

## **Reforms policies: Winning support and increasing implementation through successful PR**

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Credibility is vital to any administration. It is especially important to an administration which has embarked upon critical, but often painful, reforms

Hard to win, but easy to lose, credibility is a prize that can be earned through painstaking devotion to grooming one's reputation and promoting greater understanding of one's efforts. In other words, it is the remit of Public Relations, which the Institute of Public Relations in the UK defines as:

*the discipline that looks after reputation –with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and support.*

Mindful of the need for public support, Western administrations devote ever-increasing resources to public relations. In Eastern Europe, lack of tradition and resources have conspired to give Public Relations a relatively modest role. Perhaps too, this neglect has been due to a failure to understand the potential role of PR in a modern administration.

### **What can the PR expert contribute to the work of the policy maker?**

#### Clearly explained policies....

Public policy is, needless to say, the domain of specialized experts such as economists and lawyers. Policies are the considered result of a subtle and complex balancing of the interests of a range of stakeholders, while taking into account economic and market constraints and, of course, the need to comply with growing international regulations, as Macedonia becomes integrated into the EU and WTO.

So what, you may ask, is the role of the PR generalist?

Indeed, experts are often reluctant to let PR officers speak about "their" policies, fearing that they do not fully understand them and that they may therefore mislead the public.

But this is a misleading argument. If the PR officer cannot be made to understand the issue, why should experts feel they can explain it any more effectively to the journalist or member of the public?

Complex though they are, policies must be understood by the public if they are to be accepted and implemented. Again and again, implementation of reforms has proved to lag far behind legislation.

Educating the public is an urgent task. Focus groups held within the framework of this project indicate that in many cases consumers and entrepreneurs were ignorant of their rights and obligations.

The public cannot be expected to implement policies they know little about.

This is where the PR expert can help. Policy experts are not necessarily communication experts, skilled at explaining complex policy in clear language, and memorable phrases. It is the task of PR officers to develop and implement communication strategies that will identify clear messages to explain each policy and which will also help the administration to communicate strategically with one voice across different departments and bodies.

*Greater understanding of different perspectives...*

It is no less important for an administration to consult its citizens. Consultation benefits the administration. It provides insight about the issues that are of primary concern and relevance to the stakeholder; it helps identify acceptable solutions; it provides forewarning of potential barriers.

In focus groups that looked at different laws in the course of this project, the stakeholders frequently came up with valuable insights and solutions from which the policy makers benefited and which were taken on board in the final versions.

Consultation is also a useful way to educate stakeholders about matters relevant to policies and anticipate their response, while winning their buy-in by letting them influence policies. For example, the Chamber of Commerce will be much more willing to promote a new law among its members if it has been given an opportunity to include a number of changes which it knows will benefit local business.

Moreover, stakeholders are inclined to reject policies that have been developed without first consulting them.

The project focus groups also found that stakeholders would welcome the opportunity of being consulted through meetings and surveys, especially when policies are being developed that directly impact on them.

Proper consultation is no less the task of public relations than is explanation.

## **What are the tasks of PR in an administration?**

### ***In policy development***

The PR department needs to work alongside policy experts as soon as a policy begins to be developed. Typically his tasks in this are as follows:

**Research:** It is the task of the PR expert to obtain all relevant information to help understand how various publics will respond to the new policy. In this he may use primary methods of research (surveys, focus groups, meetings) and/or secondary research methods (reports, media coverage, etc)

**Advise policy makers:** On the basis of this research the PR officer can provide useful guidance to the policy maker on presentation or fine-tuning of content.

**Elaborate a strategy and messages:** The preparatory research allows the PR officer, in collaboration with colleagues, to work out an overall approach and a set

of messages to be communicated to various target audiences. The messages should be tested to ensure they are properly understood and accepted by stakeholders.

**Prepare a briefing document:** The briefing document summarises the background, aims and strengths of the reforms in relation to the concerns of the stakeholders. It also identifies potential weaknesses from the viewpoint of the stakeholders and suggests how these might be minimized. The briefing document should be summarized to all key administration staff and is an important means of ensuring a coordinated communication strategy.

**Develop a PR campaign plan.** Once the strategy and messages are agreed, the PR officer develops a more detailed document which indicates what facts and sub-messages should be used to support the strategy, which audiences should be targeted and how.

**Develop a media plan.** This identifies a series of story ideas to be used over a period of time to provide ongoing news coverage of the issue. The media plan indicates who will present the policy, where and how, with details of intended interviews, endorsements, etc.

### ***In policy implementation***

Once the policy has been drafted and the communication strategy has been approved, the PR officer should:

**Manage relations with the media.** The PR officer must identify appropriate measures for presenting reform measures to target audiences. In part this task is reactive: the PR officer must monitor coverage to see if response is necessary, and if so, agree and coordinate these responses with colleagues. Should policy experts speak to the media directly, the PR officer can help negotiate appropriate occasions and identify any difficult questions they might need to be prepared for.

**Supervise the implementation of the campaign.** This role includes coordinating the development of materials, and organizing of events, the ongoing coordination of messages.

**Monitor the campaign's success.** Not infrequently a campaign will run up against unexpected difficulties. The PR officer will need to constantly monitor implementation and assess the need to modify the plan.

**Evaluating the campaign's results.** Evaluation enables an administration to build on past successes and to learn from its mistakes. Proper evaluation is vital to this process and needs to be done objectively if it is to serve the needs of your administration.

Clearly the proper implementation of all the tasks outlined above requires significant PR resources, the like of which no public administrations currently boast in Macedonia. In the interests of wider knowledge, acceptance and implementation of reforms however, such investments are recommended as soon as they might be possible.