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Introduction to Public Relations Campaigns

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AIMS OF THIS CHAPTER

- To define a public relations campaign
- To demonstrate the key sections of a campaign and how it is developed through a hypothetical case study

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INTRODUCTION

As noted in the Preface, the successful design and implementation of public relations campaigns require creativity, flexibility and strong organisational skills. It is the design aspect of the public relations campaign that we will examine in this chapter.

Just as there are many definitions for the term 'public relations', it is important at the outset to make clear in our mind what a 'campaign' is. Harrison (2011, p. 324) distinguishes the different types of public relations activities and notes that a campaign is:

a planned set of communication activities, each with a specific defined purpose, continued over a set period of time and intended to meet communication goals and objectives relating to a nominated issue: for example, a campaign to increase industrial safety.

While situations and circumstances will vary from campaign to campaign, as you will read in later case studies, there are some essential elements common to all public relations campaign planning.

The Golden Target awards from the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) recognise campaigns conducted by public, corporate and consultancy practitioners. The criteria for these awards outline the common elements necessary in planning a successful campaign. These criteria are broadly employed in the case study below.

AN APPROACH TO CAMPAIGN PLANNING

The following is a hypothetical example of the steps involved in designing, planning and implementing a public relations campaign. It should be noted that this particular campaign would fall into the marketing communications area within the arts industry.

Renewing a reputation

Jenny Ross has been employed by the local council as the Public Relations Manager for the Council Performing Arts Centre (CPAC). Also new to CPAC is the Artistic Director, Stefan Orlowski. Stefan has dropped into Jenny's office to talk about the first CPAC production for the new performing year.

'Look Jenny, the previous season was a dismal failure. The plays were unpopular and poorly produced. CPAC's reputation is at rock bottom,' Stefan says.

Jenny nods in agreement. 'The subscriber base of 2500 is holding, but we're going to need a real hit to hang on to them this season, Stefan.'

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‘I know and I’ve got a real winner. You know, at my previous theatre in New York, we staged *Freedom*.’

‘I remember reading about it,’ said Jenny. ‘The critics were in raptures and the press labelled it as the most controversial play of the decade.’

‘It is,’ replied Stefan. ‘I took it on a tour of Europe late last year and we had the same success. I’ve managed to secure the rights. So, the Australian premiere will be here at CPAC—it’s our opportunity to restore CPAC’s reputation, Jenny. Can you draft a comprehensive public relations campaign to fill the house for our opening night?’

Constructing a plan for a campaign

Jenny will need to identify the challenges and problems CPAC faces in this situation. To assist her in developing the campaign, Jenny is using a plan that covers the major elements of public relations strategic campaign planning. While different terms may be used or interchanged with the ones here, the following are the key steps in public relations campaign planning:

- 1 forming problem statements
- 2 research
- 3 identifying target publics
- 4 setting goals and objectives
- 5 defining strategy and tactics
- 6 evaluation.

In the rest of this case study about CPAC, we lay out the steps a practitioner may go through in planning a campaign. Included in this plan are rationales for each step undertaken by the practitioner. The other case studies in this book provide further examples of campaign planning and will enlarge your understanding of this most important public relations activity.

1 Problem statements

Problem (or opportunity) statements identify a target public, and state both the problem and the reason for the problem. Jenny must state *communication* problems and opportunities that can be solved using public relations tactics, for example:

- Patrons view CPAC as likely to produce disappointing plays because they have either attended or heard about one or more of the past year’s poor productions.
- Few patrons plan to attend the new production, because they believe that it is likely to be a disappointment.

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Problems or opportunities must be cast in terms of either the *thoughts* or the *actions* of *target publics*. Defining the problem as a production design fault, for example, would not be relevant to a public relations practitioner (unless they were involved in cross-functional management problem-solving). This would be a more appropriate problem for an engineering manager.

The guiding principle is that Jenny cannot write a problem/opportunity statement without knowing who the target publics are, and what they think or feel, or what they may do. It is also useful to prioritise the problems.

2 Research

Jenny must now contemplate the research she needs to undertake to plan the campaign. She would most likely divide her pre-campaign research into 'secondary' and 'primary'.

In this instance, Jenny has started with desk (or secondary) research. She will undertake an analysis of organisational materials, library research, research of online databases, the internet and so forth. This research may provide her with information on all aspects of the CPAC campaign, plus any relevant economic, social or regulatory issues, and current information regarding target publics.

Jenny has also broadly examined existing sources relating to contemporary theatre, the previous reviews of *Freedom* and media reaction to its debut. Existing CPAC files allow her to analyse subscriber demographics, psychographics and attitudes.

Now Jenny wants to gather primary data. She interviews Stefan to get more information on his experience of staging *Freedom* overseas. She also considers undertaking some qualitative research using focus groups to:

- 1 define target publics
- 2 unearth information to help develop a range of questions for subsequent formal quantitative questionnaire construction
- 3 test effectiveness of planned key messages.

Jenny also decides to undertake primary quantitative research that would involve a method of random sampling (for example random telephone sampling) to help establish a baseline of the subscribers' attitudes/behaviours regarding the subject of her plan.

This baseline allows Jenny to undertake evaluative research. At evaluation points during—and particularly after—the campaign, the baseline can be measured against changes in target publics' opinions or behaviours. It will help her measure the success or otherwise of her campaign.

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3 Target publics

The target publics are those groups or individuals with whom Jenny must communicate to overcome the problems faced by CPAC:

- existing subscribers
- potential subscribers
- theatre reviewers
- local media.

Jenny's key target public are the existing subscribers. Her secondary research, from existing files, has told her that the subscribers are males and females, predominantly aged eighteen to thirty, who reside in the inner-city area. Most are university students or workers in their first jobs, one to three years out of university.

Jenny's primary research focus groups, based on the above subscriber profile, revealed the following:

- Subscribers respond to the 'latest thing'—such as restaurants, cafés and bars that have a reputation for being fashionable—then abandon them when the next latest thing comes along. They are beginning to believe that, following the recent run of disappointing plays, CPAC 'has had its day'.
- CPAC's subscribers are social liberals, sympathetic to Indigenous, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual) and environmental issues. They see themselves as inner-city sophisticates, tuned in to international trends in music, art and fashion.

4 Goals and objectives

Goals are generalised ends that can provide a framework for decision-making. Objectives are derived from goals, but they are specific and measurable. A goal is often the flip side of a problem or opportunity, because the purpose of most goals is to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity.

A goal is often relatively abstract and may be difficult to quantify—for example, 'We want to improve our reputation.' An objective, on the other hand, is something that can be documented—it is observable. For example, a broadly stated objective could be: 'We need to get 20 per cent more people into our theatre.'

A set of goals is achieved only by achieving a subset of interrelated objectives. An objective is a strategic step along the way towards achieving a desired goal.

Most often, public relations objectives describe ways to implement various components of the overall campaign. For example, a goal might be to increase public

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awareness, and a related set of objectives might be to prepare and distribute media releases, hold a media conference and contact community opinion leaders.

Good objectives should:

- solve the problems or exploit the opportunities defined
- be consistent with the broader goals and objectives of the organisation
- be achievable with chosen public relations tactical devices
- be specific and measurable
- be governed by a deadline
- specify the means by which they will be measured.

So, given the two problems facing CPAC, Jenny's objectives will be something like the following:

- 1 To convince 75 per cent of the 2500 subscribers that the new play is distinct from—and better than—the past year's disappointing productions, and to have done so a week before *Freedom* opens; the achievement of this objective will be measured by a random sample telephone survey undertaken seven days before the play opens.
- 2 To convince 15 per cent of the subscribers to attend opening night and a further 50 per cent to attend the balance of performances over the scheduled two-week run of the play (the achievement dates will obviously line up with the performance dates of the play); the achievement of this objective will be measured by monitoring ticket sales.

Note how the objectives flow out of the problems on a one-for-one basis and are focused on the target public. Also note that Jenny must make a reasoned guess at what percentage of the target public she will, in practical terms, be able to convince.

5 Strategy and tactics

Given (1) the problems identified at CPAC, (2) the objectives Jenny is pursuing based on these problems, and (3) the facts she has uncovered about her key target public, she must now develop an argument to win that target public over. A persuasive strategy is the means by which she will convince the subscribers to think or do what the campaign requires.

Jenny's strategy is to change the existing attitudes of the CPAC subscribers. She must demonstrate to patrons that attending the play is in their self-interest because it is a 'must' for those who want to be up to date with the latest international theatre trends. She must also demonstrate that it is in their interest to support CPAC, so she will appeal to their need to be seen to belong to the social group with whom they identify (young sophisticates).

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To determine the best tactics to use, Jenny should ask the following questions:

- 1 Is the medium selected the best available to deliver the key messages to my target public, or would an alternative be more effective?
- 2 What back-up tactical devices would be effective to repeat and/or reinforce my key messages?

In this particular scenario, a direct mail letter is just one of many possible tactics for delivering messages. The question is: Is this the most effective tactical device at Jenny's disposal?

Let us suppose that, in the course of the focus group research, Jenny recalls that this target public does not want to read lots of information and would prefer communications to have an air of sophistication. She might therefore decide to send stylised postcards, rather than letters.

She might also feel that a spread of tactics would be better than relying on the postcard alone. So, as back-up tactics she could decide to use news releases and advertisements targeting the media that are popular with the target public. This means, for example, quality newspapers, arts programs on radio and television, and perhaps news and current affairs magazines.

6 Evaluation

Although Jenny will have already provided deadlines and identified means of measurement for objectives, this segment allows Jenny to expand on the rationale for the selected measurement.

She may need to consider the relative merits of quantitative as opposed to qualitative surveying. Remember, in this scenario one of the objectives called for random sample telephone surveying (quantitative) for evaluation. While sufficient time needs to be allowed to construct quantitative surveys, they have the advantage of providing—via a relatively small sample—an accurate indication (within the set margin for error) of the views of a large population.

As discussed earlier, another benefit of this approach is the ability to compare results against the baseline of target public attitudes obtained at the research stage. Jenny will be able to see what level of impact her campaign had on the total population of subscribers. Note that, over the course of a lengthy campaign, a number of quantitative 'tracking surveys' may be used to enable the public relations practitioner to alter the frequency or distribution of tactics.

Then again, sometimes qualitative surveying may be more appropriate where an indicative snapshot of attitudes is required (for example intercept surveying) or where

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in-depth information on the motivations of behaviour is required (for example focus groups).

Jenny will also remember that the second objective called for actual ticket sales to be used for evaluation. Care needs to be taken with this type of measure if it is used in isolation. While it does provide a true bottom line of success or failure, unless it is used in conjunction with survey methods it will not provide data as to *why* the result is what it is.

Note that many of the methods described above are further explained in Chapter 4. It will be worthwhile to reread this case study when you have familiarised yourself with the types of research that can be employed in pre-campaign research and campaign evaluation.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CAMPAIGNS

Grunig wrote in 1992 (p. 80) that ‘although scholars of public relations agree that ethics should be a priority when teaching and practising, the literature of our field (as evidenced, largely, in the body of knowledge) reflects little familiarity with ethical theory’. In subsequent years, many academics and practitioners have sought to emphasise, through texts and scholarly publishing, the ethical dilemmas that public relations practitioners often face. How can they reach a morally right course of action? One suggestion for ethical public relations decision-making is by ‘implementing and maintaining inter-organisational communication systems which question, discuss and validate these and other claims’ (Pearson 1988, cited in Grunig 1992, p. 81).

Many moral values originate from personal and religious beliefs, and provide some basis for determining appropriate behaviours towards others in professional practice. Harrison notes that, ‘Every profession has a moral purpose. Medicine has health. Law has justice. Public relations has harmony—social harmony. Public relations professionals keep information flowing among their employers and clients and stakeholders’ (Harrison 2006, p. 187).

Public relations practitioners will also be bound by the ethics of their organisation. An organisation may express its ethical personality through a code of conduct, or state it in its mission and values statement.

Professional associations—such as the PRIA and PRINZ—emphasise, through their codes of ethics, the importance of guiding their members’ behaviours. However, not all public relations practitioners are members of professional associations or work for organisations that have a code of conduct.

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A public relations campaign involves practitioners making decisions that affect key publics for the organisation's or client's betterment. While the practitioner may engage in a campaign that is technically competent, it could also be the case that such a campaign is ethically inappropriate. For public relations to be considered a profession, its individual practitioners must display at all times both technical competence and ethically justifiable behaviour.

How can the public relations practitioner approach the challenge of acting ethically? The law requires every citizen to act in accordance with it, in society generally, in the workplace and in professional relationships. The law is therefore not necessarily a strong basis for acting ethically.

Professional codes of ethics and organisational codes of conducts require public relations practitioners to examine further ethical principles, rules, models and standards that can help guide competent practice. These concepts will assist the practitioner in making ethical judgments and in their moral reasoning.

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