Public relations is the business function charged with planning and managing an organization's relationships with key stakeholders through the effective use of a range of communication channels and methods. The purpose of public relations is to gain and maximize the support of stakeholders for the organization and to ameliorate the risk posed by any who might be opposed to it.

The jurisdictional boundaries and precise function of public relations are open to some debate, and the role ascribed to it depends on where it is located within the organizational structure and the span of activity allocated to it. In some organizations, it is represented at board level and is regarded as essential for strategic decision making; in others, it is deployed as a tactical promotional tool and a part of the marketing function. This lack of consensus on the purpose and activity-set of public relations is reflected in the literally hundreds of definitions that seek to delineate and describe it. One that has broad acceptance is that proposed by the International Public Relations Association in 1978, which, as written by Sam Black, states that

*public relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisations and the public's interest.*

This statement encapsulates a number of key features that help to explain public relations' inherent complexity and tensions.

**Public Relations Definitions**

First, the phrase *public relations*—this identifies that the function is responsible for those organizational relationships that are not private; they are available to scrutiny by others. The word *public* also introduces other concepts particular to the field. The "general public" often is identified as a "target" for public relations activity, because one of the many purposes of the discipline is to influence public opinion, often through the mass media. Also implicit is the notion of the "public sphere," where debate and discussion about issues affecting the general public and the nature of society itself occur. These debates, in turn, affect "public opinion."

A term specific to the field is *publics*. Publics are groups (usually called stakeholders in the business and
management literature) who have characteristics in common. Thus, typical publics for organizations are employees; customers; the local community; financial investors and analysts; local and national government entities; suppliers and distributors; opinion formers; professional, trade and regulatory bodies; and increasingly, ill-defined online communities with multiple relationships with organizations. These groups, in turn, have specific labels within the practice. Hence, work with employees is called internal or employee relations; with customers, consumer or marketing PR; with local and national governments, public affairs or lobbying; and with financial investors and analysts, city or financial PR.

Stakeholding as a concept emerged in the 1980s. Stakeholders are those groups or individuals who both affect or are affected by an organization. A differentiating concept between the notions of stakeholders and publics is that the latter are active or potentially active and that they collect around interests, issues, or opportunities that usually have been created by the organization, for example, polluting the local environment, introducing new services, moving to a new location, or acquiring another company.

Second, the phrase *art and social science* illustrates the duality of the practice in that it has a creative side that finds expression in the problem-solving capabilities required of practitioners and in the tactics used in public relations programs such as imaginative events, creative writing, the use of powerful imagery, and the effective exploitation of channels such as newspapers or mobile technologies. The other side of the practice emphasizes that public relations is a measurable, scientific discipline that systematically employs communication tools to persuade target publics to think, feel, or, ultimately, behave in particular ways. To do this requires a knowledge of the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, politics, anthropology, philosophy, and management theory.

Third, the analytical and predictive aspects of public relations work point to one of its key tasks: to see the organization in context. Organizations are constantly affected by changes in the external environment. The social, political, technological, economic, and regulatory environment is in constant flux, and stakeholder reactions to these changes need to be monitored and predicted, because this could well alter stakeholder perceptions of and attitudes toward the organization. For example, if an organization does not adapt quickly to changes in attitude to a particular political regime, it may find itself out of step with the views of its stakeholders, who may then withdraw their support for its products or shares. Analyzing these broader trends and predicting their consequences is at the heart of issues management, a mainstay of strategic public relations.

Public relations seeks to create a "buffer" against undesired consequences by identifying those issues that are potentially dangerous to the organization and recommending mitigating courses of action. These recommendations may include that the organization must align itself to public opinion or, if this is not possible, recommend courses of action that will minimize the damage caused by being misaligned, for example, explaining why a plant has to be closed in an area of high unemployment. The key is that public relations is concerned with maintaining the organization's "license to operate" with the public with which it is engaged and on which it depends. It also seeks to build a "bridge" to key stakeholders through communication so that those stakeholders are engaged with the organization in a positive way. Hence, when the organization is acting in ways that carry stakeholders' approval, they will become its supporters and ideally its advocates. Stakeholders with whom there is ongoing dialogue also act as a sounding board so that when organizations are about to act in ways that may alienate stakeholders, early warning signals can be detected.

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Counselling Organizational Leaders

The role of public relations practitioners as counsellors of organizational leaders implies that it is a senior management activity. In some organizations public relations is relegated to a tactical role, often known as the "journalist in residence" role. In this position the public relations practitioner is treated as the "post boy," tasked with getting out the message in as favorable light as possible after all the important decisions have been made. In its strategic manifestation, public relations is seen as integral to decision making at the most senior level. It sets the context for decisions by providing the trend analysis and predictions indicated earlier, and it informs senior management of the likely consequences of decisions by predicting what stakeholder reaction will be. By facilitating good decision making and articulating the process and the resultant content, indeed often negotiating these factors with stakeholders, public relations again seeks to reinforce the legitimizing of the organization, and hence diminish risk.

Planning

Public relations programs are planned. They are not haphazard, but are purposeful and deliberate. Good practice mirrors typical business planning models and embraces four stages. Stage 1 is situation analysis, where research will reveal the context of the issue under consideration, the nature of the communication task, and the benchmark position. Stage 2 is program strategy in which objectives for the program are set, target publics identified, appropriate content designed, the overall approach and individual tactics decided, and the appropriate resources and timescales allocated. Stage 3 is implementation, where the strategy is executed and monitored. Stage 4 is evaluation, where the effect of the program is measured against the benchmarks and objectives set. It is estimated that in good organizations, up to 70 percent of the public relations work is planned, with the remaining 30 percent being taken up with capitalizing on ad hoc opportunities such as exploiting emerging topics in the media or dealing with crises.

Also implicit in the word planned is that the relationships that result from these communication programs will be long term and sustained. Indeed, if the "bridge" to stakeholders is to be a solid one, communication must be two-way, ongoing, and built on principles of openness, honesty, commitment, and mutuality in order to generate trust.

Ethics

The professional bodies for public relations practitioners, for example, the Public Relations Society of America and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the United Kingdom, have a code of ethics that states that public relations practitioners must not only serve their organization and clients with integrity and competence, but that they should also serve the public interest.

It is in this arena that much of the controversy surrounding public relations resides. There are numerous books that describe the excesses of public relations in furthering organization interests above the public interest, notably those by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber. In the realm of political public relations, too, the concept of "spin doctoring," where spokespeople will, for example, put the best possible gloss on an unfeasible position, or even appear to lie or mislead by omission to justify a political decision, has done much to undermine public trust. The term public relations exercise is synonymous with slick activity that disguises deceitful intent. There is no escaping the fact that public relations is purposive and persuasive in intent and that in a democracy there are serious questions about the legitimate limits of persuasion, access to the public agenda by those who have the power
and/or resources to buy professional help, and the nature of the relationship between the press and organizational and political spokespersons.

Activities
Public relations practitioners work in all industry sectors and for the public sector, nongovernmental organizations, and charities. They also work for a nation’s political parties and for individuals seeking to represent themselves, whether they be football players or royalty. They work on short-term projects such as product launches, or on long-term behavioral change programs such as antismoking or climate change mitigation. At the heart of public relations work is change. Organizations and their publics engage with each other in a relationship where, ideally, both are seeking benefits either for themselves or for others and where both are prepared to give benefit in return. However, it has to be recognized that sometimes relationships are fostered for purely instrumental reasons, and even where relationships are mutually beneficial, the balance of give and return may vary over time. Implicit in the communication and relationship-building paradigm is proactivity, response, and adaptation to change.

The activities that practitioners undertake to effect that change are broad-ranging and include intelligence gathering and interpretation in order to advise senior management, issues and crisis management, and planning and implementing relationship-building programs with the key publics (or stakeholders) of the organization. In practical terms this may include activities such as organizing face-to-face or small group meetings, organizing events and exhibitions, managing and producing content for bespoke or bulk publications (including Web-based materials), media relations, corporate social responsibility activities, sponsorship, and corporate advertising.

Public relations is a fast-developing discipline. The emergence of new technologies along with the challenges of globalization have given it added prominence as organizations seek to establish and preserve their legitimacy with a growing number of diverse and demanding stakeholder groups. Organizations are defined by what they say about themselves and also by what others say about them. The ability of public relations to build and maintain relationships over the long term is being increasingly recognized as a vital element in the strategic capability of organizations and is essential if organizations are to maintain their license to operate.

See also
Communication Challenges, Corporate Social Responsibility, Employer-Employee Relations, Lobbying, Marketing, Persuasion

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**APA**

Gregory, Anne
Leeds Metropolitan University

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**


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