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PUBLIC RELATIONS TECHNIQUES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Summary. The aim of the author is to show how local authorities and municipalities apply the tools of public relations to shape the image and reputation in local communities.

Keywords: public relations, local government, managing the city.

TECHNIKI *PUBLIC RELATIONS* W ADMINISTRACJI PUBLICZNEJ

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób jednostki samorządu terytorialnego wykorzystują narzędzia *public relations* w kreowaniu wizerunku i reputacji w środowiskach lokalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: *public relations*, samorząd terytorialny, zarządzanie miastem.

Companies and organizations compete to sell their services and products in a rapidly changing and unstable environment. Becoming successful requires a positive image of the product (service), and the trust of customers. Public administration must also face the challenges of contemporary business environment, taking advantage of methods and tools previously implemented in other areas. In case of local government trust and positive perception are the basis of success as far as the implementation of new strategies, programs and projects is concerned. As noted by Zdzisław Knecht: “Polish state and local administration face the big change. Integration with the European Union, new problems, struggles against competition – demands knowledge and authority from civil servants. Best municipalities benefit from the experience of business: take care of the image, marketing, asking inhabitants about their needs. The winners of the election and men of trust apply the

principles of public relations in order to gain favour of voters and raise the prestige of the office”¹.

To get approval for their actions and support of inhabitants, local authorities must use the tools and techniques of public relations. It is also necessary to include inhabitants into decision process. Local authorities though must be open and transparent and willing to share information. Access to information builds positive relationship between elected representatives of government, civil servants and inhabitants, that can be the basis for an effective management system. If inhabitants are not informed about local government activities, they do not have a chance to participate in decision making process.

Nowadays public relations is no longer seen as a “stepchild of marketing” - to quote a metaphor, used once by Philip Kotler². Opportunities available by dint of public relations makes to consider it as one of the tools of modern management. The international authority in the field of public relations, Sam Black, defines the nature of this discipline of management as follows: “The essence of public relations remains the same, regardless whether you apply it to politics arena, to economic and trade, to relations within communities, to charity, work in foundations or to other situations concerning specific external conditions. Different however – because depending on the circumstances – are methods of operation”³.

Today, activities such as public relations are important for any organization, both commercial and non-profit. It is effective PR, that determines the image of the organization and widespread opinions about it the environment. Shaping the image of the company is essential PR task and it applies both to profit-oriented organizations, public administration, NGO's or nation-states. Marta Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz underlines this basis of PR applied to other than profit-oriented organizations: “shaping the image has become a normal sign of how states function – no country can afford to ignore the way in which it is seen”⁴.

Among entities operating in the market according to the rules of economy, keeping the positive image and reputation reflects of course to increase of profits - “The main task of public relations in the US economy was to determine the means by which companies can influence society to create an atmosphere enabling them to achieve their goals. This aspect of public relations is defined, and rightly so, by the term *public affairs*”⁵. In turn, the local government primary goal is to gain trust and support from people. Organizations need to adapt to the needs of their target groups and public relations is an indispensable tool in the process.

¹ Knecht Z.: Public relations w administracji publicznej. Teoria, praktyka, badania. Wydawnictwo C.H. Beck, Warszawa 2006, s. IX.

² See: Kotler P.: Marketing. Gebethner i S-ka, Warszawa 1994.

³ Black S.: Public relations, Oficyna Ekonomiczna. Kraków 2003, wydanie IV, s. 11.

⁴ Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz M.: Public relations Polski w okresie kandydowania do Unii Europejskiej. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2007, s. 7.

⁵ Black S.: op. cit., s. 23.

Public relations can be considered in many different ways. One of them it is the definition of Institute of Public Relations (1987), quoted by Sam Black: “Practical activity of the public relations it is planned and continuous effort to develop and maintain a good business reputation and mutual understanding between the institution and the recipients of it's activities”⁶. However, the author of one of the most famous books in the field of public relations favours a definition that reads as follows: “Public relations is the art and science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual agreement based on a true and complete information”⁷. As a completion of definitions given above, let it be Zdzislaw Knecht position, sufficient especially in the context of this article: “public relations is created to bring the institutions to the people they serve”⁸.

Considering public relations we talk about four basic models based on different communication activities: publicity, information operations, persuasion and dialogue⁹. The philosophy oh these models and the differences between them are identified by prof. James Grunig, while Michal Fleischer presents them in outline as follows:

Four models of public relations¹⁰

Table 1

	publicity	information operations	persuasion	dialogue
description	propagation, popularization	talking about, making statements, making announcements	argumentation	dimension of knowledge
goal	action as a result of something	enlightening, explanation	education	consensus
type of communication	unidirectional, one way, simplified	unidirectional, one way, wide/complex statement	asymmetric bidirectional, taking into account the feedback	symmetric, bidirectional
model of communication	sender → receiver stimulus → response	sender → receiver	sender → receiver	group → group model of convergence

⁶ Ibidem, s. 14.

⁷ Ibidem, s. 15.

⁸ Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 2.

⁹ Fleischer M.: Corporate identity i public relations. Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa Edukacji Towarzystwa Wiedzy Powszechnej, Wrocław 2003, s. 161.

¹⁰ Ibidem, s. 162.

con. table 1

type of research	qualitative research of extent and acceptance	studies on the understanding	evaluation of attitudes, survey	evaluation of behaviour, study of behaviour
typical representatives	P.T. Barnum	Iry Lee	Edward L. Bernays	James E. Grunig
used today by	political parties, creating events, sales promotion	agencies, offices, organizations	organizations, unions, churches	organizations, PR agencies
estimated share on information market	25%/15%	35%/50%	35%/20%	5%/15%

As shown by M. Fleisher in a chart above, offices - so the public administration - represent a model based on information operations, which aims to present the activities of the body so that it is best understood by the public. "Grunig explained that in the first two models communication is always one-way – from the organization to customers"¹¹. According to Sam Black, the four above models of public relations are not mutually exclusive, because in today's complex PR campaigns there are elements coming from them all and put together¹².

Public relations in an essential part of management at the local level. The basis of democracy is the involvement of local residents in the affairs of local government. "For image and opinions of the administration it is important to make people identified with their community (fill the social role). Working together, both the administration and the people who live in the area, should create a complementary entirety"¹³. To make people engaged into local issues, local authorities make use of PR tools. Commercial organizations adjust their PR tools to specific audience groups (target groups), while the actions of local government are addressed to all inhabitants Market Firms adjust their PR tools to specific groups of consumers, while the actions of local government are addressed to all residents. The actions of local authorities are based on the assumption of collective responsibility and partnership between the representatives of local authorities and inhabitants.

Zdzislaw Knecht lists currently the most important potentials of PR:

"organize information and promotional campaigns aimed at the explanation of the controversial events in their activity – in response to crisis such as plane crash, environmental pollution, decrease of credits in opinion polls etc., launch of explanation actions and actions influencing society in a positive way, promote achievements (achievements, possibilities of interactions, archive resources etc."¹⁴

¹¹ Black S.: op. cit., s. 170.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 74.

¹⁴ Ibidem, s. 5.

All these activities are aimed at taking care of the reputation of the organization and at building positive relationships between the organization and the external environment (local or supra-local). The image, as stated by Michael Kunczik, “is not only a trademark, easy to remember slogan, but carefully crafted personality profile (image) of a human, institution, product or service. An individual profile of institutions and corporations can be created. All latest techniques are used for this purpose”¹⁵. Yet Knecht noticed that the image is “an image of the institution as well as product, service, person, country, etc., which is a subjective image, a set of experiences that do not have to coincide with an objective assessment of reality. Arises in response to the stimuli provided to costumers by the organization (or a certain person)”¹⁶.

In the public sector attention should be paid to the use of tools for effective communication, shaping reputation and attitudes of active cooperation, as well as the selection of measures to promote the region and its development¹⁷. Maria Siwko argues that in creating the image of the region as well as in the promotion of the city the leading role is played by the local authorities, whose aim is to take such initiatives and solutions that serve the forward-looking vision of development¹⁸.

The image of the local government can be built using the following tools and techniques:

- Local law or other documents made by local government.
- Media.
- Brochures.
- Information boards.
- Meetings with inhabitants.
- Surveys¹⁹.

The flow of information between local governments and citizens can be effective with the use of public relations tools. In order to conduct effective information policy municipalities work with the media, publish press releases, organize press conferences, representatives of local authorities give interviews on current issues or take part in radio and television programs. Own publications such as brochures, maps, pamphlets, guides, albums allow a permanent presence in the public space, provide information to petitioner and visitors. Organizing events has a positive impact on the perception of offices and civil servants, “and events related to the past of the city can strengthen local ties and consolidate a sense of community”²⁰. The role of participation in fairs and exhibitions is worth mentioning here -

¹⁵ Kunczik M.: Images of the Nations and International Public Relations. Bonn 1992, s. 188, za: M. Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz, op. cit., s. 47.

¹⁶ Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 6.

¹⁷ Ibidem, s. 76.

¹⁸ Siwko M.: Kształtowanie wizerunku regionu środkowopomorskiego. Materiały pomocnicze do przedmiotu „Public relations”, Politechnika Koszalińska, Koszalin 2001, s. 12.

¹⁹ Zob., Knecht Z.: op. cit., Rozwadowska B.: Public relations. Teoria, praktyka, perspektywy, Studio Emka, Warszawa 2003.

²⁰ Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 81.

even the process of applying for hosting a big event (e.g. EXPO) is important, because, as noted by Marta Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz, these are now the most effective indirect methods of creating an image²¹. On the other hand surveys can help to obtain diagnoses of the local situation, opinions on socially important issues received from residents of a city or region, which enables the implementation of activities in line with the needs of interested groups²². Best appreciated from the perspective of building trust and understanding aspect of information policy is definitely direct contact, such as formal meeting with the mayor or governor or incidental meeting, arising out of the situation.

Staff engaged in PR play an important role in the functioning of the local government and the achievement of its objectives. Therefore, they should fully understand the objectives and tasks of PR and coordinate all activities directed externally, skillfully shape public opinion and - most importantly - to encourage inhabitants to participate in the management of the municipality. "Modern cities must be promoted, and the mayors should act like chairmen of large companies - to deal with marketing, hiring consultants building and planning strategies for the future, but also perfectly manage and cope with unpredictable situations"²³. This necessity arises on the basis of knowledge and experience that in today's world so called grapevine is no longer an adequate channel of dissemination of information - it can not guarantee the intended results because it often distorts the facts and information provided is inaccurate and incomplete. Therefore there is a need to establish even in the smallest municipalities efficient departments (even one-person) responsible for PR. Competent development of information policy of the municipality is a *sine qua non* condition for an agreement between inhabitants and local authorities, providing stakeholders with access to information about the key decisions (such as budget and strategy development). Practice shows that effective communication improves self- image and increases support of inhabitants. In this context, the main tasks of PR for local government are:

- Communication.
- Transmission of information (about meetings, regulations, public orders).
- Feedback analysis.
- Organization.
- Management.

These related to each other, complementary features are the essence of PR in local government. When used together they strengthen communication, organizational and management capabilities of local authorities and ultimately result in establishing a strong relationship with inhabitants. Below there are shown practical observations on the implementation of specific PR tasks by local governments.

²¹ Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz M.: op. cit., s. 69-71.

²² Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 82.

²³ Tamże, s. 161.

Communication between local government institutions and citizens is constant. Each type of communication act (oral or written) with a citizen, a group of citizens, non-profit organization is an action in the field of public relations. So, to achieve the maximum possible positive outcome of every act of communication (with the exception of conversations with inhabitants or groups) should be planned and directed to the right target group (targeting)²⁴. Local authorities tend to regard people as a homogeneous group whereas PR has to introduce different techniques to reach different groups. Other tools and techniques are required to influence the elderly and different are used as far as the youth is concerned. Hence the importance of the identification of the main groups in local environment should be seen. Segmentation also supports local authorities in understanding of various groups and allows representatives to better meet those expectations - "a group of customers may be small or large, but each of them must have common interests and problems"²⁵.

Information is a part of the communication function. Some information has also a legal dimension and therefore must be treated separately - local authorities are obliged to publish the rules of certain information (e.g. public orders or disposal of property). The informative function should also guarantee the flow of feedback from citizens, organizations and other entities to local authorities. Feedback is the only way to confirm that the sent message has been received and properly interpreted. Feedback can take many forms – letters asking about some information, list of questions, letters of complaints, comments in the street or at meetings, especially at meetings of city council and mayor's (or president's) meetings with local people. The feedback will help local authorities to assess the decisions they take. Feedback often indicates a preference inhabitants choose, it can also show the aspects of the decision or a problem that officials and politicians have not taken into considerations. Therefore planning public relations strategy requires to provide with two-way communication between the local government and citizens.

Analysis of feedback allows those responsible for PR and policy-makers to determine trends in the community, allows to predict changes in mood, to identify events that may occur. Feedback analysis expands knowledge of the authorities in the field of desires and problems of local community. Sources of feedback information are: public opinion polls, thematic meetings with inhabitants, interactive radio and television programs, letters from inhabitants, councillors' and the mayor's meeting with local community.

The *organizational* function of public relations is closely linked to the local government office of internal communication. Effective internal communication helps authorities in unifying communication with external stakeholders - the citizens, NGOs, local entrepreneurs. Particularly important here is paying attention to efficient means of communication with inhabitants, and not focusing on answering questions, providing requested information or

²⁴ Black S.: op. cit., s. 47, por.: Fleischer M.: op. cit., s. 180, Kotler P.: op. cit.

²⁵ Black S.: op. cit., s. 49.

responding to the complaints, which from the point of view of the image of the administration (considering time, effectiveness and possible solution etc.) has a great impact²⁶.

Management enables local authorities to influence public opinion and to form it. Management function of public relations is to guarantee successful communication. "Communication is crowned with success only when there is a strategy, which is accompanied by tactics that contains guidelines of operating in the process of communication"²⁷. Management can be an effective tool in building support of citizens and improving confidence about taken actions. Manner, place and time of response of local authorities to the problems and expectations of citizens form a strong message. Precise information policy, an adequate local government response to the expectations of people create a positive image of the local authorities government and increase the confidence of people in their representatives.

In order to communicate effectively with citizens internal communication should be also effective. The staff responsible for PR must work closely with the mayor and heads of city departments and agencies to make sure that information sent by the local authorities to receivers and all those non- municipal structures is accurate, compact and prompt. If the internal communication between the units of local government - the mayor, the office and the board is not working in an efficient way, messages that address people may be contradictory or misleading. In this case, the colloquial statement, which says that "partial information is worse than no information" works. In practice it often happens that some of the units of local government are not aware of the activities of other units. Execution of tasks by each of them individually may proceed without objection in the context of their individual goals, and lack of wider perspective makes the achievement of the objectives common to the whole community more difficult. Therefore accent falls on the role of internal communication system, which must guarantee the supply of information to employees, motivate them to act, promote cooperation and facilitate the resolution of conflicts within the organization.

PR plays a major role in creating a positive image of local government. Local governments that keep their promises, that are transparent, provide with a high level of municipal services, build trust and a positive opinion and can count on the people's support. The more people know about the activities and plans of local authorities, the greater will be their involvement in local affairs and the higher sense of responsibility. The basis of effective communication between local authorities and citizens it is a sense that both share common values. The basis for the relationship inhabitant - the local government is the confidence (or lack therefore). Taking part in elections, citizens entrust their future elected representatives, giving them the credit of trust. That's why the local government should devote much attention to maintaining that trust throughout the tenure. Regaining lost confidence when public opinion turn against the local authority requires a lot of effort. Good opinion on local

²⁶ Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 106-107.

²⁷ Fleischer M.: op. cit., s. 175.

authorities is a huge asset. In case of failure people are more willing to forgive the government which they trust more. PR tools should not be used to improve reality. People trust what they see. If you do not see the positive results of the work of local authorities, the promises remain without coverage authority loses people's trust and most frequently also power. It is important that the local government had a comprehensive, unified PR strategy, which sets out clearly the roles and responsibilities in the field of information policy, so that measures to prevent the formation of a negative opinion can be taken at an early stage. The condition of success is transparency. Even when the local authorities in fact, driven by the public benefit do not act transparent - the lack of transparency may cause citizens' suspicions. To avoid this situation, the authorities should be as open as possible and to provide citizens with access to information by using the tools and techniques of PR (brochures, public meetings, radio and television programs).

Kozłowski points out four main goals of information policy in municipalities. These are the realization of the right of citizens to information, inspiring an efficient system of social communication in the municipality, to create an agreement between the community and the municipality authorities and external promotion of municipality²⁸. “The negative pattern bureaucrat – applicant linked to public awareness with the behaviour of particular civil servants and with a kind of particular culture (...). Higher skills and knowledge of people make gradual changes in their awareness and expectations towards institutions, acting on behalf of the state” - says Knecht²⁹. Modern public administration is functioning in terms close to business entities – aware of the importance of reputation and relationship with the environment. City is seen as a product, and the task of local government is to manage its brand in such a way as to make it attractive to different audiences – inhabitants, investors and tourists. Particularly important is defining the mission of public administration as a “shaping the image of the municipality, city, town, which is mostly based on the background of the experiences of citizens in dealing with local authorities and an assessment of the results of the activities authorities take on issues of importance to society”³⁰. Effective public relations in the field of mutual relations between citizens and local authorities determines the success of this mission.

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²⁸ Kozłowski J.: Polityka informacyjna gminy, [w:] J. Regulska (red.): Grochem o ścianę. Warszawa 1995, s. 29, za: Knecht Z.: op. cit., s. 85.

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Omówienie

Organizacje konkurują w sprzedaży swych usług i produktów w szybko zmieniającym się środowisku. Warunkami powodzenia jest pozytywny wizerunek produktu (usługi) oraz zaufanie klientów. Administracja publiczna również musi sprostać stojącym przed nią wyzwaniom, stosując metody i narzędzia wdrażane wcześniej w innych dziedzinach. W przypadku samorządów lokalnych zaufanie mieszkańców i pozytywny odbiór są podstawą powodzenia w realizacji strategii, programów i projektów. Aby uzyskać dla swych działań akceptację i wsparcie mieszkańców, przedstawiciele władz lokalnych muszą używać narzędzi i technik PR. Dostęp do informacji buduje pozytywne relacje pomiędzy wybranymi przedstawicielami władzy, pracownikami instytucji samorządowych i mieszkańcami, które mogą stać się bazą efektywnego systemu zarządzania. Współcześnie działania z zakresu public relations ważne są dla każdej organizacji, zarówno komercyjnej, jak i non profit. To właśnie skuteczny PR decyduje o wizerunku danej organizacji i opiniach o niej rozpowszechnionych w środowisku zewnętrznym. Kształtowanie wizerunku danego podmiotu jest podstawowym działaniem PR i dotyczy zarówno organizacji zorientowanych na zysk, administracji publicznej, sektora NGO, jak i państw narodowych. Nowoczesna administracja publiczna funkcjonująca na zasadach zbliżonych do podmiotów gospodarczych jest świadoma znaczenia reputacji i relacji z otoczeniem. Miasto postrzegane jest jako produkt, a zadaniem administracji jest zarządzanie jego marką w taki sposób, aby był on atrakcyjny dla różnych grup odbiorców – mieszkańców, inwestorów, turystów.