

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **The practice of public relations within selected organisations in Durban, South Africa**

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**This paper attempts to probe the practice of public relations within selected organisations in Durban, South Africa. Public relation is an important function of any organisation. It provides the avenue for the organisation to effectively monitor and interact with other key groups within the organisation. The most common disciplines that influence the function of public relations are communication; management and marketing. Public relation manages the communication between an organisation and its publics by building and enhancing relationships that benefit both parties. Public relations should play the role of interpreting the organisations' philosophy, policy and programs, all of which emanate from top management. Some public relations departments have large numbers of staff and generous budgets even though the original motivations for their functions have long been forgotten and their mission is not clearly defined. Conversely, many, if not most, organisations reorganise the public relations functions, reduce the number of staff and try to do more with fewer people. Even practitioners disagree about what is the best structure and place for their functions in various types of organisations. This paper therefore uses a case study research method to probe the practice of public relations within seven organisations in Durban, South Africa. The findings are reported against the three functions of public relations: communication, management and marketing.**

**Key words:** Public relations, marketing, communication, management.

## **INTRODUCTION**

For many years public relations practitioners have been struggling to define the strategic contribution that public relations makes to an organisation's success. In South Africa, public relations still struggle to gain respect (Watt, 2005: 1). The possible reason for this could be ascribed to the lack of understanding of the role of public relations. Public relation is an inter-related discipline – its functions overlap with other disciplines. Watt (2005: 1) argues that no longer can the public relations professional in South Africa be justified in supplying column centimetres to its clients. This is the changing tide that will see public relations consultants reverting to the true essence of the trade – moving back into the realms of strategic lobbying

and finding new and creative ways to influence perception regarding their clients. Organisations need to recognise the value of placing public relations at the boardroom table, as a strategic business partner and critical part of business planning and operations.

The aforementioned statement strongly recommends that public relations ought to be positioned at the helm of an organisation and as a management function. The communication function of public relations is seen as being integral to an organisation. According to Lamb and Mc Kee (2005: 1), no formal organisation is an island. Each is composed of an internal system of social networks, and each exists within a framework of interrelated systems of relationships with key stakeholders such as competitors, consumers, sponsors, regulators, and the media. Public relation is an important subsystem of an organisation and the effective practice of public relations is integrally bound to the health of an

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organisation. As such, it provides the avenue for the organisation to effectively monitor, interact and react with other key groups within the organisational environment. Public relation in this instance is seen as a communication function. It is seen as an action part of an organisation that supports development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and the groups with which it is interdependent.

Tench and Yeomans (2006: 4) further maintain that 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 opinions; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilise change; serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

The aforementioned definition contains overall goals, processes and tasks of public relations and positions the discipline firmly as both communication and management function aimed at establishing and maintaining a positive image amongst groups on which an organisation depends in order to achieve its mission. However, according to Davis (2004: 190) many organisations do not show public relations as an independent role. Traditionally, public relations and marketing functioned separately and maintained separate departments in most organisations, however according to Naidoo (2007: 3) public relations very often has been described as synonymous to marketing. Many authors (Lubbe and Puth, 1994: 10; Cutlip et al., 2000: 6) contend that people confuse public relations with marketing. Whilst Newsom et al. (2000: 41) and Skinner et al. (2001: 43) argue that there are distinct disparities in the two functions, Naidoo (2007:3) argues that public relations has been described as synonymous to marketing. Whilst some organisations may view public relations as a separate entity, as opposed to marketing, others see these two functions as falling under a common umbrella. It is, therefore, evident that the boundaries between public relations and marketing are very blurred. Public relations and the marketing function work together by building exchange relationships with consumers, customers, clients, distributors, and other marketing parties through areas such as sponsorships, corporate identity, image building and media relations.

The multiple roles of public relations may be because of its multiple functions through its association with communications, management and marketing. Watt (2005: 1) argues that just as the South African democracy and political change is afoot, so too the constituency of the public relations professional

changing. This statement reinforces that in South Africa there still is debate regarding the role of public relations in relation to other functional departments within organisations.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Henslowe (2003: 1-2) postulates that the public relations discipline is often either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted so that it is used in a pejorative way, associating it with propaganda, 'economy of the truth' or evasion. Most organisations disregard public relations as an integral part of the organisation. In most instances, organisations only acknowledge the importance of public relations when things go wrong and in times of a crisis. Consequently, public relations practitioners salvage the situation by apologising to the organisations' publics, assuring them that all will be dealt with and that the crisis is under control. Stroh (2007: 1) maintains that it is important to recognise that many cross-disciplines have been integrated to build theory for public relations in terms of relationships and relationship management. This postulation reinforces the view that public relation is a communications process. However, problems are often encountered with organisations not understanding the difference between public relations as a discipline on its own, and public relations as a marketing, communication and management tool. Most organisations have given little or no credence to public relations, some organisations do not understand the role that public relations plays within an organisation. Therefore, the extent to which this debate unfolds in the practice needs to be explored. This paper therefore uses the three themes identified earlier to construct an interview schedule to further probe the practice of public relations within selected organisations in Durban, South Africa.

## THE ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) defines public relations as the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. Lubbe and Puth (2002: 10) further contend that public relations practitioners are involved in a variety of work assignments or functions which may include research, strategic planning, counselling, communication, evaluation, media relations and placement, organising, writing, editing, media production, speaking, training, management. According to Venter (2004) the most common disciplines that influence the function of public relations are communication, management and marketing.

### Public relations as a communications function

Rensburg and Cant (2009: 49) maintain that public relations do not exist as a function on its own. It is an integral part of the communication function of an organisation. Ströh (2007: 1) also maintains that public relations should be the umbrella function that manages the communication between an organisation and its publics to build and enhance healthy relationships to the benefit of all parties involved. Tench and Yeomans (2006: 29) identify two dominant public relations roles: the *communication manager*, who plans and manages public relations programmes, advises management, makes communication policy decisions and oversees their implementation and the communication technician, who is not involved in organisational decision making, but who implements public relations programmes such as writing press releases, organising events or producing web content. Tench and Yeomans (2006: 29) further note that there are two other roles, sitting between the manager and technician. The first role is the media relations role, a highly skilled job requiring profound knowledge and understanding of the media.

The second role is the communication and liaison role, meaning the individual who represents the organisation at events and meetings and creates opportunities for management to communicate with internal and external publics. Because public relations seeks to communicate with its key stakeholders it also plays a societal role in that it helps organisations survive in their social environments by working on relationships with publics in order to bring about social and economic change and development. Grunig et al. (2002: 280) further maintained that the public relations' function also supports other organisational functions, such as human resource management (relationships with employees and unions), lobbying (governmental communication), and financial management (investor relations and other financial relationships with stakeholders such as analysts and shareholders).

This view clearly indicates that relationships are at the centre of public relations, and is seen as an important ingredient for the effective functioning of an organisation. This perspective positions public relations at the level strategic management, because it can influence the way stakeholders support an organisation's overall goals.

### Public relations as a management function

Public relation as a management function is supported by Skinner et al. (2001: 6), as well as Cutlip et al. (2000: 6). Seitel (2004: 87) maintains that when managing an organisation's public relations system, practitioners must demonstrate comfort with the various elements of the organisation itself; must be the interpreter of the organisation, its philosophy, policy and programs, all

which emanate from top management. Therefore, public relations must report to those who run the organisation. However, in many organisations, this reporting relationship has not always been the case. Often, public relation has been subordinated to advertising, marketing and other disciplines.

It is argued that the strongest public relations department is one led by a communications executive who reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer. The role of public relations in strategic management within organisations is viewed in terms of four areas, namely; the environment, strategy, organisation and people. Seitel (2004: 74) states that as a management function, public relations is in a position to: evaluate internal and external opinions, attitudes and needs on an ongoing basis; advise management regarding their possible effect and to act as an instrument in bringing about policy changes and in directing new courses of action. Van Riel (1995), quoted in Tench and Yeomans (2006: 29) explains that corporate communication is the management of communication, organisational communication and marketing. From the aforementioned, it is evident that public relation plays an integral part in the management of an organisation. However, there is also confusion between the public relations and the marketing function. It is therefore also important to make a distinction between the two disciplines in order to reflect the diverse view of their roles and their position within an organisation.

### Public relations as a marketing function

Skinner et al. (2004: 43) reinforce that communicators, marketers and public relations practitioners have a lot in common. Both deal with organisational relationships and employ similar processes, techniques and strategies. However, the two functions have to be separated by mission and goal. Kotler and Keller (2009: 45) assert that marketing is about identifying and meeting human and social needs. Belch and Belch (2001: 23) maintain that it is important to recognize the distinction between marketing and public relations. When an organisation systematically plans and distributes information in an attempt to control and manage its image and the nature of the publicity it receives, it is really engaging in a function known as public relations. The relationship between the public relations and marketing functions has always been an ambiguous and confusing one. It is, therefore, important to make a distinction between the two disciplines. However, it is again crucial to acknowledge that both public relations and marketing convey the essence of communication. The main focus of both functions is to maintain and build harmonious relationships with the organisations and their publics (both internal and external). Koekemoer (2004: 400) states that in practice, marketing consists of a

coordinated programme of research, product design, packaging, pricing, promotion and distribution. The goal is to attract and satisfy customers on a long-term basis. Marketing's fundamental responsibility is to build and maintain a market for an organisation's products and/or services. Product publicity is part of marketing communication. Since many think that publicity is synonymous with public relations, product publicity also contributes to the confusion between marketing and public relations. Public relations specialists do help in the marketing effort by writing product publicity stories and arranging media coverage of new products. However, Cutlip et al. (2000: 8) argue that effective public relation contributes to the marketing effort by maintaining a hospitable, social and political environment. Grunig et al. (2007: 357) put the differences between public relations and marketing in sharp contrast by arguing that the marketing function should communicate with the markets for an organisation's goods and services. Public relations should be concerned with all the publics of the organisation.

The major purpose of marketing is to make money for the organisation by increasing the slope of the demand curve. The major purpose of public relations is to save money for the organisation by building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organisation to meet its mission. Koekemoer (2004: 399) concludes that public relations and marketing are two functions that are most often confused, with public relations typically being subsumed under the larger more powerful marketing function. It is evident that different perceptions regarding the distinction between marketing and public relations exists across organisations, as do different perceptions regarding the key tasks that marketing and public relations practitioners are responsible for. Cornelissen and Lock (2000: 231) mention that some organisations argue for the integration of the two disciplines, while others proclaim that these two organisational functions should remain independent. Based on this, it can be concluded that without a clear indication of the role and place of these two functions in the organisation, their contribution to the overall functioning and performance of the organisation could be greatly misunderstood and diffused.

It is evident from the aforementioned that public relations play an integral part in the functioning of an organisation. However, the debate on the role and functions that public relations play within an organisation still exists. Venter (2004: 7) mentions that endeavours by organisations such as PRISA to reposition the discipline, does not seem as if it will be resolved in the near future. Therefore, the extent to which this debate unfolds in the practice of public relations needs to be explored. This paper therefore uses the three aforementioned themes identified to construct an interview schedule to further probe the practice of public relations within selected organisations in Durban, South Africa.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The approach used for this research is the case study method. Welman and Kruger (1999: 190) define the case study method as a "...limited number of units of analysis (often only one)...such as an individual, a group or an institution (which) are studied intensively. Seven organisations in Durban, South Africa served as the primary unit of analysis for this paper. These organisations represent the petroleum refinery, manufacturing, beverages and freight transport sectors and were selected on the basis of their size, influence on the South African corporate world (most are listed on the Johannesburg stock exchange) and willingness to participate in the study. Two individuals per organisation were interviewed (head of department and one public relations practitioner).

The criterion used to select the participants was - they had to be practitioners who practised public relations within their organisations. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews based on the themes identified in the literature review. The literature review was then used as the basis for a questionnaire, which attempts to probe the practice of public relations within selected organisations in Durban, South Africa.

Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Jacob (2006) explains that to conduct a content analysis on any text, the text is coded or broken down into manageable categories on a variety of levels: word, word sentence, phrase, theme and visuals and then examined using one of the basic methods of content analysis, conceptual analysis or relational analysis. In terms of this paper conceptual content analysis was used. The frequency of certain words, phrases and themes common were identified. The findings are reported and contextualised against the three functions of public relations.

### Data analysis and interpretation

Findings are reported based on the themes extracted from the literature review.

#### Does the organisation have a public relations department?

Findings reveal that most (57%) of the organisations do not have a public relations department. The other organisations (43%) indicated that they do have a public relations department which has also been incorporated into other interdependent departments such as communications and marketing. These findings confirm Davies (2004: 202) argument that the home for the public relations functions is still not clear in most organisations.

#### The location of the public relations department

Most respondents (58%) indicated that within their organisations the public relations discipline is most likely to fall under the communications department. Other respondents (14%) said public relations would be housed under the marketing department. Whilst other responses, (14%) revealed that public relations falls under the corporate affairs department in their organisation. The remaining (14%) indicated that public relations falls under other departments. These responses confirm Cutlip et al. (2000: 60) assertion that most organisations have not established or identified the role and position of public relations and even practitioners disagree about what the best structure and place for their function in the various types of organisations are.

### **Public relations activities executed by public relations practitioners**

Respondents indicated that public relations professionals have different designations. Majority of the respondents (57%) revealed that within their given department the Head of Department is called the Communications Manager and there are Public Relations Officers and assistants that work under this manager within the department. Others (29%) indicated that the department is headed by a public relations and communications manager and has various subordinates such as marketing coordinator and corporate social investment coordinator and public relations coordinator. Further responses, (14%) revealed that the public relations professionals deal with conducting tours and media relations only. Respondents also reported that public relations plays an important part in a wide variety of ways throughout the organisations, most of these are directed towards helping the organisations to inform both internal and external public by providing information about the organisation or its products and services. Evidence of these findings is reflected in the following statements:

Public relations' professionals take care of everything that needs to be communicated to all stakeholders. It is there to develop and maintain relationships with stakeholders, improve visibility and positioning of the organisation and serves as the custodian of the organisation's branding. This includes events management, all promotional activities and roll out of different programmes within the organisation such as weekly and monthly internal publications. Basically, the role of public relations is to ensure the smooth running of the production process and to get the information to the people and maintain a good image for the organisation.

### **Public relations as a communication function**

Respondents (40%) view the role of public relations practitioners as communication technicians, whilst most respondents (60%) indicated that their organisations viewed their roles as communication managers. They said that the communication manager plans and manages public relations programmes, advises management, makes communication policy decisions and oversees their implementation. They mentioned that whilst communication technicians are not involved in organisational decision making, they are involved in implementing public relations programmes such as writing press releases, organising events or producing web content. Evidence of these roles is reflected in the following quotes:

Public relation is the 'glue' that holds all communication together. Organisations previously had separate public relations and marketing departments; however, through research the organisation has come to a decision to have public relations professionals servicing other departments such as marketing, corporate social involvement and human resources.

Through critically looking at the different roles that public relations practitioners play within the selected organisations, it can be said that public relations is seen as 'being a communicator, a go-between, an interpreter or communication link between the organisation and all its stakeholders. This supports Grunig et al. (2002: 553) view of public relations.

### **Public relations as a management function**

Respondents (70%) revealed that public relation is rarely involved in top level decision making. Others (30%) mentioned that public relation is part of senior management. A respondent stated that because it is a global organisation, the group marketing director has

a board of director status and represents both the marketing, public relations and communications department at top-level decision making.

Other responses indicated that public relation liaises occasionally with top level management when the regional office has urgent matters to communicate to the various provincial departments". A few respondents mentioned that public relations plays a very small role in the interpretation of philosophies, policies and programs within the organisation, purely because there are highly trained and qualified people (at a strategic level) who are responsible for this task.

Based on the findings it is clear that a majority of the organisations do not view public relations as a management function or rather have failed to acknowledge the role that public relations can play in top-level decision making. Findings clearly indicate that the level of participation by public relations at top-level decision making is very minimal. The reason for the minimal involvement is a result of public relations being housed under other departments and not being regarded as a department that can stand independently. Cutlip et al. (2000: 8) stresses that in order to become involved in strategic planning, public relations practitioner should operate at the highest level of organisational management and have access to the most senior information and decision-making systems.

### **Public relations as a marketing function**

Findings have revealed that most (57%) of the respondents believe that it is very important to make a clear distinction between public relations and marketing. Others (29%) of the respondents indicated that it was not important for their organisation to make a distinction between marketing and public relations. Reasons for this are reflected in the following excerpts:

Organisations have categorised both disciplines under the communications umbrella; therefore, the two disciplines will always complement one another in all the functions and roles performed. It was important to make a clear distinction between the two disciplines. This is due to the fact that the nature of the organisation requires that one division (marketing) focuses on improving visibility of the organisation's products and positioning the different brands; this translates to basically building and maintaining markets for the organisation's products and services and satisfying customers, which is what marketing means for this particular organisation. For example in our organisation distinguishing between marketing and public relations is very important. For example, as public relations professionals we do not go out to find customers. The marketing department does that. As public relations professionals we add value to the organisation by communicating effectively with all our stakeholders and ensuring that we maintain a good image for our organisation at all times.

This confirms Grunig et al. (2007: 357) belief that puts the differences between public relations and marketing in sharp contrast by arguing that the marketing function should communicate with the markets for an organisation's goods and services. Public relations should be concerned with all the publics of the organisation. Other respondents indicated that it was not important for their organisation to make a distinction between marketing and public relations. This is mainly because the organisation has categorised both disciplines under the communications umbrella; therefore, the two disciplines will always complement one another in all the functions and roles performed.

One respondent indicated that, due to the integration of public relations with other departments, public relations practitioners may often share two functions (public relations and marketing). Both public relations and marketing are viewed as communication

functions. Respondents also added that the interaction between the marketing and public relations professionals within their organizations has begun to develop into something much more complex and far-reaching. Marketers are now evolving and have a wider range of possible communication channels and technologies for getting messages across to their publics and for stimulating direct responses from their target audiences. The results from the aforementioned data indicate that both public relations and marketing are interdependent and share overlapping functions with regard to communication. From the findings, it appears that the level of interaction and overlapping of functions between the two disciplines has also led to the integration of departments.

Further responses reveal that organisations merge public relations with marketing because the two disciplines have been perceived to have overlapping functions and share complementary characteristics. It has also emerged that for some organisations it is a matter of convenience, whereby staff members are equipped with both public relations and marketing skills which enable them to be comfortable with both disciplines. However, it should be emphasised that the integration of both disciplines to form one department may vary in different organisations depending on the focus and nature of the organisation. This point supports Botha (2010: 95) assertion that, communication programmes should be integrated or co-ordinated by the public relations and communications department that is separate from the marketing department, and that this department should have a matrix arrangement with the departments it serves.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings it can be concluded that there is a trend amongst organisations for public relations to be incorporated under the marketing or communications departments to function as a single department. It was also concluded that the public relations departments that previously functioned separately to marketing or communications have now merged to form departments now called public relations and communication, corporate affairs and corporate communication. Findings further showed that marketing and public relations should be recognised as top-level decision making function as both functions greatly impact on the organisation's overall aims and objectives. It can therefore be concluded that public relations practitioners are involved in strategic planning, should operate at the highest level of organisational management and have access to most senior information and decision-making systems. This will enable practitioners to evaluate internal and external opinions and advise management regarding possible effects.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered:

Maintaining relationships of mutual benefit between an organisation and its key publics is essential since the management of such relationships may determine the overall success of an organisation. Public relation is a

management function and has a role to play in strategic management. It is therefore recommended that public relations should be given an equal status as other functions at top management level within an organisation.

Public relations practitioners must be the interpreter of the organisation, its policy, philosophy and programmes. Practitioners should be afforded the opportunity to act as agents and instruments in bringing about policy changes and directing new courses of action within an organisation.

For communication to be effective, public relations' managers should be positioned to serve all departments of the organisation. Ideally, he or she should have board of director status, as happens in the world's most successful companies. Public relations should be the 'glue' which holds organisational systems together, and promote a free flow of information throughout the organisation, both internally and externally since virtually all actions and activities of an organisation have a public relations ramification.

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