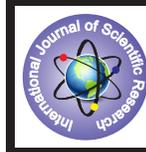


## Role of Public Relations for Effective Communications in NGOs



### Management

**KEYWORDS :** Public Relations, Non Government Organizations, Publics

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### ABSTRACT

*NGOs exist because Government cannot do everything. NGOs generally are funded by Government, national/ international network of NGOs and/or corporate. Normally these funding bodies try to rule the philosophy and working style of NGOs and turn them in their interest. Due to financial limitations in the sector, it becomes difficult to attract devoted volunteers and employees. Also, NGOs must operate and be managed in the public interest. They must communicate their goals and objectives in order to maintain visibility, credibility, accountability and growth. Unavailability of funds and importance of trust and faith in the sector create need for a promotional tool, which is perceived as ethical. Public Relation clearly plays a vital role. The present research is undertaken to study the communication objectives of Indian NGOs. It further aims to study the role of Public Relations (PR) in the achievement of these communication objectives. Findings indicated that communication objectives targeting to beneficiaries were paramount importance by NGOs.*

### Introduction

Non Government Organizations (NGOs) play an important role in any society. NGOs have been referred to as the backbone of the civil society as defined by Hyden (1995). They exist because Government cannot do everything. NGOs provide services to people and community to help improve quality of life but NGO sector encounters funds and management related problems. NGOs generally are funded by Government, national/ international network of NGOs and/or corporate. Normally these funding bodies try to rule the philosophy and working style of NGOs and turn them in their interest. Due to financial limitations in the sector, it becomes difficult to attract devoted volunteers and employees. Above all, numbers of NGOs are increasing day-by-day. Besides, owing to their purposes, charitable organizations must operate and be managed in the public interest. They must communicate their goals and objectives in order to maintain visibility, credibility, accountability and growth. These NGOs have to communicate with various public like beneficiaries, volunteers and funding bodies and many more for achievement of organizational objectives. NGOs need to create awareness amongst beneficiaries about the cause. Attracting and retaining volunteers is also not an easier job for NGO only continuous and effective communication can help.

It has become imperative that NGOs create awareness about their activities but unavailability of funds and importance of trust and faith in the sector create need for a promotional tool, which is perceived as ethical. The objective is not to sell the product but to build long-term image and relationships. Public Relation clearly plays a vital role. Over last few years, PR has become an important weapon in the hands of communication department of any corporate. A proper mix of PR tools can help NGOs ensuring that all stakeholders are reached effectively.

### Literature Review

Leaper (1980) brought about importance of communication for NGOs in the research work. Gomez (1998) studied the Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) use in Colombian NGOs. The patterns of relationship emerged among the CMC users in NGOs are rarely related to internal communications, rather they were related to communication exchanges with partners in other organizations who shared common interests and concerns with them. CMC was perceived to be providing fast and inexpensive communication and useful to promote information exchange and collaboration between partners.

A study conducted by Sleurink (2002), elaborates the applications of e-marketing to NGO sector as an opportunity for the different NGOs to collaborate and converge; power shifts from public to private sector; to diversify their financial resources by initiating commercial activities using e-marketing tools; a channel for funding bodies to get insight into an NGOs performance; and a virtual helpdesk for feedback mechanism to the beneficiaries.

Chris et al (2006) opined that NGOs do not regard HRM as a serious issue. The fact is much of the work that charities and NGOs carry out is dependent on the people (i.e. employees or volunteers) who work for them. HR issues in the organizations surveyed were frequently overlooked in favor of campaigning programs. NGOs need to understand that good HRM is not about diverting resources from beneficiaries to staff: it is critical if they are to achieve their aims.

The only work, which was found related to PR practices in NGOs for effective communication, was undertaken by Naude et al (2004). The authors reported the use of internet by South African NGOs. The paper investigated how NGOs with connectivity are utilizing the internet for daily operations and for disseminating information to the stakeholders. The study gave initial evidence that NGOs are using internet technology to not only benefit themselves but also to the connected and unconnected stakeholders communities that they work with. They proposed that managing a web site requires more than technical knowledge and for implementation a sound understanding of communication, especially with regard to PR is important for an organization. Although the research paper advocated the role of internet for NGOs but this is limited to only utility and implementation of one tool of PR. This also didn't elaborate the role of PR practices as a whole for NGOs. The present research is undertaken to study the communication objectives of Indian NGOs. It further aims to study the role of Public Relations (PR) in the achievement of these communication objectives.

### Methodology

It is an exploratory study about NGOs to study their communication objectives and hence the roles of PR. Total of 105 NGOs were contacted for the study. NGOs were chosen by snowball technique as it was found that from the initial sampling frame many were either dormant or not genuine. Convenience sampling method was adopted to target the NGOs for data collection. Personal Interview method was adopted for data collection. Within the NGO, any office bearer, competent and authorized to provide the information sought for the study was deemed as qualified for the personal interviews.

The questionnaire contained both open and close ended questions. The initial questions recorded the NGO profile regarding its work area, classification etc. The next section dealt with communication practices of the NGOs, the groups they communicate with and communication objectives (ranked response). Prior to the finalization of the questionnaire, a Pilot Sampling was carried out to ensure that all required information areas are covered and that there are no discrepancies in the final questionnaire. For the pilot sampling 5 NGOs were interviewed in Indore, problem areas were identified and the same rectified in the final questionnaire.

To know the reasons/ objectives for which NGOs communicated

with target groups, ranked responses were gathered. The respondent were given nine objectives to rank from 1 to 9, where 1 stood for most important and 9 for least important. Reverse Weight Method was applied to arrive at the final scores of each of the attribute. The importance of the attribute is directly proportional to the score i.e. higher the score, the higher is the importance. The formula for the calculation of the scores is simple; let's say there are N attributes to be ranked. Now, every time an attribute gets rank 1 a reverse score of maximum ranks i.e. N will be allocated to the attribute, rank 2 the next highest (N-1), and so on. The final score for each attributed is calculated thus - Final Score = (Frequency for Rank 1 x N + Frequency for Rank 2 x (N-1) + ...+Frequency for Rank N x 1)

**Results**

**The findings of the study are as follows:-**

Section I represent the publics targeted by NGO while communication; this exemplifies the importance of Public Relations in the sector. Section II presents the communication objective of NGOs and how Public Relations can contribute in their achievement.

**Section I**

**Publics of NGOs**

NGOs have to communicate with a number of publics. The various groups with which the NGOs communicate are listed below:

The table I below clearly depicts that almost all NGOs communicate with beneficiaries, funding bodies, volunteers, government bodies, media and other NGOs. These six groups can, therefore, be termed as the key communication groups for NGOs.

Groups	Frequency	Percent
Volunteers	103	98.1%
Beneficiaries	102	97.1%
Other NGOs	101	96.2%
Government	99	94.3%
Media	97	92.4%
Funding bodies	96	91.4%
General public	9	8.6%
Opinion Leaders	8	7.6%
Sample Base	105	

**Table I**

Note: The number of responses is greater than the number of observations, due to multiple responses.

More than 90% of NGOs are targeting beneficiaries, funding bodies, volunteers, government, other NGOs and media, in their communication. The data clearly indicates the importance of targeting internal as well as external publics by NGOs for its existence and sustenance. NGOs have to communicate with multiple publics to accomplish their objectives. Comparing non-profit with for-profit sector; these two sectors are no different from each other in terms of targeting stakeholders. NGOs target beneficiaries to create awareness about their program, to persuade them, so that beneficiaries can get benefited by the programs of NGOs. Volunteerism is big force in non-profit sector. NGOs target volunteers as they execute programs run by NGOs. NGOs generally do not have salaried employees, volunteers are the backbone of the sector, and they perform the activities. Willetts defined NGO as an independent voluntary association of people acting together on a continuous basis for some common purpose, other than achieving Government office, making money or illegal activities. Communication with funding bodies is crucial as they usually depend for funds on donors.

Other NGOs have to be communicated as they are either networking partners, competitors or funding bodies. Interaction with them can be necessary and even fruitful as many-a-times project are undertaken together for a cause. Media assist NGOs in reaching to the mass so they have to be communicated as well

and it is mandatory that a relationship should be maintained with them too.

NGOs are required to target various types of public to be successful in long run, to be able to fetch funds and to survive in increasingly competitive environment. Wilderom et al (1996) opined that the key to quality management is satisfying many stakeholders. In providing services, non-profit organizations must, therefore, take into account all parties who either affect or who are affected by the organizational strategies. It is the task of management to facilitate communication between stakeholders outside and within the organization. The "great skill of non-profit management must lie in managing the relationships with and among stakeholders".

**Section II**

**Communication objectives of NGOs**

NGOs communicate for number of reasons with various publics. They need to be in communication with them for their existence, for achievement of objectives, to serve beneficiaries etc. The table II clearly depicts the objectives of communication with various publics.

Objectives of communication	Score	Rank
To educate beneficiaries about the cause	745	1
To bring about attitudinal change	665	2
To create awareness amongst masses about NGO activities	540	3
To raise funds from funding bodies	497	4
To attract volunteers	495	5
To network with other NGOs	482	6
To lobby the government	425	7
To improve internal staff relations	365	8
To get favorable coverage from the media	358	9

**Table II**

Reverse weight method has been used to arrive at the final scores in the table II. The formula for the calculation goes like this; rank 1 is allocated the maximum weight (equal to total number of ranks) say N, rank 2 the next highest (N-1), and so on. The final scores have been calculated using the following formula - Final Score = (Frequency for Rank 1 x N + Frequency for Rank 2 x (N-1) + ...)

'Educating beneficiaries about the cause' is clearly coming out as the most important reason, with its score being 745; 80 points ahead of the second most important reason i.e. 'bring attitudinal change'. The third most important reason is 'To create awareness among masses'. 'Raising funds from funding bodies' is ranked fourth. 'Improve internal staff relations' and 'Getting favorable coverage from media' are respectively the second least and the least preferred reason of communication.

An analysis of the importance associated to the various reasons of communications reveals that most of the communication is aimed at the 'Beneficiaries'. NGOs rated Educating beneficiaries about the cause, Bring attitudinal change and To create awareness among masses as the top three communication objectives. It is evident that NGOs direct their maximum communication to beneficiaries. This indicates that NGOs have to use tools which can ensure good reach to this group. Number of PR tools can ensure achievement of these objectives for NGOs. The importance of a cause can be explained to the beneficiaries in a meeting face-to-face. It can be ensured that they adopt the idea and bring it in to the behavior. Not only beneficiaries, but, Volunteers can be motivated to work for cause through meetings and similarly meetings with funding bodies like government, international NGOs, corporate etc. play crucial role in fund generation. McCathrin (1990) opined that "Small group meetings are seen as an effective management tool." NGOs play significant role in the

nearby communities; they really bring difference in the lives of people out there. It can be said that meetings can be purport source of interaction with the members of the community. As opined by Cutlip et al. (2005) meetings bring people together, providing opportunities to speak and listen, a two-way communication.

Opinion leaders play crucial role in convincing beneficiaries. Lesley (1998) opined that PR planning is greatly influenced by the knowledge of publics you want to reach. Publics often are reached through key individuals, sometimes referred to as Opinion molders or Opinion leaders. They may lead specific group or hold influence in a field of importance because of their respected roles in the community such as a judge or bank president. But Usage of PR tools to achieve communication objectives to reach beneficiaries are not limited to these only. Moore (1981) opined that the principal media of external communication used by welfare organizations in communicating with general public are press publicity, motion pictures, radio and television broadcasts, periodicals, public speaking, displays and exhibits, conferences, periodical advertising, outdoor advertising, booklets, folders, and other printed matter and special events.

'Funding bodies' figures at number four on the importance ladder of the communication objectives, NGOs run on public money and funds provided by the funding bodies. They do not have profit motive, but the truth is, without money they cannot effectively serve their publics. NGOs have to understand that donors give money for self satisfaction, thus they should be able to communicate the cause effectively. Another crucial issue is every NGO would want the donors to come back to the NGO to donate, therefore building relationship is essential. Fund-raising - lies at the heart of every non profit organization and is a primary PR function, as emphasized by several scholars. (Seital 1995, Baskin 1997, Lane, 2004; Block, 2001; Carlson and Donohoe, 2003).

'Improving internal staff relations', as PR objectives is not being given much importance by the NGO sector in contrast to 'profit making organizations' which have set up Employee Relations departments. Volunteers and staff play a significant role in raising funds and motivating beneficiaries towards the NGOs. Drucker (1990) while stressing on the importance of volunteers said that "Volunteers should be seen as an important market, because more volunteers you bring, more people you can serve. NPOs need to make a determined, continued effort to find the right people. It should be remembered that Volunteers get their satisfaction out of their work, not the paycheck. Recognition is important for volunteers and is an important part of the support and care of volunteer workforce".

NGOs have ranked 'Getting favorable coverage from media' as the last PR objective, whereas, if an organization gets favorable coverage from media or has good media relations, then it can actually create a good image of the organization in the market or amongst other publics. Campbell (1996) referred that "Media relations is not only the most utilized communications tool, it is also identified as the most effective". It is a creative method of using the media to reach and communicate with the relevant constituencies. The NGOs in the study are ignoring this fact. One of the reasons for this maybe, NGOs perception that media does not respond as favorably to the non-profit sector as it does to the 'for-profit sector'.

All the PR objectives are important for sustainability of any NGO to work for the cause effectively as opined by Baskin et al (1997) that Communication with members, government and other groups becomes the basic product of many not-for-profit organizations.

## Conclusions

It has very clearly emerged from the study; that Public Relations will remain at the core of the NGO sector, as for-profit organization. NGOs have a paramount need to communicate with its internal and external public for sustainability in continuously changing environment. They need to be in touch with the publics at grass root to reach them effectively, but problem of funds is a characteristic of the sector; thus PR can be of great help. PR has many tools in its basket which has personal touch that increases trust and faith and at the same time allows NGO sector to reach public at very low cost. NGOs find it very difficult to attract motivated volunteers. Volunteerism is an activity that is a result of self motivation, as NGOs are not able to pay great money in return. The sector finds the solution in terms of PR strategies to motivate the volunteers to contribute for the cause/s efficiently and continuously. Moore (1981) referred that the principal media of internal communication used in informing employees, volunteers and members of a social welfare organization are handbooks, reports, periodicals, kits, reprints of publicity, radio and television scripts and films. Funding bodies always have an eye on NGOs that how sector is spending money. NGOs are funded by government, corporate, international aids, member dues, individual donors etc. Methods for implementing communication strategies in financial relations include personal meetings, financial literature (correspondence, quarterly and annual reports, dividend disclosures), financial news releases and annual meetings (Baskin et al. 1997). Good public relations can not only assist in getting money but also building trust. In - a - nutshell good PR can help NGOs in communicating effectively with various stakeholders.

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