

Public Relations: Political PR, Campaigning, and Reputation Management

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PRL 206: Public Relations Principles and Concepts

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Abstract

The following paper explores political communications roles between candidates and the public, as well as the role of PR practitioners in serving candidates during campaign cycles and in office. First, political public relations and the distinct functions of Political and Governmental PR are defined. The second section outlines the history of Political PR and identifies influential moments that assisted in the evolution of reach and skill sets. After describing the history, advantages and disadvantages of both subsets are considered through a subjective analysis. The fourth section compares how the two branches of public relations, governmental and corporate, are similar to other PR careers. In addition, the skills and advanced training required of each profession are discussed. The paper then looks to the challenges and growth Political and Governmental PR have yet to face. Finally, I will discuss my opinions and interests in Political PR and reflect on the career in relation to my own life and goals.

Public Relations: Political PR, Campaigning, and Reputation Management

Public relations is a field that combines skills from several different communications careers and is vital to individuals, companies and governments. Political PR, whether campaigning for a specific candidate, cause or serving government officials, is “focused on the development of communication strategies targeted at specific publics” (Gonçalves, 2014). In attempting to run for office or protecting one's reputation once elected, PR professionals are essential in effectively creating strategic messaging, campaigning and being the liaison between the official and the public.

Overview

Professionals in Political PR work to target specific demographics and communicate persuasive messaging whether working for a campaign or an elected official. Government PR practitioners or “press secretaries” are necessary in keeping the public up to date on the activities of government officials and agencies by drafting and distributing press releases to media outlets (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Press secretaries act as an official’s “formal spokesperson and media liaison for all local media” and work to “develop all local media strategy” (*Press Secretary Job Description*, 2017). A spokesperson is essential in communicating an official’s perspective on different issues to be covered by the media and are responsible for reporter interactions, ensuring that communication allows “all parties [to be] fully informed” (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009, p. 102). Press secretaries are the connection between an official and the public through different media platforms.

Political PR practitioners are involved in campaigning and working to get a candidate elected to office. Campaign managers handle finances through creating a campaign budget, as well as supervise both fundraising and advertising content from a campaign strategy perspective

(MasterClass, 2018). Effective communication is critical in portraying a candidate's views and stances to target audiences in a positive and persuasive light. A campaign PR professional is not a spokesperson like a press secretary, but is essential in ensuring that a campaign runs smoothly and preparing a response to any issues or scandals that arise. Crisis management is an important skill for both press secretaries and PR practitioners involved in campaigning; whether dealing with controversy or any number of crises, professionals must protect the reputation of their clients. Political PR professionals work behind the scenes to lead the campaign's initiative and be the liaison between a candidate and the public.

History

While Political PR has been around since the ancient Greeks, public relations' relevance in American politics didn't begin until "US President Thomas Jefferson first referred to the term 'Public Relations', in 1807" (Gonçalves, 2014). When the public saw government agencies beginning to use PR practices, they feared manipulation of public opinion which led to the passage of the Gillett Amendment in 1913. The amendment restricted government agencies from using public funds towards "pay[ing] a 'publicity expert' unless specifically appropriated for that purpose"; however, this just caused the government to drop all PR monikers and continue to expand communications (Page & Parnell, 2021). Modern public relations was heavily shaped by Edward Bernays, referred to as the "father of modern public relations," and Arthur Page as they brought PR into politics through expanding tactics towards social issues and business challenges (Page & Parnell, 2021). Edward Bernays was an important figure in the early 20th century in introducing the foundational skills of public relations such as "identifying your target audience, conducting research to understand their views, and tailoring your message accordingly" (Page & Parnell, 2021). PR careers in the government have only expanded since their conception as the

demand for highly-skilled communicators who can navigate different media platforms has risen with media coverage.

The PR professional's role in campaigning has changed significantly since the first American elections. Political cartoons, party symbols and other campaign tactics such as "picnics, parades, mass meetings, and rallies" (Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, 2016) were first introduced into the public sphere in the early 19th century. While many tactics such as parades and rallies are still used during campaigns, campaigns have taken to the clouds as technology and media have been advanced. The most recent example is President Trump who "relied heavily on social media, influencers, and state-of-the-art digital strategies" to gain support for his presidential campaigns in both 2016 and 2020 (Page & Parnell, 2021). Though the general goals of a campaign professional have remained the same, the introduction of new media and technology over history has increased the ability of candidates to reach mass audiences.

The White House Press Secretary (WHPS), seen as a crucial link between the president and the general public, is a position that was introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 to "interact with the press on behalf of the president" (Page & Parnell, 2021). As news platforms have grown and adapted so have the position and the job requirements. Initially, press secretaries were usually former journalists appointed to communicate with the White House press corps. However, more recently, the position has been filled by a political communications professional whose aim is to "manage [the] president's message and respond to criticism from political opponents or other leaders" (Page & Parnell, 2021). The WHPS position continues to be an essential link between the press and president, and those vying for the job pick up crisis management and media skills along the way.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Whether working on campaigns or serving elected candidates, there are a lot of advantages and disadvantages to Political and Governmental PR work. As our political sphere becomes more complicated with the rise of different voices from social media platforms and the demand for high-quality content, “being [a] versatile ‘jack of all trades’ will inevitably become both an essential feature and an unavoidable challenge of the PR profession” (Ryabicheva, 2020). This can be seen as both an advantage and disadvantage. On the one hand, having versatile skill sets that can be applied to many fields will widen job opportunities. However, if a practitioner is lacking in specific skills or expertise, it can be extremely difficult to provide successful campaigns. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, public relations specialists are commonly subject to long work days, overtime and weekend work (2020). While this career would be a busy and fast-paced life, not everyone is willing to give up a consistent schedule and remain committed to long hours. Experience is required for most jobs within PR professions, but especially for careers in Political and Governmental PR, which can be taken as a positive aspect as experience increases job security as well as wages (*Press Secretary Job Description*, 2017). In order to succeed in either profession, one needs to assess how committed they are willing to be as long hours, expertise in a variety of skills and meaningful experience are main aspects of the job description.

Comparison in Other Fields

Political PR practitioners employ similar skill sets to many different professions. Government PR such as public affairs and lobbying as well as the corporate side of crisis and reputation management are similar fields. Political relations is helping to elect a candidate and Government PR is serving them once elected. Lobbyists work for businesses, corporations,

interest groups or other organizations and represent their interests to government officials and agencies (Doorley & Garcia, 2007, p. 162). Instead of communicating the values and stances of candidates to gain support and eventually votes, lobbyists and public affairs practitioners represent different groups or government agencies and their interests to officials. The same interpersonal skills required for a Political PR professional are required for other governmental relations careers; while communicating with different audiences, both professions require strong oral and writing skills to effectively produce persuasive messaging (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). A similar career for a practitioner in political crisis management is corporate reputation management. A crisis is a crisis, whether for a government official, candidate or celebrity chef. The same strategic and problem-solving skills are required as a professional must deal with a situation that can harm a company's public image (Doorley & Garcia, 2007, p. 329). While there are specific skills required of Political and Government PR practitioners, the overarching communicative and research-based strategy skills are applicable to many other professions.

Skills or Advanced Training

While it's not necessary to have a degree specific to communications to be in campaigning or crisis management, "public relations specialists typically need a bachelor's degree in public relations, journalism, communications, English, or business," and internships at PR firms are helpful in differentiating oneself from other candidates (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In addition to a degree in a semi-relevant field, experience in communications and media relations is often required, as seen in Rep. Steny Hoyer's search for a Press Secretary that is "experienced, aggressive, and digital savvy... with strong media relations skills" (*Press Secretary Job Description*, 2017). Skills in media relations are pertinent to both subsets of

Political PR. Campaign managers and press secretaries alike must be adept at handling reporters and “need to be able to recognize conflicting issues that may divert attention from their message” (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009, p. 40). Doorley and Garcia assert that transparency, consistency and understanding the socio-political environment are the best practices professionals should apply in their work; researching and knowing both the audience and issues thoroughly are vital to representing an official, agency, or organization (2017). Credibility is a key aspect of public relations as an industry. If there is no trust, then an audience is not going to be persuaded by messaging; therefore, it is important that PR professionals employ integrity and honesty through their work.

PR professionals who work on campaigns to elect candidates are required to have “creativity, flexibility and strong organizational skills” (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009, p. x) as well as interpersonal skills to maintain the reputation of the candidate. When campaigning, a practitioner is appealing to several different demographics, and while it is important to tailor a message towards a specific audience, full consistency with “the campaign overarching messages” (Ryabicheva, 2020) is paramount towards creating trust and credibility for a candidate. If transparency and consistency are not met it can create issues with audiences and, depending on the severity, lead to crisis. When running a campaign or representing a current official, crisis management is a crucial skill; “while not all issues can be resolved prior to the onset of a crisis situation, an issue ignored is a crisis ensured” (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009, p. 190). PR practitioners in crisis management are required to develop strategies to preemptively deal with crisis situations. Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone and Terrell (1993) reflect on persuasion being the foundation of conflict management in which audiences can gain different perspectives that

“enhance reconciliation, rather than decisiveness” (p. 20). Crises can come from anywhere; a PR professional must be adaptable and flexible in order to quickly respond with an effective strategy.

Future

Public relations as a whole field shows promise for growth as more companies, individuals and groups look to expand their influence and take political stances on social change. The projected employment rate from 2019 to 2029 is “to grow 7 percent... faster than the average for all occupations” (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Organizations and companies are also expected to take stronger political stances on social issues as these PR tactics have become “tangible assets” to enhance reputations and visibility, creating more demand for PR professionals (Ryabicheva, 2020, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). However, while growth is projected, the industry is highly competitive and professionals will need to confront the current distrust in the media. Edelman’s Trust Barometer, which measures trust in NGOs, media, business and government, “reveals that none of the four institutions [are] seen as both competent and ethical” (Edelman, 2020). This is a serious issue for the future as PR specialists will need to restore the trust in government officials, the media and the government itself in order to effectively spread their messaging. While social media has provided communications professionals with new platforms and a larger reach, fake news and hoaxes “wrapped in the guise of constructive criticism and alternative opinions” (Ryabicheva, 2020) can cause negative perceptions of public relations and overall distrust of online media, as seen in the Trust Barometer. In an attempt to gain public credibility and expand the view of traditional PR practices, Ryabicheva asserts that future PR practitioners should engage in “crowdsourcing” and interacting with non-professionals as more citizens have become engaged in journalism and politics (2020). It is clear that the Political PR profession is vital to campaigns and reputation

management, but is also an expanding field as the client list for those who want to maintain their public reputation and target direct audiences is constantly growing.

Personal Interest

While Political PR might not be as exciting as branding or working with celebrities, my end goal outside of college is to get a job working in campaigning whether for a candidate or an issues-based organization. During high school, I became passionate about politics and creating lasting social change, and I believe that Political PR is the best way to use my skill sets towards making a difference in my communities. I'm someone who is meticulously organized, versatile and hard-working, all skills required for the industry. Not only would I develop multiple skill sets through communication and understanding different target demographics of the US, but I would be able to do so in a creative and meaningful way. Given our current political climate, I think we have a long way to go to get back to a place of respect and empathy for our fellow citizens, as well as trust in the democratic systems. If I were to go into Political PR, I would focus on the transparency that is so necessary for credibility as well as empathy and understanding for those from different perspectives. Politics is a complicated field of different people's morals and priorities; however, it's one I believe I can make the most positive impact in.

Conclusion

While not direct actors in the political sphere, Political and Governmental PR practitioners are essential in communication between candidates, officials, and the general public. Political PR professions are not only indispensable to the officials they work for, but also to adapting to news media and providing consistent, targeted messaging. Though a contested profession, Political and Governmental PR continue to expand their influence and tactics to sway public opinion.

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