

How Public Relations Strategies can Improve Police-Community Relations

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Introduction

Traditionally, policing styles and methods have relied much upon criminal justice theories and research. There are programs that work and some that do not. Much depends upon the location and demographics of the community being served. In order to know what the community needs you have to ask them. This involves a change from traditional one-way communication style, telling the public only what they need to know, to a two-way communication style (Crop & Pincus, 2013; Department of Justice and Equality, 2011; Everett, 2001; Heath, 2001; Korzenny, 2012; Scott, 2013; Skogan, 2004).

A department and its' members can suffer negative feelings from community members if the police organization is not responsive to the concerns and needs of the public. A newer tactic has emerged from the arena of community policing, which can help to greatly improve police-community relations. There is not much research on this subject, but what does exist is showing that community policing works if packaged in such a way that officers buy into the program and it includes communication exchange with the community. The use of Public Relations strategies seems to improve the relationship between police departments and the communities they serve (Crop & Pincus, 2013; Department of Justice and Equality, 2011; Everett, 2001; Heath, 2001; Korzenny, 2012; Scott, 2013; Skogan, 2004).

Public Relations Defined

It is difficult to succinctly define Public Relations. Public Relations involves a number of activities designed for different purposes. The practice of Public Relations continues to change and evolve. Defining it really depends upon what it is being used for, by whom and who you ask (Crop & Pincus, 2013; Heath, 2001). Robert Heath (2001) says:

“The emerging vocabulary of the new definition of the discipline includes the following: relationships, shared control, trust, social capital, shared meaning, argumentativeness, listening, openness, mutually

beneficial relationships, multiple publics (stakeholders and stakeholders), epistemological issues of fact, axiological issues of value, ontological issues of choice-based actions, chaos in place in linearity, cognitive involvement, legitimacy gap, problem recognition, constraint, power, and collaborative decision making” (p.2-3).

If you look at Public Relations from an advertising or marketing perspective, then it tends to be more one-sided. Branding and sales involve packaging a product or service in such a way that it entices a consumer to buy it. If the goal of an organization is to repair or build up its reputation then a two-way conversation is much more effective. This can involve consumer surveys, demographic studies and determining what values your target population holds as important (Scott, 2013). Public Relations strategies have evolved over many years to encompass a great number of varying perspectives and approaches (Crop & Pincus; 2013Heath, 2001; Scott, 2013).

Public Relations: An Overview

Early in our history our forefathers used information as a form of persuasion for political platforms and to garner support. There was no electronic means to deliver information, nor was there social media. Word of mouth, speeches in the public square and newspapers served to deliver the intended message (Grunig, 2001).

As technology developed, advertising campaigns in newspaper and radio became prevalent. The invention of television added another outlet. Newspaper, radio and television were the primary options for delivering information and to a large number of people at one time (Scott, 2013).

Public Relations can encompass a wide range of activities and can be used for a variety of purposes (Crop & Pincus, 2013). Public Relations strategy includes advertising, marketing, product or business branding as well as the use of public information personnel. Private and

public organizations can control or strategically craft the release of information to the public (Heath, 2001; Scott, 2013; Crop & Pincus, 2013).

Public Relations and Police-Community Relations

Changes in policing are being influenced by approaches to service provision in the private sector. Customer service, Public Relations, and technological advances to foster communications and increase trust and confidence in police agencies are important parts of the concept. This new concept has been introduced as “National Model of Community Policing”. (Department of Justice and Equality, 2011, p.8).

Typically, police department communication has been a one-way street. The prevailing criminal justice mindset has been that the public does not have a grasp on what activities law enforcement officers engage in on a daily basis. In recent years, there has been a shift towards more two-way communication and transparency. This has resulted in adoption of strategies from other disciplines to increase community engagement and public satisfaction with police (Crop & Pincus, 2013; Heath, 2001; Scott, 2013; Skogan, 2004).

Everett (2001) discusses “organizational ecology” of Public Relations which involves focusing on “...the organizational-environment relationship...” (p.312). Effective Public Relations strategies include awareness of community needs and opinions while at the same time adapting to changing environments, populations and cultures (Everett, 2001; Korzenny, 2012). It is important to develop strategies for improvement to foster trust and collaboration: this requires an organization-wide change in attitude (Everett, 2001). Improving police-community relationships with the use of P.R. strategies can also serve to improve job satisfaction for employees (Gehrt & Moffitt, 2009).

Public information has not been viewed as important in years past. Usually this role in police organizations has been filled with a police officer or command officer (Department of Justice and Equality, 2011; Everett, 2001; Gehrt & Moffitt, 2009; Plowman et al, 2001). It is becoming more prevalent to hire civilians with public relations, environmental psychology or with education in marketing or even consulting firms to fulfill these roles. There is an increasing demand for skilled public information professionals, but there is a shortage of these individuals. Hiring skilled Public Relations professionals is only part of the equation. Public support is also a key factor (Department of Justice and Equality, 2011; Everett, 2001; Gehrt & Moffitt, 2009; Plowman et al, 2001).

Best Practices

Gourley (1954) believes that police departments need public support in order to be effective. Negative attitudes towards police officers can impact safety, morale, job satisfaction and increase negative interactions between members of the department and community. Additionally, Gourley (1954) asserts that public relations strategies can assist by building relationships, trust and confidence between police and the public.

The first step towards improving police-community relations is to determine how the public feels about the police. Without gaining this information, with the aim of addressing public concerns, any strategy would be a waste of time. Tools to gather this information include surveys, studies, and third party research companies. The goal is to reduce costs, but improve services to the entire community including populations that have been neglected in the past. Another thing to keep in mind is developing procedural safeguards to ensure equal protection and service delivery as well as cultural competence in communications styles (Department of

Justice and Equality, 2011; Gourley, 1954; Hunter et al, 2004; Korzenny & Korzenny, 2012; Skogan, 2004).

Secondly, procedures, practices and training need to be evaluated to determine if they contribute to a negative image. The speed at which information travels in this technologically advanced world necessitates paying attention to constituents and engaging in communication, negotiation, to collaboratively solve problems (Plowman et al., 2001). Skogan (2004) expresses the belief that community policing is most effective when adaptations are made to fix strategies that do not appear to be working and that change occurs from the top down.

Organizational Structure

Community policing has been proven to be ineffective if not adopted by the entire organization. In Chicago, a community policing initiative was enacted in 1993 and was expanded to include the entire force in 1995. The goal of the program is to increase officer's contact with the community to develop relationships of trust and involve other groups by making referrals to other agencies or city departments to solve problems (Skogan et al., 2002; Skogan, 2004).

Challenges to the program include keeping those involved engaged while integrating new technologies and changing environments as well as lack of funding. Another problem is that initiatives only tend to last as long as the administration that put them in place. Thus far, the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy or CAPS has proved to have support and longevity in most areas of government in Chicago (Skogan et al., 2002; Skogan, 2004).

Another example, Washington DC Police Chief Cathy Lanier, is a one-woman public relations dream. Lanier changed her departments' focus from a "hot spot" and "zero tolerance"

policing strategy to one of building community relationships. The department also implemented the use of social media tools to gain assistance from the public (Buntin, 2012).

Lanier explains the old way of doing things resulted in “alienation” and “loss of respect” for police, which made it more difficult to solve crimes. When Lanier first started as a beat cop community policing existed but other officers disliked what was termed “the grin and wave squad” and that it was felt that “They don’t do no police work.” Only the community policing officers participated in community engagement (Buntin, 2012).

As Lanier rose through the ranks she realized that it bothered her that the community hated the police. She also knew that line officers viewed community policing disdainfully. She instead asked her officers to “develop sources.” Lanier realized that in order to do this, officers had to talk to people and form relationships. Lanier also makes herself available and regularly patrols her district, stopping to speak to citizens in all areas of the city (Buntin, 2012).

Results of Lanier’s efforts have proven to be effective. The amount of money paid out to informants has increased, murders have declined and murder cases are solved more frequently than not. Critics like Kris Bauman, head of the police union, are not a fan. “To Bauman, initiatives like All Hands on Deck capture the essence of Lanierism: public relations masquerading as policing strategy” (Buntin, 2012). Police Departments need to embrace and look at different strategies from other disciplines be it Criminal Justice Research, Public Relations, Organizational Theory or others. It really boils down to community policing using a public relations strategy.

Multi-Disciplinary Approach

When the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety Citizen Review Board received a number of complaints over time, the departments hired an outside consulting firm to research

and analyze traffic stop data. The study found that black motorists were stopped, searched, handcuffed and arrested at a much higher rate than white motorists. When Chief Hadley learned the results of the report he met with members of the department and community and released the information to the public (Associated Press, 2013, September 04; Hall, 2013).

Chief Hadley did an unusual thing by hiring an outside firm to do the study (rather than internally), accepting and acknowledging the results and then taking the information to the organization *and the public*. Hadley called the study a “wonderful opportunity for us to change the narrative of the relationship between the community and Public Safety.” Hadley admitted that racial bias has persisted over long periods of time and that it will take time and effort to make the needed changes. He then asked for the public’s support and patience while this occurs. Hadley expressed his commitment for change, improvement, training and mentoring of officers and the development of community partnerships (Associated Press, 2013, September 04; Hall, 2013).

Acknowledging a problem in an open, honest and transparent manner raises the organization in the esteem of the public as well as increases its’ legitimacy. Trying to obscure or hide a problem can result in liability and mistrust. In this age of instant information, media coverage and technology it is likely that the information is discoverable anyway.

Technology and Communications

Motschall and Cao (2002) postulate “Public information activities are viewed today as integral to police operations, particularly as society has become increasingly technological and media-oriented” (p.153). It is important to use this technology in a responsible manner. There is an increased call for training and professionalism in government public relations roles (Motschall

& Cao, 2002). It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between excessive or responsible use of social media in a public relations manner.

Flint Mayor Dayne Walling makes appearances on radio and television programs, uses YouTube for a weekly message, as well as social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. Councilman Sheldon Neeley objects to Walling spending money on what he calls “propaganda”, and views it as a waste of taxpayer dollars. The costs associated with Walling’s television and radio spots does not sit well with other city leaders due to Flint’s large and increasing deficit (Longley, 2010).

Social media can be a useful tool when used as an information exchange between Law Enforcement and the public. Information exchanged in this manner can be useful in developing leads, solving crimes and facilitating public relations and community support. Social media can also be a risk when used improperly. The release of sensitive information can compromise investigations and lead to liability for the organization (Scott, 2013; Stuart, 2013).

Some of Scott’s (2013) New Rules of Marketing and PR include: “You are what you publish”: “People want authenticity, not spin”: “People want participation, not propaganda”: “Social networks like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn allow people all over the world to share content and connect with the people and companies they do business with” and “On the web, the lines between marketing and PR have blurred” (p.36).

Stuart (2013) exhorts organizations to establish policies and procedures regarding what is and is not allowable for officers to post on their social media sites. He goes on to encourage annual training for Public Information Officers in the newest technologies and how to use them properly while keeping the organizations’ goals in mind. If police departments adopt a public relations approach and develop working relationships with the public and other service organizations it will greatly improve their community relations.

Conclusion

Law Enforcement agencies are tasked with providing for public safety. Historically this meant enforcement influenced only by criminal justice research and theories. The changes in our population demographics, cultural make-up, media and technology are driving changes in the application of other sciences to criminal justice. It benefits both the police organization and the community to engage with the public in a two-way information exchange police (Crop & Pincus, 2013; Heath, 2001; Scott, 2013; Skogan, 2004).

Police departments can find out what the public wants, needs and feels as well as to address better ways to enhance services to meet these needs. Positive police-community relations foster an increased cooperation which benefits police departments because community members are more cooperative, appreciative and helpful. This can also increase job satisfaction for police officers as well as increasing safety and decreasing cynicism (Everett, 2001; Gehrt & Moffitt, 2009; Korzenny, 2012).

There is not a lot of research specifically measuring the results of police departments using a public relations strategy. What does exist, points to adding strategies from other disciplines to criminal justice practice in order to increase positive interactions with the community. Using public relations strategies to engage and exchange information and ideas thus far has proven to be an effective way of improving police-community relations.

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