

PR GOALS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract: *The ability to improve a competitive position involves the need to promote and create entrepreneurship in public organisations as well as implement modern management concepts. The strategic orientation in the management of public organisations is related to the search for identity, the vision of development and the implementation of a particular management strategy.*

The key issue is the incorporation of public relations into an institution's development strategy and its close connection with the existing promotional activities. All public organisations are constantly assessed by the general public, and their functioning is seriously hindered without an appropriate level of social trust. Trust is a prerequisite for their development, necessary for implementing new ideas or operation methods. In order to win trust it is crucial to achieve probity social participation in the activities of a public organisation.

The reliability and a positive image of a public organisation are necessary for the performance of its public tasks. A favourable reputation supports the link, maintaining and strengthening it, with the social environment.

The improvement of competitiveness in public organisations is one of the current issues in the area of management. Both in the case of companies and public organisations the idea of competitiveness is the ability to confront local, regional, national, and international rivals. Such challenges are faced by states, regions, cities as well as different public institutions: schools, hospitals, etc. They use public goods which serve local communities and the whole society.

In Poland, following the democratic breakthrough in 1989, social activity and individual entrepreneurship were reflected in the formation of many new public organisations (particularly on the market of educational and social institutions), which became rivals for traditional organisations in the field of fund raising from central and local public resources. As a result, the way that public institutions were managed had to change, too. The importance of efficient management, i.e. the creative implementation of the development concept, its proper and effective functioning, based on the influence exerted on the environment and employees in a manner appropriate in a given situation, became obvious.

Changes in the environment caused that both new and traditional public organisations faced the necessity to apply the competitive orientation, which, in terms of the management of these institutions, involves:¹

- the recognition of threats and opportunities in the environment, i.e. overall conditions of functioning
- the creation of the ability to compete
- the building of competitive advantage.

The ability to improve a competitive position involves the need to promote and create entrepreneurship in public organisations as well as implement modern management concepts. The strategic orientation in the management of public organisations is related to the search for identity, the vision of development and the implementation of a particular management strategy.

¹ M. Bednarczyk: *Public organization. Competitiveness management*, PWN, Warszawa – Kraków 2001, pp. 42-43

The key issue is the incorporation of public relations into an institution's development strategy and its close connection with the existing promotional activities. Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center, Glen M. Broom, who have developed the latest definition of PR, claim that "public relations is a function of management, which establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an institution and the groups of the public which are critical to its success or failure."² This definition, in the most accurate and concise way, clarifies the meaning of public relations, which is communication management within an institution (office, company, organisation) and with its environment.

PR plays a particularly important role in the case of public institutions, which meet social needs, so in order to attract customers and sponsors they can only convince the potential clients of the usefulness of their offer. Public relations aims to create a positive image and establish rapport with the environment, so it involves the mutual influence of the behaviour and attitudes of individuals. The goal of R is to gain acceptance and trust for an organisation, as well as to maintain the favourable conditions for its functioning. PR should convince the environment that an organisation operates in agreement with its interest. It strives then to build the social consensus.³

The idea of a civic society and the developing self-governance are a significant element contributing to the systematic growth in a community's involvement in solving the problems which occur on different levels of the social life. All public organisations are constantly assessed by the general public, and their functioning is seriously hindered without an appropriate level of social trust. Trust is a prerequisite for their development, necessary for implementing new ideas or operation methods. In order to win trust it is crucial to achieve probity social participation in the activities of a public organisation.

One of the most important tasks is then solving a management-related problem – a problem of forming and coordinating relationships with the environment, communicating with different groups of the public. Communication means interactions with the environment in order to stimulate desirable behaviour, change attitudes and gain acceptance.

Public communication processes are particularly related with democracy. They occur in open political systems, where social life is ruled by the law. They are not possible in closed political systems – authoritarian and totalitarian – where their substitute is one-way propaganda, aiming to realize the sender's particularistic interests.

Public communication is based on the idea of openness, free access to information, its unhindered flow and such knowledge and skills of the participants of the communication process that will allow sending, receiving and processing information. The essence of public communication is the legitimization and realization of the common social interest. Public communication assists the applications of legal rules and procedures as well as public decisions. It is linked with the existence and functioning of all institutions of a public character, whose activities relate to all people and are accessible to all individuals, and whose goals, ways of founding and competencies are determined by the existing legal norms. These institutions have a regulatory function, protecting and serving both an individual citizen and the whole society.

Public communication is formal and occurs in a particular communication (information) space. It aims at the transfer and exchange of information of public significance and the maintenance of social bonds by the public institutions responsible for this process. Within the public communication system there is a number of public institutions, communicating with their clients, users, and recipients. These are the organs of the state and local authorities, public administration institutions, public services and inspections, such as

² S. M. Cutlip, A. H. Center, G. M. Broom: *Effective public relations*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1994, p. 15.

³ B. Rozwadowska: *Public relations. Theory, practice, perspectives*. Studio Emka, Warszawa 2002, p. 15.

the police, the fire service, state-owned companies, enterprises owned by the local government, non-governmental organisations.

As B.Dobek-Ostrowska and R. Wiszniewski claim, the public communication system comprises all the public organisations, operating within a particular state territory, their publics and the interaction networks between all of them in time and space.⁴

Two directions are indicated for the flow of public communications:

Direction I: from public institutions to citizens

- communications have the form of national legal acts or local laws, adequate to the constitutional competencies of particular authorities, such as an act, a resolution, a directive, a decision, an order, etc. Their dissemination is print-based;
- official documents issued by different public institutions, with a seal and a signature of an official. They deal with internal relations of a public institution or external relations between an institution and its clients. Such documents can be disseminated in a traditional printed form of internal bulletins, magazines, instructions, decisions, memorandums distributed with the use of an IT network (Internet websites, intranets)
- written communications of an informational character which are not legal acts or official documents, and their objective is to facilitate the service for a citizen and the functioning of an institution, e.g. information on notice boards and in computer networks
- direct (oral) communications relating to interpersonal and group communication
- visual communications: posters, exhibitions, logos, photographs
- mass media communications: press articles, radio broadcasts, television interviews, official speeches, news programmes, tv spots
- communication campaigns, treated as a complex and multifaceted communication, which deal with serious social issues

Direction II: from citizens to public institutions:

- referenda and elections
- decision making with the participation of citizens
- direct participation of the public in demonstrations, pickets, marches, manifestations, strikes, official election meetings, conferences
- individual contacts of a citizen with public institutions
- indirect contacts with public institutions: letters, faxes, phone calls, e-mail, the Internet, online meetings, which constitute the virtual public sphere
- opinion polls

In public communication particular elements of the communication process display certain characteristics typical of the public sphere. A communication is a compromise of interests between individuals and social groups. It is based on the existing legal norms and regulations and its nature is that of a regulation which allows the functioning and balance of the whole system. It can, for example, deal with the legality of proceedings, or inform about procedures appropriate in particular cases. It aims to prepare citizens for new legal solutions, e.g. reforms, changes in an organisation.

Three basic types of public communication have developed:

- informing about and explaining decisions, operations of an institution, rules and proceedings, new regulations
- improving the image of a public institution and promoting its services

⁴ B.Dobek-Ostrowska, R. Wiszniewski :*The theory of public and political communication*, Publishing House Astrum, Wrocław 2001, p.19.

- consulting new solutions and projects, promoting and discussing social choices and the public offer.⁵

Senders in public communication are politicians, who, following the election or appointments, hold public positions from the central level up to the level of a local self-government, but also officials and civil servants employed in the offices of public authorities and in the institutions of a public status. Public communication occurs through interpersonal, group, institutional and mass communication, the public sender, however, tends to use the mass media most frequently because this allow him to reach a wider group of recipients. Public communication includes five basic forms of activities conducted by public senders:⁶

- managing public data
- relationships between public services and their users
- promoting services offered to the public
- informational campaigns
- raising the status of public institutions.

Local communication is a specific subsystem of public communication. Local communication involves acts and processes relating to communication between people which occur in a local environment, between residents of a particular local community (a municipality, a city district, a city, a county, a subregion) in order to realize current agreement.⁷ It is social communication limited to a local community.

Local communication is a basic component of the functioning of a local community, the form of the participation in a social, political, cultural, economic life. The elements of local communication are senders, their communications and recipients. Local communication occurs in a social environment which consists of the components of at least three systems – political, cultural and socio-economic.⁸ The political system involves such bodies as local authorities, political parties, non-governmental organisations, local interest groups, all realizing their tasks. The cultural system is based on values and behaviour patterns, customs and traditions, forms and ways of participating in a social, political, and cultural life – all this creates the image of a community, its identity, and it indicates the degree of development and integration.

The management of communication between an organisation and its public is the essence of public relations as a conscious, purposeful and organized activity. PR plays a role which serves the implementation of the strategy, its goal is two-way exchange of information, while its fundamental result is a positive image and social approval for an organisation's activities. Public relations enables establishing a favourable climate, a sense of identification and commitment from the groups of the public.

The essence of public relations can be reduces to a few key words, such as reputation, social feedback, reliability, trust, and the search for mutual understanding which is always based on accurate and complete information.⁹ Reputation means a good opinion about an organisation, associated with trust and security, which gives rise to its credibility.¹⁰ It may be characterized with values addressed to different groups of an environment: reliability reflects customer expectations, credibility attract sponsors or investors, solidity is important for employees, while responsibility draws the attention of the general public.

⁵ Ibidem, pp.34-36

⁶ B. Dobek-Ostrowska: *Fundamentals of social communication*, Publishing House Astrum, Wrocław 2004, p. 139.

⁷ R. Kowalczyk, *Local press in the public communication system*, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, Poznań 2003, p. 115.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 119.

⁹ S. Black: *Public relations*, Oficyna Ekonomiczna, Kraków 2003, p. 12

¹⁰ Z. Zemler: *Public relations. The creation of a corporate reputation*. Poltext, Warszawa 1992, p. 12.

In other words, reputation can be defined as:

- the temporary perception of an organisation's distinctive features by the environment and their positioning against the competition
- the signalling of an organisation's general attractiveness for the environment based on individual requirements in terms of quality, economic criteria, needs and expectations
- the idea of the environment about its relationships with an organisation respecting the future needs and expectations
- collective experience of an organisation's activities in the past based on the perception of the environment and the future perspective against the competition.¹¹

Reputation management is a strategic asset for any organisation, it is a significant element of building trust within its environment and achieving success. Public organisations are perceived through their activity for the community, its effectiveness and quality, and their success stems from social recognition and high assessment, while they are obliged by law to extensively inform about their activities. These organisations should have an unblemished opinion and be trustworthy, because they fulfil a social mission.

General PR goals of public organisations focus on:

- the information dissemination in the internal and external environment
- the creation and promotion of a positive image
- the creation of a favourable climate around the organisation, its activities and initiatives
- the development of favourable cooperation conditions with prospective customers.

Particular goals differ depending on the character of an organisation, often focusing on fund raising and increasing activity. In order to meet these goals, to attract sponsors and patrons, an organisation not only must find appropriate sources of finances, but also guarantee the probity of its operations.

The image creation is a necessary condition to reach complex goals of an organisation's development strategy. It assumes consistent, well-planned, long-term public relations activity. Public relations tasks focus on the creation of an image which will distinguish an organisation from its environment. It is crucial to emphasise such values that are actual assets compared with the competition. A positive image, present in the environment, provides the perspective from which all the information about an organisation are interpreted. A good communication system enables understanding decisions within particular projects that are to meet social expectations. Controversial decisions, which are, however, often strategically important and necessary for proper functioning, are more easily implemented when relations with particular public groups are good and an organisation has a stable image. In this respect, the image plays a subsidiary role in an organisation's management and the realisation of goals and tasks.

In order to achieve goals determined by public relations, particular tools are used. They can be divided into two groups; one group comprises the tools that are present in many public organisations, such as media relations, media monitoring, crisis communication; the other group includes the tools that only being introduced gradually, for example, e-PR, internal communication, public affairs, and lobbying.

Public organisations, using traditional media, i.e. press, television, radio, and the Internet, should develop a strategy for influencing and maintaining communication with the public, stimulating it to become more active, which will help win advocates and supporters and obtain a favourable response from the opinion-forming circles. The wide public and

¹¹ J. Filipek: *Reputation is capital. How to manage it?* „Impact” No 10 (28)/2001, p. 52.

media should be encouraged to take interest in an organisation's mission and goals, understand its problems and needs, and approve of its activity.

In the public sphere the need to assert the civic right to information, the creation of an efficient social communication system, and the initiative to build agreement between an organisation and the community are absolutely crucial. The two-way flow of information establishes trust, whereas the lack of current information on plans, activities and their consequences provided to the public raises suspicions of self-interest and negligence in the realisation of public interests. Informational openness facilitates the achievement of an organisation's goals, integrates around tasks, which has a favourable impact on an organisation's image. At the same time, the analysis of the information coming from different public groups allows an organisation to solve problems effectively, predict social reactions and offer solutions in advance, avoiding a deeper crisis.

Public relations, playing a contact role, is located on the dividing line between an organisation and its environment. It gathers knowledge on the attitudes, opinions, views and expectations of the society. This information is the basis for the issue management, which enables a quick identification of an issue, its analysis and the creation of a number of options on how to deal with a particular situation. This allows to react in an efficient and adequate way. Thus public relations plays also an important role and provides an early warning for an organisation's management about threats for its development, because in the conditions of the market economy and competition the security of existence is an important element of an organisation's activity. It can be achieved by winning the approval of the environment for an organisation's rules of conduct. The only way to gain understanding is to provide reliable information on the goals, tasks, rules and procedures from an organisation to the environment.

Public relations, playing a harmonising role, allows gaining understanding and mutual adjustment of the interests of an organisation and its environment. This role is important for public organisations, since harmonisation improves the transparency of activities and provides their justification in response to the public's expectations. Under the threat of a conflict such a policy helps to achieve agreement and find a mutually satisfying solution.

Market profiling enables an organisation to win the public's trust. The constant development of particular competencies and providing the environment with the information relating to these competencies results in a conviction that an organisation is developing, acting in the public interest, improving its operations, and as such it becomes trustworthy.

The major task for public relations specialists in public organisations is the creation of an image that is desirable and expected by the social environment. Scott M. Cutlip lists the following goals for public relations within organisations operating in the public sphere:¹²

- winning the approval for an organisation's mission,
- developing communication channels,
- creating and maintaining a climate favourable for fund-raising,
- supporting the development,
- maintaining a public policy that is favourable for an organisation's mission,
- informing,
- motivating key representatives of the public to effectively support an organisation's mission and goals.

Public relations is used in many organisations, both within a particular institution and through specialized agencies, and it can be applied to all spheres of the public life, such as power execution, economic and industrial activity, solving social and self-governance issues, education, health care, charity, international policies. There are many concepts relating to the role tasks of public relations. They can be divided into groups.

¹² S. Cutlip, A. Center, G. Broom, *Effective public relations*, op.cit., p. 497.

One group of PR tasks deals with informing the general public. This role is realised through providing the environment with the reliable information about an organisation as well as informing the employees about its goals, presenting an organisation's position on the issues that are of interest to the environment, updating the environment on the goals, rules of conduct, policies, interests, and opinions, gaining understanding for an organisation's problems and reasons, providing the information about an organisation's new products to the public, and, finally, adjusting operations, rules of conduct and policies to the expectations of the environment.¹³

Another PR task is the concern about the organisation's reputation, its continuous protection and reinforcement. It is crucial then to strengthen positive attitudes, the desirable image, good opinions and reputation in the environment. If it is necessary, the emphasis is on the regaining of the lost trust and support for the organisation and its strategy.

In a crisis situation the PR task is to minimise a negative impact of a particular problem on the organisation's image through the ability to predict, prepare for, and prevent a crisis situation. Public relations, skilfully applied in such a situation, will not only contain the crisis, but also strengthen the organisation's position. Thus it is so important for the organisation to constantly strive towards such a condition which is in agreement with the environment's expectations through the adjustments and modifications of the core activities, which will result in restricting or eliminating conflicts, strengthening the organisation in the time of a crisis, social approval and the legitimisation of its existence in the social and economic life.

In terms of internal relations PR deals with building efficient communication systems and mutual understanding between the management and the employees, for example, through integration and training events for the staff. In the view of PR, an organisation as a safe employer should evoke a sense of responsibility, loyalty, and group solidarity in his employees, encourage team work, attract good candidates and avoid staff turnover.¹⁴

For every organisation it is very important to win the support and acceptance of the community within which the organisation actually operates. However, the climate of support and acceptance is particularly important for an organisation operating in the public sphere. Such an organisation is the object of interest for the media and public opinion, thus it is crucial for its development to maintain positive relations with the authorities and other public institutions, such as political parties, interest groups, civic initiatives, social organisations, special government offices, economic, social, and religious associations, celebrities of the social life and journalists.

The significance of public relations for the development of a public organisation cannot be overestimated. PR allows establishing and maintaining good contacts with the social environment, informing the public opinion about the organisation's operations, building understanding. It also helps create a positive image, which plays a strategic role for the organisation.

Every public institution must be trustworthy and reliable. Therefore creating a positive opinion about it, strengthening and building trust should be perceived as its major goals. The reliability and a positive image of a public organisation are necessary for the performance of its public tasks. A favourable reputation supports the link, maintaining and strengthening it, with the social environment.

¹³ K. Wojcik: *Public relations from A to Z*. Volume 1. Publishing Agency Placet, Warszawa 2001, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 31-37.

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