

EXCERPT

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PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY: A CONCEPTUALIZATION

Within the framework of the previous discussion on strategy in the strategic management and PR literature, PR strategy is conceptualized based mainly on Steyn (2000a, 2002, 2003b); Steyn and Puth (2000).

The concept of PR strategy is based on the assumption that public relations/corporate communication is practiced as a strategic management function with a unique disciplinary identity, assisting an organization to adapt to its environment by achieving a balance between the organization's commercial imperatives and socially acceptable behavior. (For this purpose, the environment is conceptualized as a collection of stakeholders, publics and activists, and a patterning of strategic, social, political, environmental and ethical issues.) This balance is brought about, *inter alia*, through identifying and responding to issues and stakeholder concerns by ensuring that organizational and communication goals are aligned to societal and stakeholder values, norms and expectations. Furthermore, by building relationships through communication with those on whom the organization depends to meet its economic and socio-political goals.

PR strategy provides the focus and direction for an organization's communication with its stakeholders and other interest groups in society. It is an organization or institution's proactive response to a fast-changing environment, an approach that directs its course of action and provides an indication of its positioning for the future with regards to two-way communication with societal and strategic stakeholders. It is developed within the context of the organization's vision, mission, corporate culture and policies, goals and objectives (the internal environment), but focuses on an assessment of the external environment.

PR strategy is thus first and foremost a position to match an organization to the concerns, expectations, values and norms of its societal and stakeholder environment -- a pro-active capability to adapt the organization to changes identified through environmental scanning and boundary spanning activities. It creates a competitive advantage for the organization through the early detection and management of societal and stakeholder issues and expectations, involving strategic stakeholders in decision making, determining *what* should be communicated to avoid conflict and obtain win-win solutions -- thereby stabilizing societal and stakeholder relationships, giving the organization the autonomy to concentrate on achieving its mission.

PR strategy is not based on the traditional linear approach to strategy formulation. By adapting the organization to values, trends, events, issues and stakeholders in the environment, it can be regarded as 'adaptive' strategy. It also focuses on relationships, symbolic actions and communication, emphasizing attitudinal and cognitive complexity among diverse stakeholders and societal interest groups, the essence of 'interpretive' strategy.

Based on Mintzberg's (1987) views on deliberate strategy formulation and emergent strategy formation, PR strategy is conceptualised as consisting of both deliberate and emergent components:

1. PR strategy as deliberate strategy is a pattern of decisions for using communication as a strategic opportunity in organizational goal achievement (e.g., building relationships with strategic stakeholders, portraying the organization as a good corporate citizen, maintaining a good reputation, or communicating change initiatives).

Deliberate PR strategy is formulated in the context of the organization's vision, mission, corporate strategies, policies and strategic goals. It can therefore be considered a mid-term strategy (two years or more). The organization's key strategic priorities are reviewed to select strategic organizational positions and goals to be communicated to internal and external stakeholders (Digital Management, 2005). A key focus is therefore the organization's strategies that have already been formulated as part of the regular cycle of strategy development or budgeting process.

2. PR strategy as emergent strategy is a pattern in important decisions on using communication to solve organizational or communication problems in unstructured situations, or to capitalize on opportunities presented. In emergent PR strategy, the final objective is unclear and elements are still developing as the strategy proceeds, continuously adapting to events and people (i.e. external and internal stakeholders, societal issues, and the interest/activist groups that emerge around issues). Emergent PR strategy thus outlines the communication needed to address constantly emerging societal and stakeholder issues, and crisis situations. In this sense, emergent strategy is a shorter-term strategy (i.e. less than two years). The rationale is that should an issue continue for a longer period, it will become part of deliberate strategy.

Emergent PR strategy is in accordance with Grunig and Repper's view (cited in Grunig, 1992) that managing communication strategically entails analyzing the environment to make an organization or institution aware of stakeholders, publics and issues as they evolve, and developing communication programs that can help resolve such issues. Stakeholder and issues management thus form a core focus of emerging PR strategy.

Deliberate and emergent PR strategy produce a profile that can be used to determine which stakeholders or issues should receive more or less emphasis (within the PR strategy's Triple Bottom Line focus of "people" and "planet", rather than "profit").

The process of formulating deliberate PR strategy to communicate organizational positions and assist in achieving organizational goals, and recognizing the issues and possible communication solutions that form emergent PR strategy, entails strategic thinking to prioritize key organizational goals and positions and interpret information gathered mainly in the social, political and environmental sectors of the macro environment, with a view to identifying consequences for organizational stakeholders and other societal interest groups. To put deliberate PR strategy into action, a strategic communication plan is created for each PR division/section/unit, i.e. expressing the strategy in terms sufficiently clear to render it formally operational, breaking it down into sub-strategies. (It is on the grounds of this strategic PR plan that the PR function lobbies for organizational resources.) Control is exercised to

ensure that the chosen strategy is implemented properly and cost-efficiently, and produces the desired results. Emergent PR strategy is turned into action within the framework and structures of this strategic PR plan.

Deliberate and emergent PR strategy is more than 'strategy communication'. Public relations is not simply an enabling function, facilitating the successful implementation of strategic decisions. In itself, it is a contributor to the strategic decision making process.

The level with responsibility for formulating deliberate PR strategy is the functional or middle management level. Stakeholder concerns and issues can emerge both internal and external to the organization and can be recognized by PR practitioners or employees on any organizational level. It is however the responsibility of a practitioner in the role of the PR manager to make a concerted effort to develop emergent PR goals to address these stakeholder concerns and issues, by recognizing possible communication solutions.

PR strategy is however optimally developed by a PR function with a strategic mandate where a practitioner in the role of the PR strategist:

1. Scans the environment for issues, stakeholder concerns and reputation risks (the core source of emergent PR strategy).
2. Makes inputs in this regard into the organization's deliberate strategy processes at the strategic level.
3. Facilitates the development of functional PR strategy.

PR strategy thus makes the PR function relevant in the strategic management process by providing the vital link between enterprise/corporate/business strategy and the PR function, aligning PR/communication goals to organizational goals. The deliberate PR strategy indicates what the PR function needs to do (communicate) to implement higher level, deliberate organizational strategies—first and foremost the enterprise strategy, but also the corporate and business unit strategies, as well as other functional strategies such as marketing and HR. Emergent PR strategy indicates what the PR function needs to do and communicate with regards to emergent issues and stakeholder concerns, i.e. how to

use communication to solve organizational problems or capitalize on opportunities presented.

The heart of PR strategy formulation and formation lies in the conceptual work done by senior PR practitioners and the strategic decisions taken in co-operation with other organizational leaders. PR strategy can be seen as the thinking, the logic behind the PR function's actions - the "what" rather than the "how". Implementing PR strategy results in doing the right things, rather than only doing things right. It focuses first on impact and outcomes (an effectiveness approach), and then on process (an efficiency approach). PR strategy is not the same as communication plans, but provides the framework for the strategic and operational PR/communication plans necessary to carry out the strategy. PR strategy thus provides a new way of thinking about, defining and studying organizational and communication problems, and of evaluating the efforts of PR practitioners.

In conclusion, the development of PR strategy makes the PR function relevant in the strategic management process by providing the link between the communication plan/activities and the achievement of the organization's mission and top-level strategies. It provides an integrated, strategic approach needed by organizations for dealing with multiple stakeholders on multiple issues.

MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS IN THE PR LITERATURE FOR DEVELOPING PR STRATEGY

In the PR literature, there are only a few references to conceptual frameworks and models (empirically tested frameworks) for PR strategy formulation at the functional level, implying/referring to PR participation in strategy formulation at the top management (enterprise or corporate) level (Steyn, 2002):

- The conceptual framework of **Grunig & Repper** (in Grunig, 1992:124) on the stakeholder, public and issue stages in the strategic management of PR—improved by **Grunig, et al** (2002:145). **Likely** (2005) commented that the latter model provides little detail on actual strategic management (i.e., the development and execution of corporate and business level strategy) or on strategy formulation and formation. It therefore required further conceptualization.

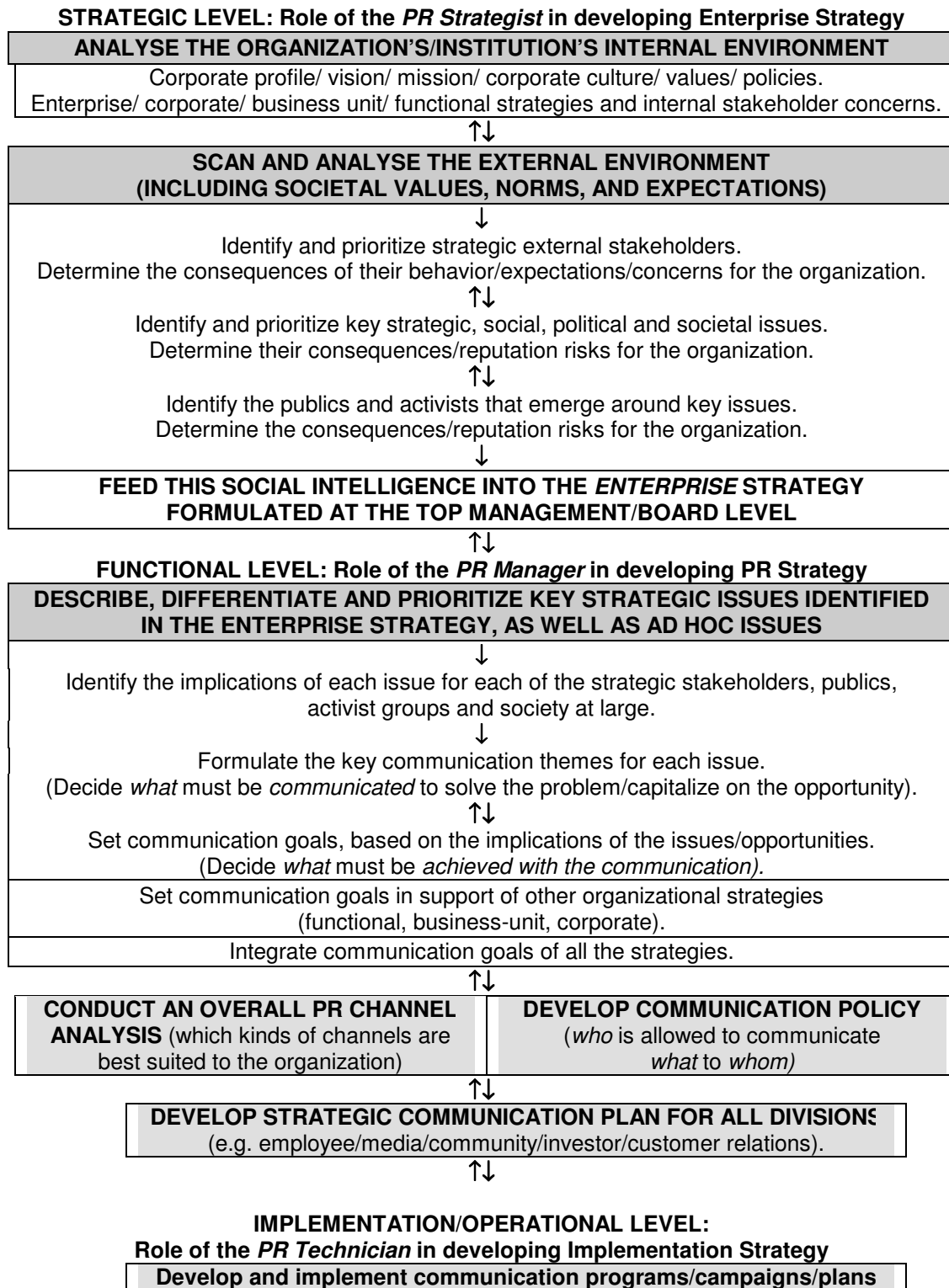
- The conceptual framework of **Moss & Warnaby** (in Kitchen, 1997:65), linking PR strategy (as functional strategy) to the corporate and competitive levels of strategy formulation and conceptualizing PR strategy as adaptive and/or interpretive strategy.
- In elaborating on the Moss & Warnaby framework, **Vercic & Grunig** commented that building symbolic relationships with stakeholders/publics by means of communication programs on the micro (implementation) level is not sufficient for a contribution towards organizational effectiveness. Rather, behavioral relationships must be built on the institutional (enterprise or macro) level. *“The institutional level obviously is the substance of public relations”* (Vercic & Grunig, in Moss, Vercic & Warnaby, 2000:40).
- **Oliver** (1997) applied the Johnson and Scholes strategic management model to public relations. Oliver’s (2001) reference to this framework includes a valuable differentiation between ‘ordinary’ PR management (the need to keep the overall corporate message consistent) and ‘extraordinary’ PR management (the need to monitor changes in stakeholder perceptions that could impact corporate goals, that could in turn lead to changes in the message). In the author’s view, ‘ordinary’ PR management might be referring to deliberate PR strategy formulation whereas ‘extraordinary’ PR management might be seen as emergent strategy formation.
- **Likely** (2003) illustrated the strategic management role of PR by means of a generic strategic management model. He suggests a strategic role for PR in all seven stages, notably in deliberate (intended) strategy formulation, strategy execution, emergent strategy formation and actual realized strategy. Although there are differences, there are also similarities to the author’s conceptualization of deliberate and emergent PR strategy in a previous section.
- The educational model of **Steyn** (2000a); Steyn & Puth (2000:63) is an empirical model -- the outcome of a longitudinal action research project in which the hypothesized framework was implemented amongst 94 non-profit organizations, 48 national and provincial government institutions and 68 small-to-medium sized companies in South Africa. Basic premises of the model is that different individuals/groups take part in strategy formulation at different organizational levels, and that lower-level strategies and goals support and are developed within the context of higher-level strategies and/or

issues. Furthermore, PR strategy is developed on the functional level by a practitioner in the (redefined) role of a PR *manager* (Steyn, 2000a; 2000d), based on the enterprise strategy but also on ad hoc issues. Functioning at the top management level, a practitioner in the role of the PR *strategist* (Steyn 2000a, 2000b) contributes to the development of enterprise strategy. (In smaller organizations, the roles of PR *strategist* and *manager* will of necessity be played by one practitioner).

Complementing the PR strategy model is a model for developing PR plans (Steyn & Puth, 2000:82), explaining the process for a PR *technician* to develop implementation strategy and PR activities that are linked to (functional) PR strategy by means of the PR goals identified during the PR strategy formulation phase.

- Steyn's (2003c) adapted model for formulating PR strategy, applied in the development of a prototype software solution (Steyn & Bütschi, 2004), clearly differentiates between enterprise and functional level strategy formulation (i.e., PR *strategist* and *manager* roles). This model is depicted in Fig. 8.2.
- In his masters' research, Prinsloo (2005) explored the viability of Steyn's (2003c) adapted model for PR strategy formulation amongst the dominant coalition of one of South Africa's major banks. Based on the findings of the empirical research, Prinsloo proposed a framework for formulating enterprise strategy, differentiating it from corporate (financial) strategy. He also adapted Steyn's (2003c) model to a financial institution.

Fig.8. 2: Model for developing public relations strategy, linked to enterprise strategy



Source: Adapted from Steyn & Puth (2000:63); Steyn (2003c).

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Public Relations Strategy: An Operationalisation

The operationalization of PR strategy that follows next is based mainly on the author's research program on PR strategy. However, all the models mentioned in the previous section have elements that are also contained in this operationalization. The most important similarities were highlighted in the discussion of each model.

PR strategy consists of both deliberate and emergent components. The process outlined below is not linear and does not necessarily follow this order, but it points out important activities in the development of PR strategy.

Formulating **deliberate PR strategy** can be seen as a process of:

- Analyzing/reviewing the organization's top-level strategies/strategic goals/strategic intent/key priorities that result from the formal strategy development process and budget cycle,
- Scanning and monitoring the environment to identify key strategic stakeholders and their concerns, societal issues, and the publics/activists who express a concern or interest in these issues,
- Drawing the organization's stakeholder map,
- Identifying/selecting those strategic organizational goals, priorities and positions with consequences for internal and/or external stakeholders, other societal interest groups and the organization's reputation (i.e., prioritizing what should be communicated *about*),
- Thinking through the implications/consequences/impact of the selected organizational goals, priorities and positions on each of the stakeholders and publics/societal interest groups,
- Addressing these implications by deciding *what* should be communicated (selecting key communication themes) and what should be *achieved* by this communication (setting deliberate PR goals),
- Developing a strategic communication plan for the PR department's divisions/sections/units to implement the deliberate PR strategy.

Emergent PR strategy unfolds (is formed rather than formulated) in the process of:

- Scanning, monitoring and analyzing the organization's internal and external environment,
- Identifying strategic/societal issues and the behavior/concerns of those publics and interest groups who emerge around them, as well as those strategic stakeholders whose behavior/concerns have consequences/implications for the organization's strategies, other stakeholders and reputation (i.e., prioritizing what should be communicated *about*),
- Thinking through the implications/consequences/impact of the concerns/behavior of stakeholders/publics/interest groups for the organization's goals and priorities, other strategic stakeholders and interest groups,
- Refining the stakeholder map,
- Addressing these implications/concerns by recognizing what must be communicated to strategic stakeholders/publics/interest groups to solve the problem or capitalize on the opportunity presented (selecting key communication themes) and the outcomes to be *achieved* with the communication (developing emergent PR goals),
- Achieving these emergent PR goals within the existing strategic communication plan, taking into account available human and financial resources. If need be, deliberate and emergent PR goals must be prioritized.