

THE ROLE OF THE SPOKESPERSON IN THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Andrei CONSTANTIN¹, Irina PETRUȚĂ²

¹Student, "Apollonia" University of Iași, Romania

²Lecturer, PhD, "Apollonia" University of Iași, Romania

Corresponding author: Irina Petruță; e-mail: irinapetruca@yahoo.com

Abstract

In both public and private institutions, communication with the public has evolved in recent years from the optional stage to the necessity or even compulsory stage. The employees in every organisation have to understand the significance of communication as well as the way in which messages are produced and broadcasted and, at the same time, they have to make sure that "the organisation speaks the same language even when it uses different communication channels". The public has the right to receive the requested information from an institution, in order to express its viewpoints and to exercise its right of democratic participation.

Keywords: *spokesperson, public relations, media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The presence of a large number of journalists from different TV, radio, print and online press at the doors of various institutions forced the appearance of the spokesperson, a specialist in communication, since he possesses information on the field of activity of a journalist and can easily initiate a dialogue with him, offering him all the necessary information (MARCONI, 2007). At the same time, a spokesperson makes the work of a journalist much easier by shortening the answer time, because he presents exactly the essence of the subject. The book "Guide to media relations" presents the spokesperson as being "an important player in the structure of the press. He represents the main source of information for the journalists and, at the same time, the accessible and concrete image of the institution. This is why recruiting and preparing a good spokesperson represents a significant issue" (BUCUR et al., 2002).

2. THE SPOKESPERSON - PROFILE AND DUTIES

The spokesperson is an individual empowered to publicly express documents and official viewpoints of the institution that he/she represents. The spokesperson's statement in a public setting represents the perspective of the institution, and therefore any voluntary or involuntary mistake may degenerate in the relationship with the media. Choosing a spokesperson for a company represents a very delicate decision because the presence of a well-prepared spokesperson will significantly contribute to the promotion of a general positive image of the institution.

For somebody to become a good spokesperson he/she has to fulfil the following requirements:

- To be a good communicator;
- Regardless of the nature of the message that he/she presents, he/she has to be clear and persuasive;
- Sincerity has to be a major asset, a quality that makes him/her highly credible;
- To be serious and loyal to the organisation that he/she works for;
- To possess solid knowledge of Romanian grammar;
- To be pleasant and well-known for the reporters;
- Not to get into conflicts with the journalists, and if this happens, to know how to get out of these conflicts without creating moral or material damages to the institution;
- To possess all necessary information about the organisation he/she works for, so that

he/she can offer persuasive answers to the journalists' questions;

- To uphold the deadlines established with the journalists;
- To have a good working relationship with his peers from the public relations department;
- To know very well the game rules of every activity that he/she has with the press (press conferences, briefings, etc.) (CHICIUDEAN, 2000).

Every organisation should have only one spokesperson in order to avoid overlapping messages or contradictions. Together with the training of the spokesperson, the personnel of the organisation should also be trained, in order to integrate unity and strictness when it comes to external communication, so that the only people who can communicate with persons outside the organisation to be the spokesperson, the general manager, or the people designated by him.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SPOKESPERSON AND THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ORGANISATION

Every spokesperson is directly subordinated to the management of the private or public organisation that he/she represents. There is a strong and permanent connection between the spokesperson and the management of the organisation and all information that have to be presented to the media should be discussed and transmitted by mutual agreement. A daily meeting between the two departments will bring many benefits, among which one can enumerate:

- The spokesperson is one of the first people to find out about the problems and perspectives that appear in the life of the organization.
- If the two departments are in direct contact with each other and discuss daily about the existing problems, they reach a mutual trust which eliminates certain restraints.
- Once reciprocal trust is gained, the spokesperson can communicate with the management regarding some problems that have not yet been revealed to the press,

which, if not solved on time, may negatively influence the image of the whole organisation.

- In order for the trust to be reciprocal, the spokesperson has to be treated as a partner in the discussion and not as a mere employee who puts an order into practice. An informal relationship between the two departments, in which the spokesperson knows that he/she can rely on the support and trust of the manager, creates a tight connection with the help of which the more difficult moments can be overcome, such as the image crisis (ŞERB, 1999; BERNARD, 2003).

4. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

Mass-media represents the main means of communication with the audience (public) and therefore all the institutions that want to gain access to this public feel the need to turn to the press. This is why the media became viral for the society and its role is highly significant. It attracted its supporters by processing the information received from politicians and other public figures, filtering it and sometimes approving it. In other words, the warranty of the press came from the fact that it did not subordinate itself to any of the powers (GREGORY & MOUNTER, 2005).

The relationship with the media does not always refer to official discussions, as for example press releases. A good relationship can also be achieved with the help of some promotion collaboration of the institution through the media. Therefore, the company promotes and informs its target audience about its products/services and the media has some financial gains and an increased number of supporters (CIASCAI, 2012; BOUGNOUX, 2000).

5. THE MAIN COMMUNICATION TOOLS OF THE SPOKESPERSON

We live in a time based on technology. We come to possess dozens or maybe hundreds of communication methods, but not all of them are useful or comply with our needs, or we may not know how to use them correctly.

The spokespersons' most widely-used means of communication are those based on technology, since they are always handy and easy to use. Among them one can enumerate:

- E-mail: Although it has been used for a very long time from the computer, now we can use the e-mail from our phones. Although it may not be the most suitable means of communication, it became a tool used by most spokespeople, since it is very easy to handle and very complex. However, in case of an emergency, spokespeople use other means of communication, in order to be sure that the message is read on time.
- Text message. It is an old tool which at the beginning was difficult to manipulate and which appeared at the same time with the telephone technology. At present, it is easy to text, it offers certainty that it is read on time, but unfortunately it cannot include than 1000 characters and you cannot send files either.
- Voice dialling. If the text option allows you to make mistakes or the message can be interpreted in a wrong manner, this method does not fail. Therefore, voice dialling represents a safe means of communication, which allows the employees from the public relations department to exchange information, regardless of existing distance between them.
- The use of the chat. Although at first sight it seems like a safe option from the perspective of gathering all colleagues in one place and not repeating the same phrase over and over again, this tool is less used due to the time wasted looking for a solution among other conversations.
- Intranet. Although, it is less used, this method is a popular one among the great corporations, as it facilitates the transfer of information and files among colleagues or departments in a relatively short period of time. One can perform numerous operations without influencing each other, such as speaking, sharing files, manipulating another computer from the network, without any harm done.

Regardless of the method used, we have to aware of the fact that it does not offer only advantages, but it also has some disadvantages. It is advisable for each spokesperson to

continually look for information regarding each communication method and about everything that is new on the market and to weigh their advantages and disadvantages. For a better and quicker formality, the spokesperson should not rely on only one communication tool, but to change it according to his/her needs or context (GREGORY, 2009; COMAN, 2001).

6. THE ROLE OF THE SPOKESPERSON IN MANAGING CRISIS SITUATIONS

A crisis situation represents a complex phenomenon which highlights an unexpected situation as well as the responsibility of the institution towards public opinion which can hinder the normal activity of the organization as well as denigrating its public image. In a crisis situation it is essential for the institution to react quickly, offering the public opinion all the requested information through its spokesperson. Therefore, the role of the spokesperson is a crisis situation refers to the following actions:

- He/she discusses with the journalists and ensures them that he will provide official information regarding that particular event as soon as possible.
- He/she prepares from the archive of the institution all the necessary documentation in order to quickly and completely inform, using an official answer, the media regarding what happened. This happens within the limits of the procedures performed or that are going to be performed by the empowered organisations.
- The spokesperson contacts the president of president of the represented court in order to obtain the necessary documentation and to request information from the judge, section or court president.
- The salesperson has to analyse all the information received and to write a document covering, as much as possible, the requests of the press, according to the provisions of the media relations guide.
- The spokesperson discusses with the management of the organisation about the

way in which information is sent to the press and the public opinion through:

- Official statement belonging to the manager of the organisation (briefing, press conference);
- Press release published on the website of the institution and sent via email to the accredited journalists, as well as to those who requested the information;
- Telephone communication, audio-video intervention on behalf of the spokesperson or of the manager of the institution in case the spokesperson is not at work.

In a crisis situation the person delegated to collaborate with the press has to respond promptly because journalists can use other ways of finding out the information, and these sources may offer fake or exaggerated information and therefore to worsen the situation.

In crisis situations institutions have to delegate just one person in order to communicate with the press, who has to positively deal with the situation, using a single, standardized viewpoint, accessible to the public opinion, therefore minimising confuse or contradictory situations. One can also eliminate the probability through which a journalist creates his/her own version regarding the situation within the organisation and broadcasting it to the public opinion (OVIDIU & CRISTIAN, 2006; DAGENAIS, 2002).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of the spokesperson within a public or private organisation and of its duties in relationship to the organisation that he/she represents.

Every institution, either public or private, has to hire or to collaborate with a spokesperson or a public relations company. This offers the organisation multiple benefits. The most important benefit consists of taking over the responsibilities that belong to the public relations department from the other departments. This aspect is beneficial for the entire company since the people who were also responsible for this department can now focus better and be more concentrated on the fields in which they are

qualified. At the same time, this person manages to make himself available to the media during the whole period, aspect which is beneficial to the management and which allows it to focus on other administrative problems. By permanently communicating with the media the spokesperson establishes a common language with the help of which he/she increases his/her credibility towards the journalists.

In the case of a situation which affects the image of the institution, the spokesperson takes the initiative and discusses with the press or with the various bodies empowered to solve the situation. The spokesperson takes over the requests of the media, the analyses them and offers an answer as soon as possible, without allowing the journalists to gather their information from other sources, therefore avoiding a major scandal.

The advantage of a spokesperson in such a situation is represented by the adequate, calm and precise language used to deal with the problem. He/she therefore manages to attract journalists on his/her side, aspects that have been taught in time, since he/she represents the public relations specialist that can, at any time, step into the shoes of the journalist and ask pertinent questions.

The difference between spokespeople is done through the way in which an organisation stands out, better or worse, since these people mirror the image of the represented institution.

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