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## OVERVIEW

# Planning and Managing Public Relations Campaigns

## A Strategic Approach

by Anne Gregory

### Recommendation

In a post-Internet world, public relations (PR) departments' assignments have broadened considerably, British PR expert Anne Gregory writes in this overview. With employees posting their own content to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, an organization's public relations director no longer fully controls the company's message. And yet the message matters now more than ever – an organization's market capitalization can hinge on whether consumers and investors buy its branding and reputational efforts. Gregory walks through the theory and practice of modern-day public relations and presents useful case studies.

### About the Author

Anne Gregory is a professor of corporate communication at the University of Huddersfield. She has years of corporate PR experience and remains a consultant and adviser to a number of large organizations.

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# Planning and Managing Strategic Marketing Campaigns

## A Strategic Approach

Anne Gregory  
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### Recommendation

In a post-Internet world, public relations (PR) departments' assignments have broadened considerably, British PR expert Anne Gregory writes in this overview. With employees posting their own content to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, an organization's public relations director no longer fully controls the company's message. And yet the message matters now more than ever – an organization's market capitalization can hinge on whether consumers and investors buy its branding and reputational efforts. Gregory walks through the theory and practice of modern-day public relations and presents useful case studies.

### Take-Aways

- Public relations has moved front and center in corporate value propositions.
- The reality of public relations has changed in recent years.
- Public relations is a chaotic field.
- Analysis is the core building block of any public relations campaign.

- Research supports analysis.
- Transparency is the new watchword in public relations.
- Public relations campaigns rely on a mixture of strategy and tactics.
- The specifics of each case should dictate your PR strategy and tactics.

## Summary

### **Public relations has moved front and center in corporate value propositions.**

The success of a modern corporation no longer revolves solely around making money. Organizations also must define and communicate their corporate values. This is the new era of corporate character – a catch-all category that includes a company’s mission, brand, social commitment, and underlying purpose. While branding was once the purview of the marketing department, and human resources owned corporate culture, the new model defines corporate character as extending to all parts of an organization.

*The world of public relations has changed radically in the last few years. Indeed, as a barometer of society itself, it has had to.*

The discipline of public relations focuses on burnishing a company’s reputation, with the understanding that organizations cannot build trust quickly. Building goodwill takes repetition and deliberate effort. A company’s public image affects its overall success. An organization with a stellar reputation is more appealing to the consumers, employees and investors. A company that falls short on the public relations front will have to win back customers, investors and potential employees.

### **The reality of public relations has changed in recent years.**

A couple of decades ago, the public relations department was an organization’s gatekeeper for external communications. The public relations team had the most powerful internal voice in communicating a company’s vision and values. Now, social media allows those outside an organization to connect with individuals inside the company. When those individuals convey a sense of the organization that differs from the message the company is trying to promulgate, an authenticity gap may follow. Some organizations have responded to this problem by practicing “radical transparency.” Airbus, for example, stopped dictating what employees could say on social media and urged them to post their unfiltered opinions.

*Public relations is more than a tactical tool used purely to ‘get out the message’ that the organization decides it wants to promote or to add gloss to a ‘story.’*

This new approach reflects a shifting mindset in public relations. No longer merely a tactical tool, public relations has morphed into a strategic play. By monitoring social media, for example, a public relations team can spot emerging issues that might inform or direct a company’s future product lines. Business decisions once made from a financial standpoint might now include concerns about reputation. For example, a decision to use the lowest-cost vendor might conflict with a company’s stated goals concerning sustainability. In this communication environment, the

public relations leader's role in advising executives about possible consequences of various business decisions has grown.

**Public relations is a chaotic field.**

Public relations professionals must accept uncertainty and endeavor to create systems that impose order on chaos. The public relations policy practiced by Group Corporate Communications offers a case study in how to tackle this problem. The telecommunication provider's PR department spells out rules for a variety of public-facing communications. The policy explains how to track the results of various efforts, and outlines what people can and can't post on social media.

*As far as possible, there have to be ways of asserting some order, although total control in the dynamic world of public relations is impossible and not even desirable.*

If the public relations team makes a mistake, its mishap is – by definition – public. That fact raises the stakes and underscores the need for planning. By putting forth an organized communication plan, such as the one used by Group Corporate Communications, a company can spot and address potential problems before a public relations program launches. That process boosts the campaign's chances for success. Planning helps public relations practitioners set the agenda.

Reacting to media calls or to the latest crisis is also part of the public relations team's job, but taking a more proactive approach allows the company to set the agenda and dictate its message. By planning its public relations strategies in advance, an organization can think about what it wants to say and how best to deliver that message.

**Analysis is the core building block of any public relations campaign.**

Planning begins with analysis: identifying problems or opportunities underlying a public relations program. In the health and beauty sector, The Body Shop and bareMinerals offer examples of companies building their brands and values around the issue of animal testing. Both vow not to use any products tested on animals. Some companies in the sector have said they sell products tested on animals only if regulators require such testing. Other competitors decided to avoid the issue altogether. If a company controls its choices in a particular area of contention, such as fast fashion brands using cheap labor, the public is more likely to hold the organization accountable for its decisions. If, on the other hand, a challenge is outside a company's control, such as a travel company shutting down because of the pandemic, consumers and the media are more forgiving.

*Without getting to the core issues there will not be a credible or effective program, or one that supports organizational objectives.*

One useful tool is the PEST analysis, which looks at the political, economic, social and technological themes surrounding an issue. This method enables public relations practitioners to break an issue down across a grid that looks at legislation and regulation, economic and monetary conditions, new breakthroughs in technology, demographic shifts, and changes in consumer attitudes. A PEST analysis lets an organization identify opportunities and challenges

by taking a broad view. Not every company will give equal weight to all four quadrants of the PEST grid. A retailer might hone in on the economic conditions that drive sales, while an organization in a heavily regulated industry might devote more focus to the political quadrant. While the PEST analysis looks at the outside world, a SWOT – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats – analysis focuses on matters within the organization.

### **Research supports analysis.**

Once analysis identifies an opportunity or challenge for the public relations team, research is the next step. The scope of the research depends on the ambitions of the project. Perhaps it requires only a few phone calls. However, in some cases, the PR team may need to embark on a full-fledged fact-finding mission that enlists the services of internal researchers and external consultants. Practitioners must be mindful of the validity and objectivity of any research results. Quantitative research focuses on data and statistics. Qualitative polling elicits opinions and attitudes. Tracking research asks the same or similar subjects the same questions over time. Satisfaction surveys collect data on customers' feedback.

*Although research around the topic in hand needs to be rigorous and objective, it need not necessarily be expensive – it depends on the task.*

In qualitative research, practitioners rely on focus groups, surveys, in-person interviews and telephone interviews. Desk research involves scouring secondary sources for insights. Some savvy organizations automate aspects of their research. For instance, the Co-op, a large British food retailer, uses an alert service from Brandwatch to notify its public relations team of social media mentions of the company. That is how the headquarters' staff learned of a fire at a branch in Wales. Brandwatch immediately notified the company of a Twitter mention of the fire, allowing the public relations team to gain control of the situation.

### **Transparency is the new watchword in public relations.**

Gone are the days when corporations could fully control their messaging. Today, so many sources of information are beyond the public relations department that organizations have no choice but to embrace candor and openness as their primary public relations strategy. Companies that try to clamp down on the information they release will come face to face with a harsh reality: If you don't provide information, consumers will view you as secretive and inauthentic. Stakeholders have no shortage of alternative sources of information – the content and message of which fall outside the control of the public relations department.

*Transparent, two-way, proactive, and interactive public relations is the only sensible way to operate.*

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump underscore another new reality in public messaging: The public's trust in traditional media and old-fashioned experts has dwindled. The influencers of yesteryear have given way to a new model. Now, communication is more likely to occur directly between the powerful and the masses, without journalists as go-betweens. As a result, the power dynamic in communications has shifted, and the pace of information dissemination has accelerated.

**Public relations campaigns rely on a mixture of strategy and tactics.**

A public relations strategy is the company's overall message. Tactics can include news conferences and media interviews, advertising on billboards and television, and sponsorships of sporting events or trade shows. Sometimes the tactics are obvious. A manufacturer rolling out a new car will offer test drives to automotive journalists and air ads aimed at car-buying consumers.

*Sometimes the type of campaign clearly dictates the selection of techniques.*

For some public relations programs, the goal is behavioral change. Consumers in the United Kingdom are very aware of Britain's Post Office, but many don't know that the Post Office offers savings accounts. As of early 2019, only half of Britons realized the Post Office offered basic financial services. To bring in deposits, the Post Office launched a "Spend Well, Save More" campaign. Its tactics included setting up a "Save More Squad" of influencers who directed consumers to Post Office accounts.

The Post Office also added a savings calculator to its website. The tool let users enter income information and then see how their savings habits compared to those of other people with similar income levels. The campaign drew coverage from BBC radio stations and Sky News. By the end of the campaign, public awareness of Post Office savings accounts had risen from 50% to 59%.

**The specifics of each case should dictate your PR strategy and tactics.**

OneSpan, a cybersecurity and financial technology company in Chicago faced a different public relations challenge: Unlike the UK Post Office, which wanted to gain traction for one piece of its operation, OneSpan sought attention for its changing business model. Formerly a hardware company, it was rebranding as a software-based cybersecurity company. OneSpan formulated a public relations strategy that called for boosting the company's name recognition in the financial industry, while also spurring discussion about cybersecurity and OneSpan's role as an expert in that space.

*Although fraud can evoke emotional responses from bank and financial institutions' customers in particular, the approach was strictly rational.*

A notable tactic was OneSpan's emotion-free approach to the issue of cybersecurity. This topic resonates emotionally with consumers, but the company embarked on an evidence-based campaign tailored to its business-to-business audience. The campaign reflected the reality that the managers who make purchasing decisions about cybersecurity tend to be senior-level executives. Facts and figures will likely persuade these individuals more than appeals to emotion. OneSpan pursued a program of white papers, bylined articles and media interviews with the trade publications that are popular with cybersecurity technology decision-makers. The company used embargoed news releases to court reporters from such outlets as Bloomberg and American Banker. The results were impressive. OneSpan garnered more than 70 news articles, a strong social media response and an increase in traffic to its rebranded website.

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