

# How Public Relations Impact on a Company's Effectiveness

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The role of public relations is dealing with the identification of organization's strategic public and developing communications programs for building solid, open and trusting relations with them. Many companies have taken a limited view of the impact that public relations can have on company's overall effectiveness. This paper consists of two parts: the theoretical framework for the role of public relations in the overall effectiveness of the company and an empirical analysis based on the primary data collected. We classified and analyzed different public relations factors (i.e. factors related to managing and implementing public relations) that influences the effectiveness of the company. We explored the correlation between public relations and a company's effectiveness and argued that public relations factors play a critical role in that effectiveness. We used linear regression and we found a significant linear relationship between the independent variable (public relations) and the dependent variable (company effectiveness).

**Key words:** Public relations, Public relations function, Company's effectiveness, Public relations strategy, Public relations agency

## 1 Introduction and theoretical backgrounds

Any company can develop a public relations program regardless of their public relations budget or number of staff. The key to implementing a successful program is to incorporate measurements and analysis from the beginning. Overall measurement of public relations programs should provide a holistic view of public relations compares with corporate goals and objectives. The company's effectiveness as a philosophy and as a result of communication activities has been explored by innumerable authors (McArthur and Griffin, 1997; Schultz and Kitchen, 1997; Low, 2000; Pickton and Broderick, 2001; Završnik and Jerman, 2006). Company effectiveness and related performance is a robust and ongoing necessity for business. Have companies become so good at implementing public relations to achieve effectiveness? Moreover, an even more important issue concerns the ability of public relations to connect effectively with key stakeholders who could impact on organisational performance.

Public relations make an organization more effective when it identifies strategic constituencies in the environment and then develops communication programs to build long-term, trusting relationships with them. Partici-

pation in strategic management provides the integrating link for public relations to enhance organizational effectiveness. To provide its unique contribution, however, public relations must be separate from other management functions. However, communication programs should be integrated or coordinated by a public relations department and they should have a matrix arrangement with the other departments it serves.

There is ample evidence that the century-long domination of mass media advertising and advertising agencies in marketing communications is coming to an end. Marketing budgets are being shifted away from traditional advertising to behaviour-oriented disciplines such as consumer promotion, direct marketing and direct-response advertising (Nowak and Phelps, 1994).

They have always known that public relations - in the form of trade and business media relations, case histories, thought-leadership campaigns and industry conferences - deals effectively with hard news and detailed information. What is new, however, is the emerging power of public relations to drive the marketing communications machine, especially when the core message is value. Smart marketers will examine how their competitors publicize their accomplishments, what messages they deliver, which statistics they cite and which influences advocate their po-

sitions - and then incorporate that information into their public relations strategy (Shadle, 1998).

As with many aspects of our society, the pace of change in public relations has been increasing in the recent decades. Some of the changes over the last decade are continuations of trends that began earlier. Beginning in the 80's, many corporations drastically reduced their in-house public relations staff and began using outside agencies more. Public relations consulting has expanded considerably and the largest agencies have grown even larger (Stevens, 2001: 19).

Grunig and Hunt suggested a useful way of looking at public relations history. They suggested the four models of communicational relationships with the public: press agency/publicity model, public information model, two-way asymmetrical model and two-way symmetrical public relations. The press agency/publicity model is the kind of activity that people associate with public relations. The aim of this type of model is to secure coverage for a client. The public information model provides information for people, doesn't seek to persuade the audience and tends to rely on one-way communication. Two-way asymmetric public relations introduce the idea of two way communication, but only asymmetrically because the intended change is in the audience's attitudes rather than the organization's practices. Two-way symmetrical public relations is a the more equal communication, where each part is willing to alter their behaviour (Theaker, 2001).

Today's public relations industry can be described as a mature profession in which practitioners and academics work together to better understand the role of public relations and to debate and clarify the many practical and philosophical issues that arise when defining the relationship between an organisation and its public. At the same time, public relations practitioners, armed with output from academia, actively engage with dominant coalitions in a range of organisations to position public relation as a strategic management discipline and to contribute positively to the achievement of organisational goals while being sensitive to the aspirations of the relevant publics (Ferjan, 2002; Moncur, 2006).

The use of contemporary public relations in Slovenia can be traced back to the 1960s, which was the "liberal" period in the communist Yugoslavia. The first public relations agency was established in the 1989 and 10 practitioners formed the Public Relations Society of Slovenia (PRSS) in the 1990. In the 1993, the PRSS became a full member of the European confederation of public relations society. In the 2000, the PRSS (the Slovenian board of IPRA) endorsed by the PRSS celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2003).

## 2 Public relations as vital component for company's effectiveness

Lots of different systems have been invented for competitive reasons, each claiming to be a better form of public relations measurement. Public relations program evaluation plays a significant role in demonstrating effectiveness (Dozier, 1990; Fairchild, 2002), and organizational impact (Radford and Goldstein, 2002). As there is no method for measuring effectiveness, practitioners select from an array of different methods and models to demonstrate their effectiveness. Evaluation models can be categorized into those focusing on a specific public relations process, such as media evaluation, or those accommodating an integrated planning approach or impact model (Xavier et al., 2005).

Broader outcome measures concern whether audience target groups actually receives the messages directed at them, were aware of the message, understood it, retained and even acted upon its meaning. There is a debate as to whether the communication materials and public relations expertise result in opinion, attitude and/or behaviour changes among target publics (Phillips, 2001).

A lot of research about the measure of reputation has been done by the academics. They have explored the relationship between reputation and commercial performance. The Reputation Institute<sup>1</sup> has tackled the measurement of reputation and provides some interesting benchmarks.

Based on a number of published lists of the most admired companies, six sets of criteria or themes have been identified that appear to dominate the construction of the reputation rating published by social monitors (Phillips, 2001; 228-229): (1) financial performance, (2) product quality, (3) employee treatment, (4) community involvement, (5) environmental performance and (6) organizational issues.

Integrated marketing analysis also includes public relations return on investments. A statistical model permit public relations to understand how media coverage interacts with advertising, promotions and other forms of marketing communications to affect awareness, brand loyalty and sales (Weiner, 2000).

Other public relations performance measurements can derive from how public relations is managed. Senior public relations professionals participate in the strategic decision processes of an organisation and counsel other managers participating in that process about the consequences of potential decisions for the public. In effect, they bring the voices of the public into strategic decision making by researching and listening to the public before decisions are made. Excellent public relations departments then strategically plan, administer and evaluate

<sup>1</sup> The Reputation Institute is a private research organization <http://www.reputationinstitute.com/sections/who/who.html>

public relations programmes to communicate with these publics, both before and after management decisions are made, so that the organisation can build and maintain good, long-term relationships with them (Grunig and Grunig, 2002).

Excellent public relations units do not under-emphasise the traditional technical skills of public relations - such as writing and preparing materials for the media and publications, writing speeches, working with the media or developing audio-visual materials and websites. Public relations departments must serve a managerial role as well as a technical role in their organisations. Public relations units play an important role in the strategic management of their organisations. They identify critical publics that affect or are affected by management decisions and who can create issues and crises for the organisation (Grunig and Grunig, 2002).

If public relations is to progress as a strategic management discipline, it is essential that it links to both the wider organisational strategies and to the wider domain of business studies. From observation, this kind of public relations is seldom seen by dominant coalitions as a strategic management discipline and public relations is ignored in business studies literature. A systems theory approach is applied to develop a framework in which public relations strategy is intrinsically linked to the various levels of business strategy (Moncur, 2006: 97).

### 3 Research questions and methodology

#### 3.1 The purpose of the research

The main thrust of the paper concerns public relations factors affecting company effectiveness, which can be viewed as a factor related to managing and implementing public relations.

#### 3.2 Hypothesis

The dominant proposition of this paper is that public relations may be playing a greater role in terms of emphasis in corporate performance and effectiveness. Empirical evidence will be presented supporting this enhanced role within a company's effectiveness level. Accordingly, we make the following hypothesis:

H: There is a correlation between public relations and company effectiveness.

#### 3.3 Variables

For the purposes of our research, the following measures for constructs were developed, drawing on the conceptual work in the context of public relations and company effectiveness.

#### *Public relations description*

The public relations scale covers the following statements: the primary function of public relations is to increase the company's reputation, the public relations office takes part in the strategic decisions in our company, the public relations office holds consultation with the managing board or the top management of our company, we are planning all public relations activities in our company and public relations build and manage relationships with the company's strategic publics. The public relations construct consists of interval scale questions. Answers were given on a Likert-scale format (7= *I strongly agree* and 1= *I strongly disagree*). The reliability of the construct was assessed using a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient. The measure had 9 items and reported an Alpha of 0.8629.

#### *Company effectiveness description*

The company effectiveness construct can be operationalized in different ways. Many authors agree that public relations has an impact on company's effectiveness (McArthur, Griffin, 1997; Schultz and Kitchen, 1997; Low, 2000; Pickton and Broderick, 2001). We used a multi-item measure containing eleven items to investigate company effectiveness in the areas of financial, marketing and other types of company effectiveness (Churchill, 1979). This variable was composed of three types of company effectiveness: market, financial and other types. We calculated the mean score for each type as a sum of all the mean score averages. The company effectiveness construct consists of interval scale questions. Answers were given on a Likert-scale format (7= *I strongly agree* and 1= *I strongly disagree*). The concept of company effectiveness reported an Alpha of 0.8535.

Therefore, measurement scales for the public relations and company effectiveness constructs demonstrated a relatively high degree of reliability.

#### 3.4 Data gathering and the characteristics of the sample

The main research instrument for the empirical investigation - e.g. the questionnaire - was developed based on the derived theoretical basis. The covering letters accompanying the questionnaires were mailed to the corporate directors, marketing directors or directors of 1000 Slovenian enterprises. We choose the convenience sample. The survey was conducted in December, 2006 and January, 2007. A total of 200 useful responses were received and that gave a response rate of 20.0%. The results presented in this paper are related to the sample of 200 respondents. The collected empirical data were processed using SPSS 10.0, with an emphasis on descriptive statistical analysis.

The relevant data on the companies were mainly provided by the marketing directors (28.3% of cases), followed by company's directors (26.3%), members of the top management (18.7%), business consultants (9.6%) and head executives (6.1%). Members of the managing boards, heads of public relations offices and counselling

specialists provided 2.5%. Other respondents appeared in 3.5% of cases.

Company size was determined from the number of employees. The sample consists of 45.8% small companies, 31.9% middle sized companies and 32.3% large companies. The companies included in the sample are distributed according to industries as follows: 41% of the respondents belong to production oriented companies, 30% to service oriented companies and 24.5% were trade oriented companies. The sample also consists of 1.5% institutions, 0.5% government organizations and 2.5% of companies chose the answer »other«.

### 3.5 The research instrument

Both the constructs (e.g. public relations factors) and company's effectiveness were measured on a Likert scale. The respondents had to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Despite the fact that the Likert-type measure does not claim to be more than an ordinal scale, it has, nevertheless, been accepted as a means of achieving quality interval measurements and there are several arguments favouring all the different positions on this issue (Avlonitis and Papastathopoulou 2000).

## 4 Empirical findings

### 4.1 Public relations practice in Slovenian companies

One of the goals of our research was to find out if companies had developed its own public relations function. The data shows that 42.3% of companies are using external public relations agencies and the remaining 57.7% of companies have their own in-house public relations office.

When asked how many employees in the company deal with public relations, we received the following answers: In the largest share of companies (46.4%) the public relations activities are performed by 1 employee - followed by 25% of companies which have 2 employees. In 14.8% of cases, 3 employees work in the field of public relations and in the remaining 6.6% of companies, 4 employees performed public relations activities. The data presented in the research is confirming that public relations activities are performed in the companies, though the public relations function is organized as a separate department or as part of the marketing or sales department.

When asked which department performed the external communication functions in their companies, respondents give the following answers: the public relations department (3%), the marketing or sales department

Table 1: Mean scores of the statements on public relations

| Statements on public relations   | Mean scores | SD   |
|--|-------------|------|
| The primary function of public relations is to increase the company's reputation.                            | 5.93        | 1.44 |
| Top management of our company has complete trust in the public relations strategy of our company.            | 5.73        | 1.30 |
| The public relations strategy arises from the corporate business strategy.                                   | 5.57        | 1.30 |
| The public relations office holds consultation with the managing board or the top management of our company. | 5.43        | 1.98 |
| Public relations build and manage relationships with the company's strategic publics.                        | 4.90        | 1.92 |
| Public relations implementation is centralized in our company.   | 4.88        | 1.91 |
| Control of public relations activities is centralized in our company.  | 4.79        | 1.85 |
| We are planning all public relations activities in our company.  | 4.76        | 1.92 |
| The public relations office takes part in the strategic decisions in our company.                            | 4.51        | 2.12 |

Table 2: The mean scores regarding the different types of company effectiveness

| Type of company effectiveness        | Mean scores | SD   |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|------|
| Other types of company effectiveness | 5.04        | 1.22 |
| Market effectiveness                 | 4.91        | 1.40 |
| Financial effectiveness              | 4.47        | 1.50 |

(42%), no department because the president of the managing board or director attends to this personally (25%), and nobody (30%).

The respondents also indicated that in 61.2%, the total communications budget goes towards marketing communications and the remaining 38.8% goes towards public relations.

#### 4.2 The impact of public relations on company effectiveness

For each statement on public relations, the average value and the standard deviation have been calculated. The re-

sults in Table 1 show that the mean scores achieved for the public relations statements are 4, 5 and more, so we can conclude that the respondents agree with the statements on public relations. The standard deviation results show that many scores are on the interval between 1.30 and 2.12 from the mean.

The results in Table 2 show that the mean scores of the different types of company effectiveness are in the interval between 4.50 to 5.04. And also the standard deviation results show that many standard deviation scores are achieved on the interval between 1.22 and 1.50 about mean.

One of the objectives of the paper concerns the correlation between different statements of public relations

Table 3: Correlation matrix between public relations and company's effectiveness

| Company's effectiveness measure  | Correlation |       |
|--|-------------|-------|
|  | r           | p     |
| Top management of our company has complete trust in the public relations strategy of our company.            | 0.378(**)   | 0.000 |
| The public relations strategy arises from the corporate business strategy.                                   | 0.384(**)   | 0.000 |
| The control of public relations activities is centralized in our company.                                    | 0.326(**)   | 0.000 |
| The public relations implementation is centralized in our company.   | 0.225(**)   | 0.000 |
| The primary function of public relations is to increase the company's reputation.                            | 0.263(**)   | 0.000 |
| The public relations office takes part in strategic decisions in our company.                                | 0.222(**)   | 0.002 |
| The public relations office holds consultation with the managing board or the top management of our company. | 0.245(**)   | 0.001 |
| We are planning all or public relations activities in our company.   | 0.361(**)   | 0.000 |
| Public relations build and manage relationships with company's strategic publics.                            | 0.279(**)   | 0.000 |

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

and the company's effectiveness. Accordingly, we build the hypothesis as follows:

**Null hypothesis  $H_0$ :** There is no correlation between public relations and the company's effectiveness.

**Alternative hypothesis  $H_1$ :** There is a correlation between public relations and the company's effectiveness.

The test statistic presented in Table 3 exceeds the critical value so we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is indeed a significant correlation between all the tested public relations statements and company effectiveness.

Because the pair-wise correlation is found to be significant, the relationship between the variables will be investigated by producing a regression model in the form of a linear equation. The independent variables (public relations statements) have been constructed on the basis of questionnaire items that detect the distinct potential impact on company effectiveness. It is important to note that all the variables have been measured on a seven-level Likert scale. For each independent variable, the average value and the standard deviation have been calculated.

We would like to test if the regression model with one predictor variable (e.g. public relations) is significantly related to the criterion variable Y (e.g. company effectiveness)? We test the equivalent null hypothesis that there is no correlation in the sample between the dependent and independent variables, but we found a significant level in the impact of public relations on the company's effectiveness. According to this, the null hypotheses that we tried to reject using regression analysis, could be formulated as follows:

**Null hypothesis  $H_0$ :** There is no correlation between the dependent and independent variables, e.g. The corre-

lation coefficient between the dependent and independent variables equals 0 ( $H_0: R_{xy} = 0$ ).

**Alternative hypothesis  $H_1$ :** There is a positive correlation between the dependent and independent variables, e.g. The correlation coefficient between the dependent and independent variables is significantly higher than 0 ( $H_1: R_{xy} > 0$ ).

For the correlation tested, we selected the regression model with the highest significance, i.e. the model with a significance closest to the significance level of 5%. To investigate the hypothesis, entering all the variables in a single block, we found that the proposed model explains a significant percentage of the variance in company effectiveness. Table 4 shows that 17.4 per cent of the observed variation in company's effectiveness is explained by the one independent variable i.e. public relations ( $R^2=0,170$ ; adjusted  $R^2=0,174$ ).

Although the empirical results do not provide a high level of support for the conclusion, we believe that the positive correlation between public relations and the effectiveness of its company can be still accepted on the basis of the available data. Such a result is in accordance with the findings of other authors (Spanos, 2001).

The results in Table 5 indicate that we can reject the null hypotheses that the coefficients for customer service (Beta = 0.417,  $t=6.455$ ,  $p=0,000$ ) are 0. The beta weight (Beta = 0.417) shows that public relations has a significant influence on a company's effectiveness.

### 4.3 Managerial implications

We have argued and documented empirically that public relations has a significant impact on a company's effecti-

Table 4: The correlation between public relations and company effectiveness

| Independent variable (x) | Dependent variable (y)  | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | Model                        | (Sign.) $\alpha$ |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------|----------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Public relations         | Company's effectiveness | 0.174 | 0.170          | Lin:<br>$y = 3,340 + 0,331x$ | 0,000            |

Table 5: The results of regression coefficients

| Model            | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t      | Sig.               |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------|--------------------|
|                  | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |        |                    |
| (Constant)       | 3,340                       | 0,273      |                           | 12,222 | 0,000              |
| Public relations | 0,331                       | 0,051      | 0,417                     | 6,455  | 0,000 <sup>a</sup> |

<sup>a</sup> Dependent variable: Company's effectiveness

veness in the sample of Slovenian companies. Additionally, each company may choose to have a unique public relations strategy but should consider its unique characteristics when developing successful public relations programs. We identified these characteristics as public relations factors that can affect the company's effectiveness. Knowing these characteristics when developing public relations programs can provide competitive advantages. This article examines the important contribution that public relations practice provides for a company's overall effectiveness. And finally, with public relations we are able to improve the company's productivity, achieve high quality services and products and, consequently, these will lead to overall effectiveness of the company.

## 5 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to provide additional insight into some of the theoretical and managerial issues surrounding the design, implementation and evaluation of public relations programs in the changing environment. We approach this task from the organizational point of view - primarily from the perspective of how a company's effectiveness is affected by public relations. The paper consists of two parts: the theoretical framework for the role of public relations in the overall effectiveness of the company and the empirical analysis, based on the primary data collected. This paper presents the results of a study that examines the factors of public relations affecting effectiveness in the sample of Slovenian companies.

Next, we discuss the development and current status of the public relations profession in Slovenia. Public relations consulting has expanded considerably and the largest agencies have only grown even larger. Data shows that 42.3% of companies are using external public relations agencies and the remaining 57.7% of companies have their own in-house public relations office. Therefore, we add that an integrated marketing communications program should be coordinated through the broader public relations function.

This study helps explain the impact of public relations on the company's effectiveness. Managers in the responding companies assessed the public relations issues in their companies and their impact on the company's effectiveness. The study confirms that there is an association between all the statements on public relations and the company's effectiveness. A statistical test supported the hypothesis that a positive correlation exists between public relations and company effectiveness. With the statistical test, we can confirm a positive correlation between public relations and company effectiveness and we can suggest that public relations does influence the company's effectiveness.

This paper provides a perspective of how to analyze the factors affecting the overall company effectiveness. The guidelines that emerge from this approach should be particularly relevant for public relations managers in industry.

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### Kako odnosi z javnostmi vplivajo na učinkovitost podjetij

Vloga odnosov z javnostmi je identifikacija strateških javnosti organizacij in oblikovanje komunikacijskih programov za graditev stabilnih, odprtih in zaupanja vrednih odnosov z njimi. Kakovost teh odnosov je pomemben kazalec dolgoročnega prispevka odnosov z javnostmi k organizacijski uspešnosti. Mnoge organizacije se zelo malo ukvarjajo z vplivom odnosov z javnostmi na celotno učinkovitost same organizacije. Naš prispevek je razdeljen na teoretični in empirični del. V teoretičnem delu predstavljamo spremenljivke odnosov z javnostmi, ki vplivajo na uspešnost organizacije. S pomočjo empirične raziskave na vzorcu slovenskih podjetij smo ugotavljali odvisnost uspešnosti podjetij od posameznih dejavnikov odnosov z javnostmi. Raziskali in analizirali smo različne dejavnike odnosov z javnostmi (t.j. dejavnike povezane z upravljanjem in izvajanjem odnosov z javnostmi), ki lahko pomembno vplivajo na učinkovitost organizacij. Ugotavljali smo korelacijo med njimi ter s pomočjo linearne regresije ugotovili statistično značilno korelacijo med neodvisno spremenljivko (odnosi z javnostmi) in odvisno spremenljivko (uspešnost organizacije).

**Ključne besede:** odnosi z javnostmi, funkcije odnosov z javnostmi, učinkovitost podjetja, strategije odnosov z javnostmi, agencije za odnose z javnostmi