

Public relations officer - civil servant, journalist and editor

Author: Nataša Krsman

A good public relations officer (PR) represents the institution he or she works for, its management and employees. Skilful PR officers are always familiar with the current situation in the institution and are ready to disclose such information rather than keeping it hidden.

Strategies related to public administration communication, transparency in institutions and crisis communication are numerous. However, all these strategies are fundamentally based on direct communication between PR officers and journalists. The key issue here is not whether communication started with a statement, a web page announcement or a media conference; what is crucial is that the general public is predominantly concerned with what is published by the media.

A PR officer who exclusively acts as a civil servant may never achieve successful communication with the media or the public which he or she addresses since the civil service framework is the key source of dissonance in communicating with the media.

PR officers must be aware of the fact that, as all other civil servants, they get paid by the very public they address and that they are in their debt from the first moment they step into the institution. PR officers are responsible for explaining to other civil servants, as well as to heads of institutions, how important the public is for their institution.

Excuses such as that the head of the institution does not allow for certain information to be disclosed are unacceptable-there is always a way to send a message to the public on a current topic.

PR officers are responsible for convincing the decision-maker in the institution that more often than not they themselves, rather than information to be addressed, become news.

Therefore, the role of a PR officer and that of communicating with the public are not incompatible, but they definitely imply certain rules of conduct. Civil service is not a sealed box or a parallel world in which state secrets are hidden. Rather, it is a house with a yard cared for by both its occupants and those on the outside who are trying to get some answers.

PR officers should connect those working in the house and those who in are standing in front of it and observing how the house and all their mutual interests represented by it are managed. The moment these two sides go their separate ways, problems occur. PR officers who cooperate with the public (or different types of public) must know that their statements should protect both sides, and we all know that the truth is the best possible defence.

People charged with communicating with the public must be available around the clock; PR officers must answer phone calls during their lunch breaks, holidays and sometimes from hospital beds. Whether the public will be satisfied simply because you are ready to talk to them even when you do not have the information they are trying to get is up to your counterpart. The spiteful ones will say this is the result of negligence, absence from work or arrogance, while the well-intentioned ones will appreciate it as a sign of readiness to get the job done.

PR officers have to understand ignorance and superficiality of those looking for answers, but also vanity and busy schedules of civil servants responsible for securing information for the public.

The finesse of the relationship between a PR officer and a journalist

It goes without saying that you cope better in situations that are already familiar to you. Former journalist should, therefore, be the best PR officers. However, in practice, former journalists generally do not change their methods when they become PR officers.

A good journalist should be a good PR officer who is familiar with the general public he or she addresses and who respects that very audience.

As it sometimes happens, the heads are perfectly satisfied with their PR officers acting as their body guards or with media advisors who only care about their bosses' photo being shown in prime-time news.

In line with the sound and the only correct journalism practice, information should be requested and provided immediately, but in such a way that it deserves to be published on a front page, as a headline or announcement of a coverage in electronic media.

PR officers who are generally available will be appreciated by journalists who will, in turn, be patient and willing to reach an agreement on certain topics, thus strengthening the relationship of mutual trust. This trust in communication is the very thing that enables cooperation outside strict rules of communicating with the public.

PR officers may teach others on topics closely related to competencies of the institution they work in, but they cannot expect everyone to know everything despite the fact that web pages became treasuries of information, although these are not used as often as they should be.

Those who start their day thinking about what they could write about, what would be exclusive news and what the public is interested in, will perform their tasks smoothly. Such people understand that time cannot be spent on writing formal letters, protocol numbers and requests for information. They will be as fast as those who want to see their information published.

A skilful PR officer can predict the questions he or she will be asked and what the emerging topic is; even if they are not asked about something in particular, good PR officers will disclose information important for their institutions and the media, i.e. the public.

The worst possible choice a PR officer can make is to avoid contact with the media, because this results in an article or coverage that ends in "PR of this institution did not answer any of our calls or submitted answers to any of our questions". Journalists are well aware of how many times very important stories go to waste simply because they received feedback from the PR officer who gave information that overthrew their hypothesis and destroyed arguments stored in their quills and cameras.

PR officers-journalists know in advance why they are being asked certain questions, who is asking them and whether information to be provided are simply what the public is interested in. Even so, they will provide the answers-the correct ones. Sometimes the sentences may be shorter and you can always refer to a law published in the *Official Gazette*, knowing that no one will have time to read and understand all the Articles. However, journalists may always

draw something from answers given by the PR officer, take it out of the context and imply something completely opposite. Neither is fair and it is the question of ethics, but it should be understood that it can be done in this way.

PR officers should have good relations with young journalists in particular. Editors often do not have enough time for them, and these young professionals will appreciate if someone explains how a certain decision was voted for and where it was published. Later on, these young journalists will make good and honest colleagues.

At the same time, journalists should maintain good relationships with PR officers since they might be given more than they ask for: a clarification, new information, proposal to refer to the competent institution, telephone numbers and other contact information.

Likewise, PR officers should appreciate their relationships with journalists because this will enable their information and statements to be released at all times. These journalists also attend the events opened for the media.

However, journalists should not forgive PR officers who ignore them; they should not forget about all the unanswered questions, not even if they receive notebooks, calendars and few pens as a New Years' gift.

Former journalists-editors and now PR officers rarely organise such events and provide small gifts because they believe these degrade both the people and the profession. Still, the hardest part is to achieve balance and even the best of relationships can come down to simple SMS requests for information with a short explanation that they need it as a background, i.e. for the third paragraph. A PR officer may be a journalist's Google, but mutual respect is fundamental to all relationships, even those with the public.

Impact on media editorial policy

A satisfying relationship of PR officers with journalists and a wise choice of topics may also indirectly affect the editorial policy in the media.

This, of course, does not imply any type of pressure on the media, but enables for a right topic to be chosen among numerous daily occurrences, a topic that falls under the scope of the competency of the institution in which a particular PR officer works. This should mean that there is a topic that is of interest to the public and that every editorial staff would publish it.

As a general rule, statements are mainly published on weekends when the topics are scarce. This is when information for which there was no space during the week are published. Likewise, journalists have more time to work on the so-called "slow-speed" topics during weekends and holidays.

Certain topics may drown in day-to-day politics or not be fully covered due to lack of editorial staff, "dead" seasons or running against time. Several telephone calls, however, and a relaxed conversation may easily end up on the front page when everyone involved know what they want.

PR officers are responsible to inform editors in time on the upcoming events, to ensure recording of multiple scenes and relax the atmosphere in meetings when the participants would like to be featured in prime-time but hate to be filmed for more than 20 seconds. PR

officers also have to provide all information before the actual event begins and they have to remain available for additional clarifications afterwards.

Editors should and can protect journalists from arrogant civil servants and they have to be aware that they represent a force, even if it is the seventh one.

At the same time, very experienced journalists and editors must accept the fact that no one is to be blamed for their failure to change the world, let alone PR officers-they should all be on the same side, working for the public.

However, it is not uncommon in practice that one side, the editors, work for the owners of the media, while the other side, PR officers, work for ministers, directors or presidents. Both sides can often be seen working for individual political parties. This is unacceptable, of course, but very evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since politics mingles itself almost with everything, politicians should respect journalism as a profession and all the weaknesses it absorbs from the society and the questionable system of values-even if they are not aware of this, their PR officers should instruct them.

Being a PR officer does not mean simply posing for different newspapers and appear on television. The allure of the profession is to act as a link between the public and decision-making centres and to manage all this information.

PR officers are traffic police working on a crossroad and very often their hands pointing at one direction are crucial for further developments. What is important is to point those hands to the right direction, but it is even more important to accept the hand that is being extended. This is the only thing that enables for information to be used in the best possible way, with public interest in mind, whether written in communication strategies or not.

(The author is a PR officer at Ministry of Finance and Treasury of Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Journalists evaluated the work of PR officers in BiH institutions

The work with the spokespersons of BiH institutions was recently evaluated by members of the informal group "Journalists' Union", which counts around 250 journalists from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Among the PR officers who are most difficult to cooperate with, most journalists have identified those who work in the Presidency of BiH, the Parliament of Federation BiH and the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of BiH.

Spokesmen for the Prosecutor's Office of BiH and the Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo (KCUS), as well as media advisers for members of the Presidency of BiH, also received a negative assessment.

On the other hand, according to the general assessment, the spokespersons of the prosecutor's offices of Tuzla, Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons, Indirect Taxation Authority, Border Police of BiH, HJPC, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the RS, have good cooperation with journalists...

Journalists point out that the spokespersons of the institutions in Republic of Srpska are generally much more up-to-date than those employed at institutions in Federation.

