

Edu Public Relations

WHEREAS much has been contributed towards curriculum development and institutional effectiveness through pedagogical means, developing focused public relations is one of the many core areas, which is still neglected at institutions imparting higher education, specifically the public sector institutions and universities.

Albeit most of the educational institutions present in the private sector are thriving to comply with the norms and nomenclature of public relations, they have still not come out of the confusion between the renowned buzzwords, namely, "marketing", "publicity" and "integrated marketing communication". Before embarking on any effort for strengthening public relations, it is eminent to understand the core concept behind the need for developing public relation for a higher educational institution.

Edward Louis Bernays, who is considered to be the father of the contemporary public relations, identified public relations as a "Management function, which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures and interests of an organisation followed by executing a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance".

While, Renee A. Prejean-Motanky identifies public relations as an integral component of the overall body of public affairs, public relations encompass all such activities useful for influencing audiences. It can act as an organisation's most significant resource for developing value, maintaining vivacity, and establishing organisational integrity.

It is paramount for Higher Educational Institutions to develop the aforementioned outcomes of public relations efforts because of the following mentioned reasons are in addition to the most visible reason of promoting their academic programmes.

- Higher educational institutions are custodians of the careers of the students enrolled in their academic programmes. Their image will directly impact on the image of their students and will resultantly have a direct influence on the entry of their students in professional careers.
- Universities, besides offering academic programmes, are also engaged in carrying out research work. In addition to the research work being carried out, the research outcomes also need to be projected to those who require for various purposes including but not limited to teaching, further research, service to the community, administrative operations and industrial consumption.
- The job placement cells of higher educational institutions are the direct dependents on the developed public relations with the demanding national and international job markets.
- Creation of industrial liaison programmes.
- Maintaining a lifelong focused contact with the alumni for seeking better alumni patronage.
- Higher educational institutions are also engaged in conducting seminars and conferences, which sometimes require extensive funding from the public and the private sectors.
- Mobilisation of funds from the public and the private sector organisations and donor agencies specifically for establishing endowment funds, chairs and scholarships.
- Effectively responding to any criticism or misconceptions about the efforts and services in place at higher educational institutions.
- Maintaining an effective and targeted liaison with the national and international media.

It is the responsibility of public relations to identify and develop stories in strong coordination with faculty and the staff about academic and research programmes, faculty endeavors, general higher education and student life issues.

- Conducting Market research focused at curriculum demand of the industry and stakeholders.
- Developing and Maintaining web communication with students, the general public and stakeholders.

The above are some of the most-important reasons reflecting the importance of developing public relations for higher educational institutions. These reasons can also be set as objectives for developing a public affairs department at any such institution desiring to develop and strengthen public relations on modern footings.

Higher educational institutions require public affairs departments, which are free from deep hierarchies and egoistic approaches. This

event to be projected. All the tasks related to the PR activity will then be framed according to the established objective.

It has been commonly observed that institutions take a limited scope of the public relation activities, usually restricted to circulating a press release or publishing an advertisement. It needs to be pointed here that public relations includes activities to ensure the institution has a strong public image. It complements all the other activities of public affairs at higher educational institutions including resource mobilization, alumni relations and job placement. Most typical responsibilities of PR personnel at academic institution may include:

- Planning and putting to action the PR strategies.
- Liaising with faculty members, students, administration and key spokespeople.
- Liaising with and answering enquiries from media, individuals and other organisations.
- Researching, writing and distributing press

Instituting human networks



will help them to keep the tactical public relations swift, elastic and cost effective. While a well-articulated public affairs department comes under the strategic plan of an institution, the current economic miseries and the dynamic changing environment do not require educational institutions with limited budgets and funding for long-time public relations plans but require actions spanned over short durations.

In this regard, public relationing needs to be tied with the tactical planning of any events organised, for instance, launch of a new academic programme, start of admission process, announcement of results, holding an alumni get-togethers, inception of a new industrial liaison campaign, etc.

Each PR activity will carry its own peculiar aims and objectives. For instance the objective of PR activity for an international conference can be convincing internationally renowned scholars to attend and speak at the conference, dissemination of conference outputs or it could be seeking financial sponsorship or all of them. The objective of the PR activity will always be in consonance with the overall theme of the

- releases to the concerned media.
 - Editing and analysing media coverage.
 - Writing and editing in-house magazines, news letters, case studies, speeches, articles and annual reports.
 - Preparing and supervising the production of publicity brochures, proceedings of events, handouts, videos, photographs, films and multimedia presentations.
 - Conceiving and coordinating photo opportunities.
 - Organising events including press conferences, exhibitions, job fairs, poster sessions and tours.
 - Maintaining and updating information on the institution's website.
 - Exploring sponsorship opportunities for institutional events.
 - Commissioning market research.
 - Responding to a potential crisis situation.
- In addition to the PR activities, another important dimension for strengthening public affairs at higher educational institutions is the development of an alumni network. Besides building a strong word of mouth, the alumni can play many critical roles including return-

ing to teach, sharing stories of their success with graduating students, serving on advisory boards or curriculum committees, creating job opportunities and providing financial resources for various events and academic programmes.

It is ironical to note that most of the higher educational institutions in Pakistan have restricted the efforts related to utilising the most valuable alumni resource to publishing an alumni directory or arranging an annual alumni dinner. Besides publishing an alumni directory or organising an annual alumni dinner, an alumni network, in the present information age, could be developed and thrived from by virtue of various traditional and non-traditional ways including:

- Developing an alumni association having its own peculiar mode of governance.
- Creating logical connection of alumni with academic affairs and partnering with them in conducting various continuing educational programmes comprising of short-term certifications, workshops and seminars.
- Developing an alumni portal and chat forums, for keeping the intra alumni and alumni to graduating student's relation intact.
- Taking alumni on board for various developments and fund raising efforts.
- Making the procedures for obtaining reference letters, character certificate, NOCs or duplicate transcript/degree simpler and friendly for the alumni.

It must always be remembered that bringing in a student requires to invest but bringing in alumni requires just appropriate actions and the alumni will always have an everlasting role in the destiny of a university.

Besides developing alumni networks, another import important area of public affairs at higher educational institutions is resource mobilisation. The objectives for resource mobilization, at any institution imparting higher education, is to:

- Cultivate a course of action for the contribution of society in the development of the institution.
- Maintain and advance the flow of financial and non-financial resources originating from the society for development of the institution.
- To find avenues, wherein the institution can provide paid assistance to industries, government, and other stakeholders on vital issues of interest.
- To seek sponsorships and assistance for conducting both curricular and extracurricular events.

It is to be realised that whereas acquiring resources from the society is an assistance offered to the institution, it is also a source for ensuring the interest of the society in the institutional programmes, both of academic and non-academic nature. After all, it is the need of the society, for which higher educational institutions are preparing the workforce.

It is of importance to consider that higher educational institutions are the most contributory units of society. Hence they can never survive by being insulated from it. They need to create interface to interact with society and establishing the domain of public affairs on concrete foundations in higher educational institutions is the only means for developing adamant human networks for the facilitation of institutional development. ■

The writer is senior lecturer/research fellow at the National Centre of Maritime Policy Research, Bahria University, Karachi
farhansherazi@ncmpr.org.pk