relations

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