

The Importance of Media Relations Resources in Malaysia

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Abstract: Media relations resources are important aspects in communication strategy to channel information of an organisation to the mass media. The practice of media relations on the other hand is important and necessitated by an editor/practitioner of a media organisation to get information from the organisation but at the same time must be managed by experienced, skilled and professional public relations practitioner. In order to put that into realisation, it is crucial for public relations practitioner to build an effective relationship with media organisation editors. This article focuses on the importance of delivery method of media relations resources from the media organisation editor's perspective in Malaysia. The method of in-depth interview was implemented to analyse the opinions of all editors from media organisations on the practice of delivering resources to them. A number of 10 print and electronic media organisation editors were interviewed for data collection purpose. Analyses showed that all media organisation editors agreed that the practice of media relations in this country along with the suggestions are crucial in the effort to help increase the effectiveness of dissemination in this country. All the editors gave positive opinions on delivery method of resources to media organisations. The respondents also provided various interesting views that can probably be made into practice for all public relations practitioners in the country.

Key words: Media relations, editor, public relations practitioner, dissemination, in-depth interview

INTRODUCTION

Delivery method of resources by public relations practitioners to media organisation editors is essential in the practice of media relations. These media relations resources are important aspects in communication strategy to channel information of an organisation to the mass media. According to Wilcox and Cameron, the usage of media statements is most common in public relations. News resources are sent to journalists and editors to be placed in news columns and the sources for most written work will get published in the media.

The practice of media relations resources: Earlier studies showed that organisations send information to inform the society about their organisation activities through media organisation's news releases and publications. Lattimore *et al.* (2009) defined media relations as an activity intended to build open channels of communication between an organization and the media as a way of sharing news and features of potential interest

to the media audiences. According to Hendrix (2001), media relations basically means obtaining suitable publicity, or news coverage on a client's activities or public relations practitioner's organisation. This process is fundamental for the core of public relation discipline, public affairs and corporate communication. Sulaiman and Razali (2002) divided media statement into three types. First, is the announcement of future occurrences or individual issues such as retirement, promotion, sales etc. Second, information with regard to welfare or charity. Third, information to portray someone's image or an association or an organisation's image. Grossman on the other hand considered media relations resources as the most suitable ones to make news announcement of a particular organization (Seitel, 2007). Hendrix (2001) admitted that media relations resources are most popular to be used by public relations practitioners in the United States.

Research by Mohd (1993) found that press release or media release is a form of media relations that is most popular in Malaysia. As high as 72.2% of public relations

practitioners admitted that the form of communication that often being put into practice is media release. The reasons given are easy to prepare, affordable, easy to get cooperation from media representatives, ease in getting feedback and able to reach the target audience. Sent out media relations resources must contain the name of the involved personnel as well as a phone number that can be contacted immediately when it is deemed necessary. The writing in the material must be concise and in news report format. The length of a media release should be between one to two pages. Statements made must consist of news and facts and not of opinions or comments. Mohd (1993) considered that the resources must be free from grammatical, spelling and photograph errors to increase the opportunity of the media statement to be published. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2012), news releases must be accurate, informative and written in a journalistic style. Mohd (1993) suggested that media release is delivered straight to the editor in the morning to provide opportunity for the media to make a revised version if it is necessary.

There is a few acceptance methods from public relations practitioners such as by post, email, facsimile or by hand carry delivery to the editor. According to Lattimore *et al.* (2009), news releases nowadays are more likely to arrive by e-mail then they come by fax, regular mail, or by hand carry delivery. In fact, most releases are now either faxed or sent by e-mail directly to the editor or the intended person of the release. Meanwhile Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee suggested that media relations resources are sent using e-mail and facsimile. A study done by Mohd and Sidin (2012) on the other hand showed that various methods are used by public relations practitioners to send media relations resources to print media organisations. Out 3 of the 420 media relations resources studied, facsimile method is the highest with 81.0%, followed by e-mail, hand-carry delivery and by post.

Paul Steiger, Editor-in-Chief of New York's Wall Street Journal, requested the cooperation from 17 local bureau managers to keep all the received resources every day. He documented as many details as possible on what journalists and editors need to adapt from news resources everyday. They collected news releases, resources through PR Wire, facsimile and letters but did not include those sent through the internet. He found that gathered news resources had exceeded 2 feet tall and 10 feet long (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006). Such a high amount clearly indicates that media statement is the most popular media communication tool in the United States. The excessive number of such news resources also occur in newsrooms throughout the world. Not all the resources can get through the gatekeepers tight inspection because they are

certainly well trained in handling informative sources with news value. Research by Mohd and Sidin (2012) found that the number of media relations resources received by the media is between 20-64 resources from Monday to Friday. Meanwhile no material is accepted by the media on Sundays.

Bland *et al.* (1996) stated that only one out of 10 media statements or 10% that are being delivered by organisation are published in newspapers. Although this percentage is still considered low but it is agreed by the media worldwide. There are three reasons for a high failure publication rate of media relations resources by the newspapers; first, media relations resources may not contain news and even so they are not found to be of significant or specific causing the media not to be interested on the issue. Second, most media relations resources are badly written, including too many technical jargons which actually cover the main news. This is a reason often given on why media relations resources failed to obtain coverage by media organisations. Third, most of the resources are not sent directly to certain people, instead a machine gun approach is applied whereby resources are sent to all media in the public relations mailing list.

According to Cutlip *et al.* (2006), a public relations practitioner's approach on the delivery method of media relations resources can generate misunderstanding of journalists at public relations practitioners. The first approach involves pressure. There are some public relations practitioners who tried to ensure that their media relations resources are used by contacting the upper management of the media organisation. This act could possibly raise any editor's anger and only lessen the public relations practitioners' credibility in the eye of the higher media ranking officer. Second is ignorance. Media relations resources that do not contain news value will probably cause dissatisfaction in editors because they will be wasting their time reading them. Third is a high number of sending resources to the media. There are still some public relations practitioners who feel that their strength is measured based on the number of media relations resources delivered to the media organisations in a week. The media generally feels uncomfortable when they are swamped by publicity resources regardless of how good the resources are. Fourth, is unprofessional media statement. Large amounts of resources are rejected due to over expressed and long writings. This reduces confidence in journalists towards public relations practitioners.

Berkowitz (1993) explained that all newspaper editors observe press release as a insignificant material due to three factors. First, press release is often badly written. Most resources are written in a complicated manner and difficult to comprehend compared to news writing style.

Second, press release is seldom based on local issues. The media gives priority to local developments. The more resources of a press release that focus on local issues, the higher opportunity for it to be used in the media. Nevertheless, practitioners may not want to do additional work which occupy local media's needs. This decision is unfavoured because studies have found that press releases on local issues have opportunity as high as 10 times to be used in the media. Third, media statement is worthless as news (Seitel, 2007). This factor, according to Berkowitz (1993), is a major dilemma in the media relations context. Editors will only use media statement if they consider the press release to be of news value.

Based on the outcome of the study mentioned above, Morton suggested five requirements for a media statement to be regarded as news. First, the impact from the main announcement made that will affect an organisation, the community and society. Second, uniqueness which involves an occurrence which hardly happen or an incident that is very important. Third, conflict which involves significant dispute or controversy. Fourth, the main individual with higher position or the rank of a person who made the announcement, the higher the opportunity of the media statement being used by the mass media. Fifth, familiarity. This refers to how far the media statement focuses on local issues or the accuracy of the news in a day. Beside all the five requirements, Seitel (2007) added that news based on human interest which touches on emotions, often considered as newsworthy. Based on Berkowitz (1993)'s research findings, it is not a surprise why many media relations resources are difficult to be disseminated. A previous study by Berkowitz (1993) found that <10% of media statement sent by public relations practitioners are published in United States newspapers. Nevertheless, according to Morton, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, USA Today, Cable News Network (CNN), Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC), Associated Press Wire, Google News and other media channels in United States and throughout the world are filled with newscasts that are generated from media statements issued by professional public relations practitioners everyday.

Despite all the negative criticism, by fact, press release still remains as the one most important public relations tool. Bonnie Grossman commented that there is no other means in public relations that can replace the role of press release in making news announcement regarding a new product, policy and practice of an organisation. Practitioners may change the delivery system, such as by e-mail or paid wire services but the news release is still the basis of public relations writing (Seitel, 2007).

Objective: This study aims to look at media organisation editor's opinions on the efforts that need to be made and understood by public relations practitioners and the organisation in succeeding the delivery method of media relations resources in this country. This study focuses on material delivery and organisation category involved by the media organisation editors. Specifically, this study has the objective to examine media editors' opinions on material delivery practice by organisations in the media relations context in Malaysia. Material delivery in this context of study refers to the delivery method and process of printed promotion resources to the press by public relations practitioners or external organisations so that they can be published by the media.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was carried out in Klang Valley as the headquarter for print media agencies which are centralized here and respondents for this study involves editors of print media (newspaper) organisations. In-depth interview method was used for data collection purpose. 10 editors were selected from two media organisations one from the press media and the other involved the television. Research samples were randomly selected based on the professionalism as editors from the large number of editors working in print and electronic media. According to Saunders *et al.* (1997), in-depth interview method only requires a small number of respondents. Meanwhile, Syed (1993) mentioned that if a population studied is homogenous or similar in terms of their feature, hence the sample size needs not to be big. This selection was made based on the role played by the editors as mass media gatekeepers who made their position so important in the media relations issues in Malaysia. Each respondent was labelled for the purpose of identifying his or her identity and to facilitate data analysis process. Newspaper editors were labeled as PRESS 1, PRESS 2, PRESS 3, PRESS 4 and PRESS 5 while television news editors were labeled as TV A, TV B, TV C, TV D and TV E.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Delivery of Media Relations Resources Research findings showed all respondents agreed that the practice of media relations resources delivery as a promotional tool used by public relations practitioners could help to fulfil the requirement of editors. What being meant as the requirement of editors here is that the resources received have news value and up to date.

PRESS 1: If there is news value hence the material will be selected. TV C: Media relations material is very useful to the editor if it is related to what that is needed to be reported by the media.

Nevertheless, there are media relations resources that have no news value and are not suitable to be made as news resources. With regard to the matter, Respondent of PRESS 2 explained:

PRESS 2: I admit that the resources sent by public relations practitioners certainly are incomplete, simple and inadequate to be turned into news resources. They only inform of an event that will take place and this is only suitable for short column at a glance. My team needs to contact the practitioner again to obtain further information. For example, we need statistics but are not provided by the public relations practitioner. Usually, media relations resources received are not comprehensive, incomplete and do not meet the requirements of media practitioners. Important information including those controversial ones are only acquired during telephone conversation with the public relations practitioner.

Since there are many resources accepted, the editor cannot provide details on the resources received when contacted by the public relations practitioner who is following up.

PRESS 4: Sometimes I cannot identify which media relations resources have been received when a public relations practitioner contacts to ensure receipt of resources. TV A: If there are too many resources, it will be difficult for the editors to examine all those resources because they have many other assignments and unable to go through the entire resources received. Perhaps it is better to send short and brief information through facsimile with nuts and bolts form instead of pages of sheets that only will get a few glances by the editor.

Looking at the total numbers, all respondents who had been interviewed could not determine the actual number of media relations resources received daily. This is because the amount is uncertain, until at times when the number of media relations resources accepted hits a total of 100. However, there are times when a small number of resources is received from the public relations 6 practitioners. According to the respondents, by average they received between 50-100 media relations resources every day such as media statements, announcements and invitations especially on Mondays to Fridays. However, sometimes the number of media relations resources sent by the public relations practitioner is low especially on Saturdays and Sundays.

This study also observed whether the practice of media relations resources give benefits or otherwise to media organisation editors. Research results showed that 100% of the respondents agreed that the delivery of media relations resources can either benefit or not to the editors. Respondents admitted that as many as 80% of resources accepted from government organisations, private, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and public relations consultancy help editors to gain needed information.

TV D: These resources can ease my work, I will be able to see what is going on around me and get information from the programs or incidents that have occurred.

PRESS 5: I really agree that media relations resources sent by public relations practitioners are very helpful and useful because the resources contain handful of information. The resources can increase my information on what is going on outside, events that are organised by various parties. If the resources have news value, that would be helpful for me to make them into news resources.

Respondents also felt that public relations practitioners are not suppose to give the same media relations resources to everyone in order to generate coverage. For example, sending resources about launching of a new product for women to the women's desk and at the same time passing it to the economic news desk and news desk. This act/situation is pictured by public relations practitioners as hogging in media relations spotlight.

PRESS 4: I found out that public relations practitioners like to send the same media relations resources to a few units in the press. This case had happened before whereby the public relations practitioner sent the same resources to different units-women's desk, economic news desk and news desk and all the three units used the same resources.

The view of this respondent supported Bland *et al.* (1996) who agreed that a high rate of failure in the publication of media relations resources is due to public relations practitioners' act of sending resources to all media using the "machine gun" approach without focusing to a particular unit.

Delivery of media relations resources method: Research results showed that respondents gave various opinions on the best ways that can be done by public relations practitioners to send media relations resources. The

delivery of these resources to media organisation editors can be done through any forms of delivery such as facsimile, e-mail, visual recording resources or hand-carry delivery and this is to be taken into consideration as valuable news resources. However, findings showed that three popular methodologies were suggested by all respondents namely hand-carry delivery, e-mail and facsimile. This is accurate with Wilcox *et al.* (2003) and Lattimore *et al.* (2009) who suggested that media relations resources are to be sent using e-mail and facsimile. Each of these methods has its strengths and weaknesses as explained by the respondents.

Hand-carry delivery method: Most respondents believed that hand-carry delivery is the best way to send media relations resources to the editors. This is because through this method, public relations practitioners and editors get to know each other, build media relations network and tighten relationship between both parties professionally. Therefore, this method provides a space for public relations practitioners to get to know media practitioners closely and chances of getting publicity so it is encouraged by the respondents.

TV B: This is good for public relations practitioners' future in the media relations context.

PRESS 2: If public relations practitioners prioritise good relationship with the media, delivery method through hand-carry delivery is surely the best.

TV D: Resources sent through hand-carry delivery can be done by public relations practitioners especially those who are new at work and want to get to know media editors for first time.

Nevertheless, hand-carry delivery method is found to have weaknesses as mentioned by 20% of the respondents. If too many public relations practitioners come to see the media practitioners in the press room, this would cause overflow of guest in the media office. This will probably lead to difficulty for media practitioners to attend to public relations practitioners to manage their time to entertain and attend them.

PRESS 5: The negativeness is when the editor could not entertain public relations practitioners when they come but would still take time to serve them. This will affect the editor's working hours.

TV B: In my opinion, hand-carry delivery method by coming personally to see the editor is not a suitable way because the editor is always busy.

Findings showed that public relations practitioners did not use this method often as suggested by the respondents from the newspapers and television. Therefore, this study proposed that public relations practitioners especially those who just started to work to take the initiative of practicing hand-carry delivery method to get to know media practitioners, building media relations network with them and strengthen relationship between both parties professionally. After the existence of such good relationship, it is suggested that public relations practitioners should not send media relations resources themselves often to avoid difficulty which might arise at the media practitioner's side in entertaining public relations practitioners as this will then further affect the editor's working time. On the other hand, public relations practitioners are encouraged to contact the media editor via telephone or e-mail or new social medium (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp) to maintain the relationship.

E-mail method: Majority of the respondents felt that the best way to send media relations resources to the editor is via e-mail in line with the current technological development. Most respondents admitted that more public relations practitioners sent media relations resources via e-mail. This method is faster compared to other different techniques and tends to ease media editors.

TV A: Delivery via e-mail is also the best method to send resources to the editor.

PRESS 2: Media relations resources accepted via e-mail need not to be placed again into other hands as they only need some modifications.

TV C: Media relations resources sent via e-mail ideally are written in one simple page to avoid causing inconvenience for the editor to process them.

PRESS 3: Method via e-mail can be used because I will log into my e-mail account every day to check on the resources sent.

In accordance with this, respondents suggested that public relations practitioners who use delivery of media relations resources method via e-mail should take the initiative of ensuring follow-up by contacting media practitioners via telephone or come to see the editors to inform about the material delivery.

PRESS 1: They can use delivery method via e-mail followed by contacting me via telephone.

PRESS 2: If there is the initiative by the public relations practitioner of coming to see me after sending me an e-mail, it would be better. It would be good to the public relations practitioners.

However, the respondents felt that when making follow up via telephone or visiting the media office, public relations practitioners should avoid from doing it when the media practitioners are busy especially during peak hours. In the News and Current Affairs segments, the television station peak period is between 5.00-8.00 pm. Meanwhile in the Editorial Department, the time for the newspaper is after 5.00 pm.

TV D: Public relations practitioners should avoid contacting the editor from 5.00-8.00 pm because that period is critical and the peak time for the editor because they would have to determine resources to be released to the main news.

PRESS 2: If public relations practitioners would like to come and see the editor, the perfect time would be before 3.00 pm. From 3.00 pm onwards until the evening is not suitable because news resources are sent by the reporters for the editor to edit. In addition, the editorial meeting will be held will be held at 5 pm. This means that the critical period of an editor starts from 5.00 pm until night time.

Therefore, based on the respondents' opinions, public relations practitioners who wish to do follow up are suggested to do it from afternoon until 5.00 pm.

Research results also showed that one drawback that often occurs as mentioned by the respondents is that the material sent through attachment such as pictures are not received.

PRESS 4: We could not rely solely on technology. Sometimes picture sent via email by public relations practitioners are not received.

The findings showed that public relations practitioners did not use much of this method as suggested by the respondents. Therefore, ICT development should be a reason for public relations practitioners to increase the usage of e-mail to send media relations resources to the editors.

Besides, as proposed by research respondents, this will enable editors to receive the resources sooner. This method also makes it easier for an editor because if the media relations resources received via e-mail are found not to have news value hence the editor is only required to do modification on the resources without having to rewrite. This situation can possibly save the time of the editor because at the same time he or she may be editing other news and managing the delivery of media relations resources from other public relations practitioners.

Facsimile method: Another method suggested by 60% of the respondents is the use of facsimile machine to send media relations resources to media practitioners.

TV D: I think the best way to send media relations resources to editors is through facsimile.

PRESS 2: The delivery of media relations resources through facsimile to editors is also a choice because i myself can see whether the resources sent have been received or not.

This study showed that public relations practitioners are more fond of using this method compared to hand-carry delivery method and e-mail as suggested by the respondents. Therefore, this study proposed that public relations practitioners continue to use this method apart from the e-mail method in order to have a variety of material delivery methods.

Post delivery method: The findings showed that all respondents did not suggest delivery through post as a best way to send media relations resources to media editors. On the other hand, respondents advised public relations practitioners not to send resources on media relations to the editor through post because they might receive them late. When the editor received the delayed resources later, the resources may have news value but could not be published the resources as the date of a program or event is over. In other words, the resources are outdated and not suitable to be used as news resources. This is because in the editorial context, latest and up to date resources or recent issues are really emphasized and outdated resources are rejected although they may be important.

TV D: I do not encourage delivery through post because resources sent this way normally will reach late to the editor. There is an instance whereby I only received the resources sent after the programme or activity was over. This is a lost for the public relations practitioner if the resources have news value.

The findings showed that public relations practitioners could less apply this method in accordance with the suggestion by respondents from the newspapers and television stations. Therefore, this study implied that public relations practitioners do not use this conventional method that may no longer be effective in the current media relations context and in the future.

Media relations: Resources of Organisations Respondents were also asked on the quality of media relations resources sent by government public relations practitioners including those from the statutory bodies,

private entities and NGOs. Results of the research showed that there are various opinions on this issue. As many as 80% of the respondents in general feel that resources sent by government organisation public relation practitioners, private statutory bodies and consultant companies except NGOs, are high in quality and newsworthy. Nevertheless, when asked in detail, the respondents considered that there are certain obvious differences between resources prepared by these organisations as explained below.

Government organisations and statutory bodies: Respondents thought that the resources sent by government organisation public relations practitioners and those from the statutory bodies are good, acceptable and there are news value.

TV D: Resources sent by government organisation public relations practitioners including those from the statutory bodies have high news value because they are related to the government.

PRESS 2: Resources sent by government organisation public relations practitioners and those from the statutory bodies are good and acceptable.

However there are also organisation resources of this category that are not suitable to be used as news resources. Respondents felt that resources from government organisations and statutory bodies emphasize more on protocol matters and appear to be formal causing messages not to be delivered as required by the editor. For example, they admitted that the resources sent are too long and written like official letters.

PRESS 1: Resources from government organisations and statutory bodies are found to be too formal which cause messages not to be conveyed. Resources sent are too long and written like official letters.

PRESS 4: Resources from government organisations and statutory bodies are found to follow protocol, formal and well-mannered in writing style and do not lead to what the editor wanted. Therefore, I think government organisation public relations practitioners need to learn more on how to provide media relations resources like what those from private organisations are doing.

Private organisations: All editors came to agree that majority media relations resources sent by private organisation public relations practitioners are found to be more methodical, easy to read and comprehend. Private organisation resources are what the editor wanted.

Respondents in general thought that their resources are good but need to be scrutinized to find news value in them.

PRESS 1: Media relations resources sent by private organisation public relations practitioners are found to be more methodical, easy to read and comprehend.

PRESS 4: Resources from private organisation public relations practitioners are what the editor wanted.

Nevertheless, there are different points of view given by the respondents who admitted that most resources provided by the private sectors are too long back along with the information attached are incomplete.

TV C: Private sector resources are found to be too long. In general, their resources are good but need to be scrutinized.

PRESS 5: I realise that resources sent by private organisation public relations practitioners especially media release is too long. Their writing does not focus direct to the facts apart from the information being attached is incomplete.

Public relations consultancy organisation: Majority of the respondents agreed that media relations resources prepared by public relation consultant organisation generally fulfil the need of media practitioner because in terms of the performance aspect it is found to be more methodical, easy to read and understood by editor.

TV C: Resources sent by public relations consultancy to television stations are generally good.

PRESS 2: Resources sent by public relations consultancy organisation are good and acceptable.

PRESS 1: Media relations resources prepared by public relations consultants are found to be more methodical, easy to read and comprehend.

TV E: I found out that public relations consultants are the ones who sent most media relations resources such as invitations for coverage, notification and related clarification on certain issues.

The opinions above are simply because public relations consultancy organisations have a more professional, trained and experienced public relations practitioners in generating media relations resources in line with media practitioners' needs.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs): The research showed that most editors felt that media relations resources sent by NGOs are too long, not in order, difficult to be comprehend, not suitable for the context and less exciting which create a challenge for the editor.

PRESS 4: Normally issues related to NGOs are emotional and irrational statements about certain issue. This causes problems to the editor as he or she is unable to produce good media relations resources.

TV C: I found out that media relations resources sent by NGOs are lengthy and this makes it difficult for the editor as he or she requires time to read it. This is done so that the voice delivered is heard and read by the public. We use a small part only from their resources where at least their goals are achieved.

PRESS 1: Media relations resources sent by the NGOs are found not well organised and obscure.

PRESS 3: Material prepared by NGOs on the other hand, although the resources are small they can be unsuitable and less exciting.

Resources by NGOs may have been due to not having permanent and professional public relations practitioners to produce briefer, exact, dense and newsworthy resources.

CONCLUSION

The delivery of media relations resources by organisations in this country is seen to be very important in media relations context in Malaysia. All editors of media organisations admit that this practice is very important for them and the public relations practitioners. Media relations practices between both parties are seen to smoothen information transfer process from organisation to mass media editors and later to the people in this country. Therefore, the delivery of media relations resources should focus on the use of the right methodology in order to make it easy for them to evaluate those resources. All editors think that the best way to

send media relations resources is by e-mail and facsimile. Research showed that all organisations send media relations resources to the media organisation editors with the hope of getting necessary promotion for free. Resources sent by involved organisations are found to have news value and format that fulfil media needs.

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