

The need for a managerial and governmental strategy.

Public Relations as an expression of strategic communication

Dumitru BORTUN¹

If this study was entitled “Strategic Communication and Its Enemies”, the list of such enemies would include: 1. *Ignorance*, which supports the identification of Public Relations either with propaganda (majority of politicians) or with advertising (majority of managers) or with customer service (majority of Romanians); 2. *Underground economy*, which gives transparency a wild berth; 3. *Clientelistic business*, where neither brand nor market positioning is required; 4. *Underground politics*, which communicates perfectly with the clientelistic business but poorly with society; 5. *Clientelistic politics*, which communicates well with the clientelistic business and the underground economy, but for which state institutions are some forms without content; 6. *Pre-modern organizational culture, with ascendant in Feudalism* which impairs the efficient communication not only in trading companies but also in public institutions, where the clan objectives are more important than the managerial goals.

In order to honor the title of the conference organized by the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, my aim is to develop the last point since a prevailing trait of the pre-modern organizational culture is the lack of strategic thinking and, consequently, of development strategies, managerial strategies and communication strategies. My examples here are taken from the public relations sphere.

We often hear the statement that Romania needs a favorable image. Whenever someone speaks of “favorable image” or of “positive image”, it’s certain that we are not dealing with a professional. A public person,

1. Associate Professor, Ph.D., College of Communication and Public Relations, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration; President of the Honorary Jury, Romanian Association of Public Relations, Bucharest, Romania, dumitru.bortun@comunicare.ro.

an organization or a country does not need a favorable image but rather an *adequate* image. The following question pops up: “Adequate ... to what?” The answer is simple: the public image must be adequate to the objectives (economic, political or geostrategic). Because public image is not a panacea, it is merely an instrument used to reach the objectives of a strategy, as it is a strategic element by itself.

It is not fortuitous that the notion of Public Relations is also defined, briefly, as “strategic communication”. The image strategy must be only a part of a more comprehensive, holistic strategy. Whoever begins with an image strategy without referring first to a business strategy (if we are dealing with a company), a political strategy (in case of a political party) or a government strategy (if we are dealing with a government) profoundly misapprehends this concept? They put the cart before the houses! Why have we been failing to implement an efficient country image strategy? That is because we lacked a social development strategy springing from a society project.

I may be taunted with the fact that we disregarded a great post-Decembrist accomplishment: the famous Snagov Strategy. And I label it “famous” because the parties and the governments after 1995 treated it like a legendary document: they all heard of it but nobody had ever seen it! I met high officials who had no idea whatsoever about the chapters of the Strategy. When asked about the Snagov Strategy they used to call they secretary of chief of cabinet, gesture which reminded me of a saying belonging to journalist Marius Tucă: We, Romanians, when we hear the word “strategy” we immediately go fetch the dictionary... We don't even think strategically and as the saying goes: God, give Romanians *l'esprit de l'escalier!*, which means the we are very smart, analytical and wise only after we hit the upper threshold. Our goal is not to avoid the threshold but to think anticipatively. Each year the first snow catches us unprepared as if we were a tropical country. The floods have always taken us short although the first catastrophic floods occurred in 1970, then in 1975 and since then they have kept repeating regularly.

I have presented only a part of the causes for which in Romania Public Relations come into prominence with great difficulty in their professional

version. As a rule, they are practiced as propaganda or advertising; because it is easier to force the “story” down other people’s throats or pay an advertising company than drafting a development strategy. I have noticed that the disease of advertising touched the country image as well. After renaming “country image” as *brand*, the government entrusted Romania’s branding as tourist destination to... two associated advertising companies: Asesores en Turismo, Hotelaria y Recreacion SA and Taylor Nelson Sofres. But the concept of *brand* is not only a matter of creativity; firstly it is a matter of strategy. Advertisers play in this game a part that comes later, as operators of some messages that stem from the objectives of the image strategy. In their turn, such objectives derive from the economic and political goals of Romania and from the information on target-publics which are delivered by research surveys.

In default of a long-term all-embracing vision, these objectives do not exist and without it Public Relations has its hands tied and cannot do anything consistent or sustainable. Public Relations can shape a reality but cannot substitute one. They are neither literature nor advertising or propaganda or religion, because they do not create a parallel universe or a transcendental universe, beyond reality. In a smart organization, public relations are a function of the management and in a country with smart elites – a function of the government. The organization, as the country, must adapt beforehand, entertain a bidirectional communication with its publics – be them internal or external, know how it is perceived by the interested publics and take those practical measures meant to give birth to a new reality, more adequate to the public’s expectations. Public relations represent the very precocious alarm system that warns the organization (the country) regarding the new trends as well as the misperceptions that baffle the success of its managerial (or governmental) objectives.

For decades it has been said that Public Relations are the “small flywheel” of the organization. Of course, the “big flywheel” is the management but whenever the latter is in crisis, public relations have a decisive contribution in overcoming the managerial crisis. The same thing applies to a country; all we have to do is to replace “management” with “government”. I hope that it is clear now for all our readers why in the last 24 years we had numerous “image strategies” on paper but no real strategy. No government dared to appropriate such a strategy as part of its governing tasks. What

would it have actually meant? To be more eloquent, I shall refer to a “smart organization” as all successful companies are. If the PR expert informs the Board of Directors (on a periodical basis!) that, for instance, the clients perceive the staff as poorly qualified, a decision is taken for the implementation of an in-service training of the personnel. The Public Relations department has the mission of informing the stakeholders on this policy and its outcomes and not to replace such a policy with messages such as “Our personnel is very well trained”. *Mutatis mutandis*, if the Bucharest Government finds out that in the interested countries Romania is perceived as a corrupt country, it must opt for and enforce the cessation of this reality and go down to business, rather than denying it or finding excuses. One of the Romanian image campaign objectives is to make the results of the new policy known by the stakeholders.

Therefore, the first rule in the elaboration of an image strategy is *to admit that you have a problem*. The one who breaches this rule stops making an image strategy and launches a justification campaign, stops looking for solutions and begins seeking for alibis; stops giving smart answers and begins throwing polemic replies. There is nothing more detrimental than surround ourselves with walls of justifications. After all, we end up their prisoners while reality moves on...

Public relations as strategy

The concept of public relations as strategy originates from the *management function of public relations*, as defined by the scientific community in the field (Grunig, Dozier, Harlow and others): „The activity of public relations represents a standalone function of leadership; a means of achieving understanding, acceptance and cooperation; a way to manage problems and controversies; a form of stimulating the leadership’s responsibility to serve public interest; a system of early warning; an objective and honest activity” (Harlow, 1976).

As I have shown elsewhere, „the most important phenomenon in the second half of the 20th century was *the generalization at macro-social level of the techniques and procedures specific to public relations*, their coming out of the „mother’s nest” (the organization). In my opinion, the phenomenon

represents an adaptation reaction to the social system, thus ensuring its self-balance and self-reproduction as the industrial civilization was becoming post-industrial. It's about the adaptive function which public relations have had since the beginning within those organizations which regarded them as a managerial activity. But now, this function has started to play its role at the level of the societal system" (Borțun, 2012).

However, the emergence of new media and the worldwide economic-financial crisis has brought again into the spotlight the role of public relations in terms of the way in which organizations adapt to the environment. Moreover, these events have brought about the interest given to *strategic* public relations (public relations as management function, operating with medium and long term objectives), thus distinguishing ever more clearly between the latter and *tactic* public relations (public relations has support for marketing and image-building, operating with short-term objectives). Strategic public relations are those having at the core not sales objectives, but rather development objectives, which are responsibly planned in relation to the set target, but also in relation to the impacts on the publics and environment where they activate.

The role of public relations in the organizations' adapting to the environment has very important consequences on the public relation profession. Once the signals received from the environment have been interpreted, the public relation advisor has to cooperate with the managers in order to establish *the strategy for organizational change*, as well as *strategic plans of reacting to refractory events* (foreseeable conflicts, possible crises etc.). This is how Grunig and White describe this function: "The successful PR advisor continuously keeps watch over the environment, trying to extend the visibility over this scope beyond the current horizon. (...) In principle, the attempts to see clearly and to anticipate help the organization buy time to plan activities, allowing it to foresee and not just to react to changes (Grunig & White, 1992, pp. 43-44). From this standpoint, the role of public relations is to provide a "radar" for anticipating opinion trends and the topics of public debates which will affect the organization and its publics.

Unfortunately, in most Romanian public institutions it is thought that the public relations specialist must be first of all an employee and only secondly a specialist, a vision which corresponds to the “closed systems” approach. In almost all ministries and government agencies, PR specialists have the status of civil servants, the heads of departments included. When it comes to the departments in public institutions, the employee’s mentality translates into a “humble servant” behavior, which calls off the role he has to play in an intelligent organization.

PR employees tend to maintain and promote an organizational image as favorable as possible, starting from the premise that if the organization is “sympathized”, its messages will also be received with good will under any circumstances. Employees only deal with supplying information *about the organization* outside it, but not with delivering to the organization information *about the environment*. That is why they cannot be part of the decision-making process; they have too little to say about *WHAT is said*, their main focus is *HOW things are said*. Sometimes, information about the environment is sent daily, but after they were forged: for example, as I myself discovered some years ago, in a Romanian ministry, the periodic press monitoring reports include more positive news about the respective ministry than were actually published, in order to save the honor of the press bureau.

Unlike the PR *employee*, the PR specialist is the icon of an open approach, which operates changes both within the organization as well as in its environment. He has the ability to offer advice and has a major impact on the decision-making process. In this view, public relations become effective in the prevention of crisis situations. As I said earlier, if the “big flywheel” of the organization remain the management, public relations are the “small flywheel”, capable of removing the “big flywheel” from the dead point (from the managerial crisis).

From the two approaches of public relations, two different methods of practicing the profession also derive: a *technical* one, where the specialist is just a doer, and a *strategic* one, where he participates to the decision-making process. James Grunig and James White refer to these two alternatives

“handiwork public relations” and “professional public relations” (Grunig & White, 1992, p. 44).

As a *technician*, the PR person describes the receiving environment in order to render the organizational communication as efficient as possible; as a *strategist*, the PR person participates to the decision-making process, that is: he is part of the dominating coalition (*dominant decision making coalition*). Jon White and David Dozier argue “This dominant coalition needs information in order to make decisions. Therefore, information is often supplied in a discriminatory manner, by the persons within the organization, who interact frequently with the organizational environment and who collect, select the information originating from this environment and transmit them to those who make decisions in the majority coalition” (White & Dozier, 1992, p. 93).

This is why I am participating in this conference: I want to plead in favor of the professionalization of the institutional communication in Public Administration in Romania – both in the central and local administration. Even at the cost of a new legislation, regulating the rights and obligations of the communicators in public institutions, defining the status of the communication specialist as *civil servant with special status* and, at the same time, binding employers to select the communicators only from the *graduates with studies in the field*. Without such a revolution, which I am tempted to call “professional revolution”, it is impossible to imagine a more efficient, less corrupt and more citizen-dedicated administration. The much-proclaimed “modernization of the state” cannot take place without the modernization of its communicational structures.

Edward Bernays (1891-1995), known as “the father of public relations”, considers that this activity can turn competition, an engine of free societies, into something more efficient and more productive: like all things, ideas compete to gain the interest and support of the public. The public relations activity can make a public adhere to current beliefs and actions or to convert to new ones – for instance, the Romanian civil servants’ body may switch from the values of the clientelistic pyramid to the modern values focused on merits. In a famous paper, published in 1923, Edward Bernays called this “creating a public conscience”, which he considered the noblest

meaning the PR profession may have: “I consider that the highest mission of the public relations advisor in the society he lives in is to create a public conscience” (Bernays, 2003, p. 162).

References

- Bernays, E.L. (1923/2003). *The Public Opinion Crystallization*. Bucharest: Comunicare.ro Publishing House.
- Borþun, D. (2012). *Public Relations and the New Society* (2nd ed). Bucharest: Tritonic Publishing House.
- Grunig, J.E., and Grunig, L.A. (1992). Models of public relations and communication. In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 285-326). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, J., and White, J. (1992). The Effects of World views on Public Relations Theory and Practice. In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), *Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 31-54). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J.E., and Dozier, D.M. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organizations. A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Harlow, R.F. (1976). Building a public relations definition, in *Public Relations Review*, 2(4), 34-42.
- Hon, C.L., and Grunig, J.E. (1999). *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations*. Gainesville, FL: The Institute for Public Relations.
- White, J., and Dozier, D.M. (1992). Public relations and management decision making. In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 91-108). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.