

# **PUBLIC RELATIONS, RITUALS, AND SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

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**Abstract:** *the paper explores educational PR and the school values, traditions and rituals as an effective way of building school-community mutually beneficial relationships. As a strategic communication approach, academic, public relations enable school institutions to educate and persuade the diverse community stakeholders, develop their brand image and brand reputation and get a more in-depth insight into the needs of its key publics. School social rituals help to engage students, parents, and teachers in mutual experiences with a strong influence on all.*

**Keywords:** *educational public relations, community relations, school rituals, image and reputation.*

### ***Introduction***

A communication policy of an educational institution is a multifunctional process of communicating a school's mission, values, principles and educational services to both internal and external publics. It enriches school community life with shared experiences, thus developing mutually beneficial relationships. Through an effectively executed communication policy, the educational institution builds and maintains its positive organizational image and reputation. An educational institution comprehensive communication policy aims to establish long-term relationships with its entire school community, beyond students (parents) and teachers. A school first needs to know its key publics' needs, interests, and preferences to develop such a policy. The educational institution's values, sense of pride and community through its system of traditions and rituals are at the heart of educational public relations.

### ***Educational Public Relations***

Organization's values and attitudes have the potential to project themselves on young people's future professional growth. Therefore, an educational institution needs to develop and implement core values and positive attitudes, which will impact students' personal development and the formation of community consciousness. However, this can hardly be achieved without implementing proactive actions and communications at an institutional level to build brand image and reputation.

Public relations as social communication technology in education convey one-way messages from the educational institution to the public. This asymmetrical communication lacked a clear focus. Its primary purpose was to present the best achievements of the school to make its image. Nowadays, educational public relations play a vital role to communicate the educational institution's essential and beneficial part in society. Favorable public opinion stemming from a positive image and reputation makes some educational institutions stand out in the eye of students and parents. Thus, educational public relations significantly contribute to the formation of shared attitudes, identification, and support of the tangible and intangible assets of the educational institution. Moreover, educational PR works in the school community's best interest by implementing activities that earn public understanding and support. All this is closely related to the social responsibility the school has to society in general.

Therefore, educational PR can be defined as a strategic "comprehensive two-way communications process involving both internal and external publics to stimulate a better understanding of the organization's role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs" [1]. It takes an important place in shaping policies and procedures in the public interest and carry on involvement and information activities that earn general understanding and support. Symmetrical communication is a core feature of the personalization of the very communication process and building the organizational image and reputation. By implementing public relations as the primary communication approach, the school could regain its leading status in the social system. Public relations help the school to open itself and become more transparent and welcoming. Generally speaking, the post-Soviet educational institution (especially the public one) is a relatively closed system. From a systems theory perspective, closed systems are more susceptible to challenges and issues in the external environment. It creates a negative image in the mind of its community. It prevents the school institution from developing itself as a socially desirable place – not as a required one.

There are three broad areas in which educational PR should be implemented: 1) explaining the nature, functions and activities of a school institution, 2) maintaining mutually beneficial relationships, and 3) correcting wrong impressions in the public domain related to the school image and reputation. Implemented in these three areas, educational PR facilitates the school's purpose to develop independent, critically thinking and contributing members of society. It can become a daunting task, in any case. The person responsible for the school-community dialogue needs a more profound and applied knowledge of educational PR.

Such an expert needs to have a deep understanding and extensive practice in anticipating image problems; providing solutions; handling all aspects of district publications, e.g., external newspaper and internal newsletter, web site; acting as the key contact for the media: writing news releases; working on getting media coverage of district news; designing objective, informational materials for budget/bond issue campaigns; developing all levels of communications, including writing a crisis communication plan; conducting public relations research, surveys, and polls; interpreting results for management; creating avenues for student/staff recognition; training employees in the importance of public relations [2].

As a result, the school community would better understand the practice of the educational institution and the community's expectations. Through targeted, planned and proactive communications, students, parents, businesses, institutions get a deeper insight into the life of the school institution, the educational process, and the everyday work of teachers, whose ultimate aim is to provide better education to students. Such proactive two-way communication creates a contact zone of mutual trust that strengthens the relationships.

All the above mentioned is necessary because a school institution is directly accountable to its community, whose support it usually seeks. Therefore, providing information and achieving mutual understanding is an integral part of the continuous improvement of the school's educational services and products and the community gets. The school–community mutually beneficial relationships enable improvements, which the school can hardly achieve or afford on its own. Therefore, educational public relations facilitate the adequate intertwining of the school institution into the social community environment. It creates a common ground for the specific interests of the school community members. It is a way of self-legitimization and obtaining public approval. Thus the communication process becomes a continuous interaction of mutually accepted and approved values and experiences, which create loyalty.

#### ***School's Image and Reputation***

School institutions develop an image and reputation knowingly or unknowingly. An image and reputation are formed during interactions between the organization and its publics. A common feature is that both print and importance require a deep understanding of the community's interests, needs, expectations, values, aspirations. A second common feature that an image and a reputation share is that they strive to support a public that invests mind, heart and soul in the mutual relationship.

Therefore, a school image and reputation provide unique advantages and gain support and cooperation of the whole school community. Thus an organizational image and reputation are communicative components of symbolic reality. As such, they belong to the set of community symbols and personalities. A critical difference between an image and reputation should be seen in the exterior-interior opposition. Metaphorically, an image is the "cover" of an individual or an organization. This cover can be relatively easily modified and managed. However, a reputation is much deeper and more complex as a construct. It goes beyond the name and the visual features – corporate logo, color, font etc.

The reputation activates an associative network in the individual's mind for a school organization. It materializes itself as stored positive or negative associations and experiences developed through the interactions between the school institution and its community. Therefore, positive emotions in the school community are a critical factor in building a school reputation. "People are emotional and intuitive beings, despite their aspirations to be rational. Emotions and rationality are tightly interrelated. However, emotions, to a greater extent, drive one action or another. Emotions are the new horizon for specialists in communications because people think with their hearts" [4, 5]. These positive emotions can be activated with a wide range of school traditions and rituals. They offer highly integrating, memorable, and positive experiences for students, parents, and other school community members.

#### ***Functions of school traditions and rituals***

Alexieva and Filipov [5] discuss school traditions, rituals, and ceremonies as milestones of the school institutional culture. They define traditions, rituals, and ceremonies as planned events and fall under the subcategory of special events. "Planned events are effective instruments for attracting the media attention and directing the public debate, changing attitudes and provoking concrete behaviour as well as building and establishing image and reputation [6, 9]. Through their use, new values are created, and old ones are changed [7]. Therefore traditions, rituals and ceremonies should be a focal point in the communication policy of the school institution. They build a sense of belonging and pride.

The more values are tied to individual attitudes, beliefs and perceptions, the more opportunities the school institution has to operate in a practical, flexible and targeted way. A tradition represents those values, skills, and practices that reflect every society's essential characteristics, which it stores over time, passing them from one generation to another. Ritualization of school life is related to the understanding of the school not only as an educational center but also as a community with specific energy and traditions. Every educational institution should have a system of symbols and rituals and use it to build connections with students, parents, teachers, and the wider community. Stable and generally accepted values, ideas, norms and ideas gradually cultivate beliefs and behaviour.

Alexieva [8] elaborates on the critical aspects of the importance of school rituals and their applications in school life are such as establishing standard rules for ritualization of school life; cultivating young people as citizens adhering to the values of a democratic society; motivating teachers to work with students with outstanding abilities; students' demonstration of professional knowledge, skills and competencies and encouraging personal expression and desire to pursue their chosen profession; creating conditions for the further creative development of the child; improvement of educational process quality; intercultural education and training. Sustainability and durability are qualities that always command respect in their immanent belonging to rituals and ceremonies.

The unchangeable nature of cultural codes of different shapes and messages transmit a person to another dimension of values. School traditions and rituals can rely on their impact only if they manage to affect the core of the human system of beliefs, attitudes and durable orientations. The occasion of an event is part of the structure, the system and the configuration of school rituals and ceremonies. Therefore it is best to understand the specificity of the occasion before searching for scenarios and instructions for implementing a rite. It brings the school community together and corresponds to the central point of the event [9]. The differences in the event importance are the cause of sometimes unnecessary showy rituals or apathetic celebrations (in the first case of minor things, and the second of a significant event) that lead to negative results and damage the image and reputation of the institution and its management.

The rituals of recognition aim to emphasize the importance of one or another event in the life of the school organization and its members with festive dinners, special award ceremonies and recognition. The full ritualization of school life shows the unique ability to attract attention, to inspire respect, and involve many to a name, a system, and a value.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the importance and relevance of educational PR and the orientation of school policy to use its diversity of strategies to promote the school institution drive strong image and reputation. To a considerable extent, how well a school promotes itself predetermines the parents' choice of the most appropriate school for their children. The fact that parents perceive school as a social entity should be kept in mind. In the school institution's best interest, all employees always act as representatives of the school. Conversations with individual teachers (in person or in-class meetings) and the written communication sent to parents have their influences. Their understanding of work, teaching profession, professionalism, and human maturity impacts the school-community relationships.

Every school has its own culture, created and set by the values, experience and norms shared by teachers and students. These shared values, standards and behaviour determine how to meet people, interact with them, their attitude towards school etc. So the modern trend is, on the one hand, for schools to use as many different communication channels to communicate internally and externally and on the other to use the traditions, rituals and symbols as a fixed part of the educational PR work with feedback as a powerful correction mechanism for effective implementation of strategic and operational objectives of the school. Thus, continuous communication and education in organizational values help build a positive image of the school institution. The organizational behaviour and communications reflect its current image, which becomes a benchmark for the school institution's community members' perceptions. The school image becomes a mind pattern through interaction and dialogue, which drives either positive or negative behaviour on behalf of the internal publics (students, parents, school management, teachers and staff) as well as the external community stakeholders (business, media, local government or national agencies, NGOs etc.).

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