

Function of Public Relations in Corporate Perception Management¹

Kurumsal Algı Yönetiminde Halkla İlişkiler Fonksiyonu

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the purpose is to define the concepts of perception management and corporate perception management and to explain for what functions public relations are responsible within these concepts. These functions are classified under two main areas as internal and external functions. In addition to this, the components of perception management that have a significant importance for corporations are expressed and necessary applications are pointed out for an effective use. It is also stated that public relations play an important role in understanding, interpreting and addressing individuals and groups of people within this understanding of perception management. It is also emphasized that public relations must be permanent in the understanding of perception management and it is important to determine and provide the demands, expectations and needs of individuals that establish the internal and external corporates. It is pointed out that public relations with perception management are interrelated and complementary processes. It is also described what basic rules are required when building corporate perception management and which application principles there are. It is also pointed out that target populations have cultural characteristics and value judgments. The characteristics of public relations messages are described when building the understanding of perception management. It is important to get feedback of these applications and to measure them in this process. It is necessary to prevent any negative perception either in internal or in external corporations by using the real examples. Visual elements of a corporation that constitute an important source for perception must be designed effectively, it should reflect the corporate identity and it should also support the perception to be created in this way.

KEYWORDS

Perception, Perception Management, Public Relations

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ÖZ

Bu çalışmada algı, algı yönetimi ve kurumsal algı yönetimi kavramları tanımlanarak bu kavramlar içerisinde halkla ilişkilerin yerine getirdiği fonksiyonlar açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu fonksiyonlar kurum içi ve kurum dışı olmak üzere iki temel alan içerisinde sınıflandırmaya tabi tutulmuştur. Bunun yanında kurumlar için ciddi öneme sahip olan algı yönetiminin bileşenleri ifade edilmiş ve etkin kullanımı için gerekli olan uygulamalar ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Algı yönetimi anlayışı içerisinde halkla ilişkilerin bireylerin ve kitlelerin anlaşılmasında yorumlanmasında ve yönlendirilmesinde oynadığı rol ifade edilmiştir. Halkla ilişkilerin algı yönetimi anlayışında sürekliliğine vurgu yapılarak iç ve dış kamuları oluşturan bireylerin istek, beklenti ve ihtiyaçlarının belirlenmesi ve karşılanmasının önemine değinilmiştir. Algı yönetimiyle halkla ilişkilerin bir biriyle iç içe geçen ve birbirini tamamlayan süreçler olduğuna dikkat çekilmiştir. Kurumsal algı yönetimi kurgulanırken uyulması gereken bazı temel kuralların neler olduğu ve uygulama esasları belirtilmiştir. Bu süreçte hedef kitlenin sahip olduğu kültürel özellikler ve değer yargularının ne kadar önemli olduğu ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Algı yönetimi anlayışı içerisinde kurgulanan halkla ilişkiler mesajlarının sahip olması gereken özellikleri ifade edilmiştir. Bunun yanında süreçteki uygulamaların geri dönüşümlerinin alınması ve ölçülmesi önemlidir. Gerçeklerden hareket ederek kurum ile ilgili gerek iç kamularda gerekse dış kamularda olumsuz bir algının oluşmasının önüne geçilmesi gerekir. Algının önemli bir kaynağını oluşturan kurumun görsel unsurları etkin şekilde dizayn edilmeli kurumsal kimliği yansıtmalı ve bu şekilde oluşacak algıyı destekler nitelikte olması önemlidir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER

Algı, algı yönetimi, halkla ilişkiler

INTRODUCTION

The constantly changing technological and social structure has begun to re-define the connection between the public and public institutions and their contents. It is now a necessity to sort out economic, political and social events, to analyze their social and institutional reflections and to develop strategies for solving these problems. There are two techniques to be used in this process. These are described as institutional perception management and public relations.

Public relations refer to the interaction process, which enables institutions to be introduced to the public and to get social support by maintaining it. The concept of perception management plays an important role to let public relations to understand individuals, to interpret their attitudes and to direct them. The success applications of public relations organized for target populations are closely related to positive perception to be built in opposite parties. The target population of institutions ascertains its connection to that institution over its perception built within its own mind. If this perception is positive, then it initiates a connection and develops it. However, if this perception is negative, it does not initiate a connection and it even finalizes any relations if built previously. It is very difficult to reform the negative perceptions built earlier and it is a process that requires time. In this view, the institutions must manage the connections and interactions they built with target populations and the public very well and this must be conducted more productively with public relations techniques within an understanding of perception management. Therefore, public relations have many functions in terms of institutional public management.

1. PERCEPTION AND PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT AS A CONCEPT

Perception refers to organization and interpretation of sensory data carried through our sense organs. It is a process in which humans try to give a meaning to the surroundings (Arkonac, 1998: 65). In addition to this, it also means that an individual must classify and evaluate all external stimuli after perceiving them. In general, perception (sense), as a concept, is the organization and interpretation of stimuli (sensual signals, images and symbols) gathered through our sense organs in a meaningfully integrated way. Perception includes the whole process of physical, neurological and cognitive senses, which is initiated after a stimulus reaches to sensors and recognized by the senses,

perceived, comprehended and defined subsequently. Perception refers to witnessing all events surrounding an individual (Reingold and Merikle, 1998:563-575). In this aspect, perception can be regarded as a very complicated process with many components.

Perceptions show us what we see, how we interpret them, what we believe and how we behave. Our perceptions create values, build problems and also solve these problems in our mind. Having such a strong ability, our perceptions are described as 'a fact' by many psychologists (Johansson and Xiong, 2003: 232). This indicates that everything that surrounds us is given a meaning by our perceptions and become a reality.

These facts, that are also perceptions, are built as a result of senses. Perceptions are shaped according to previous experiences or knowledge of an individual. Therefore, perception is a reaction of personality. The most important indicator is that senses create a form of consciousness, showing that they are a part of some object or shape. When a perception is created in a person, he/she recognizes or knows that thing (Binbaşıoğlu and Binbaşıoğlu 1992:34). Following the perception, a person pays attention to the things that are of his/her interest in the surroundings. Although a person may sometimes be indifferent to or uninterested in some knowledge, he/she pays a lot of attention to some of them and get curious (Eren, 2010: 69). Perception of a person does not point out the same level of priority to each psychological object. It is possible to say that personality traits play an important role to reveal this priority.

Besies, Stupak (2000) cites a study conducted by Cialdini (1984) and claims that perceptions are shaped in two ways as experience-based perception and mental perception. Cialdini states that experience based perceptions are improved through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting; and mental perceptions are described as a sixth sense that is called to know something. In this aspect, it is difficult to express mental perception. At the same time, each person has a perceptual environment as experience-based and mental one. The reason is that, people process and store knowledge; and then shape all that knowledge acquired from outside within a network dependent on his/her beliefs, emotions and surroundings (Stupak, 2000: 253).

This indicates that perception is not only a psychological phenomenon, but also a subjective interpretation of such characteristics as beliefs, attitudes, personality, etc. Individuals perceive what they see in accordance with their

own worldviews, beliefs and value judgments (Kares, 1991:20-21). Here, we come up with the concept of 'Perception Management' due to presence of such phenomena to affect, to direct and to change those perceptions.

Perception management, besides its meaning of controlling data flow out of the world and developing it, is the management of stimuli that is known or comprehended and then reaching the brain (Tutar, 2008:80). The reason is that individuals manage their connection with outer world with their sense organs. The data gathered from the surroundings are transmitted to the brain and initiate a process of thinking about the events happened. This process creates a meaning in the individual's brain. It searches if an individual has similar events in his/her past, what interpretations created earlier and if he/she has stereotype belief patterns about a subject. This process continues in the brain of an individual and creates a basis for perception system within the society/organization involved (Ugurlu, 2008: 148).

The understanding of perception management is the process that begins with knowing an individual in or out of an organization, to interpret and understand them, that is, to perceive them. When managing perception, the data gathered about individuals are remolded with organizational processes and perceptual components are used in a way to contribute to realize the objectives of an individual at them same time (Uğurlu, 2008:149). We can describe the factors that affect the process within the process of perception management as in the following (Eren, 2010: 70).

- The characteristics of a perceiving individual (personality, personal characteristics, experiences)
- The characteristics of objects perceived (person, item, event, living or non-living beings)
- The perception environment (the characteristics of physical, social and organizational environmental conditions in the perception environment)

The message contents also play an important role other than the receivers and resources in the perception management (Özer, 2003: 163). Here, it is possible to claim that the facts occurred after being perceived by an individual is more important than the fact itself (Reid, 2002: 2). Individuals are receivers and after analyzing the perception systems of individuals, it is important to address these systems that aim to affect message quality, coherence and clarity into a desired direction. Stimuli and knowledge is transmitted into brain via

sense and taken into assessment. The assessment criterion aims to see what is right and what is wrong, what is good, what is unimportant and what things have priority for individuals. It is much easier to understand the messages after shaping them in accordance to perception channels that are dominant in an individual's brain (Özer, 2003: 163). This indicates that there is a linear connection between choosing the right channel and perception management.

In organizational terms, the ways to perceive are described with different points of view. In some aspects, it is seen as a communication discipline applied to reach an objective by directing the target population in terms of its own profit; and in other aspects, it is the integration of all techniques that are required to use when persuading people to buy a product, service or idea as a first step (Saydam, 2006:91). Even though assessed with different points of view, perception management is a very important and complicated process that is inevitable for both individuals and institutions.

The important point, when determining strategic objectives in this process, is to determine what results need to be achieved. After determining objectives, the targets must be clarified. After determining a target or targets, research must be conducted and opposite actions, people, institutions and organizations must be determined. The persons must take his/her culture/beliefs and past into consideration and make precise and clear descriptions to complete this process. Perception management planners must approach all targets with the same attitude; and take all possible reactions into consideration from different cultures towards different situation (Callamari and Reveron, 2003:3). It is impossible to say that there is only one strategy that will give the same result for all targets.

The reason is that the connection between an institution or organization with its inner and outer surroundings and its position in that environment plays an important role. It is also important to realize this connection on a certain level in terms of managing organizational identity and image. The perception management aims to manage mutual behaviors and relations (Tutar, 2008:109). The effective organization of these relations in an integrated way within institutional bodies indicate us the understanding of 'Institutional Perception Management'.

2. INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

Perception management, although it is a new issue, is supported by technology as a concept at our present day and the results come up with an

increasing interest (Zaman, 2007: 1). The understanding of institutional perception management enables companies to reach target population in an effective way and to develop perceptions as planned; therefore creating a competitive vision in the market (Hargis and Watt, 2010: 77). It is important to build these components of perception management in an effective way to realize this.

The institutional perception management is consisted of 4 components and they are listed as follows (Elsbach, 2003: 299-320):

1. Institutional perception,
2. Actions and “tactics”,
3. Company spokesmen,
4. Company population,

2.1. Institutional Perception

The first component of institutional perception management is to create a perception that is possible to manage. The institutional perception management is designed to manipulate the perceptions of an institution. The tools used herein are listed as images (present perceptions must be valid, coherent or reliable), recognition (continuously regarded as a tough rival), and identity (the ability to make a decision on economic perception of an institution or institutional equity in downsizing applications) (Elsbach, 2003: 300).

Images can be described as the total of impressions and opinions left in people’s or institution’s mind about each other; and institutional image refers to how a company is perceived by its shareholders (Erdogan et.al., 2006: 56). Institutional recognition refers to the value judgments created in people’s mind due to all or several characteristics of an institution. Institutional identity refers to all characteristics that separate an institution from others, that emphasize the presence of an institutions, with what it is occupied and works for who and how and that indicates its dependency on other components of that institution. Institutional identity indicates the philosophy and strategy of an institution (Büyükbeşe ve Sözbilir, 2011: 224).

These tools motivate the company spokesmen that include leaders and employees when building a perception management for the whole institution. In short, it is possible to say that image, recognition and identity are three important functions that require presence and focus of a perception management

(Elsbach, 2003: 300). Institutional identity is required to present values and to create competitive superiority for target populations. It is only possible to have a positive institutional recognition as a result of reaching target populations and enhancing the institutional image (Ural, 2002: 83).

2.2. Symbolic Actions

This component is consisted of activities used by company spokesmen. Symbolic actions involve verbal expression, classifications, symbolic attitudes and physical signs. In short, the factors that create symbolic actions are explained as in the morning (Elsbach, 2003: 306).

Verbal expressions, define the responsibilities of an institution and they are created for target population, also including explanations designed to affect perceptions.

Classifications, give an opportunity to categorize or make a comparison. The main reason to do this is to set forth who is or who isn't this institution is to some extent.

Symbolic attitudes, involve a series of actions organized routinely or for private purposes in accordance with the image and identity of an institution.

Physical signs involve such symbols and signs that reflect the image, identity and recognition of an institution, its dimensions, location and design (convergence of investment banks in Wall Street) and such other variables as type of furniture used in the building (traditional or contemporary office furniture) and its decoration (pieces of art, paintings or presence/non-presence of living plants).

2.3. Company Spokesmen

This component aims to transfer and carry the symbolic actions (verbal expressions, symbolic behaviors, physical signs). It involves people perceived by the population that represents the institution. Company spokesmen are consisted of leaders employees (Elsbach, 2003: 306). Leaders and employees do the work that reflects the identity of an institution. These works are directed to the persons or groups targeted by the institution. Company spokesmen help create an institutional image to be perceived by target persons or groups in a desired way.

2.4. Company Population

The component of company population involves all people that include the objectives of institutional perception management. This population is consisted of a large number of people that are either outside the institution (execution agencies, rival companies, suppliers, customers, non-governmental institutions, and voters) or inside it (employees, partners, unions, volunteers, members, students) (Elsbach, 2003: 320).

3. FUNCTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

Perception is defined as making a differentiation from the surroundings and a process of interpreting them. When we deal with this definition in terms of public relations, perception will also involve the process of becoming aware of inner and outer surroundings that have an effect on the organization. Public relations aim to motivate people, bring them closer, develop insights and try to direct them in terms of their organizational objectives (Kadibesegil, 2003:44). The importance of understanding of perception management cannot be denied in terms of success in this guidance. In this aspect, public relations have important functions in the understanding of institutional perception management.

Perception management based public relations is an important component being beyond a necessity both for internal public relations (organizational structure, organizational culture of communicative process within the organization, motivation, efficiency, organizational climate, relations between workers and organization) and external public relations (positive and negative reactions of target population towards the organization, attitudes of organization in terms of social responsibility principle, organizational identity and the image in the target population's mind (Uğurlu, 2008:149). Following this point of view, managing public relations may correspond with managing perception.

The reason is that perception management is diagnostic for public relations and has a function of making sense. It gains importance with such applications as understanding individuals, interpreting and perceiving and perception management based public relations in and out of an organization. The important factors to reach the objectives are taking the values of target population into consideration, caring about people's cultures and exhibiting such approaches over their expectations (Saydam, 2006: 253). By accomplishing all these in a successful way, target population will have a

positive perception and the institution will manage their perception via public relations.

In addition to this, public relations help manage to foresee people's behaviors within the organization, to explain and to take them under control. The understanding of perception management also corresponds to the definition of public relations. In this way, it helps to indicate the clues of how people will be affected (Uğurlu, 2008:150).

It is possible to evaluate the function of public relations in institutional perception management as internal and external functions. Here, the internal functions can be expressed as follows:

Function of Motivation by Public Relations in Perception Management

Some components of motivation used in public relations applications activate individuals within the framework of perception management. According to this, motivation is defined as a process that aims to catch up with the continuously changing demands of target population and to provide them, developing due to the need of creating high performance individuals in the organization. Therefore, the energy of employees is activated, aiming that the organizational objectives will be realized successfully and employees will be effective and productive in their duties (Peker and Aytürk, 2002:60).

In a Gallup study cited by Fortune Magazine, it is stated that companies are required to have the following four attitudes over their employees if they wish to get higher profits. These are the employees that feel that they have the opportunity to do their best every day, the ones that feel that their opinions are valued and given importance, the ones that feel that their colleagues give importance to the quality and the ones that make a direct connection between his work and the institutional mission (Howard, 1998:23). As seen, it is possible to settle these four attitudes into employees only by internal works of public relations that are conducted productively in favor of them.

Applications of perception management based public relations should offer individuals such stimuli as pay rise, incentives pay, promotion, status, etc., and while doing this, they should also take their personal characteristics and requirements into consideration. It is another important component for creating motivation to inform employees about the advantages of organizational objectives within the organization and to emphasize the importance of value

given to these within the organization. Therefore, individuals will be more motivated to behave so as the results are known and their value is given importance. This emphasizes the importance of perception management based public relations to create motivation (Uğurlu, 2008:152). The employees that believe that they are given value and their opinions are cared will be motivated to realize company objectives.

Today, the most important thing that we need to do is to integrate the employees into this change. Communicating with them before and during any changes and caring about their opinions will provide such needs of employees as respect, admiration and importance and will motivate them to work for the future of company (Güzelcik, 1999:194).

Productivity and Job Satisfaction Function of Public Relations in Perception Management:

An organization must use the production inputs very effectively, therefore reducing the costs and increasing the quality, in order to survive in the dynamic, changing and complicated environmental conditions. Individuals, regarded as an input for organizations, have an active role that uses other inputs, conducts production and present goods and services as an outcome. Therefore, individuals have a central role within the organization. The viewpoints, capabilities, attitudes, knowledge and behaviors of employees in relation to the work, the organization and the society will affect the productivity and efficacy. So, an organization can encourage its employees to work more only when it can motivate them to produce as productively as possible. For organizations to be productive, employees must feel themselves valuable and they should also be motivated and behave and think in this way (Uğurlu, 2008:153).

Rewarding and Punishment Function of Public Relations in Perception Management:

It is important to have applications of perception management based public relations when using rewarding mechanism. The reason is that, it is highly important to know what sort of reward systems will motivate the individuals and what rewards will encourage them to work harder. Admiring the achievements of individuals with rewards that lack of care or out of interest will, of course, lead to shake their trust and eagerness to work for the company other than motivating them.

Creating Organizational Culture and Climate Function of Public Relations in Perception Management:

Organizational culture can be seen as a binder with certain rules that create a synergy in the group, that shows what needs to be done within the organization and giving people the feeling of what is valuable, that protects and strengthens the organization. Also, the organizational culture is a mechanism to create a control and a feeling that guides the members of an organization when shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Scott, 2006: 498).

It is no doubt that public relations have an important role for individuals in the process of perceiving the organization and work place. Besides creating a positive climate within the organization, public relations unit also have the sustaining role for the continuance of this climate. The reason is that, if organizational climate is negatively perceived in an organization, then psychological processes of an individual is seen unimportant, all communication channels are closed within the organization, there is no trust between individuals and the working environment involves pressure and forced applications, indicating that there is an organizational climate that reject public relations. Whereas, it is important to know that all communication channels are open, individuals have a wide and strong network of relations, there are certain rules other than pressure and each employee is aware of what is done and how it will be provided in an organization that has a positive organizational climate. In such an environment, applications of public relations have an important role in terms of perception management (Uğurlu, 2008:156). An employee with negative perceptions on organizational climate might have cynical behaviors.

Since the 1980s, it is observed that public relations are associated with organizational culture. Public relations are transferring all present data into communication channels. Organizational culture is one of them. Data production to create a convergence between the environments that wish to know organizational culture and reach it and cultural accumulation may create communicative programs that accomplish more results in terms of 'perception management' (Kadibesegil, 2006: 50). These communication programs created will support institutional perception positively.

Besides internal functions of institutions, it is also possible to describe external functions of public relations in institutional perception management.

Perception Management within the framework of Public Relations

Developments and innovations in business management today and its speed in national and international platform play an important role in terms of responsibilities under the triangle of ‘consumer, environment and society’. These quick developments will be examined and evaluated in internal and external environment within the organizational culture using applications of public relations. The identity and prestige of a company is always closely related to ‘organizational culture and structure’ (Ada, 2001: 26).

In addition to primarily and directly affecting the determination and realization of organizational objectives, the group that involves people, institutions, organizations and populations, affected again primarily or directly by the realization of those objectives in one way or another, is called ‘duty cycle’ (Varol, 1993: 214). This indicates us that the organization has a duty cycle in a large organizational area.

One of them is the consumer and ‘Consumers’ involve individuals and organizations that purchase products or services offered by the market after production and that are related to quality and quantity. Taking the demands and expectations of consumers into consideration in organizations where applications of perception management based public relations gain importance and the renewal process of company following the data that come from them, that is, giving importance to consumer relations as required in short, will help reach the objectives by eluding itself from competition environment. Besides perceiving the consumers, it is also important to perceive the ‘rivals’ in organizational environment. The organizations that wish to keep its presence in the competitive business world and to have a permanent positive image must be more up-to-date, more creative and more striking when preparing their programs of public relations when compared to others, they should also keep a close track on their rivals, evaluate their business and then shape their own working programs and policies.

Perception Management in the Social Environment of Public Relations

Organizations are established to provide some needs and to serve for specific purposes in a society. They are shaped by their interaction with their environment and develop as an extension of changes in social needs. Organizations should never be confined with their positive identities and never stop finding ways to promote themselves only in the eyes of employees and

duty cycle. Organizations must seek ways to fulfill their social responsibilities and they must look for an elevation in the eyes of social categories other than that. The understanding of institutional social responsibility that is created by the need to provide requirements of fast-changing economic, social and politic environments; that is closely associated with the ethic rules of an organization and correlated with social norms of an organization, is related to social environment of that organization, policies of public relations and perception management (Uğurlu, 2008:160). Creating a perception that indicates the institution fulfills its social responsibility will increase the social support it needs. This is one of the functions of public relations in terms of social responsibility when creating a perception.

According to Freidman, organizations are a part of the society and the world in which they are active and they are obliged to fulfill their responsibilities for humanity. At the very basic level, organizations have some mandatory attitudes such as obeying all legal obligations, paying their taxes and treating all employees equally. At the second level, they should take all possible damages to be caused by the organization into consideration, and they are required to take precautions and frequent controls in case their products are used for dangerous purposes. At the third level, organizations must volunteer to contribute to fighting against all social problems and fulfill all their responsibilities to create a healthy society (Oktay, 2002: 70). The success of organization will be seriously affected by the dominant perception within the public that indicates these applications are done voluntarily, not because of a legal obligation.

RESULTS

We perceive various stimuli we acquire from our surroundings via our senses. In this aspect, our senses involve observation, understanding and interpretation. It is possible to say that this situation is also valid for institutions. That is, the institutions need to observe, understand and interpret either internal or external populations. Such companies that experience an intensive amount of competition and wish to make a profit in this environment may use applications of perception management. These perceptions may fulfill many functions in public relations. It is seen that the basic rules that are required to realize institutional perception management successfully are also involved in public relations management. In this view, public relations and perception management are interlinked and support one another.

Public relations refer to a process management that manipulates opinions. The consistency and success of applications of public relations are in parallel to what extent these opinions are changed and how they are affected. Opinions are created in different parts of the society with perceptions of different contents. Perception management, which refers to an administrative understanding based on perception, undoubtedly has an important role in terms of public relations.

The individuals and reactions needed for public relations can easily be reached by the understanding of perception management. Knowing what sort of a perception will be created for sensitive individuals indicates the junction point where public relations and perception management meet. Intersection of public relations and perception management in terms of several objectives at some points indicate that the main focus of public relations should also involve perception management. The most important component in public relations is trust. Therefore, it is a must to know the target population very well and to describe their demands and expectations clearly in order to establish mutual trust. The perception management enables to get to know the target population in detail and help build trust among institutions.

Nowadays, it is possible that it has an application area also in business world in which competition is on increase day by day. In this view, companies must use their tools of perception management effectively to be one step further than their rivals and to direct the opinions of both society and target population about the company. To do this, in addition to taking internal dynamics into consideration, target population must be determined clearly and some strategic objectives must be defined. The institutional recognition, which has a crucial importance for companies and constitutes a basis for institutional perception, must describe the institutional image and institutional identity. Having such verbal expressions and physical signs as slogans and logos that are consistent with the institutional image, recognition and identity will make it possible to remain in people's minds both visually and auditorily as targeted earlier. It is possible to say that a successful institutional perception management will be realized by the help of public relations in companies that determine and apply all these stages in an accurate way.

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