Relaciones públicas como una herramienta de ciencia comunicativa con la sociedad

Public relations as a tool of science communication with society

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ABSTRACT
In the field of science, Central and East European countries (CEECs) have inherited various relics from the past, among them:

- bad communication between science and society,
- low level of public understanding of science (PUS),
- weak co-operation between the science sphere and the production sphere,
- small scale of science commercialisation,
- practically non-existent infrastructure of scientific and technological knowledge flows in society.

At present, the market reforms in CEECs are far advanced. So now, the main direction in their developments is to build the knowledge-based economy/society.

Moreover, the science sector has been divided into three separate sub-sectors: (1) Higher Education, (2) Academies of Sciences and (3) Industrial R&D. Higher education institutions together with academy of sciences’ research institutes constitute so-called academic science.

In reforming our countries towards modern market economies, academic science faces numerous challenges. Among them, there is a challenge: How to communicate better with society? There are various tools of such communication. One of them is public relations (PR).

The main aim of this paper is to prove a big potential role of public relations as a communication tool between academic science and society, with a special reference to CEECs. Poland will here be a case-study.

The following issues will be analyzed in the paper:
1. The role of science communication: A brief survey of literature
2. Public relations as an element of science communication
3. Polish experiences: A short evaluation
4. A desired role of public relations
5. Conclusion

Keywords: Public relations, science communication, knowledge-based economy/society

INTRODUCTION

In the field of science, Central and East European countries have inherited various relics from the past, among them:

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- small scale of science commercialisation,
- practically non-existent infrastructure of scientific and technological knowledge flows in society.
At present, market reforms in CEECs are far advanced. So now, the main direction in their development is to build the knowledge-based economy/society. In reforming CEE countries towards modern market economies, the science sector faces numerous challenges. Among them, there is a challenge to communicate better with society.

In the world’s literature, instead of science communication with society, nowadays, it is often said rather about public communication of science and technology (PCST)

* According to Leshner (2005), science and technology are embedded in every aspect of modern society and contribute greatly to economic prosperity, national and individual security, health status and quality of life.

* Science and technology, ‘the great actors and accelerators of the transformation of the world, are at the centre of the productive system, daily life and the reflection on the contemporary world’ (Jantzen, 1996).

* Society has a higher level of doubt and a lower level of acceptance of science. Therefore, PCST efforts must accept that science literacy is something that will always be limited, even to those directly involved through a formal education or occupation (Schiele, 2006).

It’s common to lament the chronic lack of science and technology knowledge exhibited by a major portion of the general public (Schiele, 2006):

- The public’s doubt about science, especially controversial science, needs to be recognized and taken into account by scientists, research organizations and government,
- Research is expanding into new fields so rapidly that no-one can keep it. The widening gap in knowledge between scientists and the general public needs to be accepted as a constant reality of the environment within which science communication will always work,
- Science communication needs to respond to clearly identified local issues, by fostering local actions focused on concrete situations,
- Science communication is a long-term process that needs to take into account the time taken to develop social relationships and shared meanings.

In order to cope with the challenge mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the skilful promotion of science is needed. We may speak about science promotion in a broad and a narrow sense. **Science promotion** in a broad sense is understood as public support for scientific research and for the dissemination of its results. This is a task for government policy. Supporting research, particularly basic research, is even the obligation of the state. Here we mean not only support for public sector research, which is obvious. But the

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1 The author of this paper is a member of PCST network.
government should also support efforts of the business sector to spend more money on R&D and innovation.

In other words, promotion of scientific achievements is an extremely important aspect of public policy for science and technology. Supporting scientific research per se is promotion in the broader meaning. This is, or rather should be, even a more important activity of government.

However, in Poland, it is not so easy. The key player in the country with respect to science and technology policy is Ministry for Science and Higher Education, previously State Committee for Scientific Research (KBN). The official status/formula of KBN, and now of the Ministry, does not allow to undertake the activity aimed at acquiring non-budgetary resources nor financially supporting the practical implementation of R&D results. Ministers of Science have often complained about this. Certain conveniences are contained in the Parliamentary Bill on Science Financing.

Poland has some positive experiences in the field of science communication with society. For more details, please have a look into Jasinski (2004). For example, just recently, the National Foresight Programme ‘Poland 2020’ was a good exercise of science promotion within public debate as a phase of the foresight process. Nevertheless, the following reservations can be formulated:

1) the main stress put on the dissemination and popularization rather than on promotion of science,
2) too small the funds, mainly state-owned, spent for these activities,
3) too narrow the scale of the activities, dominated by the Polish Academy of Sciences,
4) too limited the contribution of Ministry of Science and Higher Education,
5) too small the engagement of local governments.

Therefore, two main areas of science promotion – in the broad sense - and their respective goals are as follows:

i) promotion of research in the business sector with the main aim to increase non-budgetary expenditure on R&D, and
ii) promotion of results of research conducted in the public sector with the main aim to broaden and accelerate the implementation of these results in practice.

In order to accomplish the two aims, an appropriate level of public understanding of science is needed. At present, public participation in science is the current theme of discussions in the West. In Poland, a low level of PUS is one of reasons why the role of science in the country’s development is underestimated. The following attitude still predominates in society, especially among Polish politicians: ‘How to build economies on science?’, instead of the desired approach: ‘How to capitalize on science in the long run?’.
Science or scientific research requires good promotion both on the micro- and the macro-scale. It’s obvious that scientific institutions, such as universities, the Polish Academy of Sciences’ research institutes and other R&D units, must conduct skillfully crafted promotional campaigns. This is an activity at the micro-level, that is, science promotion or communication in the narrow sense (see further). A lack of marketing experience in scientific institutions has been one of weaknesses of the national innovation system in Poland. It must be added that promotion may also exist on the mezzo-scale, i.e., in a region/voivodship within a regional innovation strategy (RIS).

Public relations as an element of marketing communication

As known, the concept of marketing-mix contains 4Ps: product, price, place and promotion. Promotion, being the main subject of our interest, is an information activity with a purpose to promote (back up) a product/service and its producer/seller. So, the organization is here an information sender, and a potential client is an information receiver. This component of marketing-mix is now more and more often named just communication. Of course, not the change of name is important but the essence of this activity. Although its aim remains the same, this P is, nowadays, treated as a complex way of communication between the organization and the market where there exists a permanent exchange of information (feed-back) between the two. Public relations (PR) is one of four ‘classic’ forms or tools of marketing communication, besides advertising, personal selling and sales promotion. Some call PR a marketing propaganda.

The essence of the communication process is that a sender sends a message and a receiver reacts on it, so there is a two-way exchange of messages. The sender or communicator must answer three key questions:

1. Whom he/she wants to communicate with? (Audience),
2. What to communicate? (Message),
3. How to send the message to the audience? (Tools).

Moreover, the sender must, first of all, formulate a concrete goal of sending the message (Goal). And obviously, he/she should evaluate the receiver’s reaction to this message (Evaluation). So, we can speak about a GAMTE model (Goal-Audience-Message-Tools-Evaluation) of communication.

The concept of public relations is closely connected with communication of an organization with its environment. In literature, the concept is understood in various ways. Bernays (1955), e.g., treated PR as an element of the social communication. Authors of marketing course-books universally consider PR as a component of so-called marketing-mix (Lazer and Culley, 1983; Kotler, 1991; Schoell and Guiltinan, 1995). In turn, Black (1993),
Scott et al (1994) and Gregory, ed (1998) treat PR as an element of a firm’s management. E.g., in Black’s opinion, PR is wider than advertising or propaganda, and goes far beyond marketing (Black, 1993). Also, many authors, including marketers, agree that PR is a broader concept than marketing.

The role of PR as the communication instrument considerably increased in the last decades:

‘As the power of mass advertising weakens owing to rising media costs, increasing clutter and smaller audiences, marketing managers are turning more to PR. Clearly, public relations can make a memorable impact on public awareness at a fraction of the cost of advertising. The company does not pay for the space or time obtained in the media. It pays for a staff to develop and circulate the stories and manage certain events. If the company develops an interesting story, it could be picked up by all the news media and be worth millions of dollars in equivalent advertising. Furthermore, it would have more credibility than advertising. Some experts sat that consumers are five time more likely to be influenced by editorial copy than by advertising’ (Kotler, 1991, p.643).

Differences between marketers and PR specialists are not so big. For Kotler, who calls PR ‘a marketing stepchild’, the main aim of PR is to create a company’s positive image. For Black, it is a good reputation and proper publicity. Similarly, for Gregory (1998) and Pluta (2001), a firm’s positive reputation is most important here.

Kotler (1991) mentions ten following PR tools: press kits, speeches, seminars, annual reports, charitable donations, sponsorships, publications, community relations, lobbying and identity media, while Black (1993) embraces these in five groups:

(1) a written or spoken word,
(2) exhibitions and conferences,
(3) lobbying,
(4) parliamentary contacts and
(5) sponsoring.

As can be seen, both authors mention similar instruments. For instance, they include sponsoring and lobbying into PR, although in literature, there are authors who consider these separately.

The essence of public relations is well presented in the book The Essentials of Public Relations: PR is a science and art of achieving a harmony with the environment through a mutual agreement based on the real and full information. And philosophy of PR assumes that the aims are being achieved easier with a social understanding and support than with an opposition or indifference (Black, 1993). The science sector, of course, needs the harmony with its environment and the mutual understanding and support from society. This proves that public relations as the communication tool is fully useful here.

As far as public relations is concerned, in Poland, we had good experiences in (political) propaganda within the previous system, i.e. by 1989, but very little experience in the field of
PR. According to the questionnaire research among employees in 374 small and medium-sized enterprises (Pluta, 2001), as many as 40% of them do not know a concept of PR; and only 5% of the surveyed firms have a separate PR unit reporting directly to the board of directors. So, a general picture of PR in the country is unfavourable.

In Poland and in other CEECs, science needs good public relations because of the following reasons:

1) Some symptoms of a crisis have appeared in the Polish science, mainly from a financial point of view.
   → One of spheres of PR activities is just reacting to the organization’s difficulties.

2) As mentioned, a low level of PUS exists in the country.
   → An influence of PR on the general public allows neutralizing hostile opinions and strengthening favourable opinions.

3) There is a lack of agreement among political elites that science (together with education) should be a priority in the country’s development.
   → PR’s aim is to achieve a mutual agreement and consensus via dialog.

4) Managers in research organizations do not have enough skills to run marketing actions.
   → PR, which is a broader concept, can support and sometimes even replace some shortcomings in marketing activities of R&D institutions.

5) Poland has joined The European Union and so a competition is growing between research institutes – in the country and the European Union headquarters in Brussels.
   → PR actions run by R&D organizations allow them to strengthen their positions in ‘the R&D market’.

A desired role of public relations

This state of affairs needs improvement. The philosophy of public relations as the element of marketing communication may be very helpful here. One can imagine that the following mechanism will start to function (Figure 1):
So, from the view-point of a scientific institution, we can expect the following 'chain reaction':

1. skilful marketing communication,
2. appropriate public relations,
3. wider publicity and good reputation,
4. better public understanding of science,
5. more finance for research and development,
6. wider science offer and commercialization.
In the case of the science sector, **public relations consists in the presentation**, to the environment, **of its activities and all functions of science** - as a public good – in the process of satisfying social needs. Following Black’s (1993) classification, PR tools can be formulated in this case as follows:

- written and spoken word – mainly via academic teachers and their publications,
- exhibitions, fairs and conferences - where conferences are a typical form of the scientists’ work,
- sponsoring – in favour of science,
- lobbying – conducted by the science representatives and addressed to the government,
- parliamentary contacts – via scientists-members of parliament.

According to the earlier mentioned GAMTE model, a starting point in science promotion should be an identification of strategic groups of information receivers, called in marketing as target markets. Here we shall speak about **target audiences**. In Poland, e.g., PR actions being undertaken by scientific institutions should be mainly addressed to:

1. Politicians, both central and regional/local authorities,
2. Journalists, both from central and local media,
3. Businessmen, mainly industrialists,
4. Teachers and other workers in the education system,
5. Youth, both pupils and students,

Reaching target groups is the key task of public relations. Known from marketing, the concept of **market segmentation** is extremely useful here. The segmentation allows us to identify segments of a given market and then to choose, from among them, one or more target markets (see e.g., Kotler, 1991; Schoell and Guiltinan, 1995).

In the case of Poland, these six target audiences for science ought to be divided into two groups:

a) first three segments on the above list, which should be reached in the short term, i.e., primarily, and

b) the other segments on this list, which should be reached in the long term, as a long-run activity.

Each of the audiences requires various ways to communicate with. These methods must be adjusted to their information needs, which ought to be well recognized before. Let’s notice that politicians (group 1), journalists (group 2), representatives of businessmen associations (within group 3) and teachers (within group 4) are opinion leaders, very important for creating
publicity and reputation of the science sector. Thus, they require an additional attention within PR actions.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing, public relations as the modern, efficient, professional marketing tool should be widely used in communication between science and society in the process of building up the knowledge-based societies in Central and East European countries.

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