

Exploring Public Relations Career Path in the Healthcare Industry

Redefining Communications in Healthcare

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Abstract

In a world that is constantly evolving and changing, it is no surprise that the Healthcare Industry is re-inventing various aspects of its practices to keep up with the changing world. Today, organizations and businesses have a better understanding of communication. They also understand its use as a pivotal tool to establish and manage relationships with employees, clients, communities, investors, and all other categories of stakeholders. The healthcare industry is not an exemption, and this is what the paper seeks to explore.

Public Relations practice in the Healthcare Industry, career opportunities, relevance, and contributions are all aspects that will be considered in this project. Intending public relations specialists should be aware of the existing and untapped opportunities in the field of healthcare, this project, through research on scholarly articles relating to the topic, existing facts, and public data will show the positions or offices occupied by PR specialists in the field of Healthcare.

Introduction and Relevance

Over time, the word “engagement” has become a force in public relations research and practice. The concept that establishments and their stakeholders or target audience should engage with each other in ‘actual conversations’ to foster better understanding, relationship management,

business growth, and consumer satisfaction are a few of the many benefits that come with the use of effective communication that creates engagement between organizations and various stakeholders. (Avidar, 2017).

For this reason, public relations practice has not only gained prominence in recent times, but corporations and various industries are also utilizing the practice of PR to achieve these goals, this paper focuses on PR vocation in the healthcare industry. considering the ongoing pandemic and issues that have been prevalent in recent years, the importance of this project cannot be over-emphasized. This means that if there was ever a time for PR practice to be married to the healthcare industry, it is now and this paper will show how the healthcare industry has been leveraging on PR practices to communicate to clients or patients, local communities, societies, and even a larger audience on a global scale.

Engagement is part of a dialogue, and through this process, firms and the public can make decisions that are beneficial to both parties. In addition, there are many benefits that organizations and their publics enjoy as a result of meaningful engagements because it improves understanding among parties and encourages a fully functioning society whose decision-making is based on information. (Avidar, 2017).

Review of Relevant Literature

What is Public Relations?

There has been a lot of misconception surrounding the idea or concept of public Relations, it is a lot of things to many people, to Elon Musk (CEO of Tesla Inc.) PR is “manipulating public opinion” (Electrek, 2021). For this writing, a clear definition describing the parlance in which the

term “public relations” is being used will be adopted from the definition of Public Relations Society of America.

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their public. At its core, public relations is centered around promoting, influencing, engaging, establishing, and building relationships with concerned stakeholders to contribute to the way an organization is perceived. (PRSA).

The definition above elucidates the true meaning of public relations, and it is well beyond the scope of manipulating the public’s opinion or being a publicist for a celebrity, the keyword is “strategic communication” which implies a deliberately planned effort aimed at communicating in the most effective way intended to achieve desired feedback. It is because of this desired outcome or feedback that public relations practice in any industry is important as it helps them to achieve their goals and objectives.

Importance of Public Relations Practice

The investors' book (2018). discussed some of the benefits of incorporating PR practices in any organization and why doing so is crucial to its growth or success.

- **Raising Awareness:** The PR department focuses on spreading awareness by making people understand an organization’s products, services, and brand values.
- **Brand Image and Reputation:** Through strategic communication, the PR team ensures that a firm can improve its image and build up its reputation among the public and stakeholders.
- **Loyalty:** PR help build and sustain relationships with customers which in turn creates customer loyalty, this also translates into repeat business which is the backbone of any organization.

- Promotes Goodwill: One of the long-term benefits of PR practice in any establishment is that it paves the way for creating substantial goodwill for the company.
- Builds Trust and Credibility: Continuous brand promotion, done in a way to align the company's objectives to those of the society and the target audience, builds trust and credibility among the public. (Investors' book, 2018).

A look at the American Healthcare System

The Healthcare Analysis for Loyale Healthcare (2019). states that the American Healthcare system is facing important structural change, but this change is attributed to a swelling number of demands from patients, employers, and regulators. Providers understand that survival is at stake and are therefore finding the tools and strategies to keep pace with the changing world, remain relevant and competitive to be able to survive.

According to (Loyale 2019), the American healthcare industry mirrored the retail industry that most of us remember from the 1990s and earlier. If you wanted something, you had to go get it. Depending on how much time you had, you might take the time to travel to a couple of stores or make a few phone calls to compare prices and availability, but for the most part, we were contented with what we could get from the brands. Until very recently, consumers of healthcare in the U.S. had a similar experience. Whenever the need arose for care, they went to the provider in their health plan's network and got what was offered. How much it cost wasn't particularly important because the plan paid for most of it.

Things began to change in the 2,000s. Healthcare's cloudy pricing structure led to yearly upward cost increases and the introduction of high-deductible health plans by employers who were no longer able to bear the burden of the higher cost of care. As a result, average family premiums topped a record \$20,000 per year in 2018 according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey. Facing

high deductibles and copays, suddenly patients began asking "what is the cost?" and "How will I pay?".Loyale Healthcare (2019).

The American Healthcare industry is largely driven by patients who are emboldened by difficult personal financial circumstances, enabled by rapidly advancing technologies, and emergence of new entrants like Haven Healthcare, Walgreens Health, CVS Health, and others, patients are demanding more and are finding allies in state and federal government where the list of proposed legislation and regulations to control costs and improve access contains 927 different bills. Patients or consumers who once represented a small portion of healthcare's overall operating revenue, are now the third largest (behind only Medicare and Medicaid). As consumers are realizing that they have a choice when it comes to where and how they get their care. For executives and strategists, patients are now a force that must be reckoned with, it is for this reason that the practice of PR in the healthcare industry has not only gained prominence, but it has come to stay.

Communication as a Tool for Successful Healthcare Management

From Ebola, polio, and measles to COVID-19, public health has faced several crises in the last decade. These are some of the prominent issues that many healthcare facilities have had to deal with in their various localities and communities, to deal with these outbreaks or normal patient management, the services of PR specialists have been pivotal in successfully managing relationships and bridging the communication gaps. Public relations handle conversations about trust in public health in three ways.

First, public relations suggests that trust is built upon relationships, “credibility,” and “benevolence” especially in “vulnerable situations” (Bernadas 2021). The idea of vulnerability is inherent in public health given the high levels of uncertainty experienced by societies and individuals regarding diseases and personal treatments. Trust is equally critical to the public when

information is incomplete, misleading, or even “fake.” Secondly, it sheds light on disingenuous information, not as the opposite of, but a clear concept of trust that has an overlooked but important role in public health. Individuals and communities are likely to distrust healthcare professionals, public health organizations, their programs, and services if they had previous wrongdoings and are perceived to be disinterested in the overall health and well-being of the public. third, public relations contribute to the understanding of trust in public health by highlighting openness.

In other words, PR practice involvement argues for building trust and reducing distrust in public health management, also that organizations and healthcare professionals be accessible, genuine, and transparent about their programs and services especially given the high levels of risk, urgency, and uncertainty if they want to survive. (Bernadas 2021).

Impact of social media on Healthcare PR Practice

The way organizations communicate has been transformed by social media, To interact with relevant publics, it has become the most important tool for communication managers or public relations specialists. (Johann, Wolf, & Godulla, 2021).

A look at how the Center for Disease and Control (CDC) Washington profiles and describe the job of a potential PR expert tells one how PR practice has changed the landscape of communication in healthcare. *“The Public Relations and Communications Strategist is responsible for developing and implementing comprehensive public relations and communications strategies to meet the media, marketing, communications, and outreach and stakeholder engagement goals for state public health authorities, The incumbent collaborates with internal teams (communications, media relations, web, social media, outreach, and education).”* (Startup.jobs).

The way hospitals communicated and marketed before social media became popular was through broadcast, one-way messages. Traditional marketing doesn't fit with healthcare, so it's no

wonder it wasn't working. Our health is a personal matter, Patients are scared of their health statuses and unprepared for hospital experiences. Disorientated from healthcare, we grasp at information healthcare marketers push us at. (Boyer, 2011).

As a result of social media, the playing field has been leveled, it has become possible for patients to communicate with their medical providers at any time. Patients use social media to navigate the difficult and complex world of healthcare and because it is quite a challenging and complex area, public relations experts who understand and knows how to use strategic writing on all levels of social platform have changed the dynamics of communication in healthcare.

Public Health and Public Relations

Today, battling misinformation in the healthcare industry is not a battle that medical professionals can face or win alone, accomplishing a medical facility's financial goals and objectives, running a structured organization, maintaining efficient employee cum stakeholder relationship and general positive image in the public view is beyond knowing the Hippocratic oath.

Public health, which includes hygiene, epidemiology, and disease prevention, is the subject matter of this branch of medicine. It is possible to apply relationship management to several fields, but perhaps no other field could benefit more from it than public health, The importance of collaborative efforts to improve health cannot be overstated, public health in the United States over the last century has achieved many accomplishments, but it has also faced many challenges. (Wise, 2008)

Collaboration, sharing of resources, and combining talents enhance opportunities and the likelihood of positive overall healthcare management outcomes and for this reason, public health agencies and others involved in preventive efforts don't have the luxury of working in isolation

due to today's complex and expensive health environment. For success in public health, collaboration with relevant fields such as public relations cannot be an option - it is imperative.

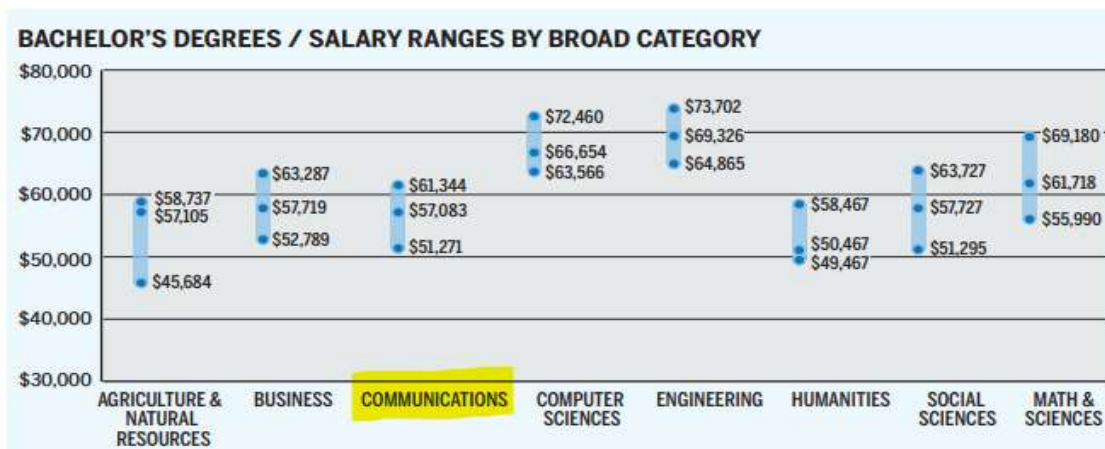
Grunig (2000) identified collaboration as the most important value in public relations, In the context of public health, collaboration and partnerships are particularly important, thereby making relationship management particularly suited to bring positive benefits, including improved health outcomes. The public needs health services and these services are brought to patients or stakeholders through various communication channels that fall within the purview of PR practice such as marketing, advertising, direct mail, press releases, social media, and internet coordination.

Career Paths in Healthcare for PR Specialists

Healthcare is a collaborative effort involving many parties, Healthcare staffing and administration are bolstered by a variety of professionals and technologies. According to Verified Market Research, the global healthcare market will reach \$665.37 billion by 2028. In 2020, the US spent \$4.1 trillion on healthcare or \$12,530 per person, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services estimates the total will reach \$6.2 trillion by 2028.(Insider Intelligence).

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers Winter 2020 Salary Survey, the largest increase in average starting salaries went to graduates of the Class of 2020 in the field of communication, compared to 2019, their overall salary projection of \$56,484 is 8.5 percent higher with public relations majors' average increasing 7% (\$55,583 from \$51,929) to advertising majors' average increasing 10.6% (\$58,500 from \$52,909). (NACE 2020)

BACHELOR'S DEGREE



Healthcare sectors include:

- ❖ **Health administration**
- ❖ **Healthcare marketing**
- ❖ **Pharmaceuticals**
- ❖ **Healthcare tech**
- ❖ **Health insurance**

PR Jobs in Health Industry

Educational Requirement Model– Bachelor's degree in Public Relations, Communications, Marketing, Journalism, English, or related field. (ZipRecruiter)

Patient/Guest Relations Representative

Excerpts from job description – Patients, families, visitors, and colleagues may speak to the Patient/Guest Relations Representative (Concierge) about the resources and services available in the surrounding community.

Senior Communications Specialist

Excerpts from the job description – Work with internal stakeholders and teams, patients, and their families to draft press releases, talking points, and media pitches.

Dir - Marketing and Communications

Excerpts from the job description – Develops and builds consumer preference and demand for the hospital through marketing, branding, internal and external communications, media relations, and community relations.

Mgr - Marketing Communications

Excerpts from the job description – Organizes and directs the marketing, internal and external communications.

Facility Director PR & Communications

Excerpts from the job description– The communication specialist supports the hospital's internal and external communication needs in pursuit of its strategic communications plan.

Community Relations Coordinator

Excerpts from the job description– Contributes to hospital marketing community relations by coordinating health education programs, health fairs, and events.

Media Relations Strategist

Excerpts from the job description– Work with the Director of Media Relations to develop messaging and strategies to respond to media inquiries.

Government Relations Assistant

Excerpts from the job description– Organizes meetings among internal employees and external stakeholders, including elected officials, non-profit groups, non-profit associations, and trade associations across the state. External stakeholders may include federal, state, and local governments.. (ZipRecruiter)

Head, Investor Relations

Excerpts from the job description– The Head, Investor Relations, will be responsible for developing and executing an investor relations strategy to effectively communicate our value proposition and progress to the investment community.

Conclusion

This project has reinforced the belief that the field of Public Relations is indeed a unique and special field, more importantly, it is bridging the communication gap between industries and their stakeholders. A spotlight on the healthcare industry has shown that despite the struggles and challenges permeating this industry, the field of PR has helped to break through communication barriers and has paved the way for better living and preventive healthcare.

Society is enlightened on health-related issues through the use of multi-platforms and channels of information that the PR personnel deems fitting to achieve the goals and objectives of any health practice or organization. From social media engagements to blogs, short videos, press conferences, official statements, direct emails, and periodic updates using strategic writing specific to each platform, PR has added value to medical practices through patient or community engagement.

As previously mentioned, patients have come to realize that they have a choice in what medical services they want to receive, where they want to receive them, when and how much they are willing to pay for these services. these preferences and patient experiences are expressed on various social media platforms. through research, PR has helped to identify these preferences and develop appropriate responses and strategies that not only benefit healthcare organizations but are considered navigational tools for society.

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