

Die geldelike bydraes van kommunikasie-bewuste organisasies – soos Sasol – maak die druk en verspreiding van Communicare moontlik. Maar wat eintlik onontbeerlik is, is die ruim erkenning wat kommunikasie in die sakegemeenskap geniet. Daarom plaas ons met graagte dié Sasol-borgingsartikel.

In search of the optimum communication area – a corporate public affairs perspective

Theo Vorster

Introduction

Communication and public affairs practitioners in a corporate environment are continuously faced with a challenge – to find the optimum mix of all the communication resources in the organisation in order to communicate most effectively.

Various departments and divisions within most companies can contribute to this communication resource pool. By identifying these various available communications resources, harnessing them into an harmonious communications unit, it is possible to identify an area which I term the OPTIMUM COMMUNICATIONS AREA.

Although every division and department in a company participates in the classical communications process, there are primarily three departments which will contain the largest communication resource for the purpose of this discussion and the illustration of the optimum communication area theory.

These departments are the *public affairs department*, the *marketing department* and the *personnel department*. Depending on the nature of a company, the individual available communication resource of each of these departments may also vary.



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Terminology

At this stage it is probably advisable to clear up some terminologies, semantics and definitions which I will use in this article.

According to a report published by the prestigious Conference Board in the United States, information gathered from 302 companies, amongst them 284 of the Fortune 500, it was concluded that the term "public affairs" was the most preferred – with "corporate communications" a distant second choice to designate the function that embraces government relations, public relations and usually other programmes as well.

"Amongst the principal alternatives, 'external relations' is seen by many executives to neglect the internal communications aspects, 'corporate communications' to overlook the coalition building and other organising aspects of the function."

Thus my usage of "public affairs". I do believe that the principal communications practitioners (internal and external) will be found in the public affairs department of the company.

Before I am crucified by my academic friends and colleagues for the use of my mainly home-grown terminologies, let me hasten to add that this discussion is not intended as a scholarly one, but rather based on ideas and theories evolved through hands-on experience gained in several large corporate and institutional environments.

Another difference of opinion may result in the understanding of the functions of the marketing department and the public affairs department. *Marketing* is regarded as the process of selling a product for a profit, while *public affairs* is a well-planned and sustained process whereby a mutual understanding between the company and its publics can be created and maintained.

These two departments must have a symbiotic existence if efforts are to be maximised. Public affairs creates the climate in which the marketing process occurs. If the climate is favourable, it enhances and improves the marketing process. If the climate is unfavourable, it will naturally put pressure on the marketing process and inhibit selling.

The functions and responsibilities of the *personnel department* is well-known.

Location of the optimum communication area

If the three principal departments involved in the

communications process are graphically depicted by three circles, the *optimum communications area* is formed by the overlaps of these circles (see diagram). The overlap representing the common denominator in each department – namely the communications element. (One may even go so far as to term the centre-most area – the *critical communications area*.)

A continuous communications flow is indicated by the arrows and could commence in any one of the three circles. For example, a proposed marketing action with communications implications should flow through the public affairs department and even the personnel department before the action is unleashed on the designated target audience or public.

Only when this "clover leaf" action has been completed, can one confidently say that the communications areas had been optimally utilised.

The same principle applies to any proposed action initiated by the other two departments.

The communications activities of the marketing department relates to product or consumer communications such as sales promotions, seminars, consumer advertising and product awareness programmes. The personnel department communicates during job interviews, induction programmes, labour and industrial negotiations with trade unions, recruitment drives, bursary programmes and the briefing system in plant and factory environments (internal and external communications). During labour unrest, for instance, the industrial relations expert (mostly from the personnel department) would communicate the outcome of negotiations to the media relations official in the public affairs department. He in turn will communicate the information to the media.

Likewise will any media feedback – positive or negative – after the launch of a product by the marketing department, usually find its way to the media section of the public affairs department.

The public affairs department, therefore, plays a key role in the activities of both the above-mentioned departments.

In order to obtain optimum communications effectiveness, all the communications activities must be properly managed, controlled and synchronised.

This is easier said than done! Professional pride lodged in these three departments, sometimes precludes the ideal and optimum effectiveness to be achieved.

An healthy working relationship should, however, exist amongst the said departments. This can be accomplished by establishing a *communications*

strategy committee consisting of representatives from all the departments concerned. Representation on each other's monthly planning sessions also adds to this esprit de corps.

The communications practitioner in the public affairs department should take the lead in establishing such a sound base for good working relationships.

In order to do this, the public affairs department must establish its own position and recognition within the company.

A professional and scientific approach, unfortunately, often is lacking and relegates the public affairs department to an inferior position within the company's organisational hierarchy. If this is the case, the situation should be rectified if it is incumbent for the public affairs practitioner to act as co-ordinator of the optimum communications process.

However, it is also important that certain aspects of the public affairs practitioner and the process is well understood and accepted by management, if the public affairs operation is to be effective.

An understanding that:

- a) Corporate public affairs must also be a management function to obtain maximum acceptance within all sectors of the organisation.
- b) The public affairs practitioner must be involved in the strategic communications planning of the company and should, therefore, have a direct reporting line to the managing director or chief executive officer.
- c) The public affairs process must be pro-active and professionally executed.
- d) Acceptability of the public affairs practitioner and the process in a corporate environment must be earned on merit and proven achievement.
- e) A clear understanding that the public affairs practitioner is no magician who can perform and achieve the impossible.

Only if the above-mentioned elements are accepted can the public affairs practitioner fulfil the key role of co-ordinator in the optimum communication process.

The corporate public affairs practitioner is sometimes uncertain to what extent he should become involved in the corporate activities.

Without sounding too prescriptive, may I advance a tried and trusted approach to practical public affairs practice:

The public affairs practitioner should be involved in the following:

- a) Identifying the target publics or audiences.
- b) Determining the perceptions (opinions) of each of these publics with relation to the company.
- c) Determining the perceptions management currently holds about the company.
- d) Determining which perceptions the management would *like* the publics to have about the company.
- e) Identifying the actions which will most effectively address the publics in order to achieve the required perceptions about the company.
- f) Identifying key individuals in the company who will take charge and accept responsibility to manage each of these identified actions or programmes.
- g) Determining target dates when the actions should be completed.
- h) Evolve a suitable method to evaluate the outcome of each action.

Conducting an effective public affairs process requires not only total involvement by management, but is the responsibility of each individual in the company.

Don't Rush – Research!

Before setting out to identify the key target areas of the company, thorough research and applicable data must be available. The worst offence a public affairs practitioner can commit, is to approach this action without some scientific and documented evidence. Don't rush – research!

Various market research organisations are able to conduct tailor-made opinion surveys which can cover most of the target audiences.

From these surveys the perceptions about the company can be determined and evaluated. The negative perceptions can be compared to the reality. But there is a distinct difference between the *facts or reality* and the *perception* of the facts or reality – the so-called *perception gap*.

An effective, pro-active public affairs programme and existing scientific techniques can minimise the perception gap.

The most important target audiences can be divided into external and internal groups or individuals. The external groups should include media, investors, opinion leaders, potential employees and special interest groups, while the most important internal target audience is own employees.

For logistical purposes the target audiences should be prioritised.

The optimum communications media mix

To change the perceptions about a company, it is important to conduct effective communications by using existing communications media. This can only occur if the communicator (the company management) and the recipients (target audiences) are on the same wavelength.

If the optimum communications area expresses the nature and culture of the company in a positive way, the target audiences will experience the company in a positive way and the image of that company will be close to the corporate reality. If, on the other hand, the optimum communications area is absent or not properly utilised, the chances are that the target audiences will experience the company in a negative way and the public perceptions will be rather different from the corporate reality – again the existence of the perceptions gap.

The traditional internal communications media which exist in a company include in-house magazines or journals, brochures and special publications, annual reports and employee reports, circulars and lately announcements via the telefax. The latter is a fast and effective way to communicate with a large group of people or if an important announcement must be made. So many times employees read important announcements about their company in the news media. This is unforgivable and is very demotivating because the employee feels cheated by his company or forms the impression that the company does not care about him.

Recent research in the United States by the Inter-

national Association of Business Communicators (IABC) concluded that employees view internal publications and the general communicative processes in their companies increasingly in a more negative light since 1980.

The advent of the electronic age has seen the implementation of so-called video journals as an effective and visually acceptable communication tool.

External communications media include the news media and electronic news media, advertising, personal appearances and personnel recruitment advertising.

Once all the above-mentioned elements have been incorporated into a realistic public affairs programme, the public affairs practitioner will be in a position to command attention and management responsibility.

His role as a key player in the communications process will be appreciated and he will be able to fulfil the vital function as co-ordinator and initiator of the communications action in his company.

The competent and confident communications practitioner should view the existence of this symbolic communications "clover leaf" as an opportunity to establish himself as a vital link in the communications practice of this organisation.

The search has now been concluded – the optimum communications area theory has been flighted.

Whether this theory can be converted to a practical reality remains to be tested – or the search will continue.

