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The Practice of Government Public Relations

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Grant Neeley and Kendra Stewart

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Although the news media and technological advances play significant roles in the lives of most Americans today, the field of public administration has virtually ignored the topic of public affairs in government. However, effective communications strategies not only advance the mission of a public agency, but also provide an important and required public service. Public information is one of the key aspects to government accountability. Today's practitioners (and students training to be practitioners) greatly benefit by understanding the crucial role that the news media plays in public life, how to deal with the media and, more generally, how external communications efforts can be used to advance the work of public agencies. Public relations is an important tool of governance just like other tools we teach in public administration programs or offer training for in government agencies.

Some of the uses of public relations in government are pragmatic, intended to advance the mission of the agency, but in unorthodox ways that reduce costs. For example, public service campaigns are ways to influence public behavior in a way that is less expensive than policing. Similarly, advertising the availability of new programs and services is a way to reach potential clients and customers through a wholesale approach, rather than the more expensive retail one-by-one outreach

effort. Besides these pragmatic uses of public relations, external communications can also be used to advance the goals of a democratic society. These would be situations of “information for information sake” rather than to accomplish a more tangible management goal. Examples of this aspect of government public relations include reporting to the public on agency activities as a way of contributing to an informed public, disseminating information as a prelude to citizen participation in agency decision making, and listening to public opinion.

Purpose of This Book

With the recent change of administration in the U.S. executive branch, we have seen increased attention to issues of public information, transparency in government, and government and press relations in the United States and abroad. In addition, rapidly evolving technology and its influence on public communication have left many in government struggling to remain current in this area. Citizens and constituents learn to use interactive tools when searching for information, utilize technology for communications, and now expect government information and services to exist in the same information space as private entities. This book is an effort of leading experts in the field to assist public managers in understanding the nuances of the rules and regulations governing public information, innovative ways to use new technology, how to respond in a crisis, and how to think strategically in crafting a public image. The very practical and applied treatment of these topics should generate the interest of practitioners and policy makers due to the lack of available information on issues of public relations in the public sector. Several chapters contain a “Best Practice Checklist” as well as other supplemental material (all provided on the CD-ROM that came with this book) that can be used to implement the strategies outlined in the book.

This book is intended to serve as a single source of information for all aspects of governmental public relations. As the U.S. government transitions into a period of more relaxed restriction of public information, public administrators need a book with practical guidelines and applicable tools to assist in this new era of government public communication. In addition, the decline of traditional journalism and the rise of social media are moving targets that are continuing to evolve and require renewed and sustained attention for public administrators to the public relations function. This book addresses some of the common issues and approaches to consider when dealing with this rapidly changing environment.

This book is aimed at providing a very practical, hands-on approach for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of various aspects of government public relations. The conception of the book is to serve as a practitioner counterpart to the academically oriented *Government Public Relations: A Reader*, which was published by Taylor & Francis in 2008 to serve as a textbook in university-level courses. The majority of the chapter authors are current or past practitioners of government

public relations crossing all the levels of government, extending outside the United States and in other areas of public service as well (such as nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]). While their writings are informed by the latest research, their interests and orientation are to improving practice. Each chapter is intended to be useful to someone practicing in the field and looking for guidance, resources, practical advice, and best practices.

Overview of This Book

Beginning with Chapter 3, the book is divided into two sections: “Reaching the Citizenry: The Tools of Public Relations,” and “Managing Government Public Relations.” Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the scope, purpose, and practices in the field of government public relations by Mordecai Lee, one of the foremost leaders in the field. Lee focuses on how public relations can help public administrators do a better job at implementing policy, accomplish an agency’s mission, and promote democratic accountability.

Section I: Reaching the Citizenry

The first section, “Reaching the Citizenry,” begins with Jerome Sadow’s chapter on media relations focusing on the role of government communication directors as they work within their organization and most importantly with the media. Particular attention is paid to communication methods, especially writing for press releases, speeches, executive point outlines, issue backgrounders, op-ed columns, letters to the editor, and TV and radio interviews. Sadow presents a straightforward discussion of public relations (PR) strategies and tactics, how to handle media criticism, crises and issues management, and the use of leaks, and identifies the important personal relationship of the media relations expert with senior agency officials.

In Chapter 4, Napoleon Byars analyzes the growing use of the web by government to disseminate information and achieve greater transparency. The chapter examines the web operations of a number of agencies including the White House, the U.S. State Department, Department of Defense, and Treasury Department. In particular, the Defense Department maintains the most extensive and perhaps effective online presence on the web. A thorough examination of how that came to be, along with where things may be headed will provide a practical and helpful perspective to practitioners at all levels of government. This chapter discusses the purpose of each website as it relates to public information as a management function and how websites have become central in helping maintain relationships with key stakeholders. In addition, the chapter presents agency tactics for directing citizens to its website and encourages them to return time and time again as part of an ongoing dialog among all levels of government and citizens.

Jenifer E. Kopfman and Amanda Ruth-McSwain cover the use of public information campaigns in Chapter 5. Saying no to drugs, buckling up, donating blood, and preventing forest fires: public information messages are prevalent in our daily consumption of information and in governmental public relations. Although public information campaigns are used by nongovernment entities, they are classically government-sponsored campaigns developed to address various social problems and communicate information to a large number of citizens to achieve positive societal results. A well-crafted public information campaign can raise awareness, change attitudes, motivate behaviors, and even impact public policy by providing crucial information to a defined target audience. This chapter presents multidisciplinary insights and theoretical perspectives as well as the experiences of the authors to provide a practitioner guide for planning, implementing, and evaluating public information campaigns. Historical and contemporary public information campaigns provide a background for reviewing campaign development stages and analyzing successful communication strategies of public-centered messages across local, state, and federal government agencies. A practical checklist facilitates the development, implementation, and evaluation of a public information effort.

Crisis, emergency and disaster public relations, the subject of Chapter 6, is a major focus of many government agencies and one that has increased in importance in the shortened news cycle and increased use of mobile technology. Brooke Fisher Liu and Abbey Blake Levenshus focus on this important crucial function for government public relations practitioners. In addition to providing a valuable overview of how to prepare and manage a crisis communication plan, the authors include recent research by effectively framing disaster messages, exploring types of frames that resonate with the media, and explaining what obstacles and opportunities practitioners face when managing crises and disasters that are unique to the public sector.

Social networks are changing the communications landscape in public administration. More recently, government agencies and elected officials are using social media channels to engage citizens and arouse support on social issues. As demonstrated by the political campaign of President Obama, social networking encouraged millions to participate in the political process. Until recently, citizens had very little interaction with government, and therefore fewer mechanisms of information sharing. In Chapter 7, "Web 2.0," Leila Sadeghi looks at how government is utilizing social media channels to engage the public and adapting to these changes in communication. This chapter also explores issues that are important in the current environment such as how government can effectively respond to tweeted service requests and complaints, practical strategies for government and universities to inform citizens of their actions, and how government and universities can monitor and measure the effectiveness of their social media strategies. Saghedhi also highlights some of the best practices currently adopted by state and local governments. The emphasis is on the use of social media to enhance communication, improve service delivery, and foster greater civic engagement.

Section II: Managing Government Public Relations

In Chapter 8, “Strategic Communication Planning,” by Diana Knott Martinelli, the focus is on an oft-neglected area of government public relations. Many government organizations are so busy with the things they *must* do, that they don’t take the time to strategically think through and plan their public relations activities, except perhaps in the case of special campaigns, where outside counsel is often secured. Martinelli argues for the need of every organization to develop an annual strategic communications plan that will identify priorities and allow for efficient use of valuable resources. This chapter presents the process of developing an annual communications plan for government entities that supports the overall vision, mission, and goals of the larger institution. This activity not only helps move the larger organization forward, but also helps the smaller unit become more visible and valuable to management. Examples taken from government and government-funded entities show how to apply these principles along with a step-by-step process that functions as a template for any organization wishing to better organize and strategically deliver its communication messages.

Chapter 9, by Shannon A. Bowen, explores the ethical challenges facing professional communicators in government public relations. Topics explored include media relations, stakeholder relations, providing public service information versus concealment for community or national security purposes, public accountability, relations with the myriad publics of the government, grassroots communication and use of the mass media, ethical use of research and data in lobbying, the ethics of constituent relations, and relationships with NGOs and advocacy groups. Using a public policy issue case study provides a real-world lens to examine how different ethical frameworks underlie governmental public relations.

As first mentioned in Lee’s chapter, government public relations is fraught with the potential for misuse, abuse, and misunderstanding by lawmakers. In Chapter 10, Kevin R. Kosar focuses on practical guidance for government professionals “Doing Right and Avoiding Wrong with the Law and Politicians.” Many modern democratic governments have laws or political norms that differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate public relations activities. Yet the line between appropriately persuasive communications and odious propaganda often is far from clear. Public relations practitioners must be cognizant of the dangers of crossing the line and setting off political consternation. This chapter guides the public relations practitioner in navigating the ambiguous border between appropriate and inappropriate activities. The chapter focuses on the U.S. federal government, as it exemplifies the diverse nature of the sorts of lines that practitioners can unwittingly cross. Description of the U.S. government’s various legal prohibitions and related political norms, found in statutory and appropriations law and embedded in the larger legal context set by the U.S. Constitution, guides those who may not be at the federal level on what to look for and consider in their own unique governmental setting. The chapter includes several brief case studies that illustrate government public

relations activities that avoid and breach these prohibitions along with questions posed to the reader for solving the dilemmas faced by government public relations practitioners.

In Chapter 11, Anne Zahradnik focuses on an important constituency for those tasked with public relations—the government organization itself. A government public relations practitioner who has researched, planned, executed, and tracked a strong communications program can still run into professional difficulties if he or she fails to communicate effectively with internal audiences. An ongoing program of educating internal stakeholders on the uses and value of public relations, and on the return on investment from public relations projects and programs, is an absolute necessity in a resource-constrained environment. Elected or appointed officials do not always understand or appreciate the important role of communications. They often consider communications a frill rather than a necessity, are understandably sensitive to accusations of wasting money, and may be quick to cut communications funding and jobs when resources become scarce. Zahradnik focuses on how to adapt and apply the external communications skills and tools covered in the earlier book chapters to ensure that internal stakeholders are aware of and understand public relations and the results it produces. This chapter gives practical advice that helps public relations practitioners apply the tools and techniques of public relations to their own work, improving funding prospects and making their job more secure.

Measuring the impact of government public relations is the focus of Chapter 12 by Maureen Taylor. She looks at moving beyond a simplistic accounting of the outputs of public relations efforts—a clipping file of news placement or anecdotes of success—toward a more deliberative process of documenting public affairs work and the resultant effects. This chapter discusses best practices in creating easy-to-use, systematic, and useful monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators that help us measure the impact of our efforts. This innovative approach is becoming an increasingly common and professional tool for measuring communication effectiveness, but it has not yet become widely used in the public sector. A brief discussion of the philosophy behind M&E is presented first, with the author offering a concise and practical explanation of how public affairs professionals can take traditional social science methodologies, such as content analysis, to show measurable outcomes of their efforts. The chapter concludes with specific examples and lessons learned of how public sector agencies (civilian as well as military) and nonprofit organizations have used this method to showcase their success and argue for additional resources.

The topics covered in this text are intended to provide the government public relations practitioner with the theoretical framework and practical tools for addressing current issues and demands in public communications. The reader is presented with a 360-degree approach to PR in government, looking at both the internal and external aspects from the start of a campaign or crisis, through implementation and eventually evaluation. Each of the authors brings a unique perspective in his or her area of expertise based on professional experience and

academic research. The intent of this book is to help change the perception that government public relations is a tool made up of propaganda used to manipulate public opinion, and to develop a better understanding of how proper public communications can lead to more efficient, effective, and accountable public organizations.