

PRESENTING THE CHURCH TO THE PUBLIC

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
AS PART OF THE WORK OF NATIONAL COMMUNICATION OFFICES

El avènement de la era de la información se ha caracterizado por procesos de desregulación y democratización en muchos lugares del mundo, incluyendo los países en vías de desarrollo. En esta nueva situación llega a ser una necesidad para las instituciones públicas pero también para la Iglesia, el reconsiderar su rol público y adaptar en consecuencia su estilo de presentación. Algunos principios profesionales del campo de las relaciones públicas que son presentados en el siguiente artículo, pueden ser una manera apropiada de enfocar el problema con una cierta metodología y sistematización. Las siguientes consideraciones pretenden establecer una relación entre estos principios y el trabajo de las Oficinas nacionales de C.S., cuya estructuración ha sido presentada en el artículo previo, presentando las posibles bases para una discusión más amplia.

Unlike commercial enterprises, many public and church-related organizations for a long time did not feel the need to explain themselves and the reason for their existence to the public. Traditionally their Services were unique and their relevance was taken for granted. But increasing 'de-regulation' in the public sector and 'secularization' of many Services formerly rendered by the Church makes it more and more necessary also for these institutions to publicize themselves in a competitive environment. There was no need for example for the national PTT's to advertise postal Services as long as no private companies were allowed in that sector - and so was not for pastoral counselling until myriads of more or less trained therapists started to make a street-corner business out of people's desire to talk.

However, the dilemma of many Church institutions is that they cannot - or for good reasons do not want to - appear in public like commercial enterprises. But changing social and political structures, especially towards more open and democratic societies, makes it necessary also for non-profit organizations to reconsider their public role and accordingly adjust their style of public presentation. It is then that they start to explore the possibilities of *professional public relations*, which - if systematically approached - means much more than putting messages across the advertising media.

In fact, serious public relations work covers the whole field of social communications and concerns the Overall image of a body or institution in the public sphere. This is important not only for modern, functionally diversified societies, but also in the developing countries, which are often composed by a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious communities. Here the Christian presence and values need even more to be explained, in

order to fight prejudice and keep the doors open for evangelization through dialogue. In the following we will outline *some principles of such a systematic approach*, especially in view of the tasks to be carried out by the offices for social communications at the national Bishops' Conferences.

A *national office for social communications*, as pointed out in the preceding article, is not merely the press office of the Bishops' Conference, giving their Statements a good journalistic shape. It is also not only a Coordination and liaison office relating to other media organizations within or outside the Church, although these tasks are already difficult enough. And it should be least a production unit where newspaper layouts are fixed and sound-mixers controlled just because technically experienced personnel happens to be available there. The main purpose and objective of a national communication secretariate is to develop a *national media and communications policy* of the Church in that respective country, have it approved by the Bishops' Conference, and then implement it successfully.

Since the Church is in many cases only one actor among others in this field, often with high credibility but low impact, this apostolate needs urgently to be more professionalised: First by separating it from the educationalist tradition in the Church (which in spite of irrefutable merits in some fields is no longer providing the appropriate Overall paradigm for Church communications), and secondly by applying the rules and principles of systematic public relations to those parts of the work which are directly concerned with the formation of public opinion.

What are the ingredients of such an approach? In the following we will touch upon

only few and simple, but *basic rules of professional public relations* and their consequences for communication offices of the Church.

1. BE HONEST

Even the best public Promotion cannot sell a product which in the long run turns out to be disappointing for the costumers. The popular concept of advertising as an instrument of seducing people through illusions belongs into the junk-room of ideology. It is true that very often it is not the product itself but social status, self-confidence or Symbols of hope and expectation which are successfully promoted through advertising (e.g. pieces of the Berlin wall). But these represent true human feelings although their content may not be authentic. So being honest means first of all that those offering a product or Service do believe in it, and are convinced that it can provide the promised gratifications. Appropriate public relations work will therefore conceptualize advertising or any other public information activity in a way that ensures *organizational (or corporate) identity*, i.e. is not in contradiction to the self-esteem of those being responsible for the quality of the product or Service. Messages creating a public image must therefore neither exaggerate nor underestimate the real possibilities, but relate the producer's intentions to the client's expectations in the most informative and persuasive way. It's ultimate aim is not to sell a product fast but to establish a long-term relationship of confidence.

2. BE RECEPTIVE

Persuasion starts by listening to your audience. You must know what their real problems and questions are, what solutions are offered to them by others, and what they think about your possible answers. The educational approach rarely had to ask these questions, since the need for teaching and the interest of those being taught could be taken for granted. But this works only as long as the message is self-explanatory or the social environment creates a strong motivation for learning. If this is not the case or diminishing, the educational paradigm fails. Instead, a *competitive, listener-oriented presentation of the message* becomes more important (key words 'inculturation' and 're-evangelization').

A good communications coordinator is therefore not necessarily one who knows how to write and talk well, although this might be an additional asset. His preferential virtue

however is that of a good listener, somebody who can understand and knows how to report to the Church hierarchy and the professional communicators what the ordinary people (the faithful and the general public) are thinking, hoping and expecting from the Church. He must be capable of identifying the actual topics on the public agenda, the trends, stereotypes and prejudice prevailing in Society, in order to advise his fellow journalists on what issues need to be tackled, which news angle might be chosen for presenting an otherwise boring story, and what foottraps to be aware of when entering the delicate field of public opinion. If Church communications is conceived as a real dialogue with people rather than just another form of preaching from the pulpit, this role of informing the Church on what goes on in public opinion is extremely important and can hardly be overassessed.

3. BE PARTICIPATORY

The best way of starting a real dialogue is inviting people for participation. *All communication activities coordinated through the national or diocesan offices should make this element of feedback an integral part of their methodology.* Radio broadcasts, news-papers and multi-media information campaigns are more successful if they contain at least a minimum of contributions made by ordinary people, be it by promoting letters to the editor, listener's access Programmes, etc. Participation is relevant not only for shaping the public perception of Church-linked media as a Service to the people; it is in fact essential for designing these media in such a way, that the communicators' intentions have a chance to meet with people's expectations and demands.

Every car manufacturer, before launching a new model, spends hours and hours in having it tested and commented by a representative sample of the projected customers. Commercial media do the same in order to get the highest possible consumer rates. Their Programmes often contain elements of participation and are constantly reviewed by selected members of the audience in order to adjust their profile to possibly changing audience demands. Do Church-linked media not deserve the same care and attention, although they might not so much depend on commercial success and often rely on subsidies? The consequences of audience research and participation might be different in this case, because commercial success is not their ultimate aim. But the need for shaping the message in a way that people can understand and would like to know more, is given the same.

Since professional journalists are often very critical about amateur participation in their domaine, it basically remains with the communications secretary to *promote the advantages of public participation and suggest suitable models of organized feed-back*. By doing so, he probably will enhance people's participation not only in Church-related media but in Church life in general.

4. BE STRATEGIC

In many countries, Church-related media are connected to each other through professional organizations along the lines of the International Catholic Media Organizations OCIC, UCIP and UNDA. Their categorial division into the fields of film and AV, press and broadcasting offers the advantage of professional specialization but can also hamper *the development of an Overall, integrated media strategy*. The unique opportunity of shaping a public image through coordinated multi-media campaigns (media-mix) is often being missed because of lacking formal cooperation and strategical integration. So the national communications office is constantly challenged to design such campaigns in consultation with the different categorial media organizations and try to implement an inter-organizational concept which deserves the name media (not film, press or broadcasting) policy.

Strategical thinking in the media field again does not take its starting point from the needs and structures of the organization represented but from the communication habits of the envisaged target public. The basic idea is not, that the Church eventually has access to press, broadcasting and film and therefore the communicators acting in these fields should do something together. It rather starts from the Observation, that the members of the target public are not in first line newspaper readers, broadcasting listeners or film enthusiasts, but complex human beings with a variety of communication contacts, both in the interpersonal and media field. The impact of individual messages thus can be multiplied, if they are simultaneously promoted through different channels. Certain media will get more attention, if their performance is supported through reference made in other media (newspapers can advertise radio Programmes, books be published in connection to feature films, T-shirts and stickers be issued along with educational Programmes, etc.). As far as we can see, the national communication offices are in the most privileged position to introduce such campaigns and *develop* a multi-media strategy in cooperation with the members and na-

tional affiliates of the specialized international media organizations.

5. BE COMPETENT

Public relations always being concerned with a two-way communication process between the organization represented and the media of public opinion, a communications secretariate has to be competent in two ways: For those working in the organization, its major task is to draw a clear picture of what is *going on in public opinion* and how the *communication goals of the organization* can be most effectively achieved within that environment. In many cases it will be the duty of the national communications secretary to stipulate the internal debate on what these communication goals are, and what themes to be launched in order to gain a position on the public agenda.

On the other hand, for media professionals and journalists outside the organization, a *press officer* or *spokesman* must be made available providing all information regarding that organization, the one who knows whom to approach in what matter and where to obtain the background data. This role requires a lot of diplomacy and sometimes the ability to speak between the lines. More important however seems his willingness to provide a real Service to his fellow-journalists and colleagues, by helping them to collect the relevant facts and write the true story. His personal integrity will be widely taken as an example for the integrity of the institution he represents.

This double capacity of a *national communications secretariate* - on the one hand communications consultants of the local Church, on the other hand its media spokesman - requires the appointment of at least two full-trained, well-experienced professionals. They must be competent partners for all parties involved, including the ability to declare their incompetence for matters that do not fall in their mandate. Most probably this ability is the most significant characteristic of true competence - a rule of public relations that also members of the Church hierarchy do not always obey, when going too much into the details of topical questions, which are not yet sufficiently juxtaposed even by the relevant experts in the field.

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Having outlined some of the principles of professional public relations in view of the duties to be carried out by a Church-related communication Office, we could of course not arrive at a comprehensive job description

which can be used as a check-list or model for those planning to install or professionalize such an office in their country or diocese. It is questionable, whether the experiences made in different parts of the world can be generalized at all. But by focussing

on public relations as one of the most important aspects of this apostolate - which has many other angles - we hope to encourage a debate on this topic, which is essential for the future of the Church in the information age. kr

News about...

* **CREC-AVEX.** L'interruption des sessions en 1989-1990, ne signifie nullement pour le CREC-Avex inactivité. Au contraire cette année est riche d'activités : sessions à l'étranger, construction du centre international CREC-Avex à Ecully (Lyon), convention avec l'Université Catholique de Lyon, recherche sur "Langage Audiovisuel et Culture", etc. Après bientôt 20 ans d'existence et une année de réflexion, CREC-Avex se prépare à faire peau neuve : en effet c'est le 9 décembre dernier que la première pierre du nouveau centre international a été posée et que la convention avec l'Université Catholique de Lyon a été signée. Ce double événement avait été précédé par un symposium sur l'organisation d'AVEX avec des anciens et des représentants d'organismes internationaux. Ainsi, en octobre prochain, un nouveau Programme français-anglais sera lancé, articulé en 3 parties : AVEX 1, techniques audiovisuelles pour la communication et le développement (technique de base et maintenance); AVEX 2, module central : Médias-Foi pour une civilisation de communication, qui sera centré chaque année sur un

thème différent (en 1990/91, le thème sera *Communication et management*); AVEX 3, spécialisation.
(CREC-Avex, B.P. 70, 93 chemin des Mouilles, F-69132 ECULLY Cedex LYON, France. Fax: 78 33 33 70).

* **L'abbé Silvio SINDAMBIWE**, Rwanda, nous a quittés. L'abbé Silvio, ancien directeur et rédacteur en chef du journal de l'Eglise catholique du Rwanda *Kinyamateka* a trouvé la mort le 7 novembre 1989 dans un tragique accident de la route à Rwabuye (Butare), quelques jours après son retour du Congrès de l'UCIP à Ruppolding. Silvio (né en 1950) avait manifesté un grand attrait pour le journalisme dès ses études. Aussi, après une formation en journalisme à Lille, il avait été nommé en juillet 1979 directeur du *Kinyamateka* (KM) et secrétaire nationale de l'Office des Moyens de Communication Sociale; de plus il animait les émissions religieuses à la radio nationale. Tous les lecteurs de KM et tous ses amis ont de suite apprécié son dynamisme, son amour de la vérité et de la liberté de la presse, ainsi que son courage,

20 YEARS OF CAMECO OFFICES

On January 15th, 1970, the offices of the Catholic Media Council became operational, arising from the founding period which started about seven years before.

Already in 1963 UCIP brought together representatives of funding agencies to discuss the future support of the Catholic press in developing countries. In 1968 Bishop Heinrich Tenhumberg gathered representatives of the International Media Organisations, of German Funding Agencies and independent experts to develop a suitable instrument for professional assistance for the growing number of communication projects in Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America after Vatican II. This group finally became the founding fathers of the Catholic Media Council. After its legal start on June 16th, 1969, the office opened on January 15th, 1970, in Aachen under its first executive director, Karl Höller. The following two years were characterized by creating the necessary infrastructures for the envisaged consultancy and research activities. Hence, the basis was developed for coping with the growing demand for support in the development and coordination of Christian communication structures and ventures in Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America.