

**Public Relations at Clean Water Action:**  
**How an Environmental Advocacy Group Uses PR to Grow a Grassroots Campaign**

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PRL206: Public Relations Principles and Concepts

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the use of communications towards the overall goals of Clean Water Action. First, an overview of the organization Clean Water Action is given to contextualize the nonprofit's purpose, as well as an introduction to the interviewee, Michael Kelly, whose background led him to becoming the Director of Communications. Then his specific skills and responsibilities in his role are addressed, as well as an analysis of PR theories relevant to a Clean Water Action PR practitioner's practices. Rex Harlow's definition of PR is examined through the organization's maintenance of communication with their publics, and key stakeholder groups are identified. Next I express my own opinion on the importance of a company's CSR efforts as well as an example of Clean Water Action's CSR endeavors. The media relations strategies used to build relationships and their contribution to the organization's reputation management are also discussed. Lastly, the paper concludes with my final takeaways from the interview and nuggets of wisdom I will take with me through my PR journey.

**QUESTION #1:**

*Part One: Describe your chosen organization, giving each of these: its purpose, size, major product/service, location(s), historical origins, any unique features, name of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), name of top public relations practitioner, any other pertinent or interesting facts about the organization.*

Clean Water Action is an American non-profit environmental advocacy group whose purpose is to connect experts, communications and “solution-oriented” people together with the goal of pushing environmental sustainability policies and educating the public with their main priority being water (Clean Water Action, 2019). Founded during the Clean Water Act campaign in 1972, their mission is “to protect our environment, health, economic well-being and community quality of life” (See **Appendix A** for the entire mission statement) (Clean Water Action, 2019) through grassroots efforts to campaign for environmental candidates and bills. Clean Water Action is one of America’s “largest, most effective environmental organizations” with almost one million members and a strong grassroots outreach as workers conduct field canvassing in several states (Clean Water Action, 2019).

Their campaign efforts have been crucial in shaping laws such as the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Superfund for toxics cleanup with their methods of “person-to-person outreach” and fundraising (Clean Water Action, 2020). The main priorities include: water, oil and gas, civic engagement and elections and environmental justice to name a few (full priority list below in **Appendix B**) (Clean Water Action, 2020). Robert Wendelgass is currently the CEO with our interviewee, Michael Kelly, serving as the Director of National Communications. The HQ is in Philadelphia, but there are locations in eleven other states (for a total of twelve), not including a national office in DC (Clean Water Action, 2020).

Some interesting facts about Clean Water Action are the overwhelming number of employees who are members of the Democratic Party — 93.1% —as well as the 35.4% who are ethnic minorities (“Clean Water Action Careers & Jobs,” 2020). While the Democratic Party statistic is not too surprising, it is great to see that a large percentage of the employees represent voices that have been silenced for too long in politics.

*Part Two: Get to know your interviewee a bit: Provide educational background; how they got into public relations; previous positions; involvement in professional societies and/or community organizations.*

I enjoyed interviewing Michael Kelly, the National Communications Director for Clean Water Action. Michael has been with Clean Water Action as the Director of Online Communications for over a decade, and has amassed traditional skills of communication and relationship building as well as adapted to the new social media platforms for a larger outreach.

Michael graduated from Emerson College with a B.A. in Visual and Media Arts, and described how he had always been a writer and communicator who cared about progressive issues. Early in his career he worked as a Neighborhood Projects Manager at the Seattle Parks Foundation where he worked in low income communities to get parks funded and built in areas that were typically underserved. Later working as a Mobilization Coordinator at the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, Michael first learned the importance of building deep and trusting relationships with people so that everyone can move forward together instead of having only transactional relationships. When going into communities and attempting to provide services, he described how vital it is to go in humbly with authentic motivations to better both the organization and the efforts, with open communication being the foundation. This role was

an introduction to larger responsibilities for communications efforts as he wrote weekly emails and launched social media outreaches to educate the general public about housing and homelessness policies (Michael Kelly, n.d.). His goals of helping people work on issues that he cares about, and being able to shape the messaging of a movement came to fruition with the opening of the Clean Water Action Online Communications job. The role of shaping the way a company talks to the public about environmental issues, and using storytelling to get others involved is the core of what drove Michael towards PR, and a key aspect to his every day work.

## **QUESTION #2:**

*Part One: What specific skills and roles does your interview perform for the organization? Give specific skills and be sure to ask your interviewee about their time and responsibility allocation for each section. By playing this role, how does the public relations practitioner advance the mission of the organization?*

As the Communications Director, Michael's responsibilities include managerial tasks, acting as the main liaison with developed press strategy and overseeing the online communications. His LinkedIn describes roles such as "day to day management of [the] online presence and social media reach" as well as developing the "online communications strategies and campaigns" (Michael Kelly, n.d.). Michael used the phrase "jack of all trades" to describe the array of skills a PR practitioner must have to relay information from experts and determine strategies for the best tactics to reach key demographics. One of the foundational skills of PR is relaying information to mass audiences in an easy to understand form, and for Michael, the ability to collaborate and build trust with experts so they respect his ability to communicate the

information they want addressed is crucial to his role. Social media is also a major responsibility (discussed further in **Question 5**) as well as managing the regional staff for communications.

A common phrase I have heard throughout this semester was “content is king.” This applies in Michael’s work through the ability to tell a story with grace and humility, as well as building a trusting relationship where people feel comfortable enough to share. The digital space is constantly injected with new media, news and information and an emotional and authentic story has the power to grip an individual more than any infographic could. Michael described how a powerful story can go a long way to getting others involved and aware of current issues, which is the core of why he is involved in environmental communications.

PR practitioners must have vast communication skills, but also an understanding of the industry they are working in. As Clean Water Action is a political advocacy group, Michael stressed the importance of collaboration in strategic planning for the changes coming out of Congress each day. Plans can change in a moment, and he described the ability to pivot and have many strategies and resources ready quickly as vital to his job. Any political activity requires knowledge of government, those in office and the interest groups affecting targeted policies. While one cannot prepare for every situation, crisis management is vital to creating a plan of action for a broad variety of problems.

*Part Two: Using the information learned on PR Theories, please select one or more theories to explain their use within the organization. Explore how theory drives practice for your organization.*

Through our interview, two key theories stuck out to me as prevalent to the functioning of Clean Water Action and the pursuit of their overall goals: the agenda-setting theory and the excellence theory.

The agenda-setting theory “states that the media have a large influence on audiences by choosing which stories to make prominent” and influencing publics on both first and second-level agenda setting (Page & Parnell, 2021). This theory relates to Clean Water Action as they appeal to the gatekeepers of media and release information directly on social media to appeal to different audiences. When asked about the importance of press releases in an increasingly digital world, Michael shared the “dirty little secret” that press releases are useless in the sense of catching a reporter's interest. He spoke of his brother-in-law who’s a reporter at the Boston Globe and how he gets tens of press releases a day; an already established relationship with a reporter is more likely to hold weight over the content of their articles than a well-intentioned press release. There are gatekeepers to traditional media that a PR practitioner must collaborate with for their stories to be featured and a key aspect of Michael’s work is building relationships with journalists so they can be provided with expertise and the context for their articles, not necessarily only to get a story published.

Another theory applicable to Clean Water Action is the excellence theory which describes the relationships an organization has with a stakeholder and the cultivation of two-way communications to manage a positive reputation between an organization and its publics (Page & Parnell, 2021). As an environmental advocacy group, a practitioner must cultivate respectful relationships with the surrounding communities as well as prepare for any situation as the political context around policies change. Michael emphasized the importance of collaboration to understand the whole playing field and the impact of different decisions on the industry. In



politics there are always going to be forces one cannot control, so collaborating with the public and within the organization on strategies ahead of time help build a quick and responsive management team.

### **QUESTION #3:**

*Part One: Using Harlow's FULL definition of public relations, create a checklist of each of the elements of that definition found in your organization. Give a concrete example of each element found.*

Harlow defines Public Relations as “a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics” (Page & Parnell, 2021).

Distinctiveness was a key concept we discussed in class. As social media has allowed for direct contact with mass audiences 24/7, the digital space is full of different organizations and companies striving to interest the individual enough to click on their post or dive deeper into the organization. One of the ways Clean Water Action demonstrates their distinctiveness is through field canvassing; while many organizations go door-to-door, most of Clean Water Action's members come from these efforts, and they also offer the ability for canvassers to listen to individuals in the community about ideas or problems they see as prevalent. This authenticity and humbleness allows Clean Water Action employees to dive deeply into communities and build long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Two-step flow (further addressed in **Question 4**) is a foundational skill used in PR to create closer relationships with stakeholders of an organization. By having members reaffirm action every year, Clean Water Action assures that members are up to date and still care about

these issues. When reaching out for my interview, it was easy to navigate through the staff pages as all had clear descriptions of the responsibilities of the roles, as well as either a phone number or email to contact. This was invaluable as I was able to set up an interview and get in contact easily with the organization even though I had not made a connection before. A company that is easily accessible and encourages that connection with the public intertwines itself with the needs of the community rather than having a corporate plan and not altering from its course.

As the Director of Communications, Michael is responsible for the overall online communications strategies, but also the management of regional PR staffers. For Michael, relationship building is crucial to working in the industry, and while he does not have close relationships with every person he wants a story on, he trusts his employees to maintain the relationships and have the ability to tell the story in an honest and graceful manner or prepare the experts to dive deeper for journalists. The collaboration aspect of storytelling was heavily emphasized, and Michael works hard to establish clear lines of communication between the experts, local communities and organization.

The court of public opinion, as discussed in class, can make or break a company's reputation. The importance of keeping open communication between all stakeholders and levels of employees in an organization is foundational to maintaining a good workplace and ensuring an organization is up to date on current issues. Michael emphasized how certain members of the organization were experts on particular fields, and it was key to pay attention to the industry as a whole to understand how different factors will impact the issues they care about. Having an expert talk to a journalist or give information for a social media post helps to keep the public correctly informed on current issues.

*Part Two: Identify at least three stakeholder groups. How does the public relations operation "build and maintain lines of communication" with these three publics? Give specific examples for each of the three publics you have chosen.*

The key stakeholder groups Michael identified for Clean Water Action are the members, general public, media and corporations. As they are an advocacy group, the main goals are to educate the public and protect the environment; maintaining both broad and direct lines of communication are essential to drawing in new members and focusing them on national, state or local issues.

I recently became one of the million members of Clean Water Action through an email subscription. Michael described members as “proactively” joining because they cared about the issue enough to sign up to the email list and then taking action through donating, and they are people he assumes know more than the general public because they are more connected to the issue through education in the emails. Each year, a member signs a Clean Water Action support statement to “affirm” action and financial support is encouraged by members as the organization does not rely on “foundational grants, corporate gifts or government spending” to uphold its independence and “grassroots power” (Clean Water Action, 2018). The reliance on members makes them a vital part of a PR practitioner’s outreach, and the communication must be persuasive enough to fund the organization.

The next stakeholder group is the general public who Michael discussed as people who care about either climate change or water in general, but do not know specifics about the issues. As discussed in class, PR practitioners must both understand and target different publics to draw people towards their products or issues. Over the past several years, environmentalism and climate change have become prevalent issues in politics with water rising to the forefront

especially after the Flint water crisis in 2014. While these issues have become more mainstream, Michael sees the general public as people who they want to provide with “top level” infographics with more explainers about why people should care and want to become members. This audience is reached through social media or features in traditional media like news articles. Social media has grown in its popularity and dominance in younger audiences and is important to consider when reaching to Gen Z who are recently coming into the political arena as voters and activists.

The press is an important stakeholder group to most PR practitioners, and it is no difference in this case. For Michael, it is important to be a “resource” for reporters in providing accurate information or connecting them to others in the organization that are experts in specific fields. He gave an example of a call from the New York Times from the past week where he connected them to Clean Water Action’s National Campaigns Manager, Lynn Thorp, who he knew was an expert on lead that could “dig deeply” into the subject to provide context on complicated issues a reporter might get wrong otherwise. For Michael, the relationship between a comms director and the press can be transactional where one gives a quote and the other “runs with it,” but his goals are for the semblance of an actual relationship that is back and forth and collaborative. While a PR practitioner cannot individually know all one million members or the whole general public, they can develop long-term relationships with reporters covering their specific industry or issue. Michael emphasized the importance of making sure established relationships do not go cold, as well as reaching out to new reporters.

An additional stakeholder group discussed later in our interview was corporations. While Michael affirmed that the public was more important to reach, corporations still need to do their part to reduce the amount of carbon emissions and plastic they’re putting into the environment. CSR (addressed below in **Question 4**) plays a large role in companies becoming more

environmentally sustainable. However, for Michael, the public still held the most weight in their ability to influence policies through government; President Biden, an environmentally conscious president, has already begun to push environmental policy along because he's "responding to the cry from the voters." The focus on corporations cannot "exclude" the public because the goal is for them to speak up and get on the streets for these issues.

#### **QUESTION #4:**

*Part One: Based on your readings and personal opinion, explain why it is important for organizations to be responsive to their publics. Address how employee communication also contributes to CSR.*

If someone had asked me to describe Public Relations before taking this class, I would not really know what to say other than it was an industry like advertising. Now, I know that no matter what field of interest someone takes, PR is the communication with different audiences for the benefit of the company/client/organization, as well as the public through tactics like two-step flow that open the lines of communication and deepen consumer relations. Corporate social responsibility is defined as "the voluntary actions taken by a company to address the economic, social and environmental impacts of its business operations and the concerns of its principle stakeholders" (Page & Parnell, 2021). We have seen how prevalent CSR has become as companies take stances on major political and cultural issues, particularly so this summer with the B.L.M. protests and polarization of the pandemic. In my opinion, CSR is crucial to a brand's reputation as a positive impact on the communities it serves. Taking a net positive business stance and communicating with the key stakeholders is important so a company can create genuine and meaningful relationships with the public. Being responsive to the public also allows

a company to properly assess their standing among both similar companies and their audiences, and then quickly respond to any problems that may arise.

In order for a company to be successful in an authentic CSR campaign, all of the employees must have a clear understanding and commitment to a company's SR values and be empowered to share their opinions and ideas. Just as a company must be responsive to its publics, there must be open lines of communication between all levels of employees. In class we discussed how CSR efforts often aided in employee prospects as most people want to work somewhere they feel that they are making a difference. Clean Water Action is an organization highly focused on CSR efforts as they lobby for environmental sustainability. Michael described the importance of trusting his employees to grow and cultivate relationships with different experts, as well as the research needed before partnering with other companies so ensure their CSR efforts are not "greenwashing." A genuine CSR campaign comes from the inside of an organization and requires a fundamental change to how a company conducts its business.

*Part Two: Give at least one detailed example of how your chosen organization performs its social responsibility function, and describe the role of the public relations person or department in helping that organization be socially responsible.*

One of the main outreaches Clean Water Action does is field canvassing in twelve states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas and Virginia. Michael described the field canvassing as informing, fundraising and listening to the community about the problems and issues they are dealing with. Program organizers and staff work with community "partners and allies" on legislation and build deep relationships, Michael explained how some relationships are decades

long with them “know[ing] the dance” of coming together to put together a program and communications plan to best help the community. While the pandemic has impacted the ability to be person-to-person while canvassing, Michael was happy to report that the efforts would continue soon in many states. As they are serving communities impacted by pollution which are often communities of color and low income, he stressed the importance of going into the situation humbly and saying “what can we do, we want to help here” as the communities know the problems that are priorities and what they need best. The local program organizers are the main connections with those in the community, and the relationships they have are indispensable as well as the collaboration that follows.

## **QUESTION #5**

***Part One:** Discuss how your organization’s public relations department uses both **media relations** and **social media** to engage its publics and to build relationships. Give specific examples, and if appropriate, suggest ways that the organization might better utilize media applications.*

Though Michael asserted that the majority of members come from the door-to-door canvassing, social media has become more relevant during the pandemic in the way they can reach new audiences who care about climate change and water. He described how the team that handles Twitter, Facebook and Instagram is good at engaging with the community and “making sure that it’s a place that you want to be” and the platforms provide useful information that people will care about. However, he did warn of the dangers of attempting to become “viral” in that you can set up the right conditions for something to catch on, but understanding what truly works in effectively reaching people is more important. At this point, mainstream media has

been flooded with climate change statistics and dire warnings. Michael pointed out that an authentic story about how an issue impacts someone actually motivates others to act on it. Social media is an increasingly prevalent link to audiences and a practitioner needs to have the skills to produce emotional and honest stories that persuade others.

Media relations was an overarching theme of our conversation. PR is a networking industry, and having collaborative and honest relationships with both journalists and experts is essential. For Michael, building relationships was foundational for the entirety of his work. If a practitioner does not have authentic and meaningful relationships they will lack collaboration and the ability to truly reach others. As discussed earlier in **Question 2**, the relationship a communications practitioner has with the media cannot be only transactional to have a long-term beneficial relationship, and there are new reporters on climate change and water issues to reach out to. This is a key aspect of both the organization and the job responsibilities of a PR practitioner.

As I was researching Clean Water Action's different social media platforms, I found their strongest reach on Facebook (50,272 followers), followed by Twitter (15.9K followers) and finally Instagram (3,163), with no TikTok or YouTube accounts. According to a 2021 Pew study, 81% of adults of all demographics use YouTube and ages 18-29 used Instagram and TikTok 71% and 48% respectively (Pew Research Center, 2021). I believe that creating YouTube and TikTok accounts would be highly beneficial in spreading awareness of Clean Water Action's messaging. Gen Z is the youngest voting generation, and creating a strong presence on platforms like YouTube and TikTok will help generate interest in the organization. Clean Water Action's goals of education and activism fit well with weekly news videos on YouTube, or perhaps a podcast of experts who discuss complicated issues that are relevant and important. TikTok is a platform



mostly used by Gen Z, and it would be inspiring to have short videos that could range from educational clips on current issues to raise awareness to what goes behind door-to-door canvassing and the people that have stories to tell. These ideas would help Clean Water Action grow their reputation among a younger demographic as well as showcase all levels of organizers.

There are several instagram accounts for Clean Water Action, the main one (see **Appendix C**) and then regional accounts for Michigan, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (in order **Appendix D, Appendix E and Appendix F**). The main account mostly provides notices to national events, posts to celebrate national holidays and news updates on the passing of acts while the regional accounts post more call-to-action and local environmental news on bills or other current political factors. The Pennsylvania and Massachusetts accounts focus on infographics and aesthetics while the Michigan account has more photographs of activists with news-style infographics to educate and address issues; however, the Michigan account is more established, the other two having started within the past four months. I believe the Michigan account has the highest quality graphics that showcase authenticity and news that people *need* to care about out of all the instagrams, including the national account. The ability to connect directly to an audience was a breakthrough of social media, and Clean Water Action should focus their efforts on cultivating an Instagram with potent images and graphics addressing current news issues. This would allow them to educate and grow their reach (following) as people share posts on Instagram stories, as well as connect to the Gen Z demographic.

*Part two: How do these uses of media contribute to the organization's reputation management efforts? How does issues management contribute to the success of an organization's reputation?*

While many of their outreach efforts focus on in-person contact, the pandemic along with a larger digital population has increased the relevance of social media platforms. Since 2011, Clean Water Action's social reach has grown 400%, which greatly contributes to their reputation management and reach into younger demographics (Michael Kelly, n.d.). As discussed in **part one**, there are many ideas that Clean Water Action could use to grow their influence on specific platforms that target Gen Z users and grow their reputation among the newest voting age group. One of the main aspects of issues management Michael discussed was honest collaboration with experts and local communities to prepare plans of media or crisis-strategies they could have prepared for any situation. As the work of water is political, a PR practitioner must be aware of the surrounding political context that affects the issue. In class we have discussed how a quick and authentic response to a problem can stop a crisis situation from exploding, and these open lines of communication help an organization stay closely connected to the needs and thoughts of the communities they are serving.

## **Conclusion**

When I first learned about this final two days before our second test, stressed out of my mind, I was not looking forward to cranking out a 25 page essay or having to reach out to someone I had never met before. While I knew I could talk to one of my parent's colleagues, many of the projects I have worked on this semester (both the research paper and group presentation) were political in nature and I have really enjoyed learning how I can focus my PR ambitions towards my passions for politics, specifically working to push for policies I believe in like environmental protections and women's rights. A few months before this assignment, Clean Water Action had caught my eye in Handshake as I was looking at internships, and I am so

grateful I had this opportunity to talk to Michael as he outlined both what he does specifically as Clean Water Action's Communications Director, but also as a storyteller who wanted to raise awareness for issues he cared about. The main takeaway from his advice I found important was to go into situations with a "humbleness and openness to collaboration" while also having confidence that you can do your job well. The skills of building trusting relationships and keeping open lines of communication are foundational to any PR career, but without an outlet or purpose for the communication, it is meaningless. He recommended finding a speciality to dive deeper into and becoming comfortable with the material. While it is still important to develop rounded PR skills, if I want to continue down the political path, I must find a specialty I am passionate about to truly connect and build meaningful relationships to collaboratively push for political change.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Clean Water Action's Mission Statement**

### **Appendix B: Clean Water Action's Priorities**

**Appendix C: Clean Water Action Instagram**

**Appendix D: Clean Water Michigan Instagram**

**Appendix E: Clean Water Action Massachusetts Instagram**



**Appendix F: Clean Water Action Pennsylvania Instagram**