



Does Your Church Need a Public Relations Strategy?

The term public relations is defined by PRSA as:

“A strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”

But, do churches really need to manage public relations? Should they care about building relationships with its members and the community?

The answer is yes. The church represents Christianity and has the responsibility for making that representation reflective of who Christ is. And, one way to do that is by giving back to the community and maintaining a positive public image. We often hear of PR nightmares during times of crisis and, how an organization responds, can have a positive or negative effect on the public perception of the organization.

There have been a number of church related events in recent years that received lots of media attention. The unfortunate shooting of a pastor as he preached, the sex scandal of the leader of a mega church or the Catholic Church child abuse scandals are all examples of times when the church needs to have a public response. Anyone who followed any of these stories can only imagine the behind the scenes efforts that went into its damage control and communication efforts. The way a church responds and communicates during a time of crisis can influence how they are perceived by the general public.

Developing an effective Public Relations Strategy is not only good church management, but it is also instrumental to influencing a positive public image.

A good strategy can help build rapport with members, employees and the general public. The goal would be for the ministry to have a good reputation within their community and a plan for responding quickly in the event of a church crisis or emergency.

A public relations strategy provides direction for communicating information and responding to the public and members.

1. Discovery

The first step in developing a plan is called discovery. Discovery is the process an organizations goes through to help them better understand, who they are, what they do, who they serve and who in the community they interact with.

For example: a church supported homeless shelter may have a mission to “provide shelter to those who have temporarily lost the ability to provide housing for themselves”. This statement helps the organization understand who they are, what they do and who they serve.

The ministry will then try to identify who in the community they interact with. In the case of a homeless shelter, it may be residents or businesses within the neighborhood they serve.

The church should have a goal to create a positive relationship with everyone they interact with. This is important because, in the case of a homeless shelter, a positive relationship can potentially increase funding, identify volunteer labor or foster collaboration for joint community projects.

2. Public Relations Strategy Plan

Developing the public relations strategy and plan is very similar to establishing church goals and should be done as part of a strategic planning process. PR goals and objectives should focus on communicating what was learned in the discovery phase.

For example, the church might have a goal of sending out press releases for fundraising events that support the homeless shelter.

This should include a communication plan for how information will be shared with congregants, employees, the general public and those who interact with the organization.



For example, think about answering questions like – how does the ministry make the public aware of the homeless shelter? How does the church field media calls following a church emergency? How are church members made aware of church strategy?

Another part of the plan is to develop a strategy for how the organization can be both **proactive** and **reactive**. For example, the plan is **proactive** by educating the public on the services the church provides as well as maintaining a positive public image. The plan is **reactive** in how the ministry plans to respond to unplanned or unforeseen events. Having a written strategy is the key to facilitating a quick and positive response.

The plan might also include the identification of the person(s) who speaks on behalf of the organization and the message that will be communicated. It requires specialized training for someone to be able to field questions from the media so having a person with the right skill set and experience is crucial.

3. Public Relations Policy

PR policy should be written for how to manage communications or respond to any number of situations or events. This includes communicating with employees, the news media or a public announcement regarding a church sponsored event.

For example, identifying what information gets shared, and how the information is communicated about a community outreach event is what the policy outlines and clarifies.

4. Public Relations Strategy Plan Implementation

Implementing the plan according to policy requires church budgeting, scheduling and a process to roll out the plan. Budgeting and timing of communications can impact the end result.

For example, dollars may be budgeted for printed material to help market a church sponsored event or community outreach.

The goal would be to use the policy to guide all internal and external communications – **what** information gets communicated to **who**, **when** and **how**.

5. Evaluation

Once the plan has been used for a while, it is important to evaluate how well it is working. Creating SMART Goals can provide specific measures to track the effectiveness of the plan over time.

For example, you might have a goal to make the community aware of all church sponsored outreach events. The measure for this goal might be the number of press releases that are done advertising church events.

Taking the time to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan can also help to identify areas that are working and areas that need additional focus or resources. Using an improvement process like the FOCU PDCA model can also help to improve how the public relations plan is building awareness within the community.

A PR strategy is designed to build positive relationships with members, donors, employees and the general public. A positive public image can elicit care and support in times of crisis.

In addition, maintaining a reputation, for positive things such as giving back to the community, providing a great place to worship, or supporting the social needs

within the community, can do more to recruit new members than any other form of advertising.

Does your church have a PR strategy?

August 5, 2014

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