



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Journalism

ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN PUBLIC HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Public Relations (PR), as a multifaceted discipline has no standardized definition. It is the discipline which looks after organization's reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. The PR is planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between organization and its publics. However, PR is a managerial function since it deals with the organization's relations with both internal and external public. The roots of PR reach far into the history, but the fundaments of the modern concept of PR could be found in the pioneering propaganda efforts against the British Monarchy during the American Revolution. Besides its use for commercial and political purposes, PR also plays an important role in the context of public healthcare communication activities. Like never before, PR in public healthcare is faced with so many challenges and expectations. Today's PR has to deal with a broad perspective of health related issues and need of target markets, together with taking into account financial aspects of healthcare services. It is the goal of this paper to provide better understanding of the application of PR in the public healthcare system.

INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) is a concept of relations and/or communication with the target audience which consists of organization's internal and external public. The PR is considered as a relatively young and fast growing discipline. The PR, as a part of the marketing communications or promotional mix, is widely used in the commercial sector. However, its applications could also be found in the non-commercial area. One, from the public point of view, very important non-commercial area is the public healthcare system. Due to its nature, the public healthcare system is often being criticized by wider public, professionals and academics. As a sequel, the public healthcare system could be considered as a non-commercial area with the continuous need for effective public relations activities. This paper provides an overview of the public relations with the special focus on the aspects of the use of PR within the public healthcare system. First, a role of public relations within the commercial marketing context is explained, together with the brief historical overview of the discipline. Second, PR is analyzed from the perspective of social marketing, with specific focus on the public healthcare system.

Functions Of Public Relations

Due to its multifaceted nature, the role of public relations could be further clarified through the description of its main functions. As **Broom (2007)** proposed, the main functions of PR are:

Internal relations

These refer to the communication processes aimed at organization's internal public. Internal relations manage the communication inside the organization, managing the information that employee's receive. Public relations department organizes communication programmes to keep employers motivated. It can be said that internal relations takes care of everyone inside the organization.

Publicity

Sometimes it is considered as a separate element of the promotional mix, but traditionally it is considered as a function within the PR. Publicity refers to the communication activities provided by an outside source in cases when the communicated information is valuable as news to the wider public. Being mostly a free of charge communication, publicity is the hardest form of communication to control. There is no control in when the information is used, how it is used and if it is used. Publicity, as a tool of public relations, is used for all aspects of our lives, from political use, marketing use, image clarification etc.

Lobbying

It is a narrow specialized branch of public with the goal to create and maintain relations with government and governmental bodies to influence legislation and regulations. Because of popular believes that lobbying is related to bribery and threats, it is highly criticized and frowned upon. Despite that general mark, lobbying is a legal way to influence government decision making. Most countries in the world have a certain organization where lobbyists are registered and where they report their work.

Advertising

It could be considered as a media for placing PR messages. In this context, PR uses advertising as a tool to approach wider public through mass media by controlling the content, placing and timing. Public relations can use advertisements as part of the communication effort with external public in order to improve corporate image, tackle some environmental issue, motivate volunteers etc.

Public Affairs

It refers to the specialised part of PR that "builds and maintains relationship with government agencies and community stakeholder groups in order to influence public policy". Public affairs can be explained as "PR tactics applied to government relations strategies to produce excellent public policy".

Press Agency

It is a field in PR that attracts public attention more than it builds public understanding, following the pattern "more the news coverage, the better". It creates stories to attract the media and gain public notice (**Brooks, 2009**).

Development/Advancement

It is a part of public relations that is most commonly used in non profit organizations. Because non profit organizations depend on donations, fees and volunteers, they become dependent on campaigns and special events to gain public support and contributions. As **Broom** explained development is a specialized part of public relations that only focuses on raising money for non profit organizations through maintaining relationships with donors, organizing charity events, auctions etc.

Issues Management

It is a function of public relations that anticipates, prepares and reacts in crisis or whenever there is a need to respond to public policy issues. Issues Management preserves the relationship of an organization and its public (**Lauzen, 1997**).

Historical overview of public relations

Public relations, although articulated in many words and forms was used at the beginnings of primary that influenced viewpoints is traced from the earliest civilizations. Archaeological dig in Iraq told farmers how to harvest and sow their crops. Fundamental elements of Public Relations also appear in the scripts of king spies in ancient India. It showed that besides espionage, the spies were expected to inform the king about the public opinion and spreading positive image of Ancient Greeks considered the public will, while the Romans coined the expression vox populi, vox Dei – the voice of the people is the voice of the also used public relations, where Kings maintained Lord Chancellor as “Keepers of the Kings Conscience” or as a third party needed to operate communication between kings and the people. At the Early Modern Era, a form of Public Relations way named propaganda. The word propaganda was invented in the seventeenth century by Catholic Church as Congregatio de Propaganda Fide- Congregation for propagating the faith (Hilsdale, 1995).

The modern roots of public relations began in United States. Public relations first appeared during the American Revolution as propaganda against the British Monarchy. However, various promotional activities in the US can be traced all the way to seventeenth century and the first settlements on the East Coast. The activity was conducted by preachers who were sent to England where they realised the dire need for a brochure which would assist them in their activities. And so in becoming the first public relations pamphlets, it is common knowledge that public relations tools are often used in political purposes. The ground for developing public relations in US flourished during those revolutionary. Campaigns to shape public opinion and move masses go back to Revolutionary War and Samuel Adams. Adams and his revolutionaries understood that the strength lies in the people and their support and knew how to channel that strength and manipulate it. They worked on arousing and organize public opinion using pen, platform, staged events, symbols, news tips etc. (Bradley, 1999).

Their main assumption was that “man kinds are more led by their senses than by their reason”. Adams would use existing events or create new ones for serving his purpose public relations to a new extent. The first presidential campaigns during the President Andrew Jackson created the press secretary growing and people gained their political power the need for campaigning became necessary. President Jackson formed his “Kitchen Cabinet” unofficial collection of advisers formed mostly by former newspaperman to help him get his ideas Fast development of industry and railroads growth of population and development of cities and wire communications in the post Civil War America evoked the beginnings of public relations for the twentieth century during contemporary public relations came to life. With the changing environment, the need for managing relationships with public raised.

Corporations gradually began to realize the importance of combining hostility and courting public favour. The expert in public relations was an inevitable phenomenon in a view of the need. In 1906, while working as a representative for a coal mine operators, he issued a “Declaration of Principles” which evolved press agency and publicity into public relations. His declaration made clear that public should not be ignored or fooled. He started the handouts to reporters which are today called press releases which brought favourable press coverage to the coal miners and therefore himself for doing a great job. He started using the term “public relations” around 1919. Not only was he a pioneer of public relations, his point of clarifying the topic of public relations is still being used (Broom, 2007).

IT development provides new opportunities for PR

“Access made 'self publishing' a reality, leading to less control

over the public information system by traditional media, to greater diversity in points of view, to increased interest in organizational transparency and to precisely targeted communication with stakeholders” (Broom, 2009).

Public relations in public healthcare

The Public healthcare, according to its definition, comprises organized health efforts directed to communities rather than to individuals, relying on a combination of science and social approaches healthcare can be traced to ancient times and shamans that cured and prevented disease. A step towards creating beginnings of the public healthcare started in the sixth century in Europe during the outbreak of leprosy. Physicians separated patients which brought to opening of “leprosaria”, leper houses and the beginning of quarantine. It is estimated that by the end of twelfth century there were more than 19,000 “medical” houses open in Europe. By the middle of fifteen century, major cities in Italy established boards of health who were in charge of investigating existence of plague, establishing quarantine, issuing health passes, arranging burials and managing leprosaria. Some contribution to public health was made by Johann Peter Frank, a hospital administrator, published a six volume proposal “System of Complete Medical Policy” where he showed a scheme of governmental programmes to promote health and protect population from disease (Cipolla, 1976).

In the twentieth century complexity of public health problems led to the establishment of academic programmes to expand research. University of London and Harvard University were the pioneers of those research programs. By the mid twentieth century, public health activities had evolved into fields of communicable diseases control, environmental sanitation, maternal and child health services, health education, occupational and industrial hygiene, nutrition, and, in most developed countries, the provision of medical care.

Relations Within Public Healthcare

Communication plays an important role in the context of public healthcare. The role of communication in performing the public healthcare services could be summarised as follows.

Communication role

It delivers relevant health status information to communities, particularly changes in rates that suggest the need for intervention, provides an opportunity for communities to voice concerns about perceived health problems. Moreover, it diagnoses and investigates health problems and health hazards in the community. It also notifies individuals and communities of potential health hazards, informs, educates and empowers people about health issues. Use multiple levels of communication, including social marketing and community education, to bring about healthy lifestyles. Mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems.

Like never before, public healthcare is faced with so many challenges and expectations. Thanks to the development of internet, health related news travel around the globe almost instantaneously. However, their sources are usually journalists with no formal medical education. While some 60 years ago, PR practitioners in healthcare had an easy job to create awareness and preference for healthcare since the healthcare organizations of that time enjoyed public support and sympathy. But today's PR has to deal with much broader perspective of health related issues and needs of target markets, together with taking into account financial aspects of healthcare services (Tomcic, Lasic and Tomcic, 2010).

Public health is of critical importance to everyone. In today's world of bioterrorism and threatening epidemics, public healthcare institutions create a border to global threats towards health and security. Through public relations public

health care creates “effective delivery of health care at the front line”. Because of the nature of public healthcare, it is the task of PR to help in bringing public health care institutions and public together by providing accurate information. Furthermore, PR should be used for both internal and external public in the process of focusing of the user’s (i.e. patient’s) wants and needs, because “...patients sometimes feel treated as numbers, are made to wait too long, do not have their condition or treatment explained sufficiently, feel lost in the system, receive poor customer service, are denied choice and experience basic lapses in care” (**Department of Health, 2007**). However, there are also some mixed emotions towards the use of PR among public healthcare professionals. While there is a presence of enthusiasm towards PR when it produces highly desirable outcomes (e.g. news coverage for a flood evacuation plan, fund-raising for some social cause etc.), the PR activities are highly scrutinised for their return on investment (**Millward and Bryan, 2005**).

CONCLUSION

PR is considered as a multifaceted field which belongs to both marketing and management. Assessing the topic from the public healthcare perspective, it could be concluded that public relations, as a social marketing communication tool, plays very important role in today’s very challenging environment. Social marketing and public relations are recognized by the public healthcare system as the concept focused on users and their needs. However, there is a certain research potential for further investigation of the practical application of PR within the public healthcare system, especially in less-developed countries. Furthermore, the practical aspect of PR in the public healthcare could also be comparatively approached.

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