

Study Unit 4: Public Relations Planning

Introduction in society, their activities and the professional in We often say PR is a management function, but a lot of people often wonder, How and why? Why is it a management function and how does it function within an organization.

This unit will give you an insight into the role of public relations within an organization.

Learning Outcomes of Study Unit 4

Upon completion of this study unit, you should be able to

4.1 PR in strategy making

4.1 Public Relations in Strategy Making

The main role of the leader of an organisation and its senior managers (or board) is to provide vision and direction. Effective organisations have a sense of purpose. They know where they are going and they know how they are going to get there. The vision may be set by a strong individual with a particular driving-force, for example Bill Gates who wanted to put a PC on everyone's desk.

Alternatively the vision may be more broad-based and generic. For example, universities exist to provide higher education; their purpose is broadly the same – to undertake teaching, research and consultancy. However, even within that broad category there are those with different priorities; some are research driven, some want to serve a regional community, some specialise in certain subjects.

Whatever the type of organisation, successful ones have a strategy that determines long-term direction and the scope of the operation.

The contribution that public relations can make to the strategy-making process is twofold: first, helping to collect and interpret information from the social environment so that strategic decisions can be made, and second, the communication of the strategic vision..

4.1.1. Information Gathering

As boundary-spanners, public relations professionals are ideally placed to gather information from both the internal and the external environment. They do this in two ways. First, they are aware of the wider macro environment. Second, they are knowledgeable about the attitudes and behaviours of the various publics of the organisation who populate this broader environment because they are in regular dialogue with those publics.

Environmental Scanning

How do public relations professionals undertake this intelligence gathering work?

‘Environmental scanning’ is the term used for gaining information about the macro environment. PR professionals use the same techniques as those available to strategic planners. They will undertake analyses of the environment using techniques such as PEST. This technique provides a framework that allows analysis of the environment by categorising it under various headings.

An example of PEST analysis

<p>POLITICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade legislation Change of government • Employment legislation • Emergence of new power blocks 	<p>ECONOMIC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rates • Inflation • Business cycles • Employment Levels
<p>SOCIAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifestyles • Consumer Preferences • Social attitudes • Disposable income 	<p>TECHNOLOGY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • Rate of change • Obsolescence • Investment in technology

The point of this kind of analysis (PEST) is to identify the key drivers that will impact on the organisation. There are no standard responses; the drivers will be different depending on the country, sector and organisation. It is also vital to identify the inter-relationships between the key drivers. Economic trends may force political decisions and technology often affects lifestyles and social interactions. For example, the internet has transformed working, purchasing and leisure patterns.

Environmental scanning establishes the long-term drivers of change and their impact. These need localising to identify the effect that they will have on the organisation itself. Environmental analyses should not only be done in the here and now, but should also include forward projections so that organisations can plan a variety of futures which they will have to accommodate, try to change or adapt to.

4.1.2. Knowledge of publics

The second element of information gathering by public relations professionals is intelligence about the organisation's publics or stakeholders. Public relations planners are in a privileged position in that they interact with organisational publics frequently: their job is to manage and facilitate the relationship between the organisation and its publics, sometimes in conjunction with colleagues from elsewhere in the organisation.

Furthermore, the public relations professional will be aware of the attitude towards or behaviour of the various stakeholders (or publics) in relation to the wider issues identified in the environment and towards the organisation itself. For example, the public relations professional working for a food retailer will be alert to the fact that genetic modification of food is a major issue. They will also be aware of the prevailing attitudes of the scientific community, suppliers, customers, shareholders and employees. They will be conscious that opinion is divided and that they will need to be alert to shifts in public opinion and buying habits. The importance of stakeholder groups to organisations cannot be overestimated.

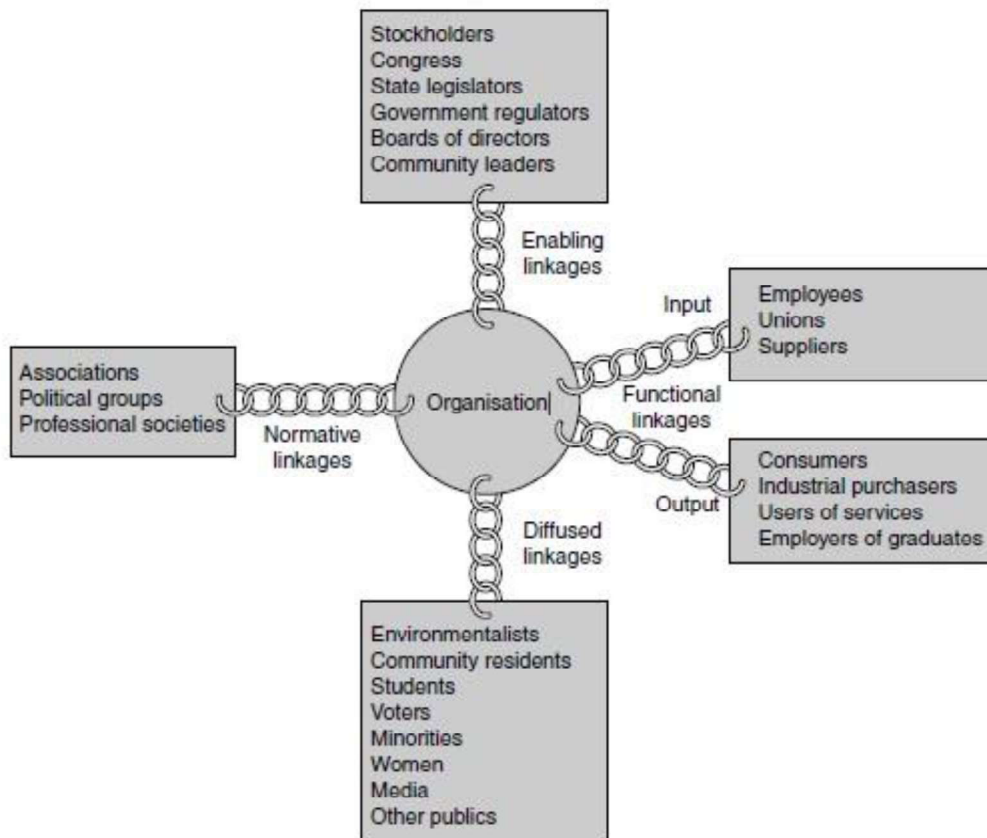
Regular research and audits of the opinion of all their publics is a vital job for the public relations professional. A typical organisation interacts with an enormous number of publics. Esman (1972) has usefully categorised these into four types of organizational linkages, as illustrated by Grunig and Hunt.

Enabling linkages are those with organisations and groups that have the authority and resources to permit the organisation to exist.

Functional linkages provide input into the organisation and consume its outputs.

Normative linkages are those with peer organisations, and *diffused* linkages are with those who have no formalised relationship with the organisation, but have an interest in it.

This categorisation not only demonstrates the number of different publics that the professional communicator interacts with, but the range of interest of those publics.



4.1.3. Information Interpretation

White and Mazur (1995) suggest that because they have such extensive contacts with sources and information, public relations staff may be in a position to provide a central collation and interpretation function. Managing and interpreting information require both research and analytical capabilities and are an indication of the skills set required of senior practitioners.

Where the environment is turbulent and creates uncertainty, those individuals who are capable of interpreting what is happening are invaluable in decision-making. Public relations practitioners are used to dealing with complex situations and to making sense of inter-linked issues involving a variety of publics. Thus they can make a valuable contribution to strategy-making by offering their skills of interpretation and counselling.

Public relations practitioners are ideally placed to be able to access early sources of information and can interpret that information to identify emerging issues and those that may have a profound effect on an organisation. For example, media content analysis can identify matters of growing importance and help clarify the direction in which public opinion is moving on a particular issue.

4.1.4. Risk Management

Knowledge of the environment and of stakeholders is vitally important in another respect too. Organisations find themselves increasingly at risk from a number of directions. In the wider context, we live in an increasingly interconnected, dependent, pluralistic world, where no one and no organisation can isolate itself from any of the ‘big issues’ that are emerging. The green environment is a clear example, but there are many more.

September 11 2001 was a defining moment for many organisations. They have had to appraise all kinds of issues that affect their business, for example, how much should executives travel? Are our products or services culturally sensitive? Are our buildings secure? With whom do we make strategic alliances? The big-picture political and Economic issues such as these can and should be tracked and monitored by public relations professionals as part of their environmental scanning duties. Indeed, issues tracking and management are part of the strategic communicator’s basic toolkit.

Furthermore, as far as stakeholders are concerned, it is possible for small groups to challenge and hold to account large organisations,

Summary of the study unit 4

In this study unit 5, you have learned the following:

- 1. PR in strategy making**

Self-Review Questions (SRQ) for study unit 4

Now that you have completed this study unit, you can measure how well you have achieved its learning outcomes by answering the following questions. You can check your answers with the Notes on Self-Assessment Questions at the end of this study unit

1. What is the role of PR in strategy making?
2. Write short notes on the environmental scanning, information interpretation and risk management