

Practical Public Relations Strategy for Local Government (US - Georgian based)

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Abstract

Democracy building has become a real and vibrant process in Georgia as a result of the changes brought by the “Rose Revolution” of 2003. The Georgian government is currently pursuing widespread reforms in the economic, political and social systems governing the country, and faces the challenge of communicating these reforms to the public in a meaningful and positive way. This situation has placed the need for creating sustainable management for public Relations creating sustainable management an urgent item on the government’s agenda.

Keywords: pursuing, challenge, reputation, publicity, promotion, merchandising, facilitate, vibrant process, multidisciplinary, mutual benefit

The Main Role of Public Relations

The importance of the public relations function as an integral part of the effective activity of any organization is still relatively unknown in Georgia, although there are some fledgling attempts to establish commercial PR agencies in the country. To date, however, there is a deficit of skilled public relations professionals in the country.

The project that will be undertaken as a result of US-based research on PR strategy for government is aimed at establishing effective Public Relations Departments in the offices of city assemblies throughout Georgia. A successful PR function in local governments will facilitate active involvement of society in the process of decision-making by government structures and raise transparency of the reform activities undertaken by government authorities. (Tench, 2006) At this stage in the democratization process in Georgia, there is a critical need for society to understand the roles, responsibilities and functions of government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens in relation to local government. Active engagement by the citizenry and civil society organizations in local government is essential in building a democratic society.

The policy and functioning of local government in Georgia is still in the early stages of development and the strength of local governments’ capacity is still far from ideal. Local governments are in need of a great deal of assistance to prepare them to undertake their responsibilities in an effective manner.

The proposed research will focus on the role of public relations function in relation to local government, and the resulting training package will be designed to assist gov-

ernment offices to communicate government priorities, options, challenges and courses of action to constituents. An enhanced PR function will help to overcome current low levels of confidence and mistrust in government and build understanding of the reforms being undertaken by the government, and facilitate the establishment of productive and lasting partnerships between communities and their local governments.

Public Relations Strategy Purpose

The overall purpose of the proposed PR strategy and subsequent project is establishment of the principles of transparency and accountability in elected governmental structures, through strengthened management within those structures for public education, communication and engagement. The focus of this value building effort will be establishment of effective public relations functions within city assemblies and other local government bodies.

The strategy and subsequent project activity in Georgia is expected to verify the following working hypotheses:

1. Modernization of local governmental institutions, such as city assemblies, will establish a body considered to be the “facilitators of democracy” between local and national administrative bodies and the public. (Newsom, 2007). The legislative system governing formation and function of local government is not yet fully established in Georgia, and public participation in governance is still a new phenomena. There is no tradition of public engagement in governmental administration and decision-making, and the population currently has very little access to information about the reform agenda of the government and the role of their local government – either appointed or elected – in carrying out the reforms. The lack of transparency

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in development of an agenda for change and poor communication of goals, strategy and poor communication has resulted in growing mistrust in the motives and capacity of the new government and their local representatives. (Willcox, 2007) This is a timely issue for Georgia right now, as legislation for local self-governance is being formulated.

2. The practical need for city assemblies to establish open, productive partnerships with civil society (non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) communities has created an imperative for the establishment of capacity for effective public relations within local government structures. PR, as a vital part of institutions that function for and in relationship with the public, is recognized as an important tool of local government in countries throughout the world. There is a critical need to build this function within governmental offices as democracy evolves in Georgia, in order to facilitate constructive engagement between communities, civil society and local administrations.

3. Deficiency in the information that flows to the public often results in tensions between central government and regional bodies. Development of the public relations sector, encompassing a wide range of mechanisms for communication and public participation, will facilitate resolution of these tensions. Establishment of effective partnerships between government and non-governmental groups and exchanges of information between appointed and elected officials, civil society organizations and the public will be greatly assisted by development of the PR sector in government. The proposed effort to build local governments' capacities for effective interchange with the public will actively involve both governmental institutions and civil society organizations.

The strategy will be implemented in two stages: (a) research, study and practical experience in government sector public relations and (b) implementation of PR training and ongoing support to selected city assemblies in Georgia.

Research: In association with an appropriate academic institution, I will undertake a combination of individual-study and will endeavor to arrange short practical appointments (internships) in the PR department of one or more local government offices. The outcome of this theoretical and practical experience will be a package of PR training materials for use by local governments in Georgia. It is anticipated that this training package will consist of a combination of:

- Short practical seminars for members of city assemblies and other local government offices, supported by appropriate written resource materials; seminar topics will tentatively include:

Democratic evolution and social, political and economic sector reforms in Georgia; the current state of legislation and reforms related to local self-governance.

The main principles of Public Relations and the potential for PR to enhance the effectiveness of local gov-

ernment.

Media relations (preparation of press releases, informational bulletins, advertisements, and public service messages).

Establishing effective partnerships with NGOs; the role of NGOs and civil society in building democracy.

Formation of public opinion; organization and management of public opinion (alternatives for overcoming negative opinions and dealing constructively with opposing views, and public communication in times of crisis.

Strategic management of PR.

- On-the-job coaching and mentoring of city assembly staff responsible for PR; and
- Placement of Public Relations interns from International Black sea University, where I am currently a Lecturer in Public Relations.

Concrete tasks for PR strategy project implementation include:

- Establishment proactive Public Relations Departments within selected city assemblies and local government institutions in Georgia;
- Undertaking training and ongoing capacity strengthening with these local government offices and, in particular, with the staff responsible for public relations;
- Engaging the media and government in joint efforts to popularize mass media in the rural areas of Georgia (known as "the regions");
- Supporting local government to planning and implement PR campaigns to raise awareness among the public of their role in supporting and engaging in democratic processes;
- Assisting government to establish transparent mechanisms for routine citizen engagement in decision-making, governance and public administration; and
- Supporting establishment of effective partnerships between local government and networks of civil society organizations/NGOs.

At the same time that my research work will result in positive outcomes for the democratic process in Georgia, it will yield great benefits for my own professional pursuits.

(a) The results of the research will enhance my ability meet my professional commitments (i.e., to analyze and monitor the contributions of PR to state-building in Georgia and serve as an expert advisor in the field; and

(b) The research results will greatly enrich the content of the PR lecture courses that I teach at the International Black Sea University.

The proposed PR strategy project will be evaluated on two levels. The package (seminar session plans, proposed methodology, support materials and individual coaching strategy) will be evaluated for excellence of professional

standards, practicality of approach, use of current best practice in the field and soundness of learning methodologies.

The second level of evaluation will focus on the ultimate outcomes of application of the PR training package on a practical level, with selected local government offices in Georgia. Expected outcomes include: (a) establishment of functioning PR Departments in local government offices;

(b) establishment of fruitful partnerships between local government and non-governmental structures; (c) greater transparency of and public participation in the activities undertaken by local governments; (d) greater understanding of and support for ongoing national and local reforms among constituent populations; (e) active participation by the society and non-governmental organizations in democratic processes, and in articulating problems and resolving them with local resources and input; and finally, (f) firm establishment of the academic discipline and practice of PR for governmental institutions in Georgia, resulting in the development of a cadre of qualified PR professionals working in the service of democratic reforms in the country.

Conclusion

This strategy project is important in several ways. First and foremost, development of a cadre of effective public relations professionals within government offices in Georgia is critically important to the success of current efforts to build public support for reform and engage Georgians in the process of democracy building. The Georgian government is currently facing a monumental tasks related to the evolution of democracy in the country – building public trust and confidence, establishing transparent and participatory mechanisms for local self-governance and successfully engaging civil society and the citizenry in democratic processes.

The approach to public relations that I have pursued in my PR strategy and is one that focuses on establishment of effective, two-way communications, with the aim of creating common ground and identifying areas of mutual benefit. This very approach will lend itself quite well to the needs and priorities of newly formed local government structures in Georgia. It will be the basis for development of the PR training package for local government.

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