

The Mexican Statement, agreed on by the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations in Mexico City in August 1978 (Seitel, 1992, 8), reads, "Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest."

Strengths

1. The emphasis that public relations practice is an art and social science. By stating that PR practice is an art implies the element of specialised skill, knowledge and methods involved (Tymson, 1996, 4). It also implies that PR practice is not completely objective, as there are subjective factors involved. PR practice deals with the human element, which is by nature unpredictable; therefore not completely objective. PR practice also considers the inputs which social sciences (eg. psychology, sociology, anthropology, statistics) can contribute. For example, a PR practitioner would have to consider cultural factors when planning a programme or campaign for its targeted publics so that there would be less risk of unintentionally offending other segments of the society.

3. The emphasis on "analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action".

Here a trend is established for PR practice. "Analysing trends" would imply the need for employing proper research methods to gain feedback on audience attitudes (Tymson, 1996, 5). "Predicting their consequences" emphasises the importance of forecasting, based on research results. "Counselling organisation leaders" show the need for PR practitioners, whether consultants or in-house PR managers, to advise organisational leaders on PR issues and activities, for example, sponsoring a charity event to boost the company image and improve goodwill between the organisation and its publics. "Implementing planned programmes of action" emphasises the execution of carefully planned PR activities and programmes. Within this definition a 4 step process for PR practice is summarised, implying that PR practice is a meticulously planned process. The factor of social trends implies that PR practice is an on-going process as trends are ever-changing. This emphasises the need for continuous research to monitor trends and attitudes as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the PR programme (Tymson, 1996, 5).

4. The emphasis on public interest.

Consideration for the public interest is an important responsibility as PR practice stresses the need for the building and maintaining of goodwill, mutual understanding and two-way communication between an organisation and its publics. Successful PR programmes depend on the public for feedback for guidance (Tymson, 1996, 4). PR also has social, political and economic responsibilities (Tymson, 1996, 4).

Weaknesses

1. Does not emphasise specific publics which are targeted as the audience.

Every PR programme or campaign must have specific targeted publics. The Mexican Statement does not clearly emphasise this important factor, only alluding to the general public. This definition leans towards a more macro view on PR practice, ignoring important factors such as the internal publics within an organisation.

A good example for this definition is the Courtesy campaign which the Singapore government has launched. Research has shown that Singaporeans lack social graciousness (analysis of social trends), and the government has therefore developed the Courtesy campaign in an attempt to educate the public on the need to develop a gracious society (after predicting dire consequences, eg. a self-centred culture). Messages are emphasised through the various mass media, with the Prime Minister as the main spokesperson. The messages are aimed at the role-models of society, for example, parents and teachers (counselling organisation leaders) as well as the general public. The programme lasts a month every year, and rewards are given to those who are found to be exemplary in their behaviour (implementation of

plan). The use of the mass media as a podium for two-way communication (eg. the public can write in to the newspapers' forum pages, television and radio talk show discussions etc.) and the highlighting of those responsible for gracious behaviour are just examples of some elements of the PR campaign the Singapore government has developed in an effort to educate the public on the need to change social behaviour.

Another definition of public relations, by Frank Jefkins (Jefkins, 1992, 8) is as follows,

"Public relations consists of all forms of planned communication, outward and inward, between an organisation and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding"

Strengths

1. Emphasises that PR communication (through programmes) is planned.

Planning would indicate that PR practice is must be organised, and that forethought is essential. Planning would also mean that PR has clear, well-defined objectives, though not necessarily rigid. Planning would also involve the setting up of programmes and would imply the need for a pre-determined budget.

2. The emphasis on "outward and inward" communication.

Outward - refers to publics that are not within the organisations planning the PR campaign.

Inward - refers to the publics within the organisation ie. staff relations or

employer-employee relations.

Jefkins mentions the need for organisations to consider the inward publics, the employees or members within an organisation. Most organisations do communicate to their internal publics through house journals, mainly in the form of newsletters (Jefkins, 1992, 110). A good example is the newsletters circulated by the Civil Service Club in Singapore (Appendix 1). Members get a monthly update on the latest happenings and developments pertaining to the club. Another example of organisations planning activities for their internal publics are the year-end D&Ds (dinner and dance). This yearly affair is part of management effort to communicate its appreciation of the employees, thus also promoting goodwill. Such efforts keep up relations with employees or members within an organisation.

3. Emphasis on "achieving specific objectives".

This implies that there are different objectives for different organisations. Each organisation has their unique objectives for PR programmes. Jefkins (1992, 8) also argues that PR, having pre-determined objectives, is not intangible as some have suggested. The management by objectives method (Drucker, 1974, 430-42) is applied here. With objectives, results of PR programmes can be measured against them, making PR tangible. This implies the need for continuous research to measure results.

4. Emphasis on "mutual understanding".

Mutual understanding implies the importance of two-way communication between an organisation and its publics. A good example of two-way communication leading to mutual understanding was shown two years ago, when there was an accident between two subway trains. The Land Transport Authority (LTA) held several press conferences and prepared several press releases to calm the public, who felt uncertain of their safety when travelling on the subway, or MRT as it is known in Singapore. Questions raised by the concerned public were answered promptly by the LTA public relations personnel. The open communication between the LTA and the public led to the understanding that the accident was a one-off, and that a repeat was unlikely. In this way, the perceptions and attitudes of the public changed, and it was not long before everything was back to normal.

Weakness

The definition does not clearly emphasise the need for PR as an on-going

process. As public opinion and attitudes are ever-changing, PR must be continuous in terms of research and planned necessary action taken (Tymson, 1996, 9).

Both definitions do not emphasise PR as a management function as Seitel does (Seitel, 1992, 8-9). Seitel also emphasises that performance is the underlying factor of all definitions for PR, and that "without proper performance, good public relations is impossible" (Seitel, 1992, 9). These two factors are also important ingredients in all PR practice. Having said that, any definition can never fully capture the entire essence of public relations, as with any other subject.

References

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Appendix 1

