RESEARCH IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: *Research has an important role in public relations (PR) being necessary in developing strategies in this area. Therefore, we can speak of two types of research, the applied research and theoretical research, both being successfully used in the work of public relations. Applied research, can be strategic (used in programs in order to identify attitudes and opinions of the target public, to develop strategies for formulating and transmitting messages, to establish the criteria for evaluating the work) and evaluative by which it determines the communication efficiency, in carrying out the program of public relations (in fact it is the comparison between the established and achieved objectives).*

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Introduction

Research has an important role in **public relations (PR)** being necessary in developing strategies in this area. Therefore, we can speak of two types of research, the **applied research** and **theoretical research**, both being successfully used in the work of public relations.

Applied research can be: **strategic** (used in programs in order to identify attitudes and opinions of the target public, to develop strategies for formulating and transmitting messages, to establish the criteria for evaluating the work) and **evaluative** by which it determines the communication efficiency, in carrying out the program of public relations (in fact it is the comparison between the established and achieved objectives).

Theoretical research "*is abstract and conceptual. It comes in support of applied research results and it identifies new directions of investigation or*

summarizing new theories" (MILO, Katie and colaborators, *Introducere în relaţii publice*, Bucureşti, Editura NIM, 1998).

Research Applications in PR

The specialists identified five areas in which research can be used, namely: **monitoring** the environment in which an organization develops its activity in order to identify the changes in public opinion and skills (in this case, the research is reduced to recording some data that allow the anticipation of social current); the **general periodic checking** of the public relations activity (which determines how the internal public or the external organization perceives its image, the conclusions being used in making decisions about the company's policy and the organization of the public relations campaigns) the **communication checking**, namely the analysis of channels, of methods, materials and messages used in the communication process of an organization (basically, there are determined the differences between what is intended and what succeeds to transmit and to receive, in order to take action, in the cases of shrinking information flows of unequal charging of some technical components of some people in the organisation's communication system, detection of antagonistic activities, identification of contradictions or gaps between the concepts that are meant to describe **what is** and **what does** the organization **do**). After an analysis of the environment where the organization operates, the **social checking** provides clues on the level of support and what can managers expect from a community; **evaluative correcting** used both in planning and implementing the public relations programs (in other words, it measures the effectiveness of taken actions, that is testing for the public for which a program is designed before and after its development, and it compares the results).

Obtaining the information for projects

For the achievement of projects, that is some strategies for public relations, there is a need for information; this information can be obtained through **formal** and **informal** methodologies of research.

The first category, **formal research**, regards the history, the context of an issue and other general data that you can familiarize the agent with the case specific to which he works.

The sources of **informal investigation** may be specialized libraries (including personal library of the public relations agent or the company to which is engaged), personal files or archive of the client (the organization that helps an agent

to overcome the existing difficulties of communication) annual reports, publications, internal or external drive in question, recording the decisions taken and their operation.

Studying the management decisions, the impact that they have had on the public, both very necessary because they can obtain interesting conclusions for how could the crisis occur and the committed mistakes at the highest level. In other words, at this stage it is confirmed the origin of the appeared difficulties, or the idea that the deadlock occurred at a different level of organization, that is outside the leading department, which means that the reasons of the crisis are not of managerial nature which consequently must be sought in other areas of information and communication flow.

In order to obtain information, the **informal investigation** may appeal on **public libraries** (government documents, press excerpts about the nature of the occurred crisis, academic papers) so as the **virtual library**, accessible via global network of computers, known as **Databas**e**,** registered a big development because of the Internet. In this context, the electronic publishing, the new concepts of interactivity (**Wold Wild Web, e-mail, Home page**), entered into the vocabulary and practice of millions of people that use the computer in order to obtain all kinds of information, is a great and effective support to informal research, in designing and in many other areas.

Thus, the informal research (which is more expensive), the agent can obtain important data and conclusions specific to the studied case. Among the most used methods include: **surveys, interviews and analysis of content.**

The first surveys are used in social, political, economic, cultural sporting issues that aim for a wide audience, as spectrum and number. In fact, **surveys** determine the state of the public, its trends and its psychological motivation. The results of the **opinion polls** are mainly **descriptive** (in the sense that the status of fact, of the moment and of perspective) or **explicative** because it shows why a certain phenomenon took place (for example, the wide-spread union events at Bucharest and other social protests). It is understood that only the opinion polls fairly and professionally conducted, can provide conclusive results; therefore, the public relations need to master well the methodology survey. In this regard, note that in addition to formulating a correct questionnaire, selecting a representative pattern is very important in order to obtain the most accurate results. The pattern is chosen by two methods, which should be well mastered; they are **probabilistic method** and **non-probabilistic**.

In **probabilistic** method included four procedures:

- **Simple random choice** (which gives to all members of a public community equal chances to be selected);
- **Systemic Random choice** (in which the population is considered a randomly composed range), it is chosen randomly a prime topic and then, until the completion of the number of subjects; each person on the line is selected (which is suitable to some polls street);
- **Stratified choice** according to which the population is divided by age, gender, financial position, education, etc., after which it can be chosen a pattern from these categories;
- **Choice of subgroups** (by dividing the population into subgroups), and selecting a pattern.

Non-probabilistic method may have two proceedings: **choosing the unstructured, non systemic conjuncture**, in which the subjects are intentionally chosen to emphasise ideas, opinions, points of view, as it happens when journalists get interviews on street or in the large markets of towns, and **the intentional choice** that aims at selecting a category of subjects that have in common, a certain feature (a party affiliation, religion, age, etc.).

According to some specialists polls can be made directly, that is face to face, by telephone, by mail (by which there are questionnaires sent with the request to respond), only in limited groups. Some institutions may organize the polls with prizes in order to know the reflection of their work in the eyes of the public (tours, goods, money, etc.). Such practices distort the results; each subject is feeling indebted to accommodate the one who pays.

Interviews are methods that often offer to the public relations' agent the possibility of knowing from the source the depth of opinions and information, regarding the researched issue. The most effective interviews are conducted **face to face**, but also the interviews by phone can provide significant and efficient data, which, unfortunately, is more difficult due to suspicion of some (in particular, managers and politicians) that, at the on the other end of the phone, it might not be a journalist, but another person interested in a diversion or in an unofficial process of research.

Content analysis is used to examine a message or a group of messages, for example checking the functioning of a communication system within an organization. For example, a **newspaper article** can be analyzed, according to specialists in the field, by criteria such as: how many official statements were

necessary in order to release the article, the position and the pagination of the article, in what spreading area was the publication included, why were the announcements used (only for the informational content, or for the organization's position and purposes), how many changes were made before publication and what effect did the changes have on the message, what kind of references occurred in the organization (positive, neutral, negative).

The subject to a content analysis (which can be done after other criteria) may be an article from a newspaper, a speech, a television program, only if each (or all combined) have been included in a **public relations** strategy; if a problem occurs such as stopping communication, deterioration of the image, it must be established accordingly the causes of the phenomenon in question.