

Received: 19/04/2015  
Accepted: 29/04/2015

*Original Scientific Paper*  
*UDC 658.8*

# **MEDIA RELATIONS AS A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT IN SLOVENIAN COMPANIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Media relations, being the most visible instrument of public relations, is a very important strategic tool of every company. Like every other relations, media relations also represent cooperation of two different sides, journalists and company representatives. In this article, we explore how these two groups cooperate: which instruments do media practitioners in Slovenia use in order to reach the media and which are the sources actually used by the journalists. The survey implemented among 65 journalists and 106 PR representatives in Slovenia showed that media relations tools used by the majority of companies are not the same as the sources of information most frequently used by journalists. Data was analyzed with SPSS.22. Managerial implications are introduced.

*Key words:* *public relations, media relations, journalists, media, Slovenia.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Every company is a part of the broader environment. Whatever the size, industry, life-cycle level, ownership or legal form of a company is, it consists of a variety of communication activities and communicates to different publics - customers, suppliers, employees, investors, journalists and regulators. In this context, public relations cannot be avoided, it is only a question of to what degree these relations are controlled and coordinated.

An important and most visible part of public relations represent the media relations. In the context of public relations, the field of media relations is also

understood as a strategic tool which requires managerial skills (Khodarahmi 2009; Phillips 2006; Fill 2005, p. 680; Smith and Taylor 2004, p. 445; Podnar and Golob 2009; Sterne 2008; O'Dwyer 2005; Beard 2002, p. 25). Media relations in practice is more tactical in nature, but it also can contribute to achieving long-term strategic objectives, such as a better image of the company or brand, appropriate media profile, a change in behavior of target audiences, better relations with the local community, greater market share, the impact on government policy, better relationships with investors and better relations in industry (Theaker 2004, p. 161).

In practice, it often happens that the articles in the media (in terms of volume and content) do not match with wishes and expectations of the companies. We theorise that a lack of knowledge about the field of media relations is the most common reason for this divergence. Moreover, companies do not follow the advice of Supa and Zoch (2009), about using the strategy of targeted media relations.

The article presents the basic characteristics of media relations with a focus on the available tools of this activity and also a survey about the scope of the available and actually used tools of media relations by the relevant groups (journalists and representatives of companies). The key question is whether the companies in Slovenia in order to reach the media coverage use the same media relations tools, which are most commonly used by Slovenian journalists as sources of information.

## **2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 MEDIA RELATIONS AS PART OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Public relations represent a long-term effort of organizations focused on creating and maintaining good relationships and mutual understanding and communication with all important stakeholders, which significantly contributes to its acceptance in the environment (Linning 2004; Phillips 2006; Gruban 1990, p. 12; Smith and Taylor, 2004, p. 445; Verčič et al., 2004, p. 17; Henslow 1999, p. 1; Egan, 2007, p. 245; Fill 2005, p. 680; Smith and Taylor, 2004, p. 444). It is a managerial activity which is in the organizational structure of the company close to the main director or the part of the management itself. It has gradually evolved from an activity of influencing media coverage, which is now called media relations and represents only a part of the public relations (Smith and Taylor 2004, p. 445; Podnar and Golob, 2009; O'Dwyer 2005, Sterne 2008). According to Zoch and Molleda (2006, adapted from Tsetsura and Grynko, 2009) media relations represent about 60 % to 70 % of all public relations efforts.

Media relations constitute a mutual relationship between journalists and media relations practitioners, who provide information about their company and changes in it to journalists; through the media they want to reach other target public (Sterne 2008; Smith and Taylor 2004, p. 444; Supa and Zoch 2009; Fill 2005, p. 691-693; Verčič et al., 2004, p. 14).

## 2.2 MEDIA RELATIONS CHARACTERISTICS

Although through editorial coverage a company achieves several objectives which are similar to those achieved by the advertising, there are three important differences between editorial coverage and advertising (Smith and Taylor 2004, p. 452). The first difference is cost. In the case of editorial coverage the space in the media is not purchased like in the case of advertising, but other costs appear because the messages should be written up carefully for a selected target group and sent to the correct editor/journalist at the right time and in the right format. The second difference is credibility. Editorials are more credible than advertisements because they are perceived as something that was written by the editor or a journalist, not the advertiser who wants to sell something. In the case of editorials less resistance to the message exists than in the case of advertisements. Some argue that the credibility of the editorials is up to three times higher than that of an advertising message (Smith and Taylor, 2004, p. 454). Editorials published in traditional media receive higher credibility marks than those in new communication media such as blogs and social media, which are known as »consumer or users generated media« (Wright and Hinson 2010). The third difference is control. The organization controls the editorial messages only in a limited extent: what and when is or will be sent to the media (Fill 2005, p. 692-693), but not what content is or will be published. Fill (2005, p. 691) points out the possibility of changes in the original message as a critical assessment of opinion makers, which leads to higher credibility of editorials. According to Smith and Taylor (2004, p. 454-456), *»the same information can have a completely differently interpretation in different media: one positive, the other negative, perhaps with a touch of cynicism«*. *»Lack of control over the editorials may be slightly reduced by preventive activities, such as caution in the dates of events and messages (eg. the opening of a restaurant that sells hamburgers is not suitable on The vegetarians world day) or a review of journalists and editors who have written positively about the company in the past«* (Smith and Taylor 2004, p. 454-456).

## 2.3 MEDIA RELATIONS TOOLS

**A press release** is a basic media relations communication tool, which helps organizations to provide to the media information, which the public sho-

uld be acquainted with and also encourage an editor or a journalist to look for more information on this topic (Smith, 2006, p. 204). The written message about a specific change in the organization is sent to the media (journalists or editors) to include this information as news in the media. Press release is deliberately short and written in a style that is attractive to the editor (Fill, 2005, p. 691). Unfortunately, only every one out of ten messages sent to the media is published, which some authors (Bland et al., 2001, p. 80; Pang 2010) relate to the following causes: incorrectly selected target media, poorly written message with too many technical details and terminology incomprehensible to target audience and the lack of news value - news do not exist or is too old or irrelevant in terms of attractions to readers. When writing a press release there should be taken into account the five basic journalistic questions - who, what, where, when, why (Theaker 2004, p. 162). The writing language should be understandable to readers, without using jargon and explaining any technical issues. Pang (2010) points out that it should not be suggested to journalists how to write their stories, because this is considered as an interference in editorial decisions.

**A press conference** is organized in case of a large, significant event for which a press release would not provide details that organization would like to underline (Fill, 2005, p. 691). Novak (2006, p. 204) explains that we organize a press conference when we want to communicate our important news to all the media at the same time and give them an opportunity to ask questions. It is always necessary to provide for journalists a material that contains a reconstruction of all statements, photos and important general information that illuminate the background (Fill, 2005, p. 691).

**A press material** is a company's personal card, which includes all important information about the company; the photos, biographies, company brochure, internal newsletter, among others (Smith 2006, p. 205).

**An interview** with representatives of organizations allows the communication of news and opinions of the organization about a problem or event (Fill, 2005, p. 691). Novak (2006, p. 205) explains that journalists decide to interview in case they want an in-depth narration of a particular topic. It is recommended to try to predict what a journalist will ask and to prepare some replays.

Journalists often want the representatives of the companies to comment some news or events. In a **statement** the representative of the company tells the company's opinion about the topic in a few sentences. It is important that the statement is brief and answers the journalist's question (Smith 2006, p. 205).

**Among other tools of media relations** Fill (2005, p. 691) refers to articles, speeches, letters to editors, photo captions.

The creation of a **website** for journalists is a part of the presentation of the organization online. According to some research, 80% of American journalists their first source of information search on the Internet (Novak 2006, p. 206). Andrewes (2006) explains that a good website meets the needs of the user as part of a complex network.

Tench et al. (2007) have found that the most effective and the most popular tool of media relations are honest, well presented personal messages forwarded by e-mail, in person at meetings or in the form of a press folder.

### **3 RESEARCH ON THE USE OF MEDIA RELATIONS TOOLS**

The theoretical review presented all the available tools of media relations. The empirical survey analyses which of these tools are actually used by companies in Slovenia and also whether the companies use the tools, which are most commonly used as sources of information by Slovenian journalists. Two hypothesis are examined.

**Hypothesis 1: A press release is the most commonly used source of information among journalists.**

**Hypothesis 2: Majority of companies do not use those media relations tools which are frequently used as a source of information by journalists.** The criterion is the average value of grades 3 by journalists.

#### **3.1.1 Research and data collection**

The research was implemented between the two relevant groups: journalists and company representatives. Primary data for the quantitative study was collected by an online survey, which was sent to the email addresses of random selected 200 journalists from 40 most important media in Slovenia (random sampling) and 500 companies (systematic sampling: every 350th company from the **Slovenian Business Register** list, without public organizations) in April and May 2014. By the beginning of May, 35 completed surveys of companies and 25 completed surveys of journalists were received, based on which we conducted a pilot study. In June 2014 all the needed 171 completed surveys were collected. Cronbach alpha coefficient exceeded the value of 0.7, which in the literature represents the threshold for sufficiently high reliability of the sample (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Online survey was completed by 65 **journalists**, among them 44.6 % were men and 55.4 % were women. The response rate was 32.5 %, which is slightly above the expectations. The sample included journalists aged 28 to 65 years with 2 to 38 years of journalistic experience. On average highly educated, even if the range of education is from the fifth level (high school) to the eighth level

(Master of Science). Respondents come from different areas of Slovenia. Almost half (49.2 %) of surveyed journalists do not belong to either of the two Slovenian journalists peer associations. Respondents generally have experience with a variety of media, some with at least two types, some with every type. Thematic areas in which respondents have experience are very different (67.7 % economy, 66.2 % politics, culture 49.2 %, 43.1 % education, 36.9 % health).

In the group of **company representatives** an online survey was sent to the general addresses of companies with a request to forward it to the person who is responsible for media relations (if there was no such person, it should have been completed by the director) of the company. In the period from 25th April to 6th June 2014, 106 responses from company representatives were received, which means that responsiveness was in line with expectations (21.2 %). Among the representatives there were 43.4 % women and 56.6 % men. Respondents were aged 26 to 70 years (average 43.29 years); on average high educated (from fifth level to the doctoral degree); coming from different regions of Slovenia. Among the company representatives that have completed a questionnaire there are 73.6 % directors, only 10.4 % media relations representatives, 2.8 % heads of departments and 13.2 % employees in other areas.

### 3.1.2 Results and hypothesis

The question »*How often do you use for your work sources of information listed below?*« **journalists** responded at a 5-level Likert scale, with the importance ratings as follows: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very often. The table below shows that as a source of information journalists most often use for their work *answers to written questions*. *Sometimes to often* they use *interviews or statements made by representatives of companies, media material, press conference or press release*. *Company websites, events and photos from the archives of the company* are less frequently (*rarely to sometimes*) used sources of information by journalists. It follows that **hypothesis 1**, which reads »**A press release is the most commonly used source of information among journalists.**« can not be accepted because as can be seen in **Table 1** a press release is in the fifth place after the frequency of use among journalists.

**The company representatives** answered the question of closed type with more than one answer possible: »*What were the media relations activities used in your company in 2013?*« About frequency of use they weren't asked, because of a very small chance of real comparison of responses. The table below shows that the 67 % of companies use an *updated website*, 39.6 % of companies use a *press release*, 27.4 % of companies organize events. Only 15.1 % of companies organize a *press conference*, supply journalists with *media material* and *photos from their own archive*; the same percentage of companies is not carried on any media relations activities.

As can be seen in Table 1, the only media relations tool used by more than majority (50 %) of companies is an *updated company website*, which is as a source of information used by journalists less than sometimes (average frequency of use is 2.89 which is less than criterion 3). It follows that the hypothesis 2, which reads »Majority of companies do not use those media relations tools which are frequently used as a source of information by journalists.« can be accepted.

**Table 1:** Use of media relations tools in companies and frequency of use of different sources of information among journalists

Source of information (journalists) / Media relation tool (company representatives)	Journalists		Company representatives	
	Frequency of use (average)	Standard deviation	Number of companies using the tool	Percentage
No activity	-	-	16 16	15,1 15.1
Photos from the archives of the company	2,15 2.15	00,905.905	16 16	15,1 15.1
Events	3,95 2.15	0,837 0.905	20 29	18,9 27.4
Updated company website	2,89 2.89	0,937 0.937	71 71	67,0 67.0
Press Conferences	3,23 3.23	0,880 0.880	16 16	15,1 15.1
Press releases	3,25 3.25	0,811 0.811	42 42	39,6 39.6
Media material	3,42 3.42	0,882 0.882	16 16	15,1 15.1
Statement of the company representative	3,66 3.66	00,853.853	20 20	18,9 18.9
Review with a company representative	3,95 3.95	0,837 0.837	20 6	18,9 5.7
Answers to journalists' written questions	4,06 4.06	1,044 1.044	5 5	4,7 4.7

Source: Survey 2014

#### 4 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

If companies want the media to publish editorials on them, they need to inform the journalists about their achievements by themselves. As illustrated by a literature review, there exist quite a few available tools for informing the media. Nevertheless, we find that the majority of Slovenian companies do not use those media relations tools, which are most frequently used as a source of information by Slovenian journalists. From a strategic point of view, this certainly is not good for the companies.

The first step to improve the situation is rising awareness within a company's management that media relations are of strategic importance for the company and, as such, in the context of public relations stand side by side to the Board Director. The second step is to ensure that at least one person is in

charge of media relations in the company. We recommend that this is a person who knows the area. We suggest that this person gains media-relations skills and pays particular attention to learning about the media in a local environment, establishing and maintaining good relationships with journalists and editors, and the corresponding transmission of information to the media. Only information placed in the right way will trigger interest in target audiences.

It is very important for a company to respond to journalists' questions and provide appropriate counterparts for any statements or interviews. In doing so, the temporal component is very important, since journalists are bound by time constraints of their editorial boards. Constantly, the work of the media relations representative is updating the company's media material for journalists and informing them through the press releases and press conferences if necessary. Updates in the company's website and archive photos are rarely used by journalists.

The reasons for the poor use of media relations tools in Slovenian companies, understanding the individual areas of media relations and management of this area with other aspects can be the starting point for any of the following research.

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## ODNOSI S MEDIJIMA KAO STRATEŠKI INSTRUMENT U SLOVENSKIM PODUZEĆIMA

### SAŽETAK RADA:

Odnosi s medijima , kao najvidljiviji instrument za odnose s javnošću , je vrlo važan strateški alat svake tvrtke . Kao i svaki drugi odnos , odnos s medijima ipredstavlja suradnju dviju različitih strana, novinara i predstavnika tvrtke . U ovom članku, istražiti ćemo kako ove dvije grupe surađuju: koji se instrumenti koriste u Sloveniji kako bi se doprlo do medija i koji se izvori zapravo koristi od strane novinara. Anketa provedena među 65 novinara i 106 PR predstavnika u Sloveniji pokazala je alati koji se koriste od strane većine tvrtki nisu isti kao i izvori dobivanja informacija koji se najčešće koriste od strane novinara

Podaci su analizirani uz pomoć SPSS.22 . Menadžerske implikacije su uvedene.

*Ključne riječi:* odnosi s javnošću, odnosi s medijima , novinari , mediji , Slovenija .