

Public Relations - What It Really Is

A major role of Economic Developers



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This monograph has been written by John Grimshaw, President and Chief Executive Officer of Ontario Editorial Bureau, who has had more than 30 years' experience in the public relations field. Ontario Editorial Bureau, with offices in Toronto and St. Catharines, has a well-qualified staff of consultants and support personnel to efficiently serve all segments of business, industry, government services, trade and professional organizations and other related areas of commerce and enterprise. The Bureau, a founding member of the Inside Canada Public Relations Group, was established in 1946 and is one of the largest consulting firms in Canada.

Basically, public relations is a social science - that of communicating with all or specific segments of the public in order to achieve understanding and acceptance.

The function of public relations is to explain the policies and activities of the enterprise to these various public sectors. Indeed, it must do more; it must project an image of that enterprise through effective communication. It must explain management's responsibility to its customers, employees, shareholders, the community where it is located, and government.

Business and industry today must recognize and assume responsibilities far greater than the manufacturing and marketing of goods and services.

Public opinion has, in recent years, become an extremely potent factor in business. What the public thinks is important. More and more companies are recognizing the impact of public opinion upon their success in the marketplace. That success is being influenced by the actions of employees, shareholders, suppliers, customers, government and the public at large.

The first prerequisites are sound policies and good performance. Effective marketing, promotion, and basic communication demands a good product or service.

Shareholders should feel the company is a good investment, the employees should feel it is a good place to work, the suppliers and customers should feel it is a good company with which to do business, the community should look upon it as a good corporate citizen, and government should be sympathetic to its problems.

Without effective public relations, the enterprise may suffer from public disapproval, loss of sales, credit difficulties, labour disputes and restrictive legislation. Today, with many groups trying to influence public opinion the public doesn't always have an opportunity to sit back and evaluate performance. What the public thinks is based upon what it knows, and this is generally predicated on what it is told and what it experiences at first hand.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of public relations to ensure that good performance is communicated to the various publics intelligently, truthfully and continuously.

Public relations is a practical and effective means of developing public awareness and support which are essential to the success and profitability of the enterprise. Thus, public relations is recognized as an integral part of modern management and business practices.

Increasing public interest and participation in corporate and community affairs in virtually every field have added to the role of public relations. Indeed, the term "public relations" may no longer suffice to describe the full range of its scope.

Public relations plays an effective role in this sensitive communications era in which John Q. Public becomes a willing or unwilling participant in "people power", and corporate decision-making is being increasingly influenced by public relations and communications specialists.

The competent PR practitioner can serve management efficiently on the same basis as the lawyer who provides legal counsel, or the accountant who provides financial services. However, as in other professions, this requires a two-way street of mutual trust.

Many factors should be considered when a company, institution or association is selecting its public relations consultants. Foremost is the reputation and integrity of the counselling firm itself. Good public relations must be honestly and sincerely created and maintained. A client will be well served only when his consultants are above reproach and are respected by the media and agencies with which he must deal.

Other qualities to be found in the successful public relations firm are:

- knowledge - of the media, social customs, local prejudices, economics, and the language or languages of the local population.
- experience - wisdom or skill in this field is most often the result of many years of service in its practise.
- skill - in all of the communications arts, writing; editing, illustrating, radio, television, and public speaking.
- understanding - of people and their motives, of economics and its influences, of the purposes of a business or institution and its legitimate goals.
- services - a complete range of public relations services on a national and regional basis, and internationally when appropriate.

A number of public relations firms possess some of these qualities; very few have them all.