

Using Facebook for Government Public Relations Campaigns: Relationship between Information Seeking Attitude and Effectiveness of Public Relations Outcomes for Facebook

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Abstract

Though government departments rely heavily on different techniques for Public Relations (PR), the fundamental questions related to the effectiveness of social media as a PR tool remains unanswered. The study aims to find out how Facebook has an impact on the effectiveness of public relations outcomes for government department's public relations activities. From a sample of 300 respondents a survey was conducted. It was found that there is a positive correlation between respondents' attitude on Facebook information seeking scale and Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes. Moreover it was also found that use of Facebook is creating a favorable attitude for target audience; knowledge levels; content of positioned values; quality of opinion; customer satisfaction; tone of opinion and mutual trust, satisfaction and commitment. Whereas, for 'mutual control' and 'relationship maturity' in PR activities of the government there is need for more research.

Key words: *Public relations (PR), Facebook, information seeking, campaign effectiveness.*

Introduction

Government departments are always engaged in various Public Relation activities. Information dissemination and keeping the various stakeholders within loop of confidence and trust are the cornerstones of all public relation activities that are conducted by any organization (Wilcox, Cameron and Reber, 2015). Government public relation activities are different from other sectors PR activities because primary purpose of government is to work for general welfare and common good. It has also been observed that government machinery diverges

from their primary responsibilities even in the case of public relation activities and becomes engaged in political image building, propaganda, counter propaganda and pseudo management of so called crisis. Moreover, PR activities also become central to the political and bureaucratic figures rather than governmental departmental activities aimed to work for general welfare and common good. On the other hand public sector PR departments claim that their campaigns are directed for the purpose of disseminating the information to the stakeholders, creating the good image for the departments and most importantly ensuring that relationship of mutual trust between government and public should sustain. These PR campaigns are different from private or corporate sector campaigns where most of the activities are designed for profit motives.

In democratic regimes PR departments of public sector organizations/departments are required to work with more efficiency than totalitarian regimes. The effectiveness of communication affects voters' attitude and behavior. Public relations campaigns draw attention of voters toward govt. efforts for delivering the promises of good governance. In PR campaigns evaluation holds immense significance because the achievement on objectives and desired outcomes can only be accessed through feedback and evaluation process. The evaluation of campaign can only be known by accessing the outcomes of campaign because outcomes resonate the stated objectives and efficiency at the campaign delivery stage (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman and Toth, 2012).

In Pakistan various government departments at federal and provincial levels are using social media. Moreover use of social media

is also on the rise among citizens for information seeking. Social media can be very effective in good governance, general welfare and common good.

Therefore, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of this new medium for public relations purposes, especially with reference to attitude building among the PR stakeholders. In Pakistan province of Punjab is considered at the top when it comes to government performance (PILDAT, 2015). The province has also taken several initiatives to promote IT based governance within province. This study tries to find out how Facebook is affecting the perception of PR stakeholders and Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes for government department's public relation activities

Keeping social media growth in consideration in Pakistan and debates around its usage, it is a high time that academia should initiate an investigation into this area from various perspectives. Public Relations is an important area where social media can be proved very effective. Various government departments are already using it for their PR activities but there is little literature available to provide an insight into their usage, motives and effectiveness. This important domain is a neglected one. Moreover in PR the attitude formation of target audience is also very important.

Research Question:

RQ1: How Facebook is affecting the perception of PR stakeholders and how Facebook impacts the effectiveness of public relations outcomes for Punjab government department's public relation activities?

Significance**Literature Review**

Social media has emerged as an important tool for organizations in the domain of Public Relations. Both public sector and private sector organizations and departments are using this medium for communication purposes. Diga and Kelleher (2009) found that public relations experts who use social networking sites find themselves as better positioned to perform their duties as PR expert because social media enabled them to remain engaged with the clients and audiences. Similarly the prospect to achieve higher positions in their organizations also increases if they have more ability to use social media as a PR tool, but they must observe the role that new communication technologies could play in their job including social media (Dozier & Broom, 2006).

Social media importance in politics has increased significantly during the recent years. That increase is socially evident in electoral campaigns of candidates (Jaeger, Paquette, and Simmons, 2010). An increase in the trend of using social media in election campaigns than diffuses to the government functionaries when respective political parties come into power.

In different countries of the world social media has become a main tool of communication in governance. In the US Obama administration relied heavily on the use of medium, but its impact in other countries may vary depending upon governance culture and availability of information technology to the grass root level (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010).

Social media has taken an important role in government communication machinery and that role has been predicted to increase

in coming years. The inherent character of social media as a medium that makes it more available, more reachable and relevant for the users increases its utility to be used by citizens (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2011). It is also interesting to note that despite an increase in the use of social media in governance, at times missing links are found when it comes to set the strategic objectives and converting those objectives to the outcomes for the PR and related activities. Moreover, use of social media in PR may also give birth to other important issues of resource allocation, government culture with respect to new media and control over medium (Magro, 2012). Therefore it is important to investigate the effectiveness of role played by social media in Public Relations activities performed for government departments.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of common good was used as a theoretical framework for the proposed study. Encyclopedia of Britannica online defines Common Good is something which "benefits society as a whole, in contrast to the private good of individuals and sections of society" (2017). For the common good as a purpose to achieve role of active citizenry is important as compared to the atomized citizenry. Active citizens are involved in collective actions and active participation in the public realm of politics and public service. The concept suites well to social media because of its interactive nature and penetration of the society as a means of public relations.

Method

For the study quantitative method was used. A survey was conducted. A sample of 300 respondents was selected by stratified random sampling. Hundred respondents were selected each from public

relations experts and media persons (PR & media experts), Punjab government employees (internal public), and the general public who consulted the Punjab government offices (external public) during the period of study (Nov, 2017 to March 2018). An instrument measuring the face book information seeking attitude and Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes for the Punjab government department's public relation activities was developed and administered.

For all the items Cronbach alpha was applied and an average value of 0.788 indicated an acceptable level of reliability.

For Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes Kazokiene and Stravinskiene (2011) study was used and adapted to the research. In 2011 Kazokiene and Stravinskiene developed a criterion to evaluate the public relations effectiveness. The criterion is comprehensive and covers the elements of PR campaign in detail. At the stage of impact evaluation they identified three stages for evaluation i.e. evaluation of PR outputs, evaluation of PR outtake and evaluation of PR outcomes. There are total twenty factors to evaluate the impact of PR effectiveness. For the study the criterion for the evaluation of PR effectiveness is selected. This criterion consists of thirteen components. For the study first, seventh and eighth were merged into one i.e. share of target audience reached. Moreover its definition and explanation is also adapted to the study i.e. it will be considered for the number of targeted audience reached effectively. Therefore following variables are considered for the study:

1. Share of target audience reached
2. Knowledge levels

3. Content of positioned values
4. Quality of opinion
5. Customer satisfaction
6. Tone of opinion
7. Mutual trust
8. Mutual satisfaction
9. Mutual commitment
10. Mutual control
11. Relationship maturity

These variables were put into instrument with five point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree.

To know the attitude of Facebook users for the purpose of information seeking a scale called "Facebook information seeking scale" was developed. The scale includes the following items for the Facebook use: obtaining information; remaining updated; information on new aspects; preferred source of information; reliability of information; use of information for decision making; and information sharing. The seven items scale has response set ranging from; almost always, often, sometimes, seldom, never.

Findings and Analysis

Hypothesis

There is a positive correlation between respondents' attitude on Facebook information seeking attitude scale and Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes for the Punjab government department's public relations activities.

For the hypothesis Pearson correlation was applied that generated the results: $r = 0.735$; $N = 300$ and $p < 0.00$ showing that there is a strong correlation between respondents attitude on facebook information seeking scale and Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes for the Punjab government department's public relations activities. The value $p < 0.00$ hence H_{10} is rejected.

For the variables on the scale Facebook impact on effectiveness of public relations outcomes one sample t test was performed that generated the following results:

One sample t-test (one tail) table:

Variable	t-value (one tail)	p-value	Remarks
Share of target audience reached	9.386	0.000	Significant
Knowledge levels	3.798	0.000	Significant
Content of positioned values	3.957	0.000	Significant
Quality of opinion	4.957	0.000	Significant
Customer satisfaction	6.476	0.000	Significant
Tone of opinion	7.661	0.001	Significant
Mutual trust	5.476	0.000	Significant
Mutual satisfaction	3.719	0.000	Significant
Mutual commitment	3.549	0.000	Significant

Mutual control	-6.359	0.358	insignificant
Relationship maturity	-4.961	0.337	Insignificant

For the variables share of target audience reached; knowledge levels; content of positioned values; quality of opinion; customer satisfaction; tone of opinion; mutual trust; mutual satisfaction; mutual commitment obtained p-values are $p < 0.05$ therefore showing that respondents have favorable opinion that Facebook is creating a positive impact for effectiveness of PR outcomes.

Whereas for variables mutual control and relationship maturity obtained p-values are $p > 0.05$ therefore showing that respondents have not agreed with the opinion that use of Facebook is creating positive attitude for the impact of Facebook effectiveness for PR outcomes.

Discussion

Findings show that use of Facebook by public sector departments in Punjab province is creating a positive impact for PR campaigns. It is not only enhancing communication effectiveness of PR departments but also creating a positive impression on stakeholders. Values of t-test performed clearly indicate that Facebook use has helped in enhancing the reach of target audience. This is especially true in the case of young urban population that relies more on social media platforms for their information needs. Moreover it has also been observed that youth also facilitate elderly population in getting information and sharing it with them.

Findings reveal that the most important contribution of Facebook has been remained in creating feelings of mutual trust, satisfaction and commitment for public reactions practitioners and users. PR works more effectively only when communication achieve some common grounds between senders and receivers. Finding common commitment is a hallmark for PR campaigns. For Facebook as a platform of communication this is easier to achieve because of its interactivity, intersexuality and inclusiveness. The mechanics of Facebook are different than web sites. Websites are static in their character and their feedback loops also works on delayed mechanism, whereas on Facebook the feedback is prompt. For government driven PR campaigns achieving mutual trust and satisfaction is an important step towards making the society a shared space for every segment of society regardless of socio economic and ethnic differences. It is also an important indicator of good governance.

For government PR campaigns an important goal is to shape up public opinion both in terms of image and also expression of the image at various forums. Findings reveal that use of Facebook can contribute to the achievement of this goal. Facebook has been found a very useful medium for countering propaganda and managing the crisis. But it should be noted that use of Facebook without proper strategy can bring more harm than benefits for any PR activity.

For the variables of mutual control and relationship maturity between sender and receivers it was found that respondents think that the presence of Facebook in communication domain of our society has not reached the level that it could achieve their favorable response on these statements.

A positive correlation between Facebook information seeking scale and Facebook effectiveness for PR outcomes can be attributed to the fact that Facebook as a medium of communication in Pakistan has now entered into the zone of information from friendship and entertainment zones. This trend is positive and can be helpful for good governance. An increased use of smartphones and access to the internet are important factors that have contributed to the reliance on Facebook by both PR departments and audience.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that public relations campaigns of government departments can achieve their goals of mutual trust, satisfaction and commitment by using Facebook as a medium of communication in their PR campaigns. Moreover presence of information seeking attitude through Facebook among the target audience is an important factor for achieving the effectiveness in PR outcomes.

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