

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Public relations is the strategically focused two-way communication to achieve a certain goal. PR department plans and implements strategies to inform and gather support for the relevant public. The role of public relations in building knowledge societies is also sensitizing citizens and create a positive social climate for the acceptance of new programs and projects in the wider public, as well as ensuring the active participations of target public and the construction of the positive publicity, which allows PR in proactive action to prevent the emergence of conflict situation. If, however, demonstrate the need, PR department implements integrated communication strategy with the aim of reducing the negative publicity.

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MISSION AND TASK OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Raising quality and improving the educational system by 2010. is a strategic goal of Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia. This is the project that has been conducted in our educational institutions for four years. The basic strategic document for its realization is Education Sector Development Plan that was adopted by the Government in June 2005. The project follows defined priorities that wish to standardize the quality of the entire educational system, enable its accessibility to everyone, but also improve teachers' professional education and improvement. In that context, the basic task of PR is to organize and pass on the desired messages to target public. This is about the communication whose goal is to achieve better understanding and acceptance of necessary changes that come with the process of raising quality and improving the complete educational system. Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, as holder of the project of improving Croatian educational system in accordance with European standards, introduces numerous changes in national scholastic and higher-education system creating pedagogical curriculum. Programmes such as introducing Croatian National Educational Standards in all primary schools, national exams and state graduation exam, reform of higher

education and coordination with Bologna Process, and development of science and technology system are main guidelines towards the society of knowledge. Therefore the role of public relations department is to inform and raise awareness of the citizens in order to create atmosphere of positive social climate for acceptance of new programmes and projects in the general public. PR strategies of two-way communication, informing and development of positive publicity are specially oriented towards gaining support from relevant public that is expected to actively participate. Proactive public relations also contribute to preventing potential conflict situations that would result in negative publicity.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PUBLIC

Ministry, as holder of the project, has to take care about target public that is “inside” educational process, whether it is applying, shaping or “consuming” it when planning strategic communications with which it wants to win favour and support of the public. Internal public is made of expert associates that take part in creating new educational programmes and their evaluation; employees in educational process that every day in direct contact with pupils and students apply gained knowledge and recommended methods, unions in education area, and pupils and students. Since the improvement of social and material position and the development of knowledge and skills of educational staff is mentioned as one of the priorities in making the society of knowledge, we can say that union goals correspond with Ministry’s goals, but in practice we are often witnesses that it is the unions who are “hot issue public”¹, especially when negotiating pay rise. Also, pupils and students are often the most critical public, unwilling to accept new things. Besides internal public, public relations department must also lead proactive relations with the so called external public, which includes political, financial, media and local public.

STRATEGIC PLANNING OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

1. RESEARCHES

The first step of strategic planning of public relations includes researching internal and external environment in order to establish the purpose of communication for each relevant public. Researches are conducted through survey or interviews with so-called focus group about certain subject. Studies of media contents (clipping), or so-called “desktop research” are also useful. They are actually internal research of existing data (like statistical indicators, complaints studies, etc.). So-called secondary researches of external statistics

¹Polemic public

are also useful, where the existing researches are used, but they are analyzed in a secondary way considering current problem.

2. PURPOSE AND SELECTION OF MODELS, CHANNELS AND TECHNIQUES OF PR COMMUNICATION

The role of modern public relations is not only to inform any more, or to create positive publicity, now PR practice is based on scientific research and two-way communication that ensures feedback about effects of our communication. Contrary to two-way asymmetrical model whose goal is to persuade, two-way symmetrical model of PR tries to gain mutual understanding. Understanding is achieved through direct negotiations with relevant target public. Apart from choosing a model and defining the purpose of PR communication for particular target public group, strategic planning also implies choosing communication channels and the most appropriate techniques that will be used. Messages have to, above all, attract attention and be understandable to particular target public they are intended for. Specifically, we want our target message to be noticed and remembered and to cause reaction in accordance with viewpoint that we are sending. The most common basic techniques are: PR writing, making printed media material (press release), organizing press conferences and preparing speeches for public appearance. Choosing the technique depends also on the medium.

2.1. BASIC PR TECHNIQUES CONSIDERING THE MEDIUM

The most important channel of communication are media. Messages for media have to contain so-called news values, i.e. have to contain new things that journalists, editors consider valuable for publishing. The most common form is press release. Printed material for journalists has to be informative and edited in a strict way, even though this kind of relation with the media enables free publicity. Using press release organization wants to present positive picture (image) about itself, its work and programme to the public, but apart from informing the media about something new, it is also used in situations when institutions have to react to negative information that are going around in public in order to refute them.

Press conferences are also used very often to present news. Contrary to press releases, conferences are organized in order to ensure better media coverage. The reason for organizing so-called classic press conference is an important event or announcement that is usually presented by leadership itself. Experts can also be present to give additional explanations to journalists' questions. Anniversaries, awards, good business results are the most common cause for

organizing so-called press party, more relaxed form of press conference that includes party for the participants. Press conference is combined with banquet or reception, while for routine mediation of professional information press briefing is used. They are used mostly by organizations that journalists show great interest for. At such brief press conferences short, professional information concerning current problems are presented, as well as so-called background information.

Written material for the radio is, first of all, meant to be spoken, therefore they have shorter form, but the advantage of the radio is that the information sent as press release can immediately be passed on. Besides informative broadcasts, numerous current topics from education area are suitable for radio interpretation through various genres like interview, comments or debates with several expert collocutors, or through surveys that show the opinion of general population about certain hot subject or problem.

Speaker's preparation for public appearance is extremely important because insecurity in the voice (e.g. because of stage fright) can create the impression of unconvincingness with the listener. Therefore voice control, rhythm of speech, special emphasis on certain expressions, as well as skilfully inserted joke or anecdote can contribute to successful public appearance, i.e. presentation of the topic that speaker represents. Speaker has to be familiar with broader strategy of PR, i.e. with the image of the institution we are trying to achieve in public, as well as with special PR programmes that are in progress. Messages have to reflect certain consistency, in other words they have to be in accordance with the mission and goals of the institution it represents. Besides preparing the speech in accordance with the rules of classic rhetoric, speaker's preparation for interpretation is also very important. Therefore PR consultants prepare strategies for two-way communication in advance, or in other words they are trying to predict questions, develop viewpoints and make a simulation of how will the statements work in the media.

2.2. TECHNIQUES CONSIDERING BROADER INTEGRAL FUNCTION

Today theory and practice talk about *Integrated Marketing Communication* (IMC) that represents strategic integration of multiple communications with target market. According to Meler, IMC developed as a result of marketing understandings that certain promotional or communication activities should not be used independently, but integral (integrated) approach is necessary in order to achieve synergic communication effects. Marketing communication mix consists of five main forms of communication: advertising, public relations and publicity, sales improvement, personal sales and direct marketing (Meler 2005,

261). Basic difference between advertising and publicity² is that the latter is free while advertisements are paid promotion. According to Meler, publicity also has significant advantages in relation to advertising. In fact, since it is usually created by journalists or “third parties” it is more convincing and acceptable for consumer because it represents trustworthy information separated from advertising messages – which creates the impression of objectivity with public, even though it actually functions in indirect way, actually it mostly represents the same thing as institutional advertising, only in concealed way. Publicity messages always contain news and can be broadcasted more quickly than advertising messages, but they are mostly one-time (Meler 2005, 293).

As the effects of mass advertising weaken, marketing experts turn more and more to public relations whose costs are more effective, and to new media and technology. Marketing of immediate reaction (direct response) is used more and more, starting from creating users databases, using new technological possibilities for the development of long-term relations with them, as well as for ‘transformation’ of satisfied users of services into future advocates of the company or institution. For example, besides classic public relations, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports issues press releases on its web pages. In order for their users to be informed about changes of content on a regular basis, database with e-mail addresses of interested users was created and they are promptly informed about new contents in the public releases section. E-mail with the notice also contains the link, which is an advantage, because the text can be opened with only one click. According to the number of clicks it is possible to ‘measure’ how much attention did the certain topic draw.

3. METHODS OF PR IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERING THE DURATION

Creating events is one of the most important instruments of marketing public relations. Companies, institutions or non-profit organizations plan the so-called events, unique happenings, which will most certainly draw media attention. In situations when there is no extraordinary news, companies can use positive publicity caused by the ‘event’ in order to gain sympathy from target public or to inform about their activities, products and services.

Creating events is an extremely important ability in encouraging for raising necessary funds for non-profit organizations that have developed broad repertoire of special events like auctions, charity dinners, book sales, fairs (Kotler, 2001, 676).

² Old name for marketing public relations was publicity, and its role was to ensure editorial space – as opposed to paid space – in the press and broadcasting media in order to promote products, places and people

Contrary to the event which is one-time happening, campaigns consist of more various events that take place in certain time intervals and are gradually intensified. Specifically, in leading communication campaign the point of culmination, or central event, and the campaign ending are set in advance. Contrary to creating events, whose role is to publicly express viewpoints, communication campaigns try to ensure positive response or support to the organization in particular moment.³

Programmes are continued communication process that exists as long as the need for informing exists. Since this is more extensive communication with public, PR department is the one that organizes and leads communication programme, and final goal of communication with target public is achieving mutual understanding and support to the organization. Programmes can include various techniques and channels.

RELATIONS WITH RELEVANT PUBLIC

1. RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

For gradual realization of changes in educational system, apart from material and personnel conditions, it is necessary to achieve harmony of social, professional and political circles. Ministry's task is to prepare documents' proposals that are created by competent experts, scientists and practitioners. All documents, before entering due process of law, must pass public discussion.⁴ Documents' proposals are also published on web pages, therefore all interested citizens have a chance to get an insight into them and can through standard mail or electronic mail express their opinion or give good suggestions. Final versions of the documents are then presented to the Government of the Republic of Croatia, or to legislative body. Proposed documents are also discussed about in Parliament, which can accept proposed documents or return them back to be "finalized".

Public relations in the segment of political public are based on lobbying whose goal is to ensure support in passing the law and communicating about effects of passed measures. Considering that the most important agreements with international institutions are negotiated and signed on highest levels, reputation and credibility of the institutions that take commitments are extremely

³ Educational campaign "*Ususret državnoj maturi*" starts. Available on: <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx?art=8643> Accessed: (8-9-2008)

⁴ *Nacrt nacionalnog okvirnog kurikulum za predškolski odgoj i opće obvezno obrazovanje u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi* stavljen na javnu raspravu. Available on: <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx?art=8792&sec=1941Pristup>: (2-12-2008)

important. Therefore, apart from lobbying, one of the PR tasks is developing and maintaining so-called “positive climate” that enables mutually successful long-term cooperation. For example: In cooperation with institutions of higher education and scientific institutes, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports organizes workshops about Seventh Framework Programme on Research and Development two to three times a month. This is so-called FP7 program that refers to the period between 2007 and 2013, and for which €50.5 billion were provided by the European Commission. Within the framework of the previous FP6 program, Croatia signed 100 contracts based on which about €10 million were provided. For the purpose of promotion, in cooperation with European Commission, info days are organized four to five times a year (Primorac;2007, 109).

2. RELATIONS WITH FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Relations with financial public are oriented towards existing and potential investors, general financial public (banks, analysts, banking advisers, fund and investment companies’ managers), business partners (e.g. Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts) and specialized financial media. Particularity of these relations is that financial institutions are legally bound to have financial reports, and mediation of inappropriate information is a criminal offence. Considering that financial public is extremely active, i.e. it seeks and interprets information by itself, PR task is mainly to build the reputation and strengthen cooperation.

Scientific and technological policy of the Republic of Croatia 2006 – 2010 got support from the World Bank to the amount of €31 million, where Government of the Republic of Croatia ensures additional €5.7 million. For projects carried out by BICRO⁵ €14 million was provided from the loan by the World Bank. In cooperation with BICRO Ministry applied for IPA funds of pre-accession assistance of the European Union: for project of development of University Campus Borongaj and for the project Fund for Investing in Science and Innovations that is oriented towards improving capacities of scientific organizations. In 2006 Unity through Knowledge Fund was established whose goal is to enable the return of Croatian scientists from abroad. For the project that is supposed to last till 2009 €3.96 million was provided from the World Bank. In cooperation with Fund for Development and Employment of the Republic of Croatia the project of development of professional studies in smaller urban areas was started, for which 60 million kuna was provided in the period between 2006 and 2009 (Primorac;2007, 60, 69-70).

⁵ These projects are: RAZUM – new product / service development, TEHCRO – technological infrastructure, VENCRO – establishing the fund of high-risk capital, IRCRO – academic community and economy cooperation, KONCRO -

3. *RELATIONS WITH MEDIA*

It is characteristic for media that they are at the same time target public and central channel for distribution of PR messages and information with which we wish to reach general public. As active or manifest public, media carefully monitor what is happening in the education area, where they have an important role and impact on shaping the public opinion. To be fair, media do not have the power to impose viewpoints, but they have the possibility to “impose” topics around which public debates will develop. Journalists and editors are so-called gate keepers who decide whether certain information will be allowed in the media or not. Public relations department always try to show events in positive light, while journalists are oriented towards criticism and search for conflicts. Because of that media can easily cross from so-called manifest public to polemic public.

On the other side, there is certain interdependence between PR and media. PR's goal is to, through media, launch information intended for wide public, present programs and projects and achieve in creating positive publicity. Media, however, use press conferences, announcements, PR reports as official source of information chosen for announcement or “starting point” for certain topic research.

4. *RELATIONS WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES*

Relations with local communities are primarily oriented towards relations with representatives of local communities who make decisions, detect problems, notice trends, but also towards private and public companies that are the holders of economic development. For example in Istria, that is prominent tourist region, pupils' interest for catering education programs is very low. Businessmen are trying to solve that problem by giving stimulating scholarships for jobs in short supply, by ensuring permanent job after finishing school and by promoting catering profession. (Strugar;2002, 15-16, 59)

Through development plan for educational system 2005 – 2010 project of school development was started. For that purpose one billion kuna will be provided. By introducing HNOS (Croatian National Education Standard) partnership between schools and local communities is encouraged, not only in the area of material and technological working conditions, but also in teaching and research projects. In 2006. project Development of professional studies was started, based on the needs of small urban areas in order to stimulate employment and development of those areas.

5. RELATIONS WITH INTERNAL PUBLIC

One of the most important goals of educational changes is improvement of working conditions, as well as the standard of employees. According to available information, 5 259 new openings occurred in science and educational system between 2004 and 2007. As an instrument of encouraging excellence, Education and Teacher Training Agency promoted 878 teachers into mentors and 480 expert assistants into advisers by the end of 2006. As a result, their incomes rose by 7 or 12%. Employees also got state-aided housing loans, where user pays 1.67% of interest, and Ministry 3.23% (Primorac;2007, 35, 37).

According to Law of the Student Union and other student organizations, in all institutions of higher education student attorney is introduced. His role is to counsel students, and to receive and solve complaints, which contributes to ensuring quality in institutions of higher education. Student Union, apart from choosing student ombudsman from among students, can participate in preparation of bills for improvement of educational process or student standard through its representative. Students are actively involved in Ministry's projects and participate in the work of many expert bodies, e.g. in the work of National Working Group for Monitoring the Bologna Process. They are also organized into numerous clubs or interest associations that are, if they have high quality programs, financed mostly by the Ministry.

One of the goals is standardization of Croatian educational system with European. Within that, better mobility of lecturers and students is being developed in the framework of higher education, whether our students continue their studies abroad, or foreign students come to Croatia. Information about international education and scientific cooperation, as well as information about scholarships offered by numerous international organizations, foundations and institutions of higher education are published on Ministry's web pages.

CONCLUSION

The role of public relations department is to inform, sensitize citizens and create positive social climate for accepting new programs and projects in general public. If needed, events and campaigns are used, while for years-long projects long-term programs are planned. Even though ideal model of public relations is Two-way symmetrical model based on two-way communication and scientific research and on direct negotiations with relevant target public, Asymmetrical model is used more often. It would be advisable to integrate PR strategy into marketing communication that would even through advertising campaign popularize the society of knowledge. I would complete the existing campaign "Ususret državnoj maturi" with an advertising campaign, that would with its style and design be adapted to pupils.

Action called Indeks was the top subject of all media debates in September. Spectacular action where 95 people from Faculty of Economics and Business and from Law School suspected of bribery, bribe-taking or mediation in bribery were arrested shocked the public. Media gave great attention to that since about twenty professors were taken to further investigation. Even though more than five months have passed from the action that was supposed to expose corruption, only two students were processed. Therefore the public is wondering whether the spectacular action was necessary only to show to Europe that we have political will to settle with corruption. Media did not respect code of ethics, and besides professors' reputation that were not found guilty, the reputation of faculties was also damaged. However, PR department did not make any move in order to reduce negative publicity, as well as faculties' leaderships, surprised with delicate investigation and unpleasant media intensification of the scandal. No one is guilty until proven guilty – this is the basic postulate that media did not respect here which resulted in negative effects and scandal, instead of contributing to better quality of educational system.

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