

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY OF PR: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Many people are of the opinion that public relations has an important role in society, in management and in organisations. Cutlip and Center (1971), two well known scholars in public relations, said that public relations was a management concept and as a staff function has grown over the past few decades due to several reasons. Among the reasons they listed were:

1. The increasing complexity of modern society
2. Increased power of public opinion
3. Need to gain co-operation and support from other groups and organisations, for example, the unions, pressure groups, and religious groups, and finally,
4. The world of interdependence.

The two scholars have given broad and general reasons for the growth of public relations. These are reasons that one can give for the development of public relations in any country. It is appropriate for us to know and to understand, among other factors, the history of public relations in a given country so as to enable us to recognise the prevailing conditions and also to predict the future of public relations for a particular country.

Beginning of public relations

The beginning of public relations has been both a plus and a minus factor for the field. When Scott M. Cutlip and other scholars (Bernays, 1989; Harlow, 1981) related the development of public relations with the American Revolution, they said that public relations techniques were used extensively to ferry liberal ideas among dis-revolutioners. Given this point, public relations were accepted as a positive factor. The field was again seen as a positive factor when it was connected with fund raising and with efforts of the United States to use public relation techniques during the First and Second World Wars.

Public relations was a negative factor when it was associated with muckraking, with circus publicity, with Broadway shows and with events of manipulation. Nevertheless the field began to take the shape as an academic discipline when courses were offered in several universities. Edward Bernays was among the first practitioners to teach a course in public relations in a New York university. He was also reputed to have written the first book on public relations entitled “Crystallising Public Opinion” published in 1923. When eventually public relations was accepted as a integral subject in communication, the field evolved from the level of mere technician to a professional orientation, but nevertheless like other communication disciplines public

relations was subjected to critical comments from other academicians as to its academic worth and standing.

But that is public relations in the United States of America. This understanding on its development is important because the United States contributed significantly to the growth and development of the practice. Although the growth of public relations in and from the United States was dominant, yet one should not remain oblivious to particular development of the field in other countries which were not in the same equation as they were in the United States. The situations in United Kingdom and in Malaysia, for examples, were different from that in the United States.

In the United Kingdom, the growth of public relations did not have the negative association with broad-show publicity or circus shows. The growth was more associated with information. During the First World War or at that period of time, information was termed as propaganda. During First and Second World War, the British used public relation as a form of propaganda to stop enemy advances and also to promote national war strategies. In Autumn 1914 a War Propaganda Bureau was established in London to prepare materials for dissemination abroad specifically to opinion leaders in neutral countries (Ward, 1989). As you look at correspondence during the early period, you will have noticed that information, public relations and propaganda were spoken in the same breadth. Nevertheless, public relations began slowly to differentiate itself from propaganda and information after the Second World War, when the British Colonial Office found it prudent to establish public relations offices in the colonies as it found information alone insufficient to meet its objectives. By that time the term “propaganda” acquired a negative connotation associated as it were with lies and falsehoods.

The early development of public relations in Malaysia was heavily influenced by British public relations. The early activities of the Information department under Peet and then by the Department of Information and Publicity under Dr. Victor Purcell, before the fall of Malaya to the Japanese forces, were replicate of British ideas formed with the single objective of waging propaganda war against the Germans and the Japanese. Sabah and Sarawak also had its own information unit but it did not fully develop until after the Second World War.

When the Malaya Union was established in April 1946, a Department of Public Relations was formed with Mubin Sheppard appointed as its first Director of Public Relations. This was in line with the decision made in the Colonial Office in London that colonies should have public relations departments and it was timely enough that in April 1946, that such an outfit was set up in Malaysia.

The public relations in Malaysia were not associated with gross circus publicity or broad-way shows as was the case in the United States. There was no such activity in Malaysia for such public relation was affiliated more with information. With the setting up of departments of information before the Second World War, and after the Second World War, during the Emergency, preparing Malaysians to accept Merdeka, persuading the people in Sabah and Sarawak to accept the concept of Malaysia, the period of Confrontation, and events thereafter.

If a survey was conducted on the area and focused on the setting of the Institute of Public Relations in British and in Malaysia, one would see that the founding members were personnel from the government sector; mainly those with the local authorities in Britain (Rogers, 1973) and with the Department of Information in Malaya. The majority of those who attended the Inaugural General Meeting in 1962 in Kuala Lumpur were from the Private sector. In Malaysia and the United Kingdom, early public relations was information and government related.

The government sector fully recognises the value of public relations and information activities as a strategy to win hearts and minds of the people. This was evident from the day the Department of Public Relations was formed in April 1946, to the establishment of the Information Services in Malaya, in Sabah and Sarawak and to the creation of present day Ministry of Information.

When the May 13 1969 incident occurred, the government again realised that one of the reasons for the ugly incident was due to the lack of information. The people did not fully understand the policies and actions of the government, and the government did not obtain sufficient feedback to understand how the people felt towards these policies and actions. One of the recommendations made by Tun Abdul Razak was the establishment of public relations officers and press liaison officers in the ministries, government departments and semi-government departments. Arising from this sense of direction to provide adequate information to the people, public relations officers were appointed in every ministry, government department or in semi-government departments.

The private sector was slightly behind in adopting public relations to meet its objective. It did not seem initially to value public relations. Among the reasons for this state of affairs in the early days was that public opinion was not vocal, there were no visible pressure groups and government laws and regulations governing business were not really creeping on them. But things have changed a lot. There is a vocal public opinion as more people are educated and know their rights, there are more pressure groups formed in the country to champion various issues that affect almost everybody. Companies also realise that, as people become more vocal and pressure groups can exert influence on the government and politicians, there will be more laws and regulations governing the conduct of business. With this in mind, many firms and business units, although one would say that in some outfits, these units function more as press agents more than anything else.

Looking at the development of public relations in the country, one could see the spread of public relations, beginning from the government sector and slowly spreading to the private sector. The corresponding growth in terms of the quality of public relations practitioners is also evident. There are more qualified people in public relations than before. In a study that was conducted in 1977 the majority of public relations practitioners had only form five qualifications, but another study conducted in 1992 found that that the majority were diploma and degree holders. There is therefore both a qualitative and quantitative change in public relations, both in the practice and among those practising it. This is a welcome change.

Many strides have also been achieved by the public relations consultancies since the early establishment of Eric White Associates in 1965. Now there are more than 40

consultancies in the country including at least two in Sarawak, and several that are operated, owned and managed by Malaysians.

It would be relevant to bring to attention that public relations programme is also available at the local universities, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Public relations continue to be a popular course sought by students in these universities at the undergraduate level. Three professors in closely affiliated with public relations. If in 1971 IPRM was struggling to launch its certificate programme, now there are four private colleges that have been given the right to conduct courses for IPRM.

What public relations does?

At the organisational level, public relation is required to communicate the organisation to the relevant publics, and to obtain feedback from the publics to the organisation. It therefore strengthens the organisation's support with the publics as much it is used to assist the organisation to achieve its objectives. This is fundamental because the organisation must be used as a useful resource of the organisation to achieve its objectives.

The public relations are also used as a strategy to gauge public mood and values over time and these as far as they affect the organisation. It therefore keeps the organisation alert to the shifting public opinion over issues that affect the organisation.

Management has also its expectations from public relations. For this one must know what management says of their expectations of public relations. One CEO (Arnold, 1989) was said to expect the following:

1. That the practitioner communicates the vision of the company and the CEO to the internal and the external publics;
2. Establish a corporate identity and reputation for the organisation; an identity and reputation that will enhance the standing of the organisation in the immediate community, in the country and among the competitors.
3. Establish core values for the internal publics. The core values will mean maintaining loyalty to the company, rapport among office colleagues, dedication to the ideas and ideals of the company.
4. Anticipating and managing crisis. The public relations unit must have the expertise to gauge public feeling within and outside the organisation on issues that are wide-ranging but very relevant to the existence of the organisation. In the event that if a crisis were to occur, the public relations must be able to advise management on ways of handling the crisis.

In short, the chief executive officer is searching for strategic communication thinkers and planners just as much as the CEO is in search of strategies for finance, production, distribution and marketing. The CEO requires a public relations personnel

who is able to devise a communication strategy that is linked to corporate objectives and business goals and not to think of communication for the sake of communication (Arnold, 1989).

The problem is that such quality expected of public relations personnel by a very demanding CEO is very scarce indeed. But the demands of the CEO in normal companies are there. These demands are common. We have therefore a problem of supply meeting demand, or to be more precise, there is a short supply of talented and qualified public relations personnel but a large demand for them. This will be one of the challenges that will face public relations.

Challenges

Edward Bernays (1989: 13-17) says the practitioners of the future will be a generalist and a specialist, oriented to society as a whole, and one special segment of it. Educational training will prepare for the broad functions of the profession.

The challenges are many, not only for public relations but for other professions as they gear themselves up for the next century. The changes will be tremendous. One must therefore be aware of the trends in society and be able to match them.

What do these mean for the development of public relations?

Newsom, Scott and Turk (1993) provided several trends, among them:

Growth of public relations role. Traditional rules of public relations will be expanded to include issue management, public affairs, community relations, shareholder relations, corporate contributions/fund raising, and employee communication. There will be specialist among public relations practitioners as they continue to function within a very specialised domain.

Increased organisation demands for accountability: this means that management would want public relations to be accountable. Use of research will be an asset. Such accountability means also that the public relations will have to match their expertise with other work professionals where accountability has always been part and parcel of their work performance. The public relations practitioner of the (present, and increasingly so of the) future will be educated and has knowledge of evaluation and research techniques to show empirical support of accountability.

Growing governmental use of public relation: there will be greater use of public relations among government agencies. Democratic, military or dictatorial government will use public relations has been used by the Eastern European governments. Government will rely on the use of technology to get its message across to the people yet realising at the same time its limitations to monopolise alternative access to information. The availability of sophisticated technology will make quick, accurate and relevant information necessary. Public relations practitioners will therefore be required to master the technologies of information.

Increased diversity of public relations publics. The demographic profiles of audience will and have changed and communicating with the audience will be more diversified and specialised. The demographic profiles will be added with the knowledge of psychographics to know the relevance of each message.

Heightened need for good internal communication: concern with internal publics will increase in the future as organisations realise that the first publics to reach are the internal publics. Organisations will continue to grow in size and complexity which therefore require more and timely communication with the internal publics. There are at least two government departments in Malaysia, at present, that are using videos to go air twice a day to bring about information to their employees.

Increased environmental concerns: the conflicting demands of jobs, conservation, security and preservation will also demand public relations attention. As the population has a bigger middle class segment the concern over health and clean air will impose demand on government agencies and the private sector to respond to such concerns. This concern with the environment will continue to grow in the future as people began to realise its importance.

In sum one can visualise what public relation development in the future will be:

1. History has indicated that the higher the level of industrial development, the higher will be the development of public relation practitioners than the other less industrialised countries. As Malaysia plans for more industries in line with its ambition to be an industrialised nation by the year 2020, the country will have more public relations practitioners. If one compares the number of public relations practitioners immediately before and after Merdeka with the number at present, there are more public relations practitioners and among the reasons for this development is the rise in the number of industries in the country since independence.
2. More job opportunities for public relations practitioners will necessary invite a response from universities and other training institutions to produce students with the appropriate qualifications. It means that there will be more public relations graduates produced by institutions of higher learning both locally and outside the country. The type of public relations functions will be increasingly professional. The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia is taking steps of moving public relations toward a chartered status meaning that a person has to have the necessary paper qualifications prior to commencement of job.

More will also mean better. In a survey conducted in 1992, it was found that the level of education among public relations practitioners were higher than the public relations practitioners that studied 13 years before. In the year 2020 it is expected that there will be a higher level of qualified public relations practitioners than the situation in 1994.

3. As we have industries that are specialised, public relations practitioners will need to have specialised knowledge in given area to enable them to offer expert advice. If this is not possible, then specialisation will take place when they commence job function. We will have public relations specialists in sports, in investor relations, in mergers and take-overs. At one time when we refer to a public relations specialist we mean a specialist in media relations, but today a specialist covers other broad fields in public relations.
4. At present Malaysia has multi-national companies that generally have their headquarters outside the country such as in New York, London, Paris, or in Tokyo. When Malaysia industrialises and as more products are exported, more Malaysian companies will be established in other countries. This will entail Malaysian companies engaging public relations from multi-national companies. Alternatively these Malaysian companies will engage public relations companies to conduct their public relations activities. For example today we have multi-national from Britain established in Malaysia. They engage public relations consultants that have their headquarters in London but has a branch in Kuala Lumpur. One example that I can give now is Asia PR that has its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, but has a branch in Singapore and also conducts public relations activities in Cambodia.

Conclusion



We began by acknowledging the importance of public relations to society and to the organisation. We acknowledge that the government and the private sectors welcome the function of public relations in meeting the needs of society and the organisation. We also note that there has been both a qualitative and quantitative change in public relations over the past decade. The trend in the development of the country is fast, and like other professions, public relations must be able to adapt to these challenges, but public relations, true to its calling, must be able to identify, shape and articulate these challenges to management. The demands of the next few decades that will indeed be challenging and demanding for public relations but these are changes that public relations can face.