

Exploring Public Relations and Management Communication

Fifth Edition



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Strategic public relations planning and management



Source: Nature Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe and assess the approaches to planning and managing campaigns and choose an appropriate one
- explain and use strategic tools to analyse the principal external and organisational context in which planning and management takes place
- plan a research-based strategic campaign or programme
- effectively manage and evaluate the impact of campaigns and programmes
- critique and apply relevant underlying theories.

Structure

- The importance of overall context
- External environment
- Internal environment
- Implications of context
- Strategic public relations programmes and campaigns
- Why planning is important
- Systems and alternative approaches to planning

Introduction

Every organisation has its own approach to the way it plans and manages its public relations campaigns and programmes. That is because there are significant differences in the types of organisations there are, the context in which they operate, and their specific public relations needs. A single-issue pressure group will have a very focused purpose and its publics and stakeholders may be very specific. A large government department – for example, a Department of Health – will touch the lives of every citizen in a variety of ways, from prenatal care to childhood and adult illnesses through to end-of-life care. Some business enterprises operate in tiny niche markets in one country, while others such as Virgin operate in several markets on a global scale. Airbnb as an organisation exists purely online, but many supermarkets have a large physical presence. However, because of the ubiquity of online, every organisation has the potential to be seen and known globally, and potentially anyone who takes an interest

can take a stake in it, that is, exert influence that might affect it in some way.

The first part of this chapter examines a range of factors that influence the way public relations campaigns and programmes are planned within organisations. It will be seen that understanding and analysing organisational context is vitally important. Public relations campaigns and programmes do not stand in isolation: they are both ‘buffers’ and ‘bridges’ (Meznar and Nigh 1995: 976) to the world and therefore a profound understanding of this outside environment is imperative. Public relations campaigns and programmes are often directed at or involve staff within the organisation, and they too have lives outside work, thus any formal communication with them must make sense within the broader context of their lives.

Importantly, the pace of change is increasing, and the external environment is becoming ever more complex. As Borge Brende, President of the World Economic Forum (WEF) says in the Global Risks Report for 2019 (WEF 2019: 5):

The world is facing a growing number of complex and interconnected challenges—from slowing global growth and persistent economic inequality to climate change, geopolitical tensions and the accelerating pace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

However, as he goes on to say:

There has never been a more pressing need for a collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach to shared global problems.

This is both the opportunity and challenge facing public relations professionals today who advise leaders on and put into effect these collaborations and it calls for a systematic yet flexible response. That is at the heart of strategic planning and management.

The second part of the chapter examines in detail the planning and management of campaigns using a framework designed to ensure all the essential steps are covered.

The importance of context

Business history is littered with companies that have not been able to adapt to changing global and industry trends or have struggled to do so. High street retailers and banks have had to adapt to online shopping and radically change their business model – some failed to do so – such as Borders, the book retailer. Polaroid struggled with the advent of digital cameras but has adjusted to a reduced market and extreme competition from mobile phone and tablet manufacturers.

Although it is true that everyone in an organisation communicates both between themselves and with external groups too, public relations is the formal management function that organisations use to handle the relationships they have with numerous publics and stakeholder groups, both internally and externally. Of course, they are not the only ones with this formal responsibility; for example, marketing and legal departments are also tasked with developing relationships

with key groups of stakeholders (see Box 9.1) and HR usually has a major role in employee communications. However, even where it does not have direct formal responsibility for key relationships, public relations often has a role in assisting these other departments with their communication tasks.

These stakeholder groups comprise people who are, in turn, affected by developments, trends and issues in society. The environment in which modern organisations operate is dynamic, rapidly changing and complex. The forces at play are difficult to understand and their consequences hard to predict and new issues and trends arise, some of them very rapidly. For example, the issues created by Brexit, the UK’s exit from the European Union, has far-reaching effects not only on organisations in the UK and Europe, but on all organisations that trade with Europe. Investors are anxious too. The rise of insurgent groups, and political and economic instabilities in Iraq, Syria and parts of Africa and Asia, have created a huge flow of refugees and immigrants into

Box 9.1

Stakeholders and publics

The words stakeholder and publics are often used interchangeably. In this chapter stakeholders are those groups that have a 'stake' in an organisation i.e. those who are affected by or can affect it (Freeman, 1984).

Stakeholders can have very loose or intermittent relationships with an organisation and can be passive. Publics on the other hand are active: they have an issue, a problem or see opportunities and are supportive of the organisation. They have much closer engagement with it (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Any stakeholder has the potential to become a public. See more on this in Chapter 10. For ease of reference the word 'stakeholder' is used in this chapter to denote any individual or group who has a significant relationship in the organisation.

adjoining countries such as Jordan and wider afield to Europe, Australasia and the USA. The impact of this in the longer term is still playing out, but issues around social, economic and cultural integration and the implications for political leaders are considerable.

Organisations themselves are changing. For example, there are more women and part-time workers and, in many countries, more migrant employees. Furthermore, attitudes are changing. Because, certainly in the Western world, people feel empowered in their lives outside work and have more choices about where they live, their lifestyles and what they will spend their income on, they are no longer willing to be disempowered at work and this can bring challenges to employers (Myers 2016). In addition, organisations now find themselves much more accountable to external groups who want to know what they stand for and how they conduct themselves.

This endlessly dynamic, more complex and ever-changing context has an impact on planning. The traditional strategic planning models were developed in the twentieth century when business life could be said to be more predictable and slower, and where the dominant business philosophy was that an organisation could, given the right analysis and plan, impose itself on the market (see academics such as Igor Ansoff (1988) and Michael Porter (1980)). Therefore, although planning is important, plans themselves must be agile and flexible in order to be able to react to – and at times lead – the ongoing and changing conversations that organisations have with their stakeholders (van Ruler 2015). Context is of course different for each organisation and depends critically on, for example, what sector the organisation operates in, where it is based geographically, its size, areas of operation and culture.

External environment

The external context is vitally important for organisations because they have limited influence over it. Smart organisations constantly scan the external environment to identify emerging trends and issues. Having spotted these issues early, precious time is bought for the organisation to adjust itself to them, to engage with them and, sometimes, to influence their development. The public relations function is a natural organisational 'boundary spanner' (White and Dozier 1992), because building relationships requires it to build links from inside the organisation to the outside world and vice versa, and within the organisation itself. Therefore, public relations is perfectly placed to do this environmental scanning.

The external environment can be divided into two categories: the 'macro' and the 'task' environment (Grant 2016).

Macro environment

The macro environment can be described as the 'big picture' over which the organisation has no control but could well impact on it. These are the issues that emerge from the actions of governments, economic and social trends and from scientific and technological developments. Sometimes called the 'remote' or 'societal' environment, the macro environment develops beyond and independent of any organisation's operating situation (de Wit 2017).

To make sense of the macro environment, analysts use frameworks which help them systematically examine environmental influences. The most well-known analytical tool is PEST, which divides the overall environment into four categories – Political, Economic,

Think about 9.1

Macro trends

What macro or global trends do you think are important? What are their possible implications for public relations professionals? Suppose you are in charge of a children's immunisation campaign: how might you communicate with rural communities in emerging countries that do not have online access or very limited mobile technology?

Feedback

For further information about global trends look at <https://www.pwc.co.uk/issues/megatrends.html> and watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqthrSDHqZw>

Political	Economic
Change of Government	Fluctuation in currency values
New political alliances within and between nations	International trade agreements
Employment legislation	Interest rates
Industry regulation	Skills level in workforce
Environmental legislation	Levels of employment
	Inflation
Social	Technological
Social attitudes	Impact of technology on work practices
Demographic changes	Developments in IT
Lifestyle developments	Access to technology
Purchasing habits	Cost of research and development
Levels of education	Speed of change

Figure 9.1 Example of a PEST analysis

Social and Technological. Figure 9.1 provides some examples of topics that fall under each of these headings. What is important is the impact they may have on an existing relationship or what they reveal about the

need to develop a relationship. For example, a potential change in industry regulation may indicate the need to deepen relationships with the trade organisation and develop contacts with government departments for lobbying purposes. In addition, the identification of certain topics could present potential issues for the organisation (see Chapter 20 'Public affairs' for further discussion).

Given the increasing complexity of the macro environment, PEST is beginning to be regarded as a rather limited tool. A development of PEST is EPIS-TLE, which includes the four elements of PEST, but also forces consideration of Information, Legal and the green Environment. The 'information' heading invites special consideration of the fact that empowerment comes to groups and individuals through new technologies, although it must be remembered that people who are deprived of relevant technology will become increasingly disenfranchised and unable to engage in debate effectively. The legal environment is becoming more complex. Organisations not only have to be aware of national regulations, but also of transnational legislation such as trading laws and other legal agreements such as those reached at the climate summit held in Paris, December 2015 and affirmed in by 184 nations and the European Union in 2018. There are also non-binding, but moral undertakings agreed to by nations such as the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations where all member states have committed to their achievement by 2030 (see Box 9.2).

Clearly, different organisations will be affected in different ways by these macro issues. A car manufacturer will be very susceptible to political, technological, environmental and social pressures to design engines that are carbon efficient, or to offer electric alternatives. A fashion manufacturer needs to be acutely aware of social trends and how consumer preferences and changing lifestyles will impact on their business, but also of the issues created by them around body image and throwaway fashion. A careful eye needs to be kept on all these macro trends because issues arising from them are often interrelated – technological developments can drive social change and vice versa. Also, some issues could be placed in more than one category, for example, educational achievement not only has social consequences, but economic and political relevance too. While there are dozens of issues and trends in the wider environment is worth picking out a few for special mention because of their direct impact on public relations work.