

CREATIVITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: Public relations are a “hot” issue nowadays. People talk about them, read about them and think they understand what they are all about. One of the reasons why people feel so confident about their knowledge in this domain is based on the belief that public relations can be learned and practiced by observing the rules. This article shows, however, that creativity is an essential part of PR. Contrary to what many people may think success in this domain cannot be achieved without creative thinking.

Key words: public relations, creativity, guerrilla PR, event planning

1. Introduction

Public relations are a “hot” subject nowadays and they outline an extremely complex territory. The strategic role of PR within companies has been obvious for some time now as public relations no longer represent a “Cinderella” domain. In a company, those who work in public relations must engage all their efforts in order to build a strong, positive image of the organization and counteract any negative elements which might affect its reputation. Public relations are more than a simple promotion, they represent a combination of multiple strategic and creative elements, in which communication, although variable, is the key element.

As in any area of activity which is just starting to gain recognition on a market where many people have not yet understood exactly what its purpose and mechanism is, public relations have to face public disbelief, their confusion and lack of information. Therefore, we think it important to try and define public relations and what they imply.

2. Public relations skills

Public relations are, according to Lawrence W. Long and Vincent Hazleton’s largely accepted definition, “a communication function of management through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals” (apud Windahl, 2009:116). A monograph edited by the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) Foundation, lists the basic components of public relations, providing an extensive view of the domain: consulting, research, media relations, publicity, relations with the employees/members, relations with the community, public affairs, governmental affairs, issue management, fund raising, special events, marketing communication etc. (Wilcox, 2009:8-9).

Since not many people are aware of the complexity of this domain, they tend to underestimate it. One of the misconceptions about public relations has to do with the

services which specialists have to provide. Some people feel that the job of a PR specialist is accessible, as it does not need any previous study and does not require any special skills. They believe that public relations can be learned and practiced by observing how others work. However, the elements presented above underline the versatility of PR activities. Furthermore, we can deduce from the list that a PR specialist has to master various skills, some of which can be acquired only through study and exercise.

Practitioners may have different qualities and different ways of dealing with a problem. Still, as Dennis Wilcox writes in his book "Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics", there are some fundamental attributes which can be found in all successful practitioners, independent of their specific tasks. These are: "the ability to skillfully use written and spoken words; the analytical ability to identify and define problems; *creativity* to find new and efficient solutions to each problem; persuasiveness and the ability to deliver attractive and elegant presentations" (Wilcox, 2009:84).

3. The concept of creativity in public relations

We would like to take a closer look at creativity. We have chosen this ability because we think that it is not understood and appreciated enough. We also believe that nowadays the key to success in public relations lies with creativity.

Let us first clarify the term "creativity" as it is understood by practitioners. For example, Jay Conrad Levinson thinks that if "in art creativity is meant to cultivate, to enchant, to touch the soul", creativity in public relations is supposed to "earn trust, to add value, to change the attitude, behavior and beliefs of the company's publics"(Levinson, 2002:19).

For Al and Laura Ries "to be creative means to be original" and they think that "creativity does not belong in the advertising department. The place for creativity is in the public relations department. PR have to be original, that is to place products and services as being new and different" (Ries, 2006:301). This definition highlights a shift in thinking as creativity is no longer believed to be "the" instrument for advertising, but an essential means for fulfilling objectives in the public relations department.

As it is in most communication domains, success in PR does not have a clear recipe. It is the result of the use of suitable instruments at the right time. The various communication campaigns used by a company or an organization obviously have the company's message as a starting point, but their success depends on the specialists' capacity to be creative.

As public relations spread rapidly, PR specialists have to bring elements of originality, to look for new perspectives and to prove with each campaign their creativity and professionalism. In order to achieve this, they may explore their creativity by turning to: idea-stimulating techniques, brainstorming, ideas' evaluation, focus group, individual creativity.

However, research must forerun any creative approach. Moreover, in public relations everything has to have a practical outcome, measurable in image capital or money. That is why the creative talent is not appreciated for itself as long as there are no tangible results. As a consequence, some firms avoid hiring very creative people who might become unprofitable. Other firms have come up with a more productive solution. They have a person in each team who tempers the creative impulse when it diverts from the target.

4. Guerrilla PR

The creative power of a team of PR specialists is reflected, among others, in the level of satisfaction of clients, coworkers, employers or in the number of clients in the case of PR firms. Unfortunately, the work quality is not the only criterion which motivates or discourages people to turn to services offered by the specialists. Many companies find the PR price lists rather restrictive and find themselves forced to renounce this type of services. But the imagination of PR specialists has managed to overcome even this obstacle. This is how *guerrilla PR* emerged – a branch that is increasingly appreciated abroad and which has recently appeared in Romania as well. Guerrilla PR is an unconventional system of promotions that may vary from Internet campaigns to wall painting.

The reason why guerrilla PR is becoming more and more valued both by clients and public is very simple. It means, before anything else, creativity in public relations. It implies the use of surprising techniques with maximum effects and minimum costs. It means the transmission of messages in a witty manner, a lot more personal and aggressive than the classical practices (apud Udrea, 2009).

It is extremely important to remember that

“you need not be a creativity magician in order to use the guerrilla creative force. You need not be an exceptional writer, an accomplished artist, a great photographer or a wonderful playwright in order to create successful campaigns. You only have to be a clear thinker, a tireless researcher and a realistic person. And you should also be passionate not about beauty and art but about your product, service or company” (Levinson, 2002:23).

We can conclude that for guerrilla PR: “the key to success does not mean to do more and more PR activities, which are money consuming, but to find methods to establish solid trustfull connections with your public by using the resources which are already in hand” (Georgescu, 2009).

5. Public relation materials and event planning

Creativity is also important for writing public relations materials. Even if most of the texts used in this domain must closely follow the writing guidelines, creativity does not become redundant. On the contrary, it is much harder to be original and to draw attention when you are limited by norms and templates. This type of condition

demands more originality and inspiration from the writer. The public does not care if the specialist has written 100 or 1000 press releases about his or her company, for them, every text is a proof of the writer's involvement, professionalism and appreciation of the company it represents. Therefore, a PR practitioner always has to come up with a new "coat" to wrap up the same defining company message.

Creativity is also a key element in event planning. Of course, there are certain recipes which can be used in order to plan a successful event, but only creativity can make it unique and surprising. The event has to look fresh and perfectly tailored for the participants. People expect to see something new everytime and this can be provided only by turning to creativity.

The Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau Inc. in collaboration with Red 7 Media's *EXPO* magazine and *Agenda* presented the first-ever survey exploring the roots, impact and importance of creativity in the meetings and events industry. The study measured results from 330 respondents to an e-mail questionnaire in the fall 2008 and focused on creativity in meeting/event planning for a corporation as well as meeting/event planning for an association or not-for-profit organization, independent meeting/event planning, trade show management or executive.

The results of the survey pointed out that

"the areas within the meeting/planning function that require the highest levels of creativity are event marketing and promotion, event design and special events. As business conditions present new challenges within organizations, the need to be creative will become more important than ever". (<http://www.expoweb.com/>).

The way people in the industry regard creativity can be seen, for example in the answers to the question: "How important do you consider being creative as part of your job?". The significant majority of survey respondents - 97 percent - said that being creative is an important part of their jobs. Sixty-one percent indicated it as a "very important" aspect of their responsibilities.

6. Creativity and new media

Another issue of great importance nowadays has to do with the way PR specialists deal with the changes brought about by the technological development and turning to creativity in order to adapt and usefully use the new means of communication might be one of the most appropriate options. If the classical press release and the relationship with the media have been the center of a specialist's activity, nowadays the media is far more complex. Internet and social media are gaining more and more territory. The public can no longer be reached only through traditional means. Specialists are trying to understand and to adapt to the new means of communication in order to keep the public interested.

The advantage of using the Internet is that it provides multiple channels to reach mass and niche audiences. For example blogs, Tweets, videos on YouTube, postings on Facebook or MySpace, PowerPoint presentation on SlideShare can all be used to

send messages about the company to the customers or various stakeholders. These new media are not supposed to be used as simple or classical means of delivering a message. They are, however, a great way of initiating a dialogue with the public in order to see their needs, desires, what they like about the company and what their dissatisfactions might be.

"This is the idea of putting the "public" back into public relations because it advances the fundamental purpose of public relations – building relationships. The dialogue and the feedback from the organization's stakeholders not only builds a relationship, but it also provides an organization with valuable insights into the interests and concerns of its employees, customers, stakeholders and the public." (Wilcox, 2009:17)

If we look at the numbers which describe the rapidity with which the Internet is developing it becomes obvious that the future of public relations is closely linked to the creative way in which PR specialists will use the new media. For example, it is estimated that around 120,000 blogs are being added every day and that 20 hours of video are being uploaded every minute of the day on YouTube (apud Wilcox, 2009:14). Therefore, public relations professionals must confront reality and acknowledge the impact Internet and social media have on this domain. Only by understanding the dynamics of the new technologies and by using them intelligently and creatively can the success of the organization be preserved.

7. Conclusions

This paper has aimed to highlight the importance of creativity in public relations as well as the variety of forms it can assume. Public relations are a complex domain, which demand multiple skills from the PR practitioners. Creativity is one of those skills and it plays an important part in successfully fulfilling the responsibilities assumed by a public relations specialist.

We have seen that Al and Laura Ries consider creativity as belonging more to the PR department than to the advertising department, even though many people still think that creativity is "the" instrument in advertising. Guerrilla PR is an eloquent example of creativity in the public relations department, as it uses original new means of promoting an image, a brand, a person etc. Moreover, a powerful, memorable event cannot be planned without creative thinking, which was underlined by the results of the survey mentioned above.

The writing of PR materials, especially those intended for new media, demand a lot of creativity on the author's part in order to make them stand out from the countless other similar materials and messages, thus further highlighting the importance of creativity in public relations.

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