

THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ENHANCING UNIVERSITY REPUTATION: GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

Nargis Qosimova

Doctor of Sciences (Philology), Professor

Dilobar Zaripova

PhD student of UZJOKU

In today's highly competitive academic environment, public relations and strategic communication have become critical functions for higher education institutions seeking to build and sustain their reputation. Effective PR not only promotes achievements but also strengthens trust among stakeholders such as students, faculty, alumni, and government agencies. As Sun and Lim argue, reputation management in higher education requires both proactive and reactive strategies to adapt to changing stakeholder expectations. Similarly, Campbell emphasizes that internal communication within universities plays a vital role in shaping external perceptions, as engaged staff act as ambassadors who reinforce institutional credibility. Together, these perspectives highlight how PR and strategic media communication underpin the long-term success and visibility of universities in the global arena.

Managing relationships is the fundamental theoretical principle of public relations, emphasizing that the main direction of PR is aimed at establishing and maintaining beneficial and mutually advantageous relationships between the organization and its stakeholders. Initially, the theory and practice of public relations were more transactional (deal-based), focusing primarily on information

dissemination. However, scholars emphasize that the field has now shifted toward relationship management (Campbell, 2018). This means that PR is no longer just about sending messages or managing the organization's image, but about developing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with various stakeholders (clients, employees, the media, government, etc.).

When describing the concept of strategic PR, relationship management becomes even more important. PR professionals must identify key public, understand their needs, and work to establish relationships that help the organization achieve its goals. Good relationships lead to cooperation, loyalty, and stakeholder support, significantly enhancing the organization's reputation and helping it achieve its broader objectives.

In universities, PR activity as a strategic management function means using communication tools and strategies to achieve the institution's overall goals, such as enhancing reputation, attracting students, building partnerships, ensuring funding, and maintaining positive relations with society. This includes actively planning, implementing, and evaluating communication activities that serve both the university and its stakeholders (students, faculty, alumni, government agencies, etc.).

In the strategic management of higher education institutions, PR as a strategic management function performs various tasks to align with institutional objectives, enhance public perception, and develop important relationships. As a key strategic function, PR carries out the following:

Reputation management: PR improves the university's reputation among the public by preparing and distributing messages that highlight the institution's achievements, values, and contributions to the state or partners. This involves strengthening positive perceptions among core audiences such as students, faculty,

alumni, and government agencies, using communication channels to build trust and credibility (Sun & Lim, 2023).

Stakeholder relationship management: PR establishes and maintains strong ties with stakeholders, including students, parents, policymakers, and other partners, to strategically manage relationships. Through consistent and targeted engagement, PR activities enhance institutional influence, support, and loyalty, which are essential for sustainable growth (Dhanwatay, 2016).

Crisis communication: Effective crisis communication is crucial for strategic management, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as financial crises or scandals. PR teams ensure timely and transparent responses to minimize potential damage, protect the reputation of the higher education institution, and maintain public trust (AKCG, 2025).

Government relations: PR professionals build connections with government officials to secure institutional support, funding, and favorable policy conditions (Inside Higher Ed, 2022). This advocacy ensures that the institution's needs and mission are represented and advanced in political discussions and legislative actions.

The operational functions of PR in higher education are equally important for managing the university's day-to-day communication tasks that connect it with its community and stakeholders. These functions ensure that institutional messages remain consistent, accessible, and effective across multiple platforms. The main operational PR functions include:

Media relations: PR establishes and maintains media contacts to promote the university's news, events, and achievements, handling tasks such as preparing press releases, organizing interviews, and responding to media inquiries (Inside Higher Ed, 2022).

Internal communication: This ensures effective communication within the university among students, faculty, staff, and administration. It includes managing newsletters, internal announcements, and policy updates. Internal communication is crucial for public relations, as it facilitates targeted information exchange between management and employees, positively impacting organizational reputation, staff loyalty, and participation.

Although many organizations underestimate its importance, research from Northwestern University shows that effective internal communication meets employees' informational needs, prepares them to better serve external stakeholders, and enables them to act as "ambassadors" for the organization, thereby enhancing its image and reputation. An organization's reputation is directly linked to its relationship with employees. Internal communication also increases employee loyalty, as engaged staff are more committed, productive, and effective, leading to higher retention and performance (Campbell, 2018). Moreover, positive internal communication contributes to external perceptions and customer satisfaction, as employee satisfaction is directly tied to client satisfaction, ultimately strengthening the institution's external reputation and efficiency.

Event management and promotion: A core component of public relations in higher education, covering the organization and marketing of institutional events such as graduation ceremonies, conferences, open days, and other community activities. Event organization involves coordinating logistics, including venue selection, scheduling, and technical requirements, alongside careful program management, ensuring a smooth and relevant experience. Multichannel promotion through social media, newsletters, and the university website expands audience reach, while video content boosts interest and engagement. Stakeholder engagement and collaboration with external organizations enhance event participation and resources (Campbell, 2018).

Content creation and management: PR efforts in higher education also involve producing content for websites, social media platforms, newsletters, and brochures. By maintaining coherent and compelling messages, universities can effectively reach diverse audiences from prospective students to alumni and the public strengthening their online presence and reinforcing key messages (Platform Magazine, 2023). Effective content management thus helps universities solidify their reputation and build lasting, meaningful relationships with their audiences.

Social media management (SMM) and marketing support: Managing a university's social media presence plays a vital role in engaging current and prospective students, alumni, and the broader community by sharing news, answering questions, and safeguarding its online reputation. Additionally, participation in or sponsorship of local events, as well as promoting the university's contribution to social development, enhances visibility and strengthens relationships with local stakeholders. By aligning these materials with the university's brand, PR teams not only attract target audiences but also ensure all communications reflect the institution's reputation and values. PR specialist Olivia Esquivel emphasized: "The core task and purpose of targeted marketing messages is to ensure they align with the university's overall brand and reputation while effectively reaching the target audience with the institution's broader mission" (Platform Magazine, 2023). This connection between PR and marketing strengthens brand identity and maximizes the impact of promotional efforts.

Overall, these operational PR functions are critical to maintaining a positive, transparent, and consistent communication environment that supports the university's broader strategic goals. Together, they foster public engagement, strengthen institutional reputation, and contribute to the overall power of the brand in a highly competitive academic landscape.

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