

Chapter 10

Using Public Relations Process in Setting up Websites: A Model Proposal for Open and Distance Education Universities

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies play a key role in public relations applications in creating an effective communication between institutions and target audiences and student support services of distance education institutions. The necessity of making use of new communication technologies by educational institutions is because they obtain and spread information. While distance education provides students an opportunity of independent and individual study, it also should make teaching and learning process easier and more interesting for students. The aim of this study is to propose a model for open and distance education universities in using public relations process in setting up websites. It can be put forward if the public relations process is applied in public relations applications carried out on the Web.

INTRODUCTION

Any organization needs to plan and implement communication activities strategically and perform organizational communication activities efficiently so that it can survive in today's global environment. Particularly in recent years over the course of the transition from an industrial to an information society, increased competition

among institutions and organizations has required changes their managerial functions. In particular, the greater need of institutions and organizations to attract their audiences' interest and support has elevated the role of marketing communications strategies in the quest to offer better products and services.

Marketing communications refers to a whole process that includes all communications efforts to potential customers, including advertising,

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public relations, organizational identity, and sales development. More specifically, marketing communications requires determining target audiences' expectations, developing sales and an organizational image, investigating the conditions of competition, branding and promotional campaigns, developing distribution channels and finally, developing methods and means to implement resulting plans (Ünusan and Sezgin, 2005:7). In marketing communications, communication by informing is necessary but not sufficient. This is because marketing communications is also considered as a persuasive communication process (Kocabaş et al., 2000:15). The objective in this communication process is to engage in a two-way communication with the target audience, to inform them about the product, service or the organization, to form a new audience attitude and behavior, and to set up a dialogue with the audience through feedback.

As a communication activity aimed at enabling institutions and organizations to understand and acknowledge their target audiences in order to create a positive image, *public relations applications* are gaining more and more significance as a sub-discipline of marketing communications in today's highly competitive environment. As a component of any marketing mix, public relations involve communication activities by institutions and organizations in order to create an acceptable and justifiable image with the target audience and the public in general so that they, especially non-profit government institutions and small-scale organizations, can earn the target audience's sympathy and support. (Bıçakçı, 1999:128).

The aims of public relations applications are stated as follows (Mihçioğlu, 1976:18-20, Tor-top, 1993:53, Kazancı, 1995:117, Sabuncuoğlu, 2001:51-53):

- To create organizational identity and promote it,
- To identify target audiences' tendencies, attitudes and behaviors about institutions/

organizations and come up with necessary recommendations,

- To create positive attitudes with target audiences towards administrations,
- To inform the public and assist the society in their relationships with organizations,
- To inform target audiences about organizations' services and applications,
- To provide the public with an opportunity to express their opinions before institutions and organizations make decisions in any action,
- To obtain useful information from the public,
- To utilize the public opinion in identifying various defects in laws and executions and eliminating these defects.

To sum up, public relations make it possible for institutions/organizations to gain public recognition, to have constructive relationships with their environment and perform their services more effectively and efficiently.

BACKGROUND

Today, almost every industry, product, service, and organization has a virtual environment –a website- to express itself online. Public relations researchers and implementers bring forward new formats of communication in this media where information spreads quickly, and information transfers through websites and applications such as Gallup polls are considered as public relations functions. In addition, various opportunities can be created by using websites to solve the problems of institutions and organizations and to find immediate solutions to crises (Friedman, 2001).

According to Robert Heath, an effective communication with the public through new technologies provides four basic benefits in public relations (Heath, 1998:273);

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