

## Public Relations as a strategic function: a path to be traced

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### ABSTRACT

The literature of the field indicates that the Public Relations professional's profile has evolved from a technical role to a strategic role and should include knowledge and skills to work with senior management in decision making. The professional, however, still finds it difficult to fit into that environment and align communications planning to organizational planning. To verify if these difficulties are the result of gaps in academic formation, an analysis was made to verify the focus of main PR courses in the country. The results demonstrate the need for courses to qualify themselves and focus on issues related to the new professional role, preparing the student for entering the new paradigm.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, strategic role, teaching in Public Relations, organizational strategy.

After many years being treated as a technical function in organizations, Public Relations have been gaining a different approach in the literature. Authors such as Grunig (2009), Kunsch (1997, 2003), França (1997) and Bueno (2005, 2009), among many others, are treating PR as a strategic function within organizations, having to act together with the senior management in making decision and becoming directly responsible for building and maintaining strategic long-term relationships that bring tangible results for organizations.

Discussions about Strategic Public Relations, however, "refers to the idea that the activity should be planned, managed, evaluated and somehow linked to organizational objectives" (Grunig, 2009: 71). For the author, these discussions do not reflect a full understanding of how the profession can contribute to organizational strategy and decision making. The excellent function of PR must be combined with a strategic communication management, so that its planning is aligned to organizational goals.

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Kunsch (1997) states that Public Relations planning is fragmented when working in isolation from other organizational areas. For communication effectiveness, the best starting point for Public Relations planning would be the strategic planning done by organizations, which contains environmental analysis, organizational diagnosis, status in different markets and objectives to be achieved, as the author notes.

Professionals, however, are not always prepared for this reality. Most of them still operates on a technical level or in some cases managerial level, and few have sufficient skills and knowledge to act strategically. Even professionals who already possess strategic vision still find it difficult to act that way in organizations and align themselves to the senior management in decision making.

The authors mentioned above state that it is the professional's duty to prove their strategic value to be included in the decision making process, which would make the profession evolved to the strategic paradigm. This article, however, questions if the preparation that professionals receive during their graduation enables and provides the sufficient knowledge to act strategically, and especially to understand the administrative processes that lead to organizational strategic planning so that they can align the communication in a proper way to organizational goals.

Simões (1999) highlights the need for theoretical knowledge, a set of concepts, definitions and principles, aligned with technical knowledge (know-how) of the Public Relations' occupation so that we can diagnose, predict and intervene in organizational processes appropriately. For the author, the appropriate knowledge is fundamental to the evolution of the concept.

It is believed, therefore, that the difficulties encountered by professionals can be caused by gaps in their academic training, which during the graduation may maintain *tied* to technical and managerial paradigms, without evolving to the strategic role of Public Relations paradigm and not having appropriate access to information and theories about organizational strategies, focusing only on communication strategies.

The study, in this context, is centered on the following areas: does the Public Relations professional has knowledge of organizational strategic planning to operate at the strategic level of organizations, among senior management? Does the professional understands the organizational strategy or only focuses on different publics? Is it possible that the professional act with excellence among senior management without

understanding the processes that lead to managerial decision making, as the tools for environmental analysis and planning?

Attempting to answer these questions, a review on Public Relations' literature was made, which indicated a strategic performance of the role. Then it was traced in the study the situation of Public Relations' teaching in Brazil with a brief review of the alignment of what is offered in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the trends described in the literature. After that, the study presents some theories about organizational strategy, which could contribute to the formation of the professionals. Finally, the concluding remarks aimed at finding a path for a strategic performance are presented.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE**

For long understood as a purely technical function, Public Relations nowadays take on indispensable strategic view for institutional positioning of organizations and for the maintenance of effective relationships with stakeholders (Kunsch, 2003). The purpose of Public Relations, according to Grunig (2009), would be to cultivate relationships with publics, given the paradigm of strategic management, rather than merely *defend* the organization, trying to influence the public towards positive attitudes regarding the organization, through messages and relations with the media, attending to the symbolic paradigm. Public Relations should "think and act strategically in pursuit of excellence and symmetrical communication" (Kunsch, 1997: 29).

Public relations, according to Kunsch (2003), need to demonstrate results and help the organization achieve its goals, fulfill its mission, develop its vision and cultivate its values. The strategic role involves helping the organization in its position in society, opening channels of communication between the organization and the public. The strategic role of Public Relations, according to the author, would be of assisting leaders on identifying latent issues involving the relationship with the public.

The strategic performance, as affirms Kunsch (2003), depends on the professional's position on the organizational structure and his capabilities of knowledge. He must be qualified to perform in an analytical and observant manner. Besides professional competence, strategic role is intrinsically linked to the strategic planning of the organization and must act in synergy with other areas. Grunig (2009) emphasizes

the importance of strategic management to identify problems in the environment and decision making.

França (1997) highlights the need to plan Public Relations strategically, including them in the global strategic planning of businesses. To Kunsch (1997), planning PR should always be aligned to the strategic planning and organizational policies outlined: "it cannot be something isolated, out of all the guidelines and actions outlined by all sectors" (Kunsch 1997: 29).

To Bueno (2009) one of the main functions of Public Relations is business intelligence, which consists of transform scattered data into strategic knowledge. Intelligence requires communication planning which should be aligned to organizational goals. Corporate communication is the tool of business intelligence which, when included in the organizational strategies, has the key role in the search for effective interaction with stakeholders, creating relationships that promote competitive advantage to the organization.

Bueno (2005) considers unimaginable an effective organizational process without a strategic communication that endorses it. For the author, however, there is still a long and difficult path between the discourse and practice of strategic communication, as many organizations do not have communication strategies that go beyond simple tasks and programs. Strategic communication requires alignment with the organizational culture, goals and planning for short, medium and long terms, accompanied by constant reviews. It is important that the entire organization takes communication as strategic, not just the field's professionals.

D'Azevedo (1994) states that the Public Relations, according to the functionalist paradigm, occupies a position in the organization as an observer of broader social context. The organization is seen as an open system that is interdependent and interacts with the environment where it operates. The professional must know the environment for better planning and interaction with it (get to know the public in extent and depth). The environmental analysis is a fundamental part of strategic management which, according to Grunig is the "stage where important organizational problems are identified and decisions on how to deal with them are taken" (2009: 74).

Although these authors stress the importance of communication planning alignment with the organization's strategic management, none of them raises the debate

of the preparation that professionals have to perform in such manner. This article proposes the debate starting from the data presented in the following section.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS' TEACHING IN BRAZIL**

To verify that the preparation that PR professionals receive to work among senior management and understand the strategic tools used by it, we examined the qualifications of graduation courses' curriculum to meet such demand. The data were searched among Brazil's education regulation organs and on the surveyed institutions' web sites<sup>1</sup>.

The Ministry of Education' Portal has 133 occurrences in the search for bachelor degree with the title *Public Relations* (regardless of being accompanied by other terms such as *Social Communication* and *License*). It was observed, however, that among these 133, 19 are extinct and 8 are becoming extinct, with only 106 active courses. It is further considered ten Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have nocturnal and diurnal course with the same curriculum and faculty, decreasing the total number of courses. So there are 96 bachelor's degree programs in Public Relations active in Brazil, registered with the Ministry of Education, all in classroom mode.

Analyzing all these 96 courses, however, was not viable considering the resources available for this research. It was also considered not helpful, as many similarities would have been found in their curriculum. Therefore we chose to select for analysis the ten most qualified courses in the country, according with the General Index of Courses (IGC) held in 2009, by INEP (National Institute for Educational Studies and Research). Presumably, if there are gaps in the curriculum of those who are the best in the country, there should also be gaps on other courses that were worst ranked.

The General Index of Courses (IGC), according to INEP, is an indicator of quality for Higher Education Institutions, which considers, in its composition, the quality of graduate and postgraduate courses (masters and doctorate). Regarding graduation courses, it is used the CPC (preliminary course concept) method, which is an average of

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted in 2011. Consider that institutional web sites may currently have suffered alteration in the course profile's description.

the different measures of the quality of a course. The measures used are: *Enade*<sup>2</sup> *Concept* (which measures the performance of the graduates), the performance of freshmen in *Enade*, IDD *Concept Indicator* (Difference from the Observed and Expected Performances) and input variables. The given *input variables* - which considers faculty, infrastructure and curriculum - is formed with information from the Higher Education's Census and socioeconomic responses to *Enade*'s questionnaire. The IGC is consequently representative of the courses that participated in the reviews of *Enade* with freshmen and graduate.

The ranking of the top ten Public Relations courses in Brazil, listed by INEP is presented in Table 1, in order of placement. UFMG was placed first and UFPB occupied the tenth place. In addition to the rankings, it is presented the academic organization and administrative responsibility of each HEI studied.

Table 1 - Ranking of Brazil's best Public Relations courses

	<b>Higher Education Institution (HEI)</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Academic organization</b>	<b>Administrative responsibility</b>
1°	UFMG - Federal University of Minas Gerais	Belo Horizonte	MG	University	Public
2°	UFRGS - Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul	Porto Alegre	RS	University	Public
3°	UNISC - Universidade de Santa Cruz do Sul	Santa Cruz do Sul	RS	University	Private
4°	UFSM - Federal University of Santa Maria	Santa Maria	RS	University	Public
5°	FEEVALE - FEEVALE University	Novo Hamburgo	RS	University	Private
6°	FECAP - School of Commerce Foundation Álvares Penteado	São Paulo	SP	University Center	Private
7°	UNISINOS - University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos	São Leopoldo	RS	University	Private
8°	PUCRS - Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul	Porto Alegre	RS	University	Private
9°	UNIJUI - Regional Northwest University of the State of Rio Grande do Sul	Ijuí	RS	University	Private
10°	UFPB - Federal University of Paraíba	João Pessoa	PB	University	Public

Source: General Index of Courses 2009 - INEP (National Institute for Educational Research).

It is notable the predominance of highlighted courses in the State of Rio Grande do Sul (seven of the ten courses ranked). It can be inferred that the geographical proximity of these greater excellence courses provides an exchange of information and experiences that help them to have better quality. As for the academic organization, just

<sup>2</sup> *Enade* is Brazil's National Examination of Students' Performance that helps the government to evaluate the country's Higher Education

one HEI does not constitute a University, demonstrating that organizations with advanced research are more likely to achieve higher quality. Regarding administrative dependence, there is a predominance of private organizations, with six representatives in the ranking. The first two places (besides the fourth and tenth), however, were federal universities.

Assessing the adequacy of these courses with the area trends on a strategic performance of PR professionals was made by the analysis of classes offered in their curriculum, related to *management, administration, planning, strategy and communication in organizations*. Some very specific disciplines such as *Web Planning* or *Marketing Planning*, for example, were not considered for not having the proper focus on the strategic management of the organization as a whole, which is what is sought in this study. The classes listed in Table 2 are based only on the curriculum used in the period in which the survey was conducted, regardless of curriculum changes in previous periods.

In addition to specific classes, the titles used to designate Public Relations courses by HEIs are specified in Table 2, due to the debates happening in academic events, courses administrations and other organizations concerned about the actual duties of the professional and how the course should be called. It is notable a few differences in the area, as some of the courses have changed the traditional nomenclature, accompanied by the terms *Social Communication* and *License*, being named just *Public Relations*. One of the most debated titles for possible change, *Organizational Communication*, which is already used by the University of Brasilia, for example, did not occur in the courses evaluated. However, this article will not step into this matter, since its goal is to assess the learning of strategy theme in PR courses and not to find a title that best describes the occupation.

Table 2 – Courses' data

HEI	Course title	Classes related to strategic management
UFMG	Social Communication - Public Relations	Ventures and Communication Management; Management in Communication; Organizational Communication Planning
UFRGS	Social Communication - Public Relations License	Management in Public Relations; Planning and Management in Communication
UNISC	Social Communication - Public Relations License	Communicative Process Management, Organizational Management; Public Relations Planning, Organizational Communication
UFES	Social Communication - Public Relations	Organizational Communication; Strategic Communication Planning
FEEVALE	Public Relations	Public Relations Management; Organizational Communication; Public Relations Planning
FECAP	Public Relations	PR's Strategic Management; Communication Planning; Planning and Business Management
UNISINOS	Public Relations	Communication and Management; Strategies for Communicative Crisis; Communication Planning
PUCRS	Social Communication - Public Relations	Organizational Communication; PR's Planning; Public Relations in Organizations
UNIJUI	Social Communication - Public Relations License	Management Crisis; Communication Management; Planning and Research in Public Relations; Administration in Communication (optional); Administration in Public Relations (optional)
UFPB	Social Communication - Public Relations License	Curriculum not available on the University website

Source: Listed HEI's web sites.

It was not possible to evaluate UFPB because the University does not present a curriculum of courses in its website. UFES's web site also does not provide the 2011 curriculum, only the old one, modified in 2008. The data was accessed, however, for being the home institution of the authors.

The data shows that all evaluated courses offer classes related to communication or PR strategies. This is already a step towards a strategic performance of the occupation, but it is not enough. Many of the classes listed are still limited to specific situations, such as planning and crises, not offering the extent necessary for the advancement of the area.

Classes related to planning and organizational strategies have only been found in two HEIs: *Organizational Management* (UNISC) and *Planning and Business Management* (FECAP). Unfortunately, universities do not provide the curriculum for each class on their web sites, which would allow to evaluate if their content is aligned with the purpose of this article, of offering greater organizational strategy concepts to PR professionals. Although there isn't deeper information, the existence of these classes in these two HEI is seen as a breakthrough towards a more complete preparation at the strategic level.



Another factor used for the evaluation of HEI as to adapt to the new paradigm of strategic management is their description of the course. It was observed that most of the HEI (UNISC, UFSM UNISINOS PUCRS UNIUI and UFPB) still treat Public Relations from the technical and managerial roles described by Grunig (2009), emphasizing activities such as program planning, research opinion, advice, communication management and technical and operational activities.

UFMG, FEEVALE and FECAP, however, emphasize the strategic role of the professional (also described by Grunig, 2009), highlighting aspects such as knowledge and strategic relationships. UFMG describes that the professional skills include "demonstrate knowledge about formulating strategic communications programs for creating and maintaining relationships between institutions and its stakeholders" (UFMG, 2011). In its institutional course web site, FEEVALE states that aims to:

train professionals with extensive knowledge of the sciences of communication, attention to social, economic and political changes, opened to new paradigms. Thus, the institution aims to train professionals who (...) use transformative action driving strategies, with the active participation of communication professionals to understand the main demands of contemporaneity (FEEVALE, 2011).

FECAP claims its course is focused on Strategic Communication Management, without abandoning the approach of the classic contents of Public Relations (quoting event planning and press relations as examples). As for the professional profile trained by the institution:

FECAP believes that the social communication professional should not be limited to the use of the tools presented in the chosen qualification. Modern communication professional must know how to manage, from a strategic standpoint, the various communication tools, providing for the organization in which he will work excellent results from financial, economic and social perspectives (FECAP, 2011).

These three HEI are certainly in a better direction to meet the PR strategic management paradigm than those organizations that still treat the profession on the technical and / or managerial point of view. UFRGS shows no concept of Public Relations on its website, in which only provides information regarding the curriculum. Therefore it was not evaluated in this matter.

If the courses considered by the MEC as the ones of highest quality in the area have precariousness in promoting the evolution of Public Relations to a more strategic

role, it is believed that other HEI ought to have even deeper difficulties. The data collected serve to alert the scientific community about the imminent update to the curriculum of the courses and especially about the vision of the PR role in contemporary organizations. Only a more qualified education in the strategic field could lead to a true legitimization of PR function that go beyond the technical and managerial role, as long as Grunig (2009).

## **A PROPOSAL FOR SUPPLEMENTARY FORMATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Theories of Public Relations field indicate the evolution towards the strategic paradigm, requiring alignment with organizational strategies. The above data, however, indicate that the education of the field's professionals is not complete in order to qualify them to execute or even understand an environmental analysis or planning conducted by the administrative point of view. Such understanding is crucial to penetrate the ground of senior management and deal with the strategic communication appropriately.

Therefore, this section will point out some knowledge considered by the authors of this study as critical to the qualification of PR professionals to work among senior management. This knowledge includes some basic elements of organizations management, environmental analysis tools and organizational strategic planning tools.

### *Concepts in Organizations Management*

According to Peter Drucker (1984), Administration is the activity that maintains the cohesion of the company, making their processes work. The administrator activity can be broken down to planning, organizing, adjust, measure and train people. These five basic operations result in the integration of resources into a viable and developing organism. Chiavenato (2000) asserts that the task of management is to interpret the objectives proposed by the company and turn them into action through planning, organizing, directing and controlling.

These are just a few basic concepts that exemplify notions that PR professionals should have on business management to understand how organizational processes and goals work. A notion of Administration also helps the professionals to exercise the managerial role of Public Relations, which focus on communication management

(important feature for the evolution of the strategic paradigm). A few simple classes such as Introduction to Management, Process Management or Management in Organizations included in the curriculum could contribute to the understanding of the topics.

### *Environmental analysis tools*

Unlike the environmental analysis from Public Relations studies, focused on relationships with certain audiences, the analyzes made by management are based primarily on the socioeconomic environment. Therefore, they assess markets, competition, competitiveness, products, etc. Next, some models of environmental analysis used in the Administration area are presented in order to illustrate the differences, what is important for the knowledge of PR professionals. Classes with themes of *Environmental Analysis* and *Organizational Strategies* could elucidate the subject.

One of the main models is the one proposed by Michael Porter (1986) of structural analysis of industries (initially it was used in industries, but today it also applies to other sectors such as services). According to the model, the level of competition in the market depends on five basic competitive forces. The five forces should be studied so that companies can develop an effective business strategy in a way that the company can influence the forces in their favor. The five forces that compose the model are: threat of new entrants, rivalry among existing competitors, threat of substitute products or services, bargaining power of buyers and bargaining power of suppliers.

The model of Coutinho and Ferraz (1995) analyzes the factors that determine competitiveness: factors internal to the company (strategy and management, capacity for innovation, productive capacity and human resources); structural or sectoral factors (market, setting of the industry and competition), and systemic factors (macroeconomic, international, social, technological, infrastructural, fiscal, financial and political-institutional). The analysis of these relevant factors for competitive success allows a dynamic analysis of the organizations' performance.

Other models are focused on evaluation of products from the market, as the BCG Matrix and the Ansoff Matrix. The BCG Matrix, according to Mintzberg *et al* (2000),

serves to plan the product portfolio through analysis of current participation and potential growth of the products on the market. The Ansoff Matrix (Ansoff, 1979) evaluates the product penetration in new and existing markets. There are several other models of analysis of environment, products or services and the organization itself, which can be evaluated by PR professionals and academics as to its relevance to the field.

### *Strategic planning tools*

Strategic planning is the continuous process of making decisions involving risks, systematically, with the greatest possible knowledge of the future; organizing appropriate activities to execute these decisions; and taking feedback from the system, to measure the outcome of these decisions in comparison with the expectations (Drucker, 1984: 136).

For Mintzberg *et al* (2000), the word strategy has existed for a long time, assuming various concepts, such as: plan, pattern, position, perspective or trick to pull away from competitors. To the author, strategy aims to: define direction, focus effort, define the organization and provide consistency to actions. Moreover, Ansoff (1979) portrays the strategy as a controlled, conscious and formal process of interaction between a company and its environment, accompanied by the change of internal dynamic aspects of the company.

According to Mintzberg *et al* (2000), there are hundreds of different models of strategic planning, but most comes down to the same basic idea: start with a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), working through the steps in articulated order, then priority is given to objectives, budgets and operational plans. There are, however, much more advanced models, using more complete analysis than SWOT (as mentioned in the previous item, for example) and more detailed performance measurements.

A popular method used currently is the BSC (Balanced Scorecard). Kluyver and Pearce II (2007) describe the method, created by Kaplan and Norton in 1992 as a set of measures that proposes to offer strategists a quick, but full, overview of the organization. It is crafted from four perspectives: customer, competence of the

company, innovation/learning and finances. The BSC focuses on adapting the company to satisfy its customers and consequently achieve results.

Another way of planning is the focus on generic strategies developed by Michael Porter. According to Porter (1993) a company can only gain competitive advantage through one of the generic strategies: low cost or differentiation. A company that tries to have both ends up not conquering customers for not having a strong positioning.

Different views of strategy and planning must be taken to PR professionals during their formative studies, to help them understand the way they function within organizations. These concepts can be added to the curriculum of existing classes related to planning and strategies or it can even be create new classes focused on the organizational strategic planning along with analysis tools that provide support to it.

## **FINAL REMARKS: A PATH TOWARDS A TRULY STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE**

The discussions raised in this article demonstrate the latent importance of qualifying PR students and professional in order to place them in strategic management paradigm advocated by the field's authors. This article intended to trace a possible path for the evolution of the field and the legitimation of Public Relations as a strategic function through the approach of some themes considered important by the authors.

It is important to emphasize that this article does not propose a reformulation for Public Relations teaching curriculums, but an option of inserting a few themes in the program that meet the needs of knowledge for the development of the field. Even without the creation of new classes it is possible to move in this direction, changing the focus of existing classes, to include strategic paradigm in its contents. As previously mentioned, some courses still describe Public Relations according to their technical and operational activities. The change in focus for a more consistent field's description with the strategic management's paradigm , aligned to organizational goals is the main purpose of this study.

The propositions made are not intended to induce Public Relations professional to learn how to perform activities of analysis and organizational planning, contrariwise, there are trained and legally entitled professionals to do so - the Administrators. The real intention is that Public Relations understands the views of management and

development of these processes in order to be able to insert themselves at the time of decision making, adding their vision according to what is ascribed to them.

According to Grunig (2009), senior strategic management often lack of stakeholder focus and that must be supplied by PR Professional. The professional will only be able to do so in a truly strategic way, acting among the senior management, if he is able to understand the organizational context in which he is inserted. The professional shall also be more respected and conquest his space more effectively when demonstrates that comprises the organizational goals and want to work to achieve them, collaborating with them through the relationship with stakeholders. This way the professional is more likely to gain empowerment by the organization, which, according to Grunig (2009), is important for the new strategic role of Public Relations.

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