

What is public relations and where does media relations fit?

Public relations, the 100 or so year-old multidiscipline, can be described as the communications wheel for any organization, whether non-profit, for profit, government or non-government.

Public relations (PR) is the organizational communication hub of that wheel. Running from it are a number of spokes (communications lines) that provide a two-way flow of information between that organization's numerous stakeholders or publics.

While most business people are generally quite familiar with advertising (the granddaddy of marketing communications), public relations remains relatively misunderstood. Therefore, many of those responsible for initiating or procuring public relations services, do not fully understand the power of public relations and what it can accomplish for them.

PR is the two-way communications that takes place between an organization and its numerous "publics" or audiences, both internal and external. Hence, it is far more than just publicity as in generating ink or airtime for a celebrity or, in the political arena, the "spin doctoring" that's done to convert bad press into good.

PR is proactive and positive, always trying to avoid a problem before it occurs. Those who do not understand PR, think it is only there to clean up problems or do damage control. It uses relationship building as one of its essential tactics. It builds strong teams, often driving those teams to consensus.

There are several disciplines within PR; including media relations, investor relations, government relations, community relations and employee (internal) relations to name just a few.

As PR matures, it has become more integrated with the traditional marketing communications disciplines of advertising and sales promotion. Some people claim that it is now becoming the strategic engine for all three disciplines, especially as marketing communications budgets have become more equalized in the past decade.

Although some argue that advertising is dead and PR is rising in its ashes, public relations is most effective when it's integrated with many other marketing communications disciplines. Frankly, a PR-friendly organization will apply its strong PR thinking to every level of the organization, from front door reception to back door shipping and receiving.

Media relations is one of PR's main disciplines, and arguably is also one of the most difficult. It is one of the only marketing communications disciplines that go through a gatekeeper to reach the end audience. The media relations strategy that enables key messaging to pass through the gatekeeper intact is easily applied to other marketing communications disciplines. Finding the 'newsworthiness' in a message necessarily

removes non-essential information. It focuses organizations intellectually to get down to their ‘brass tacks.’

Media relations can be very effective when key messaging is adopted by advertising and sales promotions (such as point-of-purchase) and rolled-out in an integrated manner. Key messaging can also be adopted by other divisions of a company, from sales to human resources, and once again, from the reception desk to shipping and receiving.

PR practitioners should be the guardians of an organization’s brand, and that concept of brand is not just reserved for a private sector, product-oriented company. The concept of brand, what an organization is, what it is about, what it wants to say, is the organization’s being, and public relations is often its protector and conscience.

PR is also about truth. Journalists, like police officers, develop an instinct for truth. Non-truthful messaging certainly won’t get through the journalistic gatekeeper very often, and if it does and is found out, an organization is in deep trouble. Truth is an essential tool in the public relations’ arsenal. Canada’s professional PR organizations, such as the Canadian Public Relations Society, have adopted strict codes of ethics to ensure practitioners continue to guard their organizational brands with integrity.

PR professional organizations have also doggedly pursued accreditation programs to teach, test and recognize senior practitioners. As the profession matures, so does that process. The profession is multifaceted, vibrant, and filled with many dedicated professionals who are directly involved in many, many facets of our modern society.

It is not an easy role and will get tougher as the PR profession continues to mature into its own hard-fought-for discipline. As one can imagine, there are many divergent forces stretching public relations in different directions, causing numerous ethical dilemmas.

The Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) has developed a Code of Professional Standards to help public relations practitioners through the ethical quagmire. Like its sister organization, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the CPRS offers the stringent APR (Accredited Public Relations) process to equip its senior member practitioners for the realities of the modern organization.

The CPRS is a national association with more than 1,700 members representing the public relations profession, through the establishment and maintenance of high professional, educational and ethical standards. More information can be found at www.cprs.ca.