

Chapter 2

Influencing Public Opinion: The Foundation of PR Then and Now

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Chapter 2 examines public opinion, propaganda, attitudes and beliefs, influencers, and the factors of persuasion. It also outlines the history of PR in the United States and Canada. The chapter ends with a discussion of the public's opinion on public relations and how that opinion was formed.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

1. Explain public opinion and why it is important to the practice of public relations.
2. Describe the various tactics that influence public opinion and explain how they are used.
3. Outline the contributions to the profession of key people in public relations history.
4. Explain why the public's perception of PR practitioners might be negative and what PR practitioners can do to counteract this view.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. Public Opinion: What it is and How it is Shaped – Page 39

Public opinion is defined as a prevailing opinion or a popularly held belief. It can be challenging to change public opinion at any given moment but it does adapt over time.

PR practitioners understand and appreciate what a powerful force public opinion is and how it is formed. They are employed by clients or organizations to influence it.

2. How PR Practitioners Work with Public Opinion – Page 42

PR practitioners work with public opinion in two different ways: they try and influence it or they use it to generate media coverage. A public relations plan outlines strategies and tactics in order to strengthen, influence, or change public opinion. In order to measure the campaign's impact on public opinion, surveys or polls are typically taken at the beginning, during, and at the end of the campaign to see if opinion has shifted.

In order to use public relations to garner media coverage, PR practitioners use interesting poll or survey results that can be tied to their organization or client and pitch them to the media. In this section, techniques for influencing public opinion are also examined.

3. The History of PR and the First Practitioners to Influence Public Opinion – Page 46

In this section, the history of PR in both the United States and Canada is explored. Reviewing this history helps us better understand the evolution of PR. Some components of the practice have changed and some are almost identical to the way PR was practised in the early days. This section also outlines the role women had on the profession's history.

4. The Public's Opinion of Public Relations – Page 57

Unfortunately, practices such as propaganda, spin, and astroturfing have tarnished the public's perception of public relations even though most practitioners act ethically and with integrity. These perceptions are compounded by the turbulent relationship the PR profession has with the media. It is up to all practitioners to help repair PR's reputation through professional and reputable practices.

CHAPTER SOLUTIONS

Public Opinion: What it is and How it is Shaped: Thinking Like a PR Practitioner (page 42)

- 1. Give an example of a recent media event that was the result of a change in public opinion. Describe what contributed to the shift in thinking.**

Answer: This question is designed to promote classroom discussion on how the public's opinions change over time. Some examples of media events that students might give as an example include gay marriage legislation in Canada, the United States, or other nations where it has recently become legal, the overthrowing of a government, a shift in popularity between political parties, and new laws that have gained popular support. Reasons for shifts in public opinion may be a landmark event, education, awareness, new information, changing values, and so on.

- 2. Explain why public opinion is just as important to organizations as it is to governments.**

Answer: Just as governments are vulnerable to the changing attitudes of the public, so are organizations. While changes in public opinion are often not as pronounced in organizations as in governments, where an election may concretely demonstrate citizens' discontent, organizations depend on the public for their licence to operate, through purchases, donations, or support. Shifts in public opinion could also result in new regulations or laws that could make it more difficult for an organization to conduct business.

How PR Practitioners Work with Public Opinion: Thinking Like a PR Practitioner (page 45)

- 1. Describe the ways PR practitioners work with public opinion and give an example of when you would use each one.**

Answer: PR practitioners work with public opinion by using public opinion polls to create media angles and to measure a campaign's effectiveness. Students can give almost any example to illustrate when they would use each technique, but they must explain that one is used as a story angle and one is used to see if public opinion is changing because of their work.

2. Outline Aristotle's three ways to persuade and give examples of when you might deploy each.

Answer: Aristotle's three ways to persuade are:

1. Reason: the use of logic in an argument. This might be used in an opinion editorial or in a speech to a rational or professional audience.
2. Ethics: the appeal to the audience to do what is right. This might be used in a speech or in a YouTube video for a social movement.
3. Emotion: the use of an emotional appeal. This might be used on a nonprofit's website or in its social media campaign.

The History of PR and the First Practitioners to Influence Public Opinion: Thinking Like a PR Practitioner (page 56)

1. Think of an example of a recent media event and describe how it might have been influenced by one of the founders of public relations.

Answer: This question is designed to get students thinking about the legacy of the profession's founders. Some ways that recent news articles might have been influenced by the founders' contributions include a news article that resulted from a news release, a news article that resulted from issues management tactics, a news article that resulted from a photo opportunity, a PR stunt, or a trained spokesperson who was used in the article as an example of corporate social responsibility.

2. Identify three positive contributions and two negative contributions to PR made by the founders of public relations.

Answer: Some positive contributions that students might identify include getting corporations to engage in dialogue with the media and the public, giving the media access to company leaders, and allowing companies to have representation in the media, and helping organizations see the value of corporate social responsibility.

The negative contributions might include helping to create a negative perception of PR through lying or manipulation.

The Public's Opinion of Public Relations: Thinking Like a PR Practitioner (page 61)

1. How valid do you think the negative perceptions of PR are? How would you defend the profession to a critic?

Answer: There are no right or wrong answers to this question. It's designed to prompt students to articulate why there might be a negative perception of PR and to defend their chosen profession by expressing its many positive aspects.

2. What is your definition of *spin*? Do you believe it is a fair term to be used in describing public relations?

Answer: There are no right or wrong answers to this question. It's designed to prompt students to articulate what spin means to them and to give their opinion on the term when applied to public relations.

Case Study: Garnering Public Opinion to Help with Negotiations: The NLMA (page 62)

1. Explain why the NLMA decided to sway public opinion in its favour.

Answer: At its core, public relations is dedicated to influencing public opinion. That is the overall objective of almost everything we do. We want the public to either think in a certain way or take a certain course of action. In this case, the NLMA wanted public opinion on its side in order to force the government back to salary negotiations. Publicly opposing the government was not a strategic direction given the premier's high popularity. The NLMA had to take a different tactic and avoid being seen as directly opposing the premier.

2. Discuss the issue the campaign focused on in order to influence public opinion.

Answer: The NLMA decided to focus on the shortage of doctors. Research indicated that this issue—the shortage of doctors and subsequent patient wait times—was important to the public. By focusing the campaign on an issue that people of the province cared about, they hoped to get public opinion on their side.