

1 What is public relations?

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Most students – and, indeed, practitioners – are familiar with the problem of trying to explain what they are studying or how they are earning their living:

‘Public relations? Is that working with people? You know, like an air hostess, shop assistant?’

‘No, more problem solving, really. And working with the media.’

‘Oh yes, all those parties.’

‘Well . . .’

Somewhere along the line words like ‘spin doctors’ are likely to crop up, replacing the more traditional ‘gin-and-tonic’ shorthand for PR. And, of course, everyone has heard of Max Clifford. But, how to explain that he doesn’t call himself a PR practitioner but a publicist – especially if the distinction isn’t all that clear to the speaker?

This chapter aims to cover the issues of definition and distinction of PR from related activities, but a word of warning. These will not solve the dilemma of trying to ‘explain’ public relations in a phrase. The fact remains that it is a complex and hybrid subject; it draws on theories and practices from many different fields, such as management, media, communication and psychology. These links will be explored more fully in this book. Readers are more likely to have an understanding of the subject and an ability to evolve their own definitions when they have reached the end of the book, rather than the end of this chapter.

In 1976, Rex Harlow scoured through 472 definitions of public relations to come up with the following paragraph:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

(Harlow, quoted in Wilcox *et al.* 1992: 7)

Although this is useful – it contains many key concepts – and saves us ploughing through hundreds of definitions, it describes what PR does rather than what it is. Since then, of course, there have been many more attempts to capture its essence.

The 1978 World Assembly of Public Relations Associations in Mexico agreed that:

Public relations 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.

(Wilcox *et al.* 1992: 6)

The words 'art' and 'social science' are helpful in explaining the continuing tension between understanding PR as a measurable, science-based application of communication tools, and the affection of many practitioners for the looser, more creative, aspects of the work. In the USA the social science elements dominate the understanding of PR, as is reflected in their education and texts about the subject. In the UK, PR is largely – though not exclusively – considered a management function and is taught in business schools. In both countries it is sometimes found in schools of journalism.

The Institute of Public Relations (IPR) is the UK's leading professional body for public relations practitioners and was established in 1948 (see Chapter 5). The definition framed by the IPR in 1987 is still useful:

Public Relations is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics.

There are several key words worth noting here: 'planned' and 'sustained' suggest these relationships are not automatic or effortless. Indeed, they have to be 'established' and 'maintained'. Public relations work exists in time – it is not a series of unrelated events. Also note that the aim is not popularity or approval, but goodwill and understanding. Many think that PR is just about promoting an organisation, whereas most PR work involves ensuring publics have an accurate view of the organisation, even if they don't like what it does. The Inland Revenue doesn't expect to be loved for its activities, but it might hope to be respected, or at least understood.

The definition also raises that strange word 'publics', which will be discussed more fully elsewhere. It is important, however, to stress that public relations is not about dealing with 'the public' as people often think. In PR we say there is no such thing as the public – there are instead many different groups of people – not just consumers, but suppliers, employees, trustees, members, local and national trade and political bodies, local residents, among many others. One of the key concepts of PR is the idea that these groups – or publics – have different information needs and exert different demands on organisations. Understanding these differences is a vital skill of PR.

Philip Kitchen (1997: 27) summarises the definitions as suggesting that public relations:

- 1 is a management function . . .
- 2 covers a broad range of activities and purposes in practice . . .
- 3 is regarded as two-way or interactive . . .
- 4 suggests that publics facing companies are not singular (i.e. consumers) but plural . . .
- 5 suggests that relationships are long term rather than short term.

It can be seen that none of the above descriptions involves parties, gin and tonic or spinning. However, public relations continues to have a serious PR problem. It has failed to communicate its core activity successfully to the wider public. As a result, many professionals have considered changing the name to avoid the associations. Job ads now seek specialists in Corporate Communications, or Image Management where once they would have looked for PR people. Sometimes the jobs have changed; often it's just the labels. Burson-Marsteller, one of the oldest and most respected PR consultancies, recently changed its title from public relations agency to 'perception management'.

The IPR addressed these concerns by extending its definition to:

Public Relations practice is the discipline concerned with the reputation of organisations (or products, services or individuals) with the aim of earning understanding and support.

This is sometimes simplified further to:

Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

This is probably the most satisfying of the current definitions: it is simple and doesn't attempt to catalogue all the tasks involved in managing reputation. It may even help students and practitioners explain what on earth it is they do.

Distinctions

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Sometimes, of course, it's easier to explain what you don't do. The following sections look at areas often confused with PR. As with definitions, the lines are not always clear. To repeat, PR draws on expertise and experience from many fields, it overlaps with other disciplines; it tends to integrate rather than exclude – this is its strength as a practice, but a weakness when it comes to descriptions and definitions.

Marketing

This is the field most commonly confused with PR – not unreasonably since marketing refers to PR in its texts and practice as part of the marketing mix. To marketing practitioners and academics, public relations is one of the 4 Ps – product, place, price and promotion – which make up a successful marketing campaign. This is not incorrect – public relations can play an essential role in creating successful products – if the other elements are right, of course. It can help create awareness of the product – especially new technological developments, where consumers need to understand what a gizmo is before they can distinguish between brands of gizmo. Once, campaigns had to explain what a fridge did, more recently the 'market' needed educating about the virtues of DVD and WAP technology.

Publicity is also essential to launch a new product or service, which is where marketing PR excels. While the marketing team may create special offers and sales promotions, the publicity people will be seeking media coverage and arranging launch events. Together, they can create worldwide successes, from the latest Star Wars film to Prozac.

So what's the difference?

The Institute of Marketing defines marketing as:

The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying consumer requirements profitably.

The two central words here are 'consumer' and 'profit'. Understanding the consumer and producing products or services that will satisfy consumer needs to the profit of the supplier is the traditional arena of marketing. Kitchen (1997: 28) explains,

Public relations and marketing are two major management functions within an organisation, but how they are organised depends upon managerial perceptions, organisational culture, and historical precedent.

Organisations dealing in fast-moving consumer goods (fmcg) are more likely than not to have a large marketing department containing a PR function. Those who depend on good intelligence about the political environment as well as consumer tastes, especially not-for-profit organisations, will have a larger PR or public affairs function. However, recent developments in marketing, such as relationship marketing and cause-related marketing, are similar to elements of public relations, and are blurring the distinctions somewhat.

In public relations texts (and this is no exception), marketing is described as primarily concerned with sales and sales-related functions. In marketing texts, public relations is rarely considered to be more than publicity. The argument concerning which is the wider discipline can be found in textbooks, university staff rooms, student debates and companies themselves. (See also Chapters 15 and 17 in this book.)

Advertising

The distinction between advertising and PR is more easily made: advertising involves paying a medium (TV, radio, newspaper or magazine, for example) for airtime or column inches in which to put across a promotional message. The content of an ad is always controlled by the advertiser, unlike the content of editorial pages or programmes, which are controlled by journalists. Public relations practitioners try to persuade journalists to cover their products and services on the grounds of newsworthiness. An ad doesn't have to satisfy any news value – it just has to be legal and paid for.

The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising defines advertising as follows,

Advertising presents the most persuasive possible selling message to the right prospects for the product or service at the lowest possible cost.

Here, the phrase 'selling message' distinguishes the two disciplines – PR aims not to increase sales, but to increase understanding. Sometimes, of course, understanding a product or service improves sales, but PR does not claim a direct causal link.

However, there are grey areas: *corporate advertising* is where an organisation purchases space in a paper, magazine or broadcast programme to put across a general message about itself, not its products. This message might extol its efforts to be green or socially responsible, or it might put the management view in an industrial dispute or takeover. The content of the message is likely to be PR-driven, related to the corporate strategic aims of the organisation rather than product support.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of four models of public relations

<i>Model</i>		<i>Two-way symmetric</i>	<i>Two-way asymmetric</i>
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Press agency/ publicity</i>	<i>Public information</i>	<i>Mutual understanding</i>
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of information	Scientific persuasion
Nature of communication	One-way: complete truth not essential	One-way; truth important	Two-way; balanced effects
Communication model	Source → Rec.	Source → Rec.	Group → Group ←
Nature of research	Little; 'counting house'	Little; readability, readership	Formative; evaluative of understanding
Leading historical figures	P.T. Barnum	Ivy Lee	Bernays, educators, professional leaders
Where practised today	Sports, theatre, product promotion	Government, non-profit associations, business	Regulated business; agencies
Estimated percentage of organisations practising today	15	50	15

Source: Grunig and Hunt 1984: 22. Reproduced by permission of Harcourt Inc.

Another grey area is the *advertorial*, where the space is bought, just like an ad, but is filled with text and images very similar to the surrounding editorial. This is increasingly common in magazines and, although the word ‘advertorial’ is usually clear at the top of the page, it’s in small print and the casual reader may well believe they are reading another article about, say, skincare products. As a result they may believe the text reflects the impartial view of the magazine rather than the more interested view of an advertiser. Harrison (1995: 5) comments,

The strength of advertorials over advertisements is that their style and format give greater credibility to the products they are advertising, by explaining them in apparently objective terms through a third party, the journalist. But what does that do to the credibility of the journalist or the publication in which the advertorial appears? If there is no intention to mislead the reader into confusing the advertising message with a news or feature report, why not just use an advertisement?

PR history

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Knowing where, when and how something started is also often helpful in working out what it is. The following section briefly looks at the ways PR has been used in the past and how it has changed during the past century. Given the difficulty of defining public relations, it is not surprising that its history is full of confusion. Should we start with flags and Roman coins as early examples of corporate identity, or go back as far as cave paintings? What about the leaflets that circulated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*? The rise in literacy and printing presses in the nineteenth century led to many reforming campaigns concerning health, suffrage and education conducted by pamphlet and newspapers articles. Are these examples of early pressure group PR?

Grunig and Hunt’s four models

James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) suggested a useful way of looking at PR history, by using four categories of communication relationship with publics, placed in a historical context (see Table 1.1). Grunig and Hunt used examples from US history. The following discussion includes some UK illustrations also.

Press agency/publicity model

This is probably the kind of activity that most people associate with public relations. A press agent or publicist aims to secure coverage for a client, and truth is not an absolute requirement. This type of PR is most common in showbusiness – celebrity PR – where individuals are promoted through media coverage. Grunig and Hunt point out that ‘practitioners in these organisations concern themselves most with getting attention in the media for their clients’ (1984: 25). Understanding is not necessary for this kind of PR, which is likely to measure success in column inches or airtime.

Past examples. Grunig and Hunt’s example of this kind of PR is the American circus owner P.T. Barnum, who in the 1850s obtained massive coverage for his ‘Greatest Show on Earth’. He coined the term ‘there’s no such thing as bad publicity’ and used stunts such as the ‘marriage’ of circus stars Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind to gain massive media coverage. The theorist Daniel Boorstin called events like these ‘pseudo events’ – activities created solely for publicity purposes. However, he added:

Contrary to popular belief, Barnum's great discovery was not how easy it is to deceive the public, but rather, how much the public enjoyed being deceived.

(Boorstin, quoted in Harrison 1995: 15)

Current examples. Barnum's obvious successor today is publicist Max Clifford, who has an astonishing reputation for securing front page coverage for his clients, though he also claims that much of his work is spent keeping them out of the papers. Both activities would be typical of press agency, which is not always over-concerned with the factual accuracy of information provided. One of Clifford's most memorable coups must be the *Sun*'s front page headline 'Freddie Starr ate my hamster', which would certainly be covered by the Boorstin quote above.

A more recent example might be the much publicised 'romance' between Chris Evans and Geri Halliwell, both clients of leading PR practitioner Matthew Freud. Many people felt the relationship had more to do with her forthcoming single than true love, but few seemed to mind. Celebrity PR has increasingly influenced the news content of daily newspapers, as well as providing the material for a proliferation of magazines like *Hello!* and *OK!*

Public information model

This kind of communication provides information to people – where accuracy is now important, indeed essential. This model does not seek to persuade the audience or change attitudes. Its role is similar to that of an in-house journalist (Grunig and Hunt 1984), releasing relevant information to those who need it. This practitioner may not know much about the audience, and tends to rely on one-way communication, from sender to receiver.

Past examples. Grunig and Hunt cite the work of Ivy Leadbetter Lee at the turn of the twentieth century. He was a business journalist who tried to obtain information about the highly secretive US industrial conglomerations that dominated the economy of the time. Lee felt that business secrecy was a poor policy and in 1904 he set up an agency, declaring his principles to the press:

This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter properly ought to go to your business office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. Upon enquiry, full information will be given to any editor concerning those on whose behalf the article is sent out.

(quoted in Grunig and Hunt 1984: 33)

An early illustration of his principle in practice was his advice to a rail company to tell the truth about an accident instead of concealing it. The company's reputation for fairness increased and the value of public information was established. Lee's own reputation was destroyed in the 1930s when he tried to advise Nazi Germany on how to improve German-American relations.

Other examples. Public information functions were established in the UK from the nineteenth century. One of the earliest appointments in the field was the British Treasury spokesman appointed in 1809. The Post Office and local government also played

pioneering roles in supplying regular and reliable information to the public, as their role and responsibilities expanded to reflect the social change through the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (L'Etang 1998). Practitioners from local government also played a leading part in defining public relations, through articles in the 1920s and 1930s and, later, by setting up the Institute of Public Relations in 1948 (L'Etang 1998)

Current examples. Local and central government continue to practise public information communication. Press releases giving details of committee decisions, budget allocation, or movement of personnel are typical public information activities. In recent years, the shift from public to private sector utilities has placed a similar emphasis on the need to explain pricing policies to customers. Many large organisations have improved their 'transparency' – the availability of information to the public. Much of this has been improved – or driven – by improved technology via the internet.

Two-way asymmetric PR

This model introduces the idea of feedback or two way communication. However, it is asymmetric or imbalanced because the intended change is in the audience's attitudes or behaviour rather than in the organisation's practices. It is also described as persuasive communication and can be demonstrated in health campaigns, for example.

Persuasive communication relies on an understanding of the attitudes and behaviour of the targeted publics, so planning and research are important to this kind of public relations.

Past examples. Persuasive communication was developed by pioneers like Edward L. Bernays, who came to prominence in the US Creel Committee, established to build support for the First World War. Bernays described the power of their wartime propaganda:

Intellectual and emotional bombardment aroused Americans to a pitch of enthusiasm. The bombardment came at people from all sides – advertisements, news, volunteer speakers, posters, schools, theatres; millions of homes displayed service flags. The war aims and ideals were continually projected to the eyes and ears of the populace.

(quoted in Harrison 1995: 19)

Bernays developed these ideas after the war, starting the first PR education course at New York University in 1922, and writing the first book on the subject, *Crystallising Public Opinion*, in 1923. Bernays' understanding of the psychology of persuasive communication may well have been influenced by his uncle Sigmund Freud and certainly drew on contemporary developments in social sciences. In any event, Bernays was the first PR academic and his influence continued throughout his long life (he died in 1995).

Other examples. In Britain, PR was developing along similar lines. L'Etang (1998) describes the work of Sir Stephen Tallents, who helped create the Empire Marketing Board in 1924 to promote trade in Empire products. He spent over £1 million on campaigns involving posters, films and exhibitions. Tallents wrote *The Projection of England* (1932) which was influential in 'persuading British policy makers of the benefit of a cultural propaganda policy and formed the blueprint of the British Council (1934)' (L'Etang 1998). Tallents went on to help found the Institute of Public Relations in 1948.

Tallents, like many contemporary public relations practitioners in the UK and USA, learned his communication skills in propaganda efforts in the two world wars. The line between persuasion and propaganda was not seen as a problem, as the quote above illustrates.

Current examples. Today propaganda is seen as undesirable and persuasion as suspicious – which partially accounts for the general distrust of public relations. Grunig argues that the asymmetrical model may be unethical as it is ‘a way of getting what an organisation wants without changing its behaviour or without compromising’ (1992: 39). But other academics, such as Miller (1989), describe public relations and persuasion as almost synonymous, because they both use symbols (texts or images) to attempt to control the environment. Miller states that if the persuadees are engaged in the symbolism they may persuade themselves to accept the message. L’Etang points out that the ‘concept of free will is important in separating persuasion from its negative connotations of manipulation, coercion, “brainwashing” and propaganda’ (L’Etang 1996c: 113).

Examples of positive persuasive communication might include public health campaigns, such as reducing smoking or encouraging safer driving habits. These campaigns depend on theories of social psychology and much audience research. It is easy to argue that while the organisation – in this case the government – clearly benefits from reduced health care costs and fewer motoring fatalities, the person changing his or her habits (the persuadee) also clearly benefits from a longer, healthier life.

Another timeless example is political campaigning at elections, where each candidate seeks to influence their constituents. However, the recent discussion of political ‘spin’ raises the possibility that tactics used legitimately in elections are now being used in government, instead of the more traditional public information approach. Perhaps it is not the practice that is new – Joseph Doane was appointed by the government as a ‘Reporter to the Press’ on behalf of George III to ‘manage’ press coverage of the monarch’s madness (Boston 1996). But in recent years the media has paid more attention to the process by which political information reaches the public – very useful material for the student of public relations.

Persuasion is not, of course, confined to the public sector and two-way asymmetric public relations is probably the most widely used type of PR. Most businesses – indeed most public relations – today try to persuade key publics that their goods or services are reliable, safe, value for money and so on. Advertising is perhaps the most extreme version of this approach and some theorists (such as Noam Chomsky) say persuasion often slides into propaganda, because the benefits are largely enjoyed by the advertiser, not the consumer.

Two-way symmetric PR

This model is sometimes described as the ‘ideal’ of public relations. It describes a level of equality of communication not often found in real life, where each party is willing to alter their behaviour to accommodate the needs of the other.

While the other models are characterised by monologue-type communication, the symmetric model involves ideas of dialogue. It could lead an organisation’s management to exchange views with other groups, possibly leading to both management and publics being influenced and adjusting their attitudes and behaviours. Communication in this model is fully reciprocal and power relationships are balanced. The terms ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ are not applicable in such a communication process, where the goal is mutual understanding (Windahl *et al.* 1992).

In both two-way models the public relations practitioner can act as a negotiator between the interests of the organisation and the interests of the particular public – what Grunig (1992: 9) calls ‘boundary-spanning’. L’Etang (1996b) has found a number of similarities between public relations and diplomacy, which illustrates this point. She contrasts the role of diplomat (two-way symmetry) with that of advocate (two-way asymmetry). It is the diplomacy role which aims to facilitate the ‘mutual understanding’ described above and contained in the definition of public relations provided by the IPR. Grunig and other theorists suggest that this model is the most ethical, because it creates an equality of exchange. Others, like L’Etang, point out that the public relations practitioner is never disinterested – there is always an employer or client – and, as organisations rarely act against their own interests, the communication is still asymmetrical (L’Etang 1996c).

Past examples. Grunig suggests that there are few examples of two-way symmetry in practice and that most of this approach is theoretical, as taught in universities rather than practised in the workplace. However, perhaps as a result of this trend in education, practice is changing.

Current examples. PR practitioners aim increasingly to be part of the decision-making process. The rise in strategic PR reflects the rise in awareness of the need to understand publics and anticipate and defuse potential problems. These days PR often involves persuading the organisation to change its practice in the face of public pressure. Recently, supermarkets’ response to public opposition to genetically modified foods (see the Marks & Spencer case study in Chapter 10) illustrates how an astute PR awareness of public concern can create opportunities for organisations willing to change their behaviour. The growth in focus groups and market research to ascertain public opinion on a wide range of political as well as consumer issues could illustrate growth in two-way symmetric PR. New Labour has enthusiastically sought to use a range of market research techniques to influence policy making. However, genuine two-way symmetry can occur only where both parties have equal power to influence the other – and it is worth remembering that this is the rarest form of PR.

It is important to note that these models do not reflect the ‘real’ world. They are not placed in chronological order and they do not exist in isolation. Grunig and Grunig (1989) point out that more than one model is usually used in organisations and ‘organisations may use different models as strategies for dealing with different publics or different public relations problems’.

As this chapter has shown, there are many arguments against the ideas put forward by Grunig and Hunt’s four models, but, as the chapter has also shown, they do help us to understand different kinds of public relations in theory and in practice.