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The Challenge in Solving a Public Relations Problem Through Linear Thinking

A Reflection and Case Analysis on Contemporary Public Relations

USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism
PR 508: Public Relations and Advertising Fundamentals and Strategy
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No. 1 /Sep 5, 2024

As I reflect on this introduction to strategy in Public Relations and Advertising, I cannot shake the memories of my time working for Hilton as a Sales and Marketing Manager at their Hampton Inn brand. As onsite employees, our Director of Sales and Marketing and I had to run all aspects of “sales and marketing” in whatever capacity that entailed; mind you, there was no clear role assignment or segmentation that made the job roles clearer and easy to divide between our department. This is very reminiscent of what is addressed in *Introduction to Contemporary Public Relations*. It portrays that often, “employers and clients define public relations narrowly or incorrectly based on the various goals and tasks they assign to [a job or role],” in my case, “sales and marketing.” (Broom & Sha, 2021) This is problematic as it becomes difficult to have direction and therefore develop *strategy*¹, a plan, or a set of steps set in place/ designed to meet a particular goal as defined by lecture and in-class discussion (note: this is the definition I will be using when referring to “strategy”).

¹ A plan or well-organized steps designed to meet a communication goal.

My role as a Sales and Marketing Manager, in its most simple form, was to conduct sales and generate revenue for the company. But what happened when we needed to act on tasks and duties that pertained to marketing and, honestly, often, public relations? *Marketing*², as defined by Broom and Sha, is directly linked to an exchange of things of value. It's a "social process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering, and freely exchanging products and services of value with others" (Broom & Sha, 2021). In reality, very little marketing is necessary for a smaller individual hotel since most of the business comes from people simply looking for a bed to sleep for the night and the rest from travel groups—the primary target for the sales team. Sure, there are many complex tactics the hospitality industry uses to increase its market share, but it often comes down to pricing and brand recognition. Only one of those is controlled by the hotel directly; the other is controlled by the corporation. This leaves us with *public relations (PR)*³; "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends" (Broom & Sha, 2021). This is where we start running into trouble. I find that because PR is often clumped into marketing or misunderstood as marketing, it is placed in a box, making it hard to strategize and, therefore, challenging for companies and organizations to identify the value. This is also why smaller businesses or companies with very limited communication departments often don't act on important PR opportunities because there is no direct *return on investment (ROI)*⁴ (Broom & Sha, 2021).

Marketing is more about the exchange and transaction, whereas PR is more opportunistic and relationship-driven. "Organizations cannot 'own' support, trust, commitment, or loyalty"—this is all key to the success of conducting business or sustaining an organization, which is only achievable through strategic public relations (Broom & Sha, 2021).

This brings me to a critical issue we encountered when the hotel sought to improve its reviews to rank as the top hotel in the area. As it may become apparent, this task pertains to relationship building, in particular, the hotel's relationship with its customers who have come and gone and, in many cases, returning customers. It was about gaining support, trust, commitment, and credibility, which does not directly correlate with sales and marketing tactics and goals.

In weekly staff meetings and emails, top management would address the issue we faced with Tripadvisor reviews. This did not always mean poor reviews; it was more of a problem with getting customers to leave reviews, which could help boost the hotel's rankings and credibility. We had an apparent problem and goal but struggled with developing and implementing a plan to get us there. In our limited department view as "sales and marketing," there was little to turn to for solutions. Simple tactics like putting Tripadvisor information on guest keys and public areas or offering small incentives like candy for leaving reviews were the extent of our efforts. These efforts never worked. Simply put, they were inconsistent and disingenuous. We were missing the "human approach," as described by Jenna Guarneri from *Forbes*. This was a PR job, and it

² A social process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering, and freely exchanging products and services of value with others.

³ The management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends.

⁴ A calculation of the monetary value of an investment versus its cost.

disparately needed a strategy. It required “deconstructing the problem in ways that are unique.” (Lukaszewski, 1998) It required challenging “the pattern of assumptions made by the intuitive and *linear thinkers*⁵,” the kinds of people who Lukaszewski describes as managers, bosses, economists—your typical CEO.

In 2024, authenticity ranks high when developing a good PR strategy—a top PR trend (Guarneri, 2023). It is absolutely mandatory for a company or organization to show authenticity if they want to engage in a conversation with their customers, particularly a conversation that will uplift the company or organization. Authenticity is essential in creating trust and credibility with customers (Guarneri, 2023). Of course, it takes much more than a mint and a business card for this to come across; it’s missing the “human approach.” A closer approach to tackling this problem (although not necessarily drawn up to directly translate to positive hotel reviews) came from a tactic developed by the guest-facing youthful employees at the front desk. The agents at the desk came up with the idea of “the guest of the day.” This was a success with guests; the front office would randomly select a loyalty program member and treat them to some goodies and bragging rights by displaying their name at the front desk as the selected guest of the day. This was exactly the kind of human touch and approach the hotel needed to engage in. The only problem here was that we needed to translate all this good energy and guest experience into good reviews (again, this was not the initial intent of the tactic; this was meant to increase loyalty program signups). However, why not kill two birds with one stone? What was desperately missing was social media integration. Day after day, we were making great connections with our guests, but they stopped there. We needed to keep the conversation going and build that trust by engaging in a conversation. Why not turn that short-lived moment with a guest into a mutually beneficial relationship, which could naturally translate to increased good reviews?

In this modern era, social media is essential as it “offers a direct and immediate communication channel, enabling outreach to a broader audience and facilitating real-time engagement and relationship-building.” (Guarneri, 2023) Unfortunately, this did not resonate with a room of linear thinkers with no communications training or experience and who often also lacked *media literacy*⁶ and the understanding of communication trends and tools. Strategy requires “critical thinking: the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form an educated judgment” (Tenderich, 2024)

“Mastery of strategy and critical thinking are prerequisites to navigating truth and intentions in today’s confusing media environment. And for a brand or corporate communicator, a third cousin to strategy and critical thinking is media literacy.”—Tenderich

It was common to be met with questions regarding ROI or concerns about labor hours spent on “side projects.” This sentiment toward essential PR functions, tools, and trends restricted the development of a proper strategy. In our modern global relationship with the media, there is no excuse for any business not to have a social media presence in some capacity. Innovation constantly drives and changes the communications landscape, and it is our responsibility to adapt

⁵ This thinking is typified by a more chronological, more linear approach. Linear thinkers are the people who not only plan with the end in mind, but actually use a structured outline format.

⁶ The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and comprehend media in any form.

and embrace the changes before we are left behind. A perfect example is the growing use of AI, a massive trend in public relations and mass media (Guarneri, 2023). This, in turn, is directly linked to another trend described by Guarneri in her article—the necessity to keep upskilling and what ultimately became the number one reason I decided to pursue my master’s degree. There is much talk going on about AI taking over jobs. Unfortunately, this will be the case in some capacity in all aspects of various industries, but we can’t just sit back and let things happen; it is our responsibility to learn how to use this new tool and make it work for us and embrace progress.

Closely linked, data is becoming increasingly important and can offer helpful insight and guidance for all kinds of communication strategies. In reviewing the 2024 Global Comms Report by PRWeek and Cision, we again see how PR strategy is vital in reaching critical stakeholders. Further, the report backs with tangible data, all the previously explored trends in PR, such as AI, social media, and how authenticity is used in public relations to build trust and credibility (Jones, 2024).

All in all, in my experience with this communication dilemma in my time working for this Hilton brand, I take away that it depended on developing strategic public relations, which meant first identifying it as such and then building the foundations to develop a strategy. This would only work by committing to developing an authentic relationship with hotel guests, implementing modern tools and trends, and stopping the perpetuation of linear thinking, which turned this PR problem into a marketing one with unrealistic assumptions and misplaced ROI goals.

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