



NEW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN THE FASHION AND TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Review paper
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ABSTRACT: *The most important contemporary world-wide trends – development of new communication technologies and, consequently, new communicative practices, and, appearance of a number of crisis situations – which began in 2008, affect all aspects of society, including economic life. Social media, for instance, are increasingly integrated into contemporary world, which means, vast majority of people are exposed to what they see online, especially, when it comes to fashion. It becomes difficult not only for customers to follow trends, but also for companies to advertise and, more importantly, sell their products. Numerous industrial sectors, including the textile and fashion companies, are exposed to various threats. Textile and fashion companies, due to a fast changing business environment, try to find out more appropriate mechanisms in order to respond to the number of new challenges and tasks. Solving any problem, on the other hand, mainly depends on the achieved level of public relations development as a recognizable business function. The crucial goal of this study explains and highlights the role of public relations in contemporary business environment, particularly from the standpoint of companies that dominate in the textile and fashion industry. The first part of the paper depicts the role of public relations in general. The central part of this paper focuses on public relations practices that deal with the development of new communicative practices, on one hand, and, crisis situations, on the other hand. We also pay attention to potential communication strategies, developed within public relations field that can help the textile industry to resolve any problem under conditions of risk.*

Keywords: *public relations, new communicative practices, social media, textile and fashion industry, customer relations.*

NOVE PRAKSE ODNOSA S JAVNOŠĆU U MODNOJ I TEKSTILNOJ INDUSTRIJI

Savez inženjera i tehničara tekstilaca Srbije



APSTRAKT: *Najznačajniji savremeni trendovi u svetu – razvoj novih komunikacionih tehnologija i, u skladu s tim, novih komunikacionih praksi, te izbijanje brojnih kriznih situacija – uveliko se odražavaju na sve aspekte modernih društava, uključujući i oblast ekonomije. Društveni mediji, na primer, sve više su integrisani u suvremeno poslovanje tako da se ogromna većina ljudi izlaže onom što vide onlajn, naročito kada se radi o modi. Kupcima postaje sve teže da prate trendove kao i preduzećima da se oglašavaju i prodaju svoje proizvode. Mnoge privredne grane, uključujući odevnu i modnu industriju, izložene su svakovrsnim pretnjama i izazovima. Tekstilne i modne kompanije, zbog poslovne sredine koja se brzo menja, pokušavaju da pronađu delotvornije načine kako bi odgovorile na nove izazove i zadatke. Traganje za rešenjem nekog problema, s jedne strane, uglavnom ovisi od dostignutog nivoa razvoja odnosa s javnošću kao distinktivne poslovne funkcije. Glavni cilj ovog rada je da objasni i istakne ulogu odnosa s javnošću u savremenoj poslovnoj sredini polazeći, u prvom redu, od praksi koje dominiraju u tekstilnoj i modnoj industriji. U prvom delu rada ukazuje se na opštu ulogu odnosa s javnošću. Središnji deo rada se usredsređuje na aktivnosti odnosa s javnošću koje su usmerene na razvijanje novih komunikacionih praksi, s jedne, i, krizne situacije, s druge strane. Autori takođe posvećuju pažnju potencijalnim komunikacionim strategijama, kreiranim unutar odnosa s javnošću, koje mogu pomoći kompanijama tekstilne industrije da lakše reše bilo kakvi problem u uslovima rizika.*

Ključne reči: *odnosi s javnošću, nove komunikacijske prakse, društvene mreže, tekstilna i modna industrija, odnosi s kupcima.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "public relations" (PR) refers to the management of relations between one organization and the public, that is, the target public. PR are also a mechanism for positioning the organization in the public. The core of the public relations is comprised of the concepts of communication, organization and public [1]. The essence of the public relations is mainly embodied in the key categories such as "reputation, perception, credibility, trust, harmony and mutual understanding" [2, p. 7-8]. The key word in PR is "reputation" [3, p. i]. Reputation is being achieved on the basis of "understanding, trust, support, readiness for cooperation and agreement" [4, p. 94]. Filipović and Kostić-Stanković use 11 key categories to describe public relations: "reputation, image, identity, perception, credibility, trust, charm, mutual understanding, truthfulness and through information" [5, p. 7]. Wilcox and Cameron believe that the essence of public relations is embodied in the following categories: deliberateness/intention, planning, performance, public interest, (feedback / two-way) communication and management function [6]. Vladimirović believes that PR are "authentic and modern type of interpersonal communication, promotion and growth of the organization, together with its goods and



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services" [7, p. 245]. PR are, in a way, "a milder form of winning the favour" of both general and specific segments of the public [8, p. 204].

Public relations have largely entered a qualitative, new development phase - the digital age. This period is mainly characterized by the introduction of new communication technologies into the practice of PR [9-13]. The development of information technologies has led to an increase in the number of the employees in the information sector. Computers are becoming more accessible to more and more people. Digital public relations, based on the application of modern Internet technologies, help the organization to reach geographically remote publics. The latest stage in the evolution of public relations actually represents "returning the public to public relations" [14, p. 37]. In the case of traditional public relations, the organization mainly focused on the local and regional market, used mass public relations, and there was a time limit and availability during a certain period of time. In addition, traditional PR mostly used one-way communication through traditional channels (television, radio and printed media). It was difficult to evaluate the results of traditional PR [7, p. 250]. Despite the fact that public relations became more interactive with the emergence of new media, an accompanying unwanted problem arose - the difficult identification of "electronic publics" [10, p. 329]. For example, to younger consumers, especially teenagers, TikTok is the most attractive of all social networks [15]. This is the reason that most of the budget for public relations is allocated for the digital PR, that is, social networks. If the organization decides to use social media, it exposes itself to risks in terms of criticism from various interest groups and the public. Such a potential loss of control over communication also puts the organization in an awkward position and, consequently, creates obstacles to establishing good two-way and symmetrical communication. Intensive communication of the organization with external groups through social media makes it difficult to define a unique voice when addressing the public in relation to the various events.

There is a special form of a crisis situation, caused by the rapid spread of messages through social networks, which is called the spillover crises. This type of crisis situation occurs when some external events, related to a certain company, create doubts, concerns or undesirable perceptions about the quality of products or services and other companies belonging to a certain branch of economy [16]. This type of crisis is increasingly occurring in the fashion industry [17]. Organizations in such situations find various ways to suppress negative perceptions; for example, by strengthening their identity in relation to the competition, by trying to improve the reputation of the entire industry, etc. Due to spreading the negative publicity through social networks, the organization can fall into a special form of a crisis situation - the so-called paracrisis. Coombs and Holladay define this form of crisis as "a visible situation that can turn into a crisis during which the organization commits unethical or irresponsible behaviour" [18, p. 409]. Although the organization is not exposed to a real crisis - it is not accused of illegal actions - it is still in a situation where interest groups can make demands regarding behaviour change in order to correct immoral or irresponsible actions [11, p. 95]. The trouble is that requests sent through social media have a public character and in that sense represent a threat to the reputation of the organization.



2. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Technological and social changes, which have significantly transformed aspects of public relations since the 1990s, refer to the perception of the role of the corporation within the global economy, the quality of the environment and the more emphasized role of management in PR. Changes in the domain of communication and the public are of equal importance. Along with the increasingly present proliferation of the public and the weakening of mass media, the modern business is being characterized by the rapid spread of new media technologies and the increasing type of communication with individuals instead of mass audiences. Communication directed towards the user dominates - receiver-driven communication [19, 20]. Instead of the predominance of mass media, characteristic of an industrial society, a global communication network is being established based on mass self-communication in which an individual (1) creates a message, (2) sends it to a potential recipient and (3) independently chooses the content to which the recipient will be exposed [21, p. 55]. This leads to a narrowing of the concepts of receiver and emitter. Since information and communication technologies promote the "dialogue" with the public, it is necessary to include digital PR, consisting of various methods and tools, in all elements of the marketing mix of the company or organization [13, p. 78]. This is, of course, widely applied in the marketing activities of fashion industry companies [22-26].

Bernard Miočić, based on previous research, distinguishes among three roles of public relations: operational-technical, managerial and strategic role [12]. The operational and technical role of PR is reflected in the implementation of communication. The managerial role is not limited only to communication, but also to planning and evaluating communication plans and participating in decision-making processes. The strategic role of PR includes "monitoring the environment, analysing social norms and values, then predicting the consequences of certain phenomena from the environment on strategy and organizational policy, as well as advising top management in relation to these phenomena" [12, p. 38]. Miočić also empirically tested and analysed the application of the model of relations (communication) with the public, with an emphasis on two-way interactive communication and dialogue between organizations and the public. The results obtained from a sample of employees in public relations (n=106) show that the public information model is mostly applied to the Internet (83%), which indicates that the feature offered by the new media environment - interactivity - is not sufficiently appreciated.

3. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND REPUTATION

Analytical research of the organization's interaction with the external environment focuses on three basic categories: corporate identity, corporate image and corporate reputation. Corporate identity is one of the oldest forms of communication between an organization and its target groups. Reputation refers to the reputation that an organization acquires and maintains thanks primarily to good performance, i.e. the use of organizational resources. A good reputation is harder and slower to achieve than a recognizable identity. A

favourable reputation requires more than implementing a formal communication system; a strong identity is needed that is being built by achieving good performance over a relatively longer period of time. Key factors that contribute to a strong reputation include credibility, reliability, transparency, trustworthiness and responsibility. These qualities not only enhance relationships but also establish a solid foundation for long-term success and influence (Figure 1). Restoration of reputation ought to be considered as a part of crisis communication within the wider communication field. Any crisis may present reputational threats to an organization, and, a subsequent process of exchange of messages (caused by a crisis), represents a specific sub-category of communication – crisis communication.

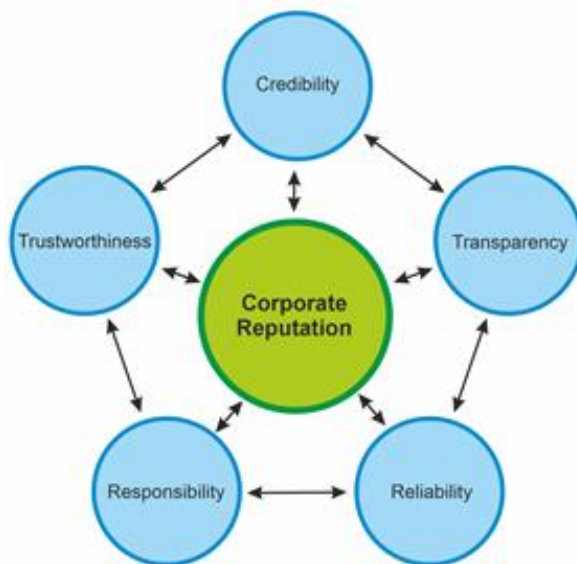


Figure 1: Key factors of a good reputation

Given the nature of the fashion industry, where customer sentiment, brand image, and public perception are crucial, a brand's reputation may be made or broken by how well it handles a crisis. For instance, H&M received a lot of criticism in January 2018 for an advertisement that showed a Black youngster sporting a sweater that read, "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" (see Fig. 2). The image was widely criticized as racially insensitive and led to protests and calls for a boycott. H&M immediately withdrew the advertisement and issued an apology, acknowledging the mistake and expressing regret for the offense caused. A thorough review of internal processes related to diversity and inclusion was initiated. Meetings were held with representatives of various communities to better understand the issues and improve practices.

Although the incident initially damaged H&M's reputation, the company's transparent and swift response helped mitigate long-term harm. H&M's example demonstrates how timely

response, transparency, and willingness to make changes are crucial in crisis management. Brands that openly acknowledge mistakes, take concrete steps to improve their processes, and actively collaborate with communities can not only mitigate the consequences of crises but also build long-term consumer trust. Furthermore, many fashion industry companies gained a significant experience in terms of communicative strategies during the COVID-19 crisis, that has transformed consumers' relationship with clothes.

Corporate reputation is not easily quantified given that it consists of various dimensions and attributes. However, there are three dominant approaches when it comes to measuring corporate reputation, that is, concepts based on (1) social expectations, (2) "corporate personality" and (3) trust [27]. The essence of the first approach is that people evaluate different aspects of the company's operations based on the expected "behaviour" of the company in the environment (region or country) in which it operates.



Figure 2: The H&M “Coolest monkey in the jungle” advertisement

Corporate relations with the public take place regardless of the marketing function and are aimed at all target groups. Although PR do not represent a typical promotional activity, their ultimate goal, to a large extent, coincides with the goals of other promotional activities [28]. The part of the communication process that refers to the interactions between the organization and certain elements of the environment (first of all, customers and public opinion) is known as customer communication. Customer PR represent the "process of planning, execution and evaluation of public relations programs, which encourage increased procurement and customer satisfaction, through the establishment of

communication (exchange of information and impressions), which identifies companies and their products with needs, desires, concerns and interests of the customers" [29]. The target group of customers is the basic group of customer public relations. The company's activities in communicating with the target public are aimed at informing, persuading and reminding [30, p. 174]. The choice of one of the three objectives, as well as the appropriate communication tactics, is aligned with the phases of the product life cycle, among which are introduction, growth and maturity, then maturity and decline. In the conditions of modern business, when consumers increasingly use social networks (for example, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, TikTok, etc.), it is justified to single out connection as a special goal of communication [31, 32]. On the basis of the dominant generation that uses social networks (Table 1), an effective communication strategy can be created. It implies the involvement of the consumer in the capacity of the so-called company representatives who promote the brand through their activities on social networks, and which other participants on these media can perceive as an independent opinion.

Table 1: Main generation in social networks group

Social networks	Established	Country of origins	Approximately consumer	Main generation
LinkedIn	2003	USA	1,1 Billion	Millennials
Facebook	2004	USA	3,1 Billion	Millennials & Gen X
YouTube	2005	USA	2,6 Billion	All
X (ex Twitter)	2006	USA	0,6 Billion	Millennials & Gen Z
Instagram	2010	USA	3 Billion	Gen Z & Millennials
TikTok	2016	P.R.China	2 Billion	Gen Z & Gen Alfa

Source: Authors researching

Promotional activities are aimed at (1) raising awareness, i.e. consumer awareness (cognitive phase), (2) changing consumer attitudes and feelings (emotional phase) and (3) encouraging consumers to a certain type of behaviour (behavioural phase). This order of promotional activities describes well the situation when consumers show interest in certain categories of products. The main goal of customer relations is to urge the consumers to change their state of ignorance to that of making a decision and towards the action of purchasing. The reaction can be expressed in only one way, but it is preferable that the reaction be on three levels of reaction: acquaintance, interest and behaviour [33, p. 169]. According to the AIDA model, there are four desirable responses depending on the means used (Figure 3). The acronym AIDA, created from four words (attention, interest, desire and action), refers to attention (cognitive phase), interest and desire (emotional phase) and action (behavioural phase). There are other ways to gradate consumer reactions, such as

distinguishing five stages of influence on consumers: introduction, interest, evaluation, trial and acceptance [34, p. 225].

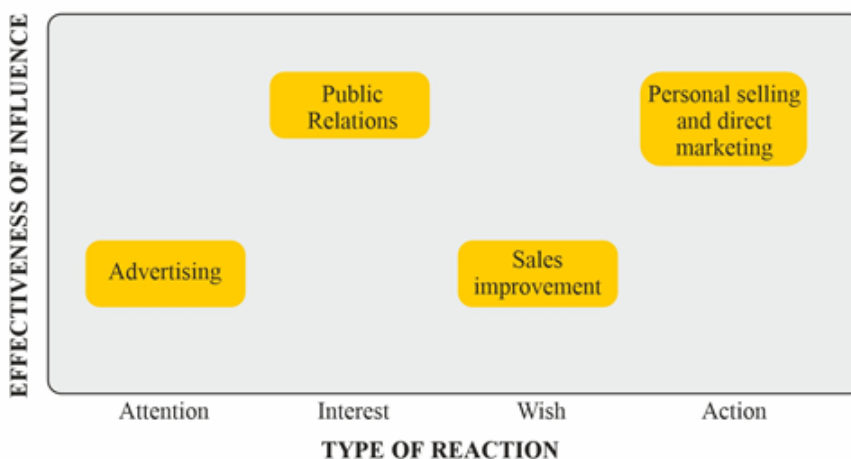


Figure 3: The AIDA model

Communication based on the use of the Internet, i.e. social media such as social networks (for example, Instagram), blogs, forums, websites for the exchange of images and videos (YouTube) is gaining an increasing role in modern business. Interactivity, characteristic of the Internet, has enabled completely new forms of establishing contacts with market participants. The Internet, in fact, gradually developed "from primarily a communication medium, into a sales and/or distribution channel, and finally into a platform for managing relationships with consumers and virtual social communities" [20, p. 147]. Instagram is more popular than other social networks and it is mostly used (61.1%) by users aged 18 to 34 [32, p. 198]. Social media is widely used by the fashion industry for mutual benefit; especially consumers [24-26, 35-37].

Companies rely on three intermediaries to connect with consumers. They can use paid media (including all forms of advertising), acquired media through which consumers, journalists and other interested parties voluntarily express their opinion about the product using "word of mouth" and viral marketing, and their own media, which mostly consist of online marketing communications. The world's most famous fashion brands have greatly developed their own media, which, compared to competing companies, makes it easier for them to access consumers. The company's own website can be very well used as a place where media representatives can get reliable and quality information. It is very common for quality websites to have a special section for journalists, where they have at their disposal complete and updated material needed to create one or more articles, as well as adequate contact addresses for additional information.



4. CONCLUSION

Modern communication technologies are greatly changing the role of public relations in many areas of the economy. Promoting interactive communication is the basic task of public relations, as confirmed by many experiences from the fashion industry.

The Internet represents the omnipresent leader of the so-called communication revolution. One of the greatest advantages of the Internet as a public relations medium is reflected in the possibility of direct and immediate access to a specific target group. This bypasses journalists and traditional news media. At the same time, the Internet is changing the media landscape in communication between organizations and the public.

It can be stated that public relations in the fashion industry represent a process of strategic management by which a fashion brand is carefully built in order to create a positive image of it in the public and maintain strong connections with consumers. In order to fulfil this overall goal, public relations establish and maintain good relations with the media, prepare brand stories, and manage events such as, fashion shows or fairs. The basis of successful public relations, characteristic of the fashion industry, consists of three pillars: communication strategies, crisis management and coordination of various campaigns.

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