

Assessing the Use of Communications Networks in Public Relations Field in Governmental Tourism Organizations in Egypt

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ABSTRACT:

The digital revolution has provided public relations in the tourism organizations with innovative communication channels. Communication Networks: "Internet, Intranet , Extranet " became the most important communication tools to achieve numerous functions in public relations .It improves the way public relations distribute information, interact with public ,and manage inside and outside organizational communications . It also enables the shifting towards *Electronic Public Relations*. The aim of this study is to assess how far the Governmental Tourism Organizations in Egypt use communication networks in performing public relations functions. The findings of the study showed that the use of communication networks in performing public relations functions is limited; the current methods of communications used in public relations are not appropriate to the ongoing progress in communication and information technology.

Key words: Communication Networks, Public Relations, Electronic Public Relations Governmental Tourism Organizations in Egypt .

INTRODUCTION :

The public relations is defined as an administrative job with communicational nature devoted to establish mutual understanding and good relationships between the organization and different kinds of audiences. Public relations perform numerous promotional and communicational functions inside and outside the tourist organization. Therefore, many tourist organizations have specialized department for public relations (Avidar, 2011; Morrison, 1996; Deuschl, 2006).

Nowadays, with the rapid pace of information and communication technology, it became necessary to move from traditional work methods to electronic ones. Communication networks influence the way public relations communicate and do its multiple functions inside and outside tourist organizations instead of traditional ways of communication that have been used before (Balandin and Laizane, 2013; Nejadirani, et al., 2011; Sheil & Violanti, 2013).

Therefore, public relations has to pay more attention to communication networks which is considered the base for successful public relations that should be applied to achieve more progress in public relation performance in the Governmental Tourist Organizations in Egypt (Mousavi, *et al.*, 2013).

So, this research sheds the light on the importance of communication networks in the field of public relations through the discussion of its concept and role proposed by previous researchers. It also investigates whether communication networks are effectively applied in public relation departments in the Governmental Tourism Organizations in Egypt. The findings of this study are aimed to contribute to the theoretical knowledge on public relations in tourism organizations.

Generally, there are three major networks are used in organizations. Some or all of these networks may be available depending on the possibilities of each organization.

INTERNET:

The internet has changed the world especially the communicational practices. It has become a very important way of communication to a majority of tourist organizations. Also, it has a multiple- uses in different areas which led to the existence of new forms of work (Standing, 2014), such as E-Management, E-Marketing, E- Business, E-Human Resource, E-Learning, E-Tourism, E-government, and many other titles (Jusufi 0.2013). Petrovici, 2014 stated that this development is also reflected in the field of public relations which led to the emergence of **Electronic Public Relations** EPR.

INTRANET:

With the growth of information and communication technology, there has been a significant growth in the intra-organizational communications through Intranets (Scheepers and Damsgaard, 2001). Averweg, (2007,p.2) described intranet or internal web as "a private network designed to serve the internal informational needs of an organisation, using Internet concepts and tools". The difference between the internet and intranet is while the internet generally allows everyone to access all network resources; the intranet allows limited employees who have username and password to access the internal LAN of the organization.

EXTRANET:

Many organizations used the term "Extranet" to describe a secure sharing of selective information outside the organization. Cartwright, 2005 demonstrated that Extranet is a combination of both Intranet and Internet, in order to share a part of organization's data safely with other institutions and bodies. This network allows a new relationship and new methods of communicational practices between the organization and its partners abroad.

THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION NETWORKS ON PUBLIC RELATIONS PERFORMANCE:

Nowadays, in the era of communication and information technology, Communication networks are playing an important role in the field of public relations. These networks are increasingly changing the way public relations practitioners communicate and do their tasks. Scholars noted that communication networks affect public relations practice especially in the age of digital revolution (Mitrofan and Bulborea, 2013; Johnson, 1997).

They can easily remove barriers in time and place, increase communication between individuals and organizations and facilitate the way of collecting and exchanging information, data and files with a non-costly way attracting a lot of tourist organizations. They also have a positive impact not only on the performance of public relations but also on the organizational performance in general. (Mousavi and Badrabad, 2008; Zlatko, 2013; Wilson and Supa, 2013).

Firstly, Intranet can be applied in the field of PR to enhance its communicational role inside the organization. It provides public relations practitioners with a secure and speedy connection allowing them managing and distributing information through a few mouse clicks (Ramashilabele, 2010). Within intranet public relations employees can also access information, collect data and share documents which are important for their work (Bezos, 2014; Buhalis, 2011, Chen *et al.*, 2004; Netanda, 2013).

By applying Intranet technology, public relations employees can also effectively follow-up and coordinate tasks and missions not only between them but also with other administrative departments inside the organization (Naqvi, 2008; Hustada & Vikstøl, 2014). This network enables them achieving compatibility in implementing various burdens and responsibilities avoiding duplication of work. In addition, intranet helps public relations managers to obtain a clear picture of what is really going inside their management or whole organization in order to monitor and evaluate performance continuously (Masrek *et al.*, 2007; Poore *et al.*, 2002). Turban *et al.* (2004) illustrated that the Intranet has the power to change decision-making process. Consequently, it can be said that intranet is a fundamental network which serves the internal communicational needs of any organization (Netanda, 2013; Lai, 2001).

On the other hand the internet has a major influence on public relations practice, which has changed the role of the PR employees in the tourism sector (Avidar, 2011). Lindic, (2006) demonstrated that the internet is a powerful tool that offers millions of opportunities for public relations practitioners to perform research and spread their message. Moreover, it has given them the ability to know the opinions and attitudes of different audiences towards the tourist organization (Holtz, 2002). Online PR has changed the PR industry and it's not going back. So, the dynamic nature of the internet requires that public relations practitioners should benefit from the advantages of the various applications and

services offered by the internet. Through internet they can do several tasks in a record time, as well as, they can integrate audio, visual and print messages, which contributes in developing their performance ,in particular, and the performance of their organizations in general(Aghaei,*et al.*, 2012; Archer,2012).

Currently, public relations uses many Internet applications such as: Online Surveys, Website, Online Database, E-mail ,Newsgroup ,Video Conferencing and Social media in order to contact directly to its audience (Gaddis, 2001; Vajpayee& Sharma,2012; Cho *et al*, 2002; Brown, 2014 Hoyle&Jr,2002). Therefore, it is hard to imagine public relations profession with its communicational nature without the Internet.

Third, many organizations have benefitted from extranet in different aspects. This network is considered the most suitable network for the communicational operations that have been done outside the tourist organization. It can be considered as Extended Intranet (Fitch , 2010; Kallioranta& Vlosky,2004) .There are many benefits of this network as a new technology in the field of public relations, these benefits are: sharing more accurate information, achieving coordination among business units, obtaining rapid feedback from other partners, publishing corporate documents (Laudon, K. C. and Laudon, J. P. 2002).

Additionally, this external communicational system can supports the business process and builds better relationships with other institutions reducing costs and decreasing service times. It makes public relations more efficient and effective than what it was before (Bidgoli, 2013).

In short, extranet enables public relations practitioners achieving integrated cooperative performance between these organizations to each other, providing them the flexibility in various dealings, which couldn't be achieved through by traditional means of communication.

As a result, it's clear that communication networks give the opportunity to public relations to be more creative and communicative in today's dynamic environment characterized by digital revolution. Moreover, these networks provide a chance to improve the communicational skills of public relations staff through depending on modern technological methods in their work (Dutton, 2013).

ELECTRONIC PUBLIC RELATIONS VERSUS TRADITIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS:

E-PR is about effective application of information and communication technology in public relations to improve the efficiency of public relations functions. It intended to achieve the flexibility and effectiveness of communication with the staff and other administrative departments inside the organization, and increased interaction with other external audiences and organizations that are related to the tourist organization; which lead to a benefit for all parties.

Based on the above distinction between traditional public relations and electronic public relations can be made and summarized in the following table.

Table 1: comparison between traditional public relations and electronic public relations

Comparisons	Traditional PR	Electronic PR
The nature of communication	- One-way communication - Confused information	-Two way communication - Accurate information

		- openness, transparency
Interaction	Inefficient due to its limited reach to different audiences	-Open. -long-term relationships between an organization and target groups
Types of communicational tools	Traditional tools such as (television,radio,newsletters ,meetings,advertisements , board,letters ,telephone,fax...etc)	Modern technological means (such as communication networks) , which kept the rapid pace of the era of digital revolution and information technology.
Saving data	Paperwork is exposed to loss and damage over time	Electronic practices can be protected and saved.
Information sources	The audience get the information from only one source	The audience has multiple channels to get the required information
Speed	A slow pace in performing tasks as a result of overlapping procedures.	-Performing tasks rapidly -Saving time
Public relations practitioners	-Negative attitudes prevail among employees towards the organization as they do not have the opportunity to discuss their problems or express their opinions. -The difficulty to access the required information.	-Positive attitudes prevail among employees towards the organization due to their access to the required information and easily communicate with each other. -They can also express their problems and suggestions to the senior management.
Public relations goals	-Low and traditional.	-Clear and targeted.
Monitoring and control	Not achieved, due to the lack of mechanisms or means that can be used by public relations managers to achieve effective control over all processes and organizational communications.	-Be able to achieve effective control over all activities and transactions that have taken place whether inside or outside the organization through communication networks. - Public relations managers can easily evaluate and assess performance.

Decision making process	<p>-The inability to provide a clear vision for the senior management about the views and orientations of the audiences towards the organization's process.</p> <p>-Public relation's employees aren't participating in the decision-making process.</p>	<p>- Receive immediate response</p> <p>- Public relation's officials can provide advice to senior management and the transfer of the perceptions and opinions of different audiences</p> <p>- Public relation's employees participate fruitfully in the decision-making process.</p>
Organization's goals	Public relations employees only establish the goals of the public relations department and don't have the efficiency to participate in developing the organization's goals.	-Public relations employees participate in setting realistic goals for the organization as they successfully communicate with internal and external public.
Success factors	<p>Doesn't have these factors because of:</p> <p>- Its limited relations.</p> <p>-Low interaction between the organization and its audience.</p> <p>-Requires more time, effort and cost.</p>	<p>It has the success factors, which include:</p> <p>- Long-term relationships</p> <p>- Achieve a High interaction</p> <p>- The use of new and innovative ways of communication</p> <p>-Ability to reduce time, effort and cost</p>

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study analyses the current situation of public relations in three of the Governmental Tourist Organizations in Egypt: Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Promotion Authority and Tourism Development Authority, to discover how far these organizations use communication networks in public relations practice.

The field study was conducted on two parts: **First** personal interviews with (10) of public relations practitioners (4) of them are responsible for information and communication technology. These interviews intend to evaluate whether communication networks are effectively applied in public relation departments and whether they have an effect on the performance of public relations in those organizations.

Second: questionnaires that have been distributed on a group of managers in these organizations in order to analyze and evaluate the fact of communication networks in these organizations as a whole. The questionnaire was distributed to (127) managers. The sample used in this stage was the simple random sample. The total number of collected questionnaires which is valid to be analyzed was (94) questionnaires with (74%) response rate representing (54%) from the total population in those

organizations (174 managers). The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to analyze the questionnaire results. The reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured. The scale was found to be internally reliable, ($\alpha = 0.878$).

At the end of the study practical suggestions are presented based on research findings for effective application of communication networks in the field of public relations in Egyptian Governmental Tourist Organizations to develop the performance of public relations.

RESULTS:

The outcome of this study can be divided into two parts. The first part disclosed an assessment of the current status of the public relations practice via personal interviews. The second part presented the findings concerning the questionnaires of the tourism organizations' managers.

Interviews Results:

The interview conducted by the researcher has proved that the surveyed organizations have an **intranet network**. On the other hand, more than a half of interviewed employees illustrated that there is no effective application for this network. All of public relations employees still depend on traditional communicational tools for internal communication such as: telephone, reports, official letters, electronic mail, which indicates the ineffective application of intranet network in the field of public relations.

The majority of interviewed employees (79%) noted that this deficiency is due to the absence of a clear policy to enable the use of intranet, along with the presence of some administrative leaders that have a psychological barrier in dealing with the modern technology, especially in the governmental sector. Consequently, this caused a weakness in the mechanism of internal communication in the surveyed organizations either among public relations employees or other departments inside the organizations.

Also, (93%) public relations employees agreed that the internet plays an important role in their daily work. It is already used and activated by public relations practitioners. They also noted that internet enhances the way they do their tasks.

Furthermore, (64%) of interviewed employees mentioned that in the case of some technical or managerial problems, they face difficulty in relying entirely on the traditional methods of communication that also used in their work. As a result, it is clear that internet affects, to a great extent, public relations performance.

On the other hand, when asked about the **extranet network**, most of the interviewed employees (71%) demonstrated that till now there is no serious decision concerning this network in both Tourism Promotion Authority and Tourism Development Authority. On the contrary, the remaining employees (29%) in the Ministry of Tourism stated that despite of having an extranet network, they still wholly depend on other traditional tools of communication.

So, until now there are no extranet network dedicated to connect the three surveyed organizations to each other, despite the large number of businesses and tourism projects which have been carried out in collaboration between them.

Subsequently, coordinating tasks and businesses among these organizations was done through relying on traditional methods of external communication such as: fax, sending a delegate person from the organization, phone, e-mail and personal interviews. Moreover, the interviews also showed that there are no electronic means of communication with other ministries such as the Ministry of planning, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Ministry of environment which are significantly associated with the tourism sector. Undoubtedly, this situation affects negatively the performance of public relations .

From the above it can be claimed that there are some limitation that hinder the use of communication networks in the field of public relations in the governmental tourist organizations in Egypt, especially both intranet and extranet. **These barriers can be summarized as follow:**

- The senior management is not convinced concerning the use of communication networks, or any other technological techniques.
- Fear of using technology and unwillingness to change among some of employees.
- Lack of technological skills, as well as, there is no benefit from the training sessions which have been held by those organizations. This is due to the absence of a specific training plan organized according to employees training needs.

Questionnaire results:

The level of using intranet network, is demonstrated as follows by Table 1:

Table (2) Assessing the use of intranet

Indicator	Frequency	(%)
Intranet connection		
Yes	63	67.0%
No	31	33.0%
If yes , the extent of using Intranet		
High	0	0.0
Medium	0	0.0
Low	13	20.6
Limited	14	22.2
None	36	57.1
Communicational tools used to exchange information and coordinate work between the different departments and sections inside the tourist organizations		
Telephone	46	48.9
Reports	36	38.3
Formal letters	29	30.9

Meetings	19	20.2
E mail	17	18.1
Advertisements board	21	22.3
Intranet	13	13.8
The simplicity of internal communication through current communicational tools		
High	12	12.8
Medium	20	21.3
Low	22	23.4
Limited	26	27.7
None	14	14.9

1. It was illustrated that a high percentage of the sample (67.02%) confirmed the existence of the intranet network inside the organizations. Conversely, the remaining percentage (33.9%) negated that.
2. The high percentage (57.1%) of those who having an intranet network ,showed that there is no effective use of the intranet in their organizations.
3. Approximately half of the sample (48.9%) are used Telephone in coordinating tasks and exchanging data inside the organization, followed by Reports at (38.3%), then Letters (30.9%) and finally only (13.8%) who used the intranet network.
4. The results shown that there is a limited coordination between the different departments inside the organizations at a rate (27.7%) of the sample. This is due to the traditional communicational tools which are still widely used in the surveyed organizations.

The above results supported what public relations employees mentioned through interviews concerning the low level of intranet usage, which indicates the ineffective application of this network.

The use of Internet network (external communication):

Table (3) Assessing the use of internet network

Indicator	Frequency	(%)
Internet connection		
Yes	65	69.1
No	29	10.7
Only in some departments	14	14.9
If yes , the extent of using Internet		
High	15	23.1

Medium	24	36.9
Low	13	20
Limited	4	6.2
None	9	13.8
The different internet applications used in organizations		
E mail	45	47.9
Website	42	44.7
Blogs	17	18.1
Database	34	36.3
Social media	29	30.9
Video-conferencing	0	0.0

- The results shown in the above table illustrated that a high level (69.1%) of respondents using Internet network.
- Only (36.9%) of the sample indicated the effectiveness of the organization's website.
- It was demonstrated that there are many Internet applications used in the organizations. The answers showed that the most Internet application used by respondents is the e-mail at a high percentage (47.9%), followed by the organization's web site (44.7%), then databases (36.2%) . On the other hand, a low average percentage of the sample (30.9%) used social media, while the blogs are the least percentage of use (18.1%).

The use of extranet network (external communication):

Table (4) Assessing the use of Extranet network

Indicator	Frequency	(%)
The extranet connection		
Yes	8	8.5
No	86	91.5
If yes , the extent of using Extranet		
High	0	0
Medium	1	12.5
Low	1	12.5
Limited	6	75.0

None	0	0
Communicational tools used to manage work with other organizations and institutions		
Fax	70	74.5
Telephone	32	34
A representative from the organization	41	43.6
E mail	19	20.2
Letters	32	34
Extranet	0	0
The easiness of external communication and coordinating tasks between the organization and other institutions		
High	6	6.4
Medium	10	10.6
Low	33	35.1
Limited	42	44.7
None	3	3.2

- The table indicates that The majority (91.5%) of the sample stated that there is no extranet network in their organizations, which is reflected in a limited average percentage (75.0%) of its usage.
- On the other hand, the absence of extranet network undoubtedly affects negatively the ease of communication and the exchange of information among the surveyed organizations. This is due to the traditional methods of communication which used by surveyed organizations.
- The results illustrated that fax is the most communicational tool (74.4%) which used to follow-up and organize work with other institutions and bodies , while there is no use of extranet in the surveyed organizations. Accordingly, this result consistent dramatically with what was mentioned through interviews concerning the absence of this network in Tourism Promotion Authority and Tourism Development Authority and it isn't effectively applied in the Ministry of Tourism. Consequently, there is a limited connection (44.7%) between the organization and other institutions.

CONCLUSION

Communication networks can increasingly change the way public relations communicate and perform in and out the tourism organizations. They give the opportunity to public relations to be more creative and communicative in today's dynamic environment.

The research's results have revealed that despite the majority of public relation managers in the governmental tourism organizations in Egypt are convinced of the importance of the use of communications networks in easing and improving the effectiveness of public relations, these networks suffers from many obstacles that hinder its use on a wide range such as the lack of finances, the lack of equipments and the lack of coordination between the departments.

The research also showed that the current methods of communications used in public relations are not appropriate to the ongoing progress in information and communication technology which negatively affected the way public relations performed its tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcome of this research the researchers recommend that Governmental tourism leaders have to make a changes to keep up with the rapid growth in technology, strengthen positive points, and determine problems that face public relations in these organizations, in order to achieve maximum benefit from communication networks. The culture of Electronic Public Relations must be spread in all the government tourist organizations in Egypt encourage employees to use technology by providing incentives and appropriate training.

The need to modernize and develop the IT infrastructure in governmental tourist organizations through clear and specific plan and attention to its maintenance and strengthening continuously.

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