

## Understanding the Role of Public Relations in the Academic and Organisational Milieu

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper ascertains the place of public relations in the academic and organisational milieu. It also extends to clarify the concept of image making in public relations. The study found that although public relations elements are found in marketing, however, public relations has gone beyond such notion and has taken its place as a section or department in an organisation. This has prompted a lot of scholars to attribute public relations under the department of communication instead of the department of marketing. Nevertheless, no matter the categorisation of public relations, its complementary role in achieving marketing objectives can never be overemphasised. Thus, public relations and marketing are not adversaries within an organisation, but rather corporate allies. As such, this study established that the image of an organisation has an impact on its marketing, and this image is developed, sustained, and communicated through various corporate public relations tools. Likewise, the firm's brands, products, services, pricing, distribution, and promotional techniques have an impact on the corporate image. Additionally, this study established that image is what people think about an organisation based on the impact of its messages. It is a more general and short-term evaluation of an organisation's messages.*

**Keywords:** Public relations, marketing, image making, organisation, communication..

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the years, there has been a debate where public relations fit in the overall structure. In this conceptual paper, public relations will be portrayed in a different sphere such as academic environment and the organisation's environment. In the academic milieu, people tend to categorise public relations under the marketing faculty while others see it as the unit under the communication section. None of this categorisation is wrong going by the nature of public relations. A business should have a defined marketing plan to successfully develop, communicate, sell and ultimately deliver products and services. Building on research, a written marketing plan identifies potential customers and potential communication media to reach an identified target customer. A budget is then established to fund a communication plan utilising the elements of the promotional mix, which include advertising and public relations. Additionally, public relations and advertising functions often are performed by outside agencies that

specialise in these areas while the marketing functions are usually performed within a large or midsize company or corporation. The marketing department hires the PR, advertising or market research organisation to perform these functions (Kitchen, et al., 2016: 22)

From the above assertion, it can be deduced that public relations could fall under the marketing plan. Additionally, from the concept of marketing mix which is defined as the "set of marketing tools that the firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives in the target (Rodríguez et al., 2017) such as product, price, promotion, place (Kotler, 2000) process, people, and physical evidence (Booms et al., 1981) (See figure 1).

Authors have categorised PR under promotion. According to Subramani et al. (2013) promotion refers to marketing communications which comprise elements such as advertising, PR, direct marketing and sales promotion. For example, Kotler (1986) reiterated his view that public relations were simply an additional element of the marketing mix.



**Figure1.** Marketing Mix: Adopted from <http://marketingmix.co.uk/content/uploads/marketing-mix-7p.jpg>

For Kotler, public relations serves primarily as a communications function and, as such, plays a far narrower role than marketing in defining and achieving business goals. However, other authors have argued that public relations duty is different from marketing and should be treated differently. Both public relations and marketing are well-known areas in many organisations. They necessarily relate to a view of communication with public, audiences, or markets internal or external to organisations (Kitchen and Moss, 2016). A more useful definition was put forward by Cutlip et al. (1985) that 'public relations is the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on whom its success or its failure depends'. This would imply:

- The selection of target publics
- The design of appropriate messages or communications
- The choice of appropriate media vehicles to deliver the messages.

The word 'management' necessitates the usual skills: analysis, planning, implementation, and control over time. For example, public relations are about managing the public's perception of clients. PR firms work for politicians, entertainers and sports teams as well as corporations. In addition to trying to get their clients noticed by the media, PR firms also keep track of how and

how often their client companies are mentioned in the press. A public relations firm will assist their clients in good times and bad to manage their public image.

While marketing constitutes another management function whose definition, according to the American Marketing Association, is 'the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services, to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational objectives (Marketing News, 1985). Under this definition, marketing is charged with creating exchanges and satisfying needs (whether individual or organisational). Such exchanges are invariably founded on communicating with target audiences. A function which again is managerially oriented and requires analysis, planning, implementation, and control. Recently, there is a growing strong resistance by public relations academics as to marketing playing a significant role in public relations, and especially the recent move toward the latest conflation of terms, if not techniques, known as 'marketing public relations'. Such resistance has been potentially inflamed and fanned by the 'traditional marketing view' of what public relations is or should be (see Kitchen and Moss, 1995).

Marketing focuses on the need to create exchanges with customers and consumers and, it borrows or uses PR tools for usage at the marketing level. Public relations have a wider

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brief to create and maintain mutually beneficial relations with publics who could impact on business success. To do this PR adopts and uses a number of diverse tools. Few would argue

with the view that PR is growing in importance in large organisations - but it is growing in two related, interactive, and synergistic dimensions for both publics and audiences (See Table 1).

**Table1.** *Difference between PR and Marketing*

<b>Marketing</b>	<b>Public Relations</b>
Marketing promotes the transfer of goods and services from the producer and provider to the consumer.	Public relations help an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other.
Marketing's immediate goal is sales.	Public relations' immediate goal is mutual understanding or positioning of the organisation with its publics.
Marketing's implicit goal is profit.	Public relations' implicit goal is positive perceptions and predispositions.
Marketing's measure of success is the number of sales and/or the revenue it generates.	Public relations' measure of success is expressed a public opinion or other evidence of public support.

**Source:** *Subramani, Ashok, & Anish, 2013; Satawedin, 2005*

On the other hand, when we look deep into the definition of public relations it could also be under the communication department or section. For example, public relations is defined as a communication method used by businesses to convey a positive image to a target audience and the general public. Public relations methods can include press releases, community involvement and speaking at public forums on issues important to a target audience. Small companies with small advertising budgets can use public relations as an inexpensive medium to establish the company name and communicate a brand image. Successful public relations programs highlight company accomplishments and positive contributions to the community. The definition above shows that public relations are communication method adopted by business firms to convey a positive image to the target audience and the general public.



**Figure2.** *Corporate image*

<https://www.westpac.com.au/corporate-banking/>

Additionally, Kitchen and Moss (2016) remarked that image is drawn from the way an organisation projects itself toward its various publics. In other words, the image is what people think about the organisation based on the impact of its messages. The image is based on both word and deed - on the verbal, visual, and behavioural messages, both planned and unplanned, that come from an organisation and leave an impression (See figure 3).

### IMAGE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The general notion of image is what a person or an organisation appears to be, which is sometimes very different from who/what they actually are in private. As such, a person who is liked or approved of by the public is said to have a good image. Someone who is disliked or disapproved of is said to have a bad image. This notion is not far from what public relations image mean. According to Heartfield (2004), the image is a more general and short-term evaluation of an organisation's messages. A corporate identity or corporate image is the manner which a corporation, firm or business presents themselves to the public (Knapp, 2001), see Figure 3.



**Figure3.** *Image-making*

A good PR and image making is found at SME website as follows:

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Since SME's inception, we have strived to advance and promote the field of manufacturing and the individuals who make it their life's work. From inquisitive high school students to seasoned professionals, SME has networked, educated and empowered the workforce that has created the world in which we live. In 2016, we are proud to extend these opportunities to corporate members. SME Corporate Membership connects companies to thousands of professionals who are committed to cutting-edge technology within all disciplines of manufacturing, including SME's Technical Communities representing 3D/additive manufacturing, robotics, advanced materials, industrial lasers and more (<http://www.sme.org/corporate-membership/>).

Another notable image-making and public relations strategy is demonstrated on MTN logo (See figure 4)



**Figure4.** MTN Image making:

<http://sesema.com/my-product/mtn/>

However, Bartlett et al. (2007) argue that because not all public receives the same messages or process them the same way, the image can be inconsistent and can vary from one public to another or from one time to another. Whereas reputation is considered interactive and closely associated with public relations, the image sometimes is linked more with advertising and the production/presentation of messages directed in support of a branding effort toward a public or market segment. Therefore in understanding image of an organisation, reputation is the key. Cutlip, et al (2006) view reputation management as the complex and continuing process of how an organisation seeks to influence the way its public's view and understand the organisation. According to Johnston (2007), reputation management begins with tracking and identifying what others say and feel about an organisation. It then focuses on both building and maintaining a desired reputation with key publics. In critical times, reputation management can be part of crisis communication, with the organisation attempting

to recover from a negative environment. Reputation lags behind an organisation's conscious attempt to affect the way people perceive it.

### Benefits of Corporate Image-making

- Stimulating sales
- Establishing company goodwill
- Creating an identity for employees
- Influencing investors and financial institutions
- Promoting favourable relationship with community, government and opinion leaders.
- Achieving a competitive position

### CONCLUSION

Commonly known across the marketing world are the "four Ps" of marketing, or the marketing mix. They consist of products (or services), the price of those products, promotion, and place (distribution). While advertising has a very clear place in the promotion part of the marketing mix, the role of public relations can be more difficult to pin down. As such, advertising is often "in your face" and easy to identify, public relations plays a more subtle, but no less important, role in the marketing plan of organizations.

However, this study suggests that although P.R elements are found in Marketing, P.R has gone beyond such assumption and has taken its place as a section or department in an organisation. This has prompted a lot of scholars to attribute public relations under the department of communication instead of the department of marketing. However, no matter the categorisation of PR its complementary role in achieving marketing objectives can never be overemphasised. Thus PR and Marketing are not adversaries within organisations, but corporate allies (Kotler 1989), because the image of an organisation impacts on its marketing (Friend, 1993) and this image - developed, sustained, and communicated by varied corporate PR tools, impacts necessarily on marketing. But equally, the firm's brands, products, services, pricing, distribution, and promotional techniques deployed has an impact on the corporate image. While both PR and Marketing are necessary for today's large multi-faceted organisations, Marketing is still charged with the responsibility to create exchanges.

In addition, research has shown that almost all large organizations either have a public relations



department or outsource their public relations needs to a company. Public relations are seen as a vital part of maintaining the organization's image and of communicating its message to its customers, investors and the general public. A positive perception of a company or non-profit can increase its sales and improve its bottom line. The functions and key tasks of a public relations specialist can be varied.

On the other hand, it should likewise be noted that an organisation image is everything. For example, there are many small businesses that develop a great business idea; do the research into their target markets, but then fall down when it comes to their image. If your business is less formal and more "fun", then you should probably be a little more creative. Use brightly coloured paper stock, or try a foil stamp to add some excitement. Building an image takes time and careful planning. If you know who your audience is, and what they want from you, you are ahead of the game. The next step – defining what your image should be – involves taking a good look at your business, and deciding how it would best fit in the marketplace. The final step – establishing your image – is an on-going process. Remember that any time you distribute printed materials, appear and speak in public, or produce any visual aids or events; you are helping to protect and maintain the image you desire.

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