

What is PR?

by Michael Bland

Introduction

Considering that public relations (PR) is about publicising and promoting things, surprisingly little is known about the business of public relations itself.

And what we do hear about PR so often seems to be negative. The very term “public relations” evokes images of yuppies in pinstripe suits plying their clients with treble gin-and-tonics; of trendy new consultancies; of Machiavellian figures behind the scenes in a takeover bid, massaging the figures and manipulating the media.

It’s really quite ironic that the people who are so good at giving their companies and clients a good image are so bad at giving themselves one – a classic case of the cobbler’s children wearing the tightest shoes.

There are several reasons for the lack of understanding of just what PR is all about, such as:

- It is a young “profession” with few established codes of practice etc.
- It calls for a high degree of creativity, which is often incompatible with good organisation and management.
- It is also fair comment that PR attracts its share of the gin-and- tonic brigade ... though they are, fortunately, an increasingly dying breed, and the new entrants to PR nowadays are more typically clean cut, hard working young graduates.

But mostly, it’s a simple question of definition. If you talk of accountancy, or advertising, or engineering, everyone has a general picture of what you’re talking about. But “public relations” can mean so many different things to different people.

The official definition of the Institute of Public Relations is:

Public relations...

is about reputation: the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

Public relations practice...

is the discipline which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour.

It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics.

This covers the field, but it is long winded, heavyweight and abstract. One of the best definitions is by Peter Hutton of research organisation MORI:

The planned attempt/effort to influence what people know and think about, and how they behave towards, a company, organisation, product, service or cause.

Much of this can be achieved by advertising, direct mail and marketing. So what's different about PR?

As a rough guideline, it is more about getting your various audiences to think well of you without necessarily knowing how they came by that impression – and without you having to pay too heavily for it. There is more emphasis on word of mouth and third party endorsement.

At its simplest, it's the difference between paying for an advertisement in a newspaper (which the reader knows is only an ad, and that you've paid for it) and getting the paper to write good things about you (which the reader finds much more credible – and which you haven't had to pay for).

In an ideal world, marketing, advertising and PR work closely together to optimum effect – and there are no sharp border lines. But one thing about PR is for certain: despite the boom in the business lately, very few organisations really know how to use it. Mention PR to most businesses and the familiar cries are:

“We don't need PR”

“What is PR”

“What does it cost?” (often the first question!)

“We already use PR...”

...but do they?

Very few organisations know:

- WHO their key audiences are... and why.
- WHAT those audiences really think of them.
- HOW they could use a wide range of PR techniques to create a better understanding – a better impression.
- and WHAT the benefits would be.

For many companies and organisations, large and small, it comes as a surprise when:

- They have a planning permission turned down because the council and residents have “got it in for them”.
 - They have problems motivating the workforce.
 - The paper gets hold of a juicy titbit about them and “gets it all wrong”.
- ...and so on...

...When for years they have had no regular lines of communication with the council and residents, no structured communications with employees... and all the paper has ever had out of them is “no comment”. Fail to communicate and you deserve what you get. This is especially true nowadays, where there’s an increasing need to communicate effectively.

Outside audiences have more and more of a “right to know” – people like:

- The media
- Authorities and government
- Pressure groups and consumer associations

If the first time you have to communicate to the outside world is in response to one of these bodies, it’s a defence measure, and you will always be fighting a rearguard action.

It will make all the difference in the world if you take the initiative – package your side of the story in an interesting, attractive way and tell it – in advance – rather than waiting to have it dragged out of you.

Those who do it well can help to improve sales, avoid misunderstandings and improve the environment in which they operate.

But how do we do it well?

The first essential is to have the right sort of people doing the job. There's no magic to PR, and those who claim that it takes years to learn the "skills" are kidding themselves. What it does take is a particular type of person – someone with:

- A sense of curiosity
- An intelligent, organised mind
- A reasonable amount of business awareness
- An ability to communicate – especially in writing.

These criteria cover a very wide range. There are good potential PR people lurking in every department.

Some organisations like to handle all their PR "in house". Others hand it all to an agency. Probably the best approach is a bit of both. Some things are best done in house, but a good PR consultancy can be invaluable for assessing your existing communications activity, helping to prepare a communications strategy, coming up with bright ideas, acting as a "word in the ear" adviser and handling overload from your PR department at busy times.

The next vital step is to get the strategy right. This is often given too little time and attention as everyone rushes into doing things without thinking them through ("Let's send a press release"). The basic elements of a PR strategy are:

Aim: "What do we want to achieve?"

Research: "What do people think of us/our product?
What do we **want** them to think?"

Objective(s): "What are the measurable steps we can take to achieve the aim?"

Messages: "What do we need to tell them?"

Audiences: "Who do we need to tell it to?"

Channels: "How do they receive their information? How are their opinions and attitudes formed?"

Methods: "How do we do it?"

Resources: "What are the budget, people and facilities?"

Timescale: "When do we do what?"

Evaluation: "Is it working?"

Only when the strategy is developed should you start to select and use the methods, the weapons in your PR armoury. Typical PR devices include:

Announcing new products and services

Events

Surveys

Media relations

Press releases

Press conferences

Sponsorships

Awards

Conferences and seminars

Speeches

Open days

Employee activities

Lobbying

Case histories

Community activity

Exhibitions

Spokespeople

Investor Relations

Internet: web sites; streaming; forums...

...and many others. Some of these overlap with marketing and advertising. And most involve developing a relationship with the various audiences, especially the media.

With the right strategic and professional approach PR can be highly effective. It can help to make people look at you differently, buy your products, use your services and create a better environment in which to do business.

And it can be great fun.