

Employing PR Principles To Streamline Government Communication

By Anthony Taiti



In today's world, when people are conscious of political accountability and social justice, a government's ability to engage and communicate effectively with its people is vital to its success. The crucial role of strategic communication in building trust and confidence among people cannot be overstated, and when PR principles are overlooked in government communication, there is a considerable risk of missing the target. In Kenya, for example, in a televised live interview following the Gen Z demonstrations in June of this year, the president is on record saying that his communication team, which is mostly made up of former journalists, may have failed him. This came after noticing a series of communication gaps, which were characterized by a lack of critical PR elements. For reasons like this, I wrote in June of last year about why journalists without professional PR training should not be hired as PR and Communication Managers.

One of the most fundamental principles of PR is research. This involves evaluating communication to determine its effectiveness with the target population and calibrating it to match or reflect reality. PR professionals leverage this principle by tailoring their communication strategy to meet the public's expectations in line with the matter at hand and communicating effectively through appropriate channels. With millions of people now owning smartphones and having access to the internet, social media has emerged as the most popular platform for individuals to publicly express their thoughts on issues that affect them. While some believe that those actively voicing concerns on social media are a minority, it has been proven over and over again that they wield profound influence over their peers. Through timely research, PR professionals identify issues, predict behaviours, and provide informed advice on managing them before they

escalate into crises.

Audience-centricity is crucial in strategic communication. It calls for people's concerns to be addressed without distractions. To accomplish this, PR professionals must first gain an in-depth understanding of the citizens' demographics. In 1968, Prof. James Grunig proposed the Situational Theory of Publics, which assists PR professionals in developing targeted communication. The theory posits that people will act on an issue or situation if they believe it affects them personally, and their actions can have a desired impact. According to the theory, PR professionals can achieve more success in engaging citizens by categorizing them based on the following three variables: problem recognition, which denotes the extent to which individuals understand a particular problem or issue (e.g., people identifying the unwanted provisions in a proposed bill); constraint recognition, which refers to people's awareness of limitations or obstacles that prevent them from taking action (e.g., coming face-to-face with armed police who arrest anyone protesting, thus constraining citizens); and level of involvement, which is the extent to which people feel attached to the issue at hand, determining their action (e.g., going to the streets to take part in the protests).

Based on the three variables, Grunig identified four types of publics: active publics (those who take action to address an issue that affects them); aware publics (those who are affected by an issue but don't take any action); latent publics (those who are affected by an issue but are unaware of it); and non-publics (those who are unaware of and unaffected by an issue). When advising on how to engage citizens, PR professionals identify the various publics and develop targeted communication for

each. They are particularly interested in "active citizens" because they consistently take specific actions to address the issue or situation at hand, such as protesting, boycotting, or suing. The "aware citizens" are also critical because they can be easily influenced by the active ones. While at it, they emphasize the principle of timely communication, which is a two-way communication process that involves listening and responding appropriately in good time. Delays in communication allow others to fill the void, resulting in misinformation and disinformation. Some issues are complex and require extensive thought before responding. As a result, conducting research during a crisis or public unrest can help the government anticipate potential scenarios and develop genuine, relatable communication.

The PR aspect of humanity must be maintained throughout all communication. Some citizens may use offensive or demeaning language to put pressure on the government, but it must remain humane in its responses. When communicating, PR professionals can assist in tapping into human elements, such as empathy, authenticity, and respect, which can help the government gain public support.

Ultimately, getting the right PR professionals will help the government streamline communication and connect with citizens on a humane level, which is what truly matters.

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