Public Relations

Inquire: The World of Public Relations

Overview
Public relations is often overlooked when people think about brands, companies, or products they like. But, public relations is one of the most influential tools a brand can use to make people like it. The purpose of public relations is to make people like a brand or a company. In order to make the things companies do in the world of public relations somewhat more identifiable and understandable, this lesson will take a look at just what public relations is. First, we will go over a definition of public relations, then explain how it is different from advertising. Then, we will cover what the public means regarding public relations. From there, we will cover some PR best practice and ethical obligations.

Big Question: What public relations strategies can you think of that have been successful in making you like a company better?

Watch: The Importance of PR
Image matters. When a company wants to improve the way they are viewed they turn to a public relations professional to help them do so. The importance of how a brand is viewed cannot be understated. Brands that are liked by the public get essentially free advertisement, whereas brands that are disliked can suffer boycotts or worse as people spread the negative word. Word of mouth is one of the most important ways a brand can gain new customers and retain old ones, so public relations is one of the most important things a brand can do.

As you go through this lesson, you will come to understand the importance of public relations to companies. Companies seek to get the most out of public relations campaigns because they can be massively influential, either good or bad. Good public relations work can make people supporters of a company for life, while a bad image can drive away supporters for years. With the growth of mass communication and technology, these images become even more important.

Companies are still trying to figure out how to harness the power of social media for good. Some companies, like Wendy’s, are successful in using social media for positive public relations. Other companies, like IHOP — or is it IHOb? Did they change back to IHOP yet? — have floundered when trying to make use of social media to grow their brand. Balancing the effective use of viral PR campaigns is something that companies will continue to struggle with in the coming years.
When you think of public relations, what comes to mind? Have you ever noticed good public relations campaigns? Or bad ones? Which are easier to notice? These are the questions that public relations professionals ask every day in their attempts to craft the best possible campaigns.

Read: An Introduction to Public Relations

Overview

Public relations is often something taken for granted in the realm of corporate and mass communication. When celebrities or companies give large sums of money to a cause, it’s called a PR stunt. Oftentimes, we use such a term without actually knowing what public relations, or PR, actually is. This lesson will rectify that by explaining what PR is, how it’s different from advertising, what is meant by the public, what PR best practices are, and what ethical obligations exist in the realm of PR.

What is Public Relations?

Public relations is a term that people say all the time without actually knowing what it means. Public relations is a professional management of a good public image. This means that acts of public relations are conscious, planned out, and done in a way to garner good will from a specific audience. Public relations is not about making everyone like you, but about making your specific audience like you.

How Does it Differ from Advertising?

People frequently confuse advertising and public relations as being the same thing, but they are very different! Advertising is focused on selling a product, with acts that are directly meant to make people spend time or money on the thing being marketed. Ads for Taco Bell that make you buy food from Taco Bell are acts of advertising. Public relations, on the other hand, is not focused on making you buy a product, but is instead focused on making you think positively about the brand in question. McDonald’s sponsoring the Special Olympics is not something that is supposed to make you buy McDonald’s food, but rather make you think more positively about the brand. Now, that positivity might make you more inclined to buy their products, but that is not the direct goal.

Who is the Public?

So, if PR consists of deliberate acts meant to make the public like a company, who is the public? It’s important to know that the word public in public relations is different than using the word public in something like a public library or a public restroom. Public, as it relates to PR, refers to those that are aware of, affected by, and/or influenced by the specific act or campaign. If you had no idea that John Cena contributed to fulfilling the most Make A Wish Foundation wishes, then you are not the public that PR act was aimed toward. Now that you have been made aware of that fact, however, you become part of that public. In short, the public in public relations are only those individuals with knowledge of the PR action in some way.

What are Public Relations Best Practices?

Because PR is professional and deliberate, let’s take a moment to look at some of the best practices that one can do in PR. First, PR can be used to effectively deliver news to those who follow a brand or product. When using PR in this way, there are two options: good news or bad news. When delivering good news, you want it to be the first thing you say. When delivering bad news, you want to put it in the middle of the message, surrounded by whatever good news you can find. Second, when using PR to
promote your brand or product, make sure you get as many different points of view as possible. Make your brand outreach look as diversified as possible! Finally, the last best practice to keep in mind for PR is knowing when and how to apologize. When your brand makes a mistake, own it and apologize. Don’t make an apology that seems like you’re sorry for being caught; make a genuine apology with a concrete plan of action to prevent similar problems in the future.

Ethical Obligations in Public Relations

PR campaigns carry a lot of power. Their purpose is to change how the public views the company. Because of the power a campaign can carry, it is important to discuss the ethical obligations present in the field of PR.

First, always be truthful. The importance of telling the truth cannot be understated. When your public finds out they have been lied to, it can lead to massive repercussions on the goodwill you were attempting to build in the first place.

Second, remember that two wrongs do not make a right. If you do something that your public does not like, don’t try to excuse it by pointing to other brands that do the same thing. Your public follows and supports you, not that other brand, for a reason. Rather than trying to duck the blame, remember that it is a best practice in PR to apologize for mistakes when you make them. Finally, do good and be good. Strive to do things that will benefit your community and your public. Don’t make half-hearted attempts. Be good at doing good, and the rewards for your brand will show themselves.

Reflect Poll: The Impact of PR

Does public relations have as large of an impact on public perception as it would like?

- Yes
- No

Expand: Crisis Communication

Overview

It is inevitable that something will go wrong. And just as inevitable is that sometimes the something that goes wrong is a very large something. It is not possible to maintain a brand that does not face some sort of large-scale issue or crisis. A crisis is any large issue that could do serious or irreparable damage to a brand and its image. When crisis strikes, crisis communication, a brand’s attempt to communicate to its public about a problem they are facing, is vital to preventing the problem from growing and focus on fixing the issues at hand.

Crisis Communication: Do’s and Don’ts

Crisis communication is a delicate art that brands need to be aware of if they want to succeed. First, brands need to establish who is in charge when crisis strikes. It is important to know who will give the orders, who is in charge of handling specific steps, and who will decide what the most important first step to take is when facing a crisis. Don’t pass the blame and shift responsibilities around to try to make yourself look better while everything else crumbles around you.
Second, keep tabs on what’s happening. Listen to the public as they tell you how they are being affected by the crisis. Seek out the newest information as the situation develops so you can stay on top of the response. Don’t assume that because you know how a problem started, you know how a problem will develop without watching it. Thinking you know what is best without keeping constantly updated on information will only allow the crisis to grow in ways that you cannot predict since you aren’t keep an eye on how it is developing.

Finally, prepare for a crisis even if it isn’t happening yet. Have plans drafted that explain the chain of command. Figure out how you plan to collect information when catastrophe strikes. Doing that work ahead of time when things are good will help prevent stress and panic when crisis occurs. Don’t just think you can handle problems as they come; only by preparing ahead of time can you handle problems without them stacking up on top of each other. Handling problems as they come is a recipe for disaster because of the time and work you will have to dedicate to solving a problem, rather than jumping straight in to fix it.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
An article providing an in-depth look at the steps of crisis communication
- Link to resource: https://www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com/the-10-steps-of-crisis-communications/

An article giving a better understanding of what crisis communication is
- Link to resource: http://www.shiftcomm.com/blog/what-is-crisis-communications/

An article giving tips to help conduct crisis communication in a more efficient manner
- Link to resource: https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate/blog/crisis-communication-tips/

Lesson Glossary

**public relations**: a professional management of a good public image
**public**: those that are aware of, affected by, and/or influenced by the specific act or campaign
**crisis**: any large issue that could do serious or irreparable damage to a brand and its image
**crisis communication**: a brand’s attempt to communicate to its public about a problem it is facing

Check Your Knowledge

1. Public relations and advertising are the same thing.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Knowing who is in charge during a crisis is the first step in solving the crisis.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Planning ahead is never needed during crisis communication.
   a. True
   b. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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