

PR Communications in Health Sector – A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study focuses on the role of PR communications in health sector and how these communications will persuade as important among the patients. As Public Relation activities has become life-blood for all the organizations so as to create positive image and brand in the market. 10 multi-specialty hospitals of Bhopal city has been selected as study area and a sample of 10 respondents was selected from each hospitals. Personal interviews with the selected patients have been conducted through the designed questionnaire. It was found that Reputation, Behaviour of staff and Sponsorship were the most important PR communications which brings the patients to that particular hospitals and plays a major role while selecting the hospitals for treatment. It is suggested that more focus should be given for portraying the Behaviour of staff and sponsorship activities of the hospital to build the positive image of the hospital. Also, patients with different educational background differs in their opinion with respect to the PR communication factors hence it is suggested to design an effective communication messages so that people belonging to different educational background can easily understand the messages and persuade in the way hospital desires them to do.

Keywords: Public relations, Communication, Reputation, Sponsorship, Behaviour, Attitude.

I INTRODUCTION

In today business world, communication plays a vital role for maintaining relationship with clients, competitors as well as customers. Effective communication skill empowers one to explain the thoughts and convey the message so as to persuade the message in the way, exactly what we meant them to understand. Communication needs to be effective in business as it is the essence of management and this is the reason why every organization, whether public or private, gives utmost importance to the Public Relations. The concept of maintaining relations with public is termed as Public relations or PR. Public relations has become vital in all areas of life and one such foremost area is health which has become one of the most important area of social activity today. The practice of public relations in health care has changed together with the dramatic changes in health care. In some sense, public relations in health care are not particularly different by public relations in any other industry given that the overall objective of the public relations is still to “match long-term relationships” and “manage reputation” (Traynowicz -Hetherington, 2001). The image of doctors and health institutions in the public is not even close to what health professionals wanted. Various health institutions are shaken by the affairs associated with corruption and bribes. Doctors are linked to the stereotype that they are people who have extremely low ability for good and effective communication with its public. To this should be added also the low awareness of management to recruit communication professionals in their institutions.

Improved public relations activities are steadily becoming one of the most important activities hospitals can engage. This increased emphasis is fueled by increased competition within the health care market where consumers are becoming more selective and using health-related information to make informed choices (Tengilimoglu, 2001). Today more and more new private hospitals are entering the health care market place. In addition, patients have become better informed and more accountable consumers of health care services and want to become more active participants in decisions regarding the treatment process (Akinici et al., 2004). This increased desire for consumer choice has forced hospital managers to look at service availability in a different way; thereby opening the door for more customer-oriented recruitment strategy. Increased emphasis in the area of public relations can help to bring consumer-friendly services to the forefront increasing agency marketability and consumer choice.

PR in health care industry was started somewhere in between 1950-60 but that time PRs need very little need to create awareness and preference because of less number of available hospitals and these facilities always gained support and sympathy of people. PR did not have to be particularly active in order to “maintain and build public confidence.” Rather, the role of public relations were attributed and limited to the communication of the information and positive image. Later on by 1970, there was a shift in the expression in health. Marketing department in the health organizations got greater responsibilities due to increasing competition in the sector and changing preferences of people to become more health conscious. The focus of marketing department is now to attract more pool of patients by identifying the desires and need of the people (Cutlip, 2003). Constant pressure forced hospital managers to seek

professional public relations and communication professionals to maintain two-way communication between hospitals or health organizations and their public. The PRs has given the responsibility to promote a positive image and transfer of news, dealing with criticism and training of internal public for teamwork.

II AIM & HYPOTHESIS

Large number of studies has been conducted so far on Public Relations and some has been directed towards health sector as well. The aim of this pilot study is know the importance of PR communication in health sector and how these PR communications portray the image of the hospitals so that they will get more number of patients. Another aim of this study is to test the developed questionnaire so that it can be reframed by eliminating the biased elements for further study. Also it has been seen that communication or messages can be analyzed and persuade in different aspects with respect to gender as Men's has some different priorities and selection criteria than that of women. Also effectiveness of any communication is depended upon the understanding of the receiver which will rely upon his educational background. In the light of above statements, following hypothesis has been formulated:

- (a) **H01:** Male and Female patients do not differ in their opinion towards the Public relation factors of Hospitals.
- (b) **H02:** Patients do not differ in their opinion towards the Public relation factors of Hospitals with respect to their educational status.

III METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

The aim of this research is to know the role of PR communication in health sector. Researcher has identified ten multi-specialty hospitals in Bhopal city

as the study area to conduct the pilot study. A sample of 10 patients is selected from each hospital who were visiting the hospitals on the basis of convenience sampling technique. As this study is targeted to know the role of PR communications, care has been taken while selecting the sample respondents that they have come across through some PR activities so far by demonstrating them each such activities conducted by hospitals. Data has been collected through the designed questionnaire by taking personal interviews with the patients waiting in the waiting halls for their turn. It is assumed that all the respondents are not related to each other in any manner and the opinions of one respondent cannot affect the opinions of any other respondent. Data collected through designed questionnaire is filled in SPSS 21.0 for checking reliability of the designed instrument which is found **0.851** at Cronbach Alpha.

IV DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Table 1 reflects the demographic profile of the respondents. The results of descriptive analysis for demographic information indicated that among the analyzed samples (n = 100), 41% of the respondents were female and 51% were males. In terms of age group, the ages of the respondents ranged from upto 20 years to above 70 years old, with the majority of respondents falling between the age group of "21-30" (31%), followed by the age group "31-40" (25%), "41-50" (24%), upto 20 years (19%), "> 50" (13%). Majority of respondents were married (57%) and having education of Graduate level (45%) followed by Postgraduate or above level (36%), up to 12th by 12% and up to 10th by 7%.. About 52% of the respondents were working people (salaried or self-employed), followed by 20% are Housewife followed by Students at 19% and 7% from others category.

Table 1
Demographic profile of the respondents (n=100)

Demographic	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	59	59%
Female	41	41%
Age		
Upto 20 Yr	7	7%
21-30 Yr	31	31%
31-40 Yr	25	25%
41-50 yr	24	24%
51-60 Yr	8	8%
61-70 Yr	3	3%
Above 70 Yr	2	2%
Marital Status		
Married	57	57%
Unmarried	43	43%

Education			
	Upto 10th	7	7%
	Upto 12th	12	12%
	Graduate	45	45%
	Post Graduate & Above	36	36%
Occupation			
	Salaried	39	39%
	Self-employment	13	13%
	Student	19	19%
	Housewife	20	20%
	Others	7	7%

Table 2 gives a description about the factors considered by the patients while selecting a particular hospital for treatment. It was found that majority of patients gives priority to the advices given by their known persons whether friends or relatives for selecting any hospital for treatment (23%) followed by the hospitals which has reputed and well known

doctors (21%). The other important factors considered by the patients in selecting the hospitals are the time of examination and process (11%), modern equipment's and treatment facility (13%), good public relation activities (9%) and distance of hospital from their places (9%).

Table 2
Factors for selection of Hospitals

Factors	Frequency	%
Advice of the friends and relatives	23	23
I have a known person working in this hospital	2	2
This hospital is near to my place	5	5
Having a good public relations activities	9	9
Having modern medical equipment's	13	13
This hospital has reputed and successful doctors	21	21
Having good physical utility (Waiting lounge, rooms etc.)	7	7
Examination and other process time is very short	11	11
Having all the medical departments	9	9

Based on the observation, researcher has identified five factors which related to PR activities either directly or indirectly and patients were asked to rate their importance in context to their criteria of selecting a hospital for treatment. These five factors are: Reputation and Image of the hospital, Logo and slogan of the hospital, Behaviour and attitude of the hospital staff, Design of the hospital (includes facility like waiting lounge, rooms etc.) and Sponsorship (includes camping of the hospitals in rural areas). Table 3 gives a clear idea about the importance of each factors based on the mean scores. The mean

score revealed that Behaviour and attitude of the hospital staff is the most important factor (4.3) considered by the patients while selecting any hospital for treatment followed by the Reputation and Image of the hospital in the market (3.8). Logo and Slogan is the least important factor considered by the patients as logos and slogans is given emphasis for promotional purpose only so that people at least remember the hospital and generally given emphasis by rural people who have poor literacy background and unable to remember the name of hospitals.

Table 3
Degree of importance of Public Relation factors while selecting hospitals

	Certainly not Important	Not Important	No Idea	Important	Very Important	Total	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reputation and Image	3	5	17	51	24	100	3.8	0.94029
Logo and Slogans	27	26	27	17	3	100	2.4	1.15379
Behaviour & Attitude of Staff	1	3	5	37	54	100	4.3	0.80773
Design of Hospital	7	12	17	49	15	100	3.0	1.20503
Sponsorship	8	14	24	46	8	100	3.3	1.08342

(a) H01: Male and Female patients do not differ in their opinion towards the Public relation factors of Hospitals.

An independent t-test was performed for identifying the differences in the opinion of male and female patients towards Public relation factors of hospitals. Table 4 presents the results of Independent t-test. It was found that null hypothesis is rejected for 3 out of 5 dimensions i.e. Reputation and Image of hospitals ($t = 2.347, p < 0.05$), Behaviour & Attitude of staff ($t = 2.327, p < 0.05$) and Sponsorship ($t = 2.318, p <$

0.05). For rest of two factors, there is no statistically significant mean difference among opinion of men and women patients towards Logo & Slogan and Design of Hospitals and null hypothesis is failed to reject for two factors. From the analysis it is concluded that men and women patients possess different opinion towards Reputation and image of hospitals in the market, Behaviour and attitude of staff of the hospitals and Sponsorship activities of the hospitals.

Table 4
Gender-wise degree of importance of Public Relation factors while selecting hospitals

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Reputation and Image	Male	51	4.55	0.931	2.347	0.009
	Female	49	3.13	0.955		
Logo and Slogans	Male	51	2.55	1.146	1.751	0.080
	Female	49	2.33	1.163		
Behaviour & Attitude of Staff	Male	51	4.17	1.203	2.327	0.015
	Female	49	2.93	1.205		
Design of Hospital	Male	51	4.59	0.813	1.02	0.308
	Female	49	4.21	0.8		
Sponsorship	Male	51	3.91	1.066	2.318	0.021
	Female	19	3.11	1.103		

(b) H02: Patients do not differ in their opinion towards the Public relation factors of

One way Anova was carried out among educational background of the patients as Independent variable and PR factors of hospitals as dependent variable to determine the differences in opinion of patients towards PR factors of hospitals. The result presented in table 5 shows that F-statistic values and p-values indicate the statistically significant differences across educational levels of patients in Reputation and Image of Hospital ($F = 3.721, p < 0.05$), Behaviour &

Hospitals with respect to their educational status.

Attitude of Staff ($F = 5.472, p < 0.05$) and Sponsorship ($F = 10.912, p < 0.05$). Remaining two factors do not show statistically significant differences. It was clearly seen that patients belonging to higher educational background gives more value to Reputation and Image, Behaviour & Attitude of Staff and sponsorship factors than lower educated patients.

Table 5
Education-wise degree of importance of Public Relation factors while selecting hospitals

	Education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F value	p-value
Reputation and Image	10th	7	3.73	0.971	3.721	0.000
	12th	12	3.84	0.94		
	Graduate	45	3.79	0.958		
	Post Graduate & Above	36	4.16	0.664		
Logo and Slogans	10th	7	2.42	1.202	1.139	0.343
	12th	12	2.46	1.078		
	Graduate	45	2.43	1.163		
	Post Graduate & Above	36	2.74	1.211		
Behaviour & Attitude of Staff	10th	7	3.12	0.747	5.472	0.000
	12th	12	4.07	0.812		
	Graduate	45	4.45	0.761		
	Post Graduate & Above	36	4.59	0.859		
Design of Hospital	10th	7	2.33	1.162	2.126	0.074
	12th	12	2.74	1.151		
	Graduate	45	3.02	0.973		
	Post Graduate & Above	36	3.13	0.921		
Sponsorship	10th	7	2.58	1.174	10.912	0.000
	12th	12	2.68	1.143		
	Graduate	45	3.34	1.021		
	Post Graduate & Above	36	3.49	0.851		

From table 3, it was revealed that Behaviour & Attitude of Staff and Reputation and Image of the hospitals are the most important factors considered by the patients while selecting hospitals. Hence, management of hospitals has to necessarily portray the good and helpful behaviour of the staff for enhancing and maintaining the reputation and image of the hospitals in the market. For this, good PR activities and communication is required. Table 6 presents the rankings given by patients to PR

communications for creating the positive image of the hospitals. It was found that Word of Mouth Publicity, Publicity on TV and Radio and Sponsorship activities of the hospitals were given high ranks showing their importance in PR communication strategy. Other important factors receiving high ranks are Publicity in Press, Face to face communications and Publicity through Printed materials.

Table 6
Ranking of PR Communications for creating positive image

Activities	Importance Score	Ranking
Printed Materials	41	VI
Face to Face Communication	43	V
Congress & Seminars	19	IX
Publicity on TV and Radio	67	II
Publicity on Press	53	IV
Publicity in Internet	28	VIII
Publicity on Billboards	37	VII
Sponsorship Activities	54	III
Word of Mouth Publicity	83	I

V CONCLUSION

The aim of this pilot study is to know the role and importance of PR communications for health sector and to assess the important activities which will persuade by patients and brings them to the hospitals. It was found that the factors considered by the patients while selecting a particular hospital for treatment are recommendations by friends and relatives, reputation of hospitals and doctors, time taken for examining the patients, modern equipment's and treatment facilities and good PR activities. Reputation of hospitals and behaviour of staff is the major PR factors considered by the patients. For portraying a positive image of the hospitals, PRs has to focus on communicating the behaviour and helpful nature of the staff and availability of modern treatment facilities. Communication is effective if one can clearly understand what the message actually is and education plays an important role in it. This study has shown that people with different educational background differ in their opinion with respect to some of the PR factors. Hence, it is highly recommended to draft the communication strategy in such a manner so that it can be easily understood by the people belonging to different educational background. Communication is the heart and soul of the PR activities and without effective communication all the PR activities are waste and blundered.

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