



# Public relations strategic intelligence: Intelligence analysis, communication and influence



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 30 December 2014

Received in revised form 23 July 2015

Accepted 9 August 2015

Available online 30 August 2015

### Keywords:

Strategic communication

Strategic intelligence

Competitive analysis

Anticipation

Issues management

Integrated strategy

## ABSTRACT

The article offers an approach to public relations from the perspective of intelligence collection and analysis. In a context of a superabundance of publicly available information on the general environment for organizations and their stakeholders, the article highlights the need for producing intelligence in order to facilitate the formulation of strategic communication and enhance relationship management activities. The literature on issues management and competitive intelligence is explored in order to analyze the relationships between their anticipatory practices and their points of convergence. The article proposes using the concepts of Intelligence-led PR and PR Intelligence for capturing and expressing two different but complementary dimensions of the relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

This article suggests that strategy formation, and specifically the communication component of business strategies, requires analytic inputs about the company environment and its stakeholders. It goes on to argue that adaptation of the organization's explicit plans to a dynamic and evolving context requires an intelligence function that anticipates and interprets developments, identifies drivers of change affecting the initial conditions, and informs management decisions and actions strategically.

It positions intelligence and analytic insights as prerequisites of strategy formulation, and strategic communication efforts. Although using the terms formation and formulation indistinguishably, the article acknowledges Mintzberg (1978) identification of the conceptual difference between both terms. Accordingly, strategies can be formulated through a conscious process "in advance of the making specific decisions" (Mintzberg, 1978p. 934). This process can result in a deliberate plan or set of guidelines to underlie the posterior actions, or they can be "patterns in a stream of decisions", i.e., realized strategies that emerge and form "when a sequence of decisions in some area exhibits a consistency over time" (Mintzberg, 1978pp. 934–935). The article claims that deliberate strategic plans, rather than being a mere collection of intuitions, require intelligence on the organization's environment.

This intelligence is necessary to capture a thoughtful organizational response to changing conditions and to address challenges from the environment or from stakeholders. In addition, the adaptation of the organization's plans to a dynamic

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and evolving context requires an intelligence function to interpret developments, identify drivers of change, and inform management decisions and actions that will lead to new strategies.

Organizations of all kinds, as well as governments, require strategic information in order to support their decision making processes in all spheres. More specifically, business and public institutions need foreknowledge, as well as knowledge in order to plan, execute, and evaluate their communication campaigns. Listening, capturing and communicating the attitudes and opinions of publics toward organizations are commonly recognized activities of the PR function. When conducted under an anticipatory logic, PR can detect problems early as well as point out opportunities for business, non-profits, and governmental agencies.

The purpose of this article is to explore how intelligence—conceived as a corporate function and a management process consisting of the legal, ethical and systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and timely communication of relevant information to internal clients and other intelligence consumers for facilitating their decision making processes—can contribute to the practice of PR and strategic communication by enabling a superior relationship management capability through such strategic information and analysis that might result in a competitive advantage.

## 2. Definitions and literature review

As with other concepts, defining strategic communication is challenging and entails considerable debate (Paul, 2011p. 3). This might be in part due to the different nature and dimension of organizations, institutions, and groups that develop strategic communication activities. At a government level, the US National Framework for Strategic Communication defines “strategic communication(s)” as:

the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals. (White House, 2010p. 2)

Analogously, Paul (2011) defines strategic communication as “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives” (p. 3); and Farwell (2012) calls it “the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives” (pp. xviii–xix).

On the other hand, at the level of organizations, strategic communication has been defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to advance its mission (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, pp. 3–4). Hallahan et al. (2007) add that strategic communication practices in organizations include: management communication, marketing and advertising, public relations, technical communication, political communication as well as social marketing (pp. 5–7).

Aguilar’s (1967) definition of strategic information usefully adds that this is “information useful for making decisions about strategy and long-range plans” and there is not information that is intrinsically strategic but that categorization depends on whether the information “relates to a strategic opportunity or problem” or not (pp. 5–6). Freeman (1984) identifies consistent factors in the definition in his view that “strategic decisions are intentional actions which are designed to exert some measure of control over the future (and the present) state of the corporation” (p. 86).

The article also concurs with Steyn’s (2007) formulation of Strategic PR/Communication as a management function that works at the strategic level of the organization managing the communication between the organization/institution and its stakeholders. It does this by: developing deliberate PR strategy aligned to the strategic goals of the organization, as well as emergent PR Strategy addressing constantly stakeholder and societal issues; formulating a strategic PR plan; “developing, implementing, and evaluating communication plans in support of the PR function’s deliberate and emergent strategies”; providing counsel to top management on communication with employees; and managing activities of a support function at the different levels at the organization, and for other functions such as marketing (Steyn, 2007pp. 138–140). Steyn’s (2007) differentiation between deliberate PR strategy and emergent PR strategy is consistent with Mintzberg’s (1978, 1987a, 1987b) distinction mentioned above in the previous section between intended and realized strategies.

From the perspective of this article, although (Grunig, 1992, p.6) asserts two-way symmetrical assumptions are key for excellence and long-range organizational effectiveness, intelligence for decision support can be a common characteristic of both symmetrical public relations and asymmetric communication management programs.

The article supports the view of that “excellent public relations departments do environmental scanning for their organizations” and that the top public relations manager “must be part of the dominant coalition, function at a high level of decision making, and participate in strategic management” (White & Dozier, 1992, p. 91). Grunig and Repper (1992) similarly claim that public relations must be part of the strategic management of the total organization by monitoring the environment and helping in the definition of its mission, goals and, objectives, especially since this involvement in the whole process “provides direction to public relations from the corporate/organizational level” and also PR should manage strategically its own programs (1992, pp. 119–120).

It is, however, important to remember that strategy decisions occur at different levels: enterprise, corporate, business, and functional level (Freeman, 1984; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2014; Steyn, 2007). As Freeman (1984) observes, enterprise-level strategy is concerned with addressing the question “what do we stand for?” or understanding the role of a particular company in society and how it is perceived by stakeholders (pp. 89–91); while corporate-level strategy can be assimilated

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