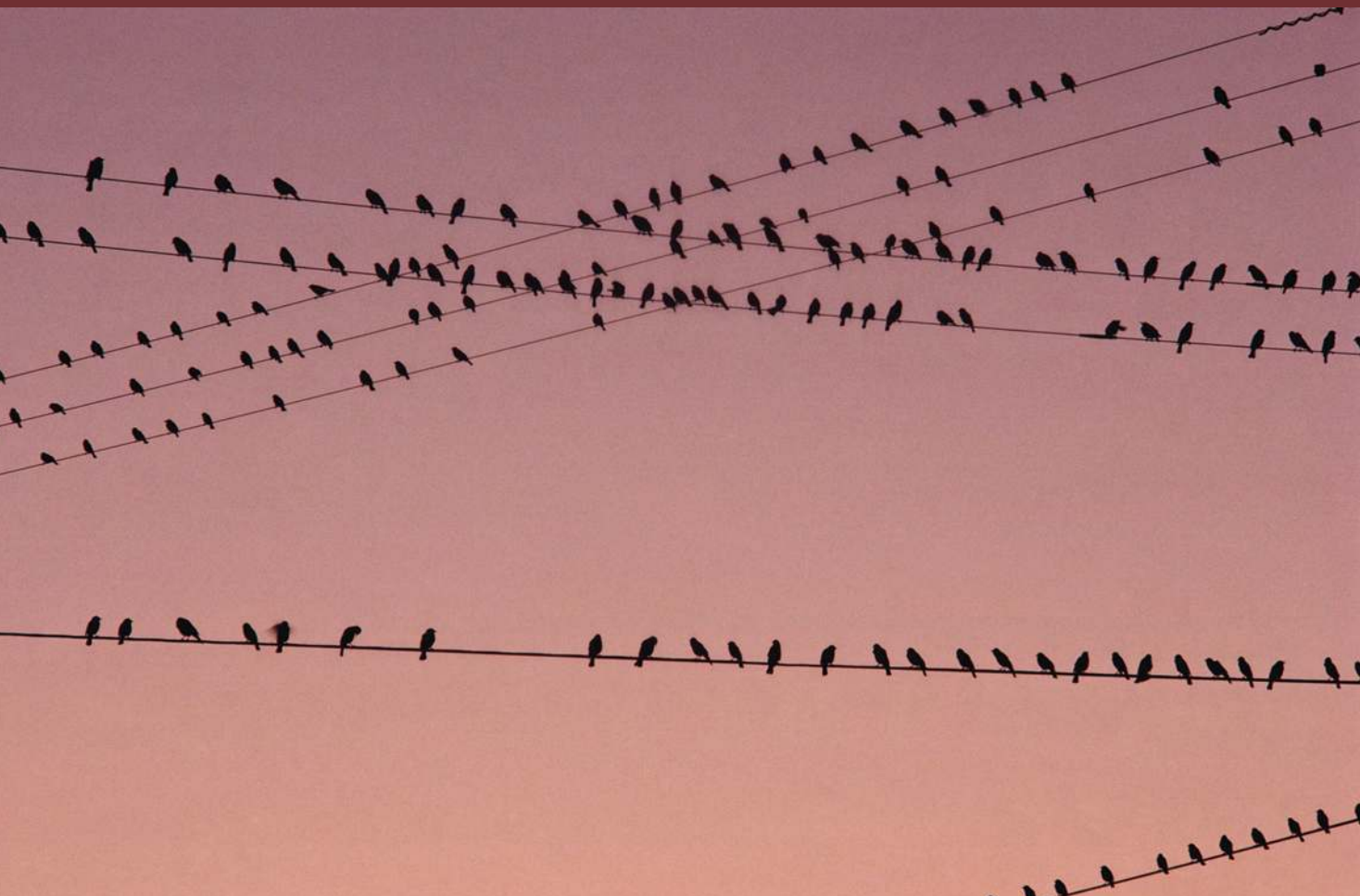


CHAPTER 25

Public relations for information and communications technologies: principles and planning



Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- recognise the social impact of technology
- describe the key features of the technology industry relevant to public relations practice
- identify the audiences targeted by the technology industry
- detail the features of the industry that challenge public relations practice
- identify key principles guiding the practice of public relations in the technology industry
- recognise applications of these principles through case studies
- apply some of these principles to example scenarios.

Structure

- Information and communication technology (ICT): background and social impact
- Industry characteristics
- ICT audience characteristics
- Public relations in the ICT industry: a model
- Principles of ICT public relations practices

Introduction

Technology is a broad term and can be interpreted as anything from books to printers to computers. Not all technologies have the equivalent impact on our lives that information and communication technology (ICT) does. A washing machine may make the process of washing clothes easier but it does not change the need for the task to be done, it does not usually change who does it and it certainly does not change the way we relate to each other (unless it is not used at all, of course). Contrast this with the mobile phone, which has transformed where and when we choose to have telephone conversations and how those conversations are conducted (through speech, text or pictures). It is for this reason that promoting ICT products through public relations is a complex process with special responsibilities. It is not about selling washing machines. It is about creating new ways of living. (Consider Think about 25.1.)

This chapter examines how public relations is conducted in the technology industry. It refers specifically to ICT and proposes that ICT public relations should be treated as a public relations specialism in its own right. ICT companies face major challenges that do not affect producers of consumer and business products. Drawing on technology theory, the chapter proposes that the specific nature of technology products and the effects of technology on society mean that public relations practitioners must plan and execute their campaigns with particular attention to industry variables. Ethics and social awareness play an important role in shaping ICT public relations strategies.

think about 25.1 Technology and innovation

Look around your house, flat or apartment. Count how many electronic devices you have. Then consider how many of them were available and affordable five years ago.

Think about the way in which you communicate with friends and family today. How might that differ in ten years' time?

Consider the record label of your favourite band, the film studio that made your favourite movie and the publisher of your favourite book. Look up the website for each one and find out what company owns them. How many are part of major media conglomerates?

box 25.1

The ubiquitous chip

Perhaps the most important invention of the last century was the microchip, whose arrival and evolution in the last three decades of the century resulted in an explosion of innovation and computing power that continues to affect almost every part of our daily lives. Why was the chip revolutionary? Rowe and Thompson (1996) argue that the following characteristics have made it so influential:

- *Size*: Technological advances mean that chips can now be microscopic in size and still process vast amounts of information. Miniaturisation has allowed integration of computing power via the chip into a range of new devices, not least the mobile phone and personal digital assistant (PDA).
- *Cost*: Microchips are cheap to produce, their costs reducing over 100,000 times since the 1970s.
- *Reliability, speed and capacity*: At the same time as the cost and size of chips has decreased, their reliability, processing speed and processing capacity have improved and are light years ahead of traditional electronic components.
- *Flexibility*: The combination of these features means that the chip is an incredibly flexible technology. It has been integrated into old machines and has opened up possibilities for new devices, such as the laptop computer and wireless networks, that in turn offer new ways of living, working and socialising. This is perhaps the most significant contribution of the chip in terms of the way we live with each other today: its transformational power when integrated into devices that manage – and allow us to manage – information and communication in our daily lives.

The chip has also facilitated the convergence of old industries as technologies have combined to create new scenarios for consumers and businesses. The most obvious example of this is the media, entertainment and communications industries, where global enterprises operating in television, cinema, publishing, music and computing have joined forces to create multibillion dollar conglomerates with global reach. Partnerships and mergers are the norm as companies struggle to gain control over the cash cows of the future: multimedia content and distribution networks (Miles 2001). AOL-Time-Warner, Bertelsmann, Vivendi Universal and Sony are examples of such organisations.

Information and communication technology (ICT): background and social impact

Mattelart (2003) provides an excellent summary of the evolution of the role of information and communication technologies in society. The world we know today, governed by flows of information from one place to another, began with the emergence of mathematics as a way of understanding the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since that time, mathematics has been the main tool for analysing both the natural world, through science, and the social world, through statistics. It also forms

the basis of information sciences, which underpin information and communication technologies.

The growth in importance of mathematics, the resulting increase in the value and importance of information and communication and the increasing sophistication of the technologies that manage such information and communication have all created a central role for technology in our lives. However, technology is, and has always been, a social phenomenon and is not value free. Mattelart illustrates, for example, how the construction and spread of information networks is closely aligned with the dissemination of ideologies and institutional forms while others emphasise the controversies surrounding new technologies (e.g. Rowe and Thompson 1996;

think about 25.2 Technology and communication

How do you usually communicate with the following:

- parent or guardian
- boss
- close friends
- lecturer?

Why do you choose this form of communication?

Feedback You might: text your friends; email your boss or your lecturer; telephone or write to your parent or guardian. These choices are underpinned by preferences based on the particular audience – your parents may not like texts or understand how to use them. Email might be the preferred form of communication for your lecturer and boss – while your friends might not have regular access to a computer, so it would not be suitable for arranging a night out at short notice.

Rosenberg 1997; Dutton 2001). Technology generates strong reactions from those who use it. Take, for example, the Luddites – workers in the mills and clothing factories of the north of England during the early nineteenth century, who demonstrated against mechanisation by destroying new equipment designed to automate tasks previously done by hand.

As part of this reaction to technology, individuals also shape and change it to meet their own needs. Freeman (2001), Miles (2001) and Williams and Edge (2001) all argue that the use of technology is ultimately bounded by its social context. This social shaping begins in the laboratory, when researchers decide where to focus their time and effort. Once technology is released onto the marketplace, the evolution continues as feedback from users shapes the next generation of invention. This is particularly the case with ICT-based products, which are designed to be actively used by individuals and are therefore particularly prone to change and adaptation, diverging from the manufacturer's initial vision (Mattelart 2003). *Cultural norms*, individual needs and group dynamics all determine how enthusiastically technologies are adopted and explain why countries differ in their uptake and use of identical technologies like email and texting. (See Box 25.1.)

Definition: *Cultural norm* means a pattern of behaviour that is considered acceptable by members of society.

Promoting technology: the special case of ICT

In the 1990s and early 2000s specialist public relations agencies for the ICT industry began to emerge. More often than not, the campaigns they run ask individuals or organisations to make sizeable investments, sometimes in products whose use they cannot

yet envisage. Such campaigns often have education and futurology at their core: they tell audiences how the technology works and explain what kind of a future might be possible should they adopt it.

This process sounds simple and not unlike public relations in other areas. However, there are a number of complexities that practitioners need to understand, relating to the industry and the audiences being targeted. These are outlined in the following sections. (See Think about 25.2.)

Industry characteristics

Issues relating to the ICT industry must be addressed by public relations practitioners developing ICT campaigns (see Figure 25.1, overleaf).

Audience breadth and depth

Because ICT is so ubiquitous, the target audiences for an ICT campaign include consumers, government, large enterprises, small businesses, students and families. Public relations practitioners must understand how to reach and communicate simple, relevant benefits to each group. They must have relationships with both specialist and general media and analysts and be able to discuss the technology in simple terms as well as in depth, to accommodate different understandings and skill levels among these audiences.

Industry partnerships

The trend towards convergence means that ICT companies work together on new products and conduct joint marketing and public relations campaigns that encompass the interests of each party. Public relations practitioners create the glue for such campaigns so that

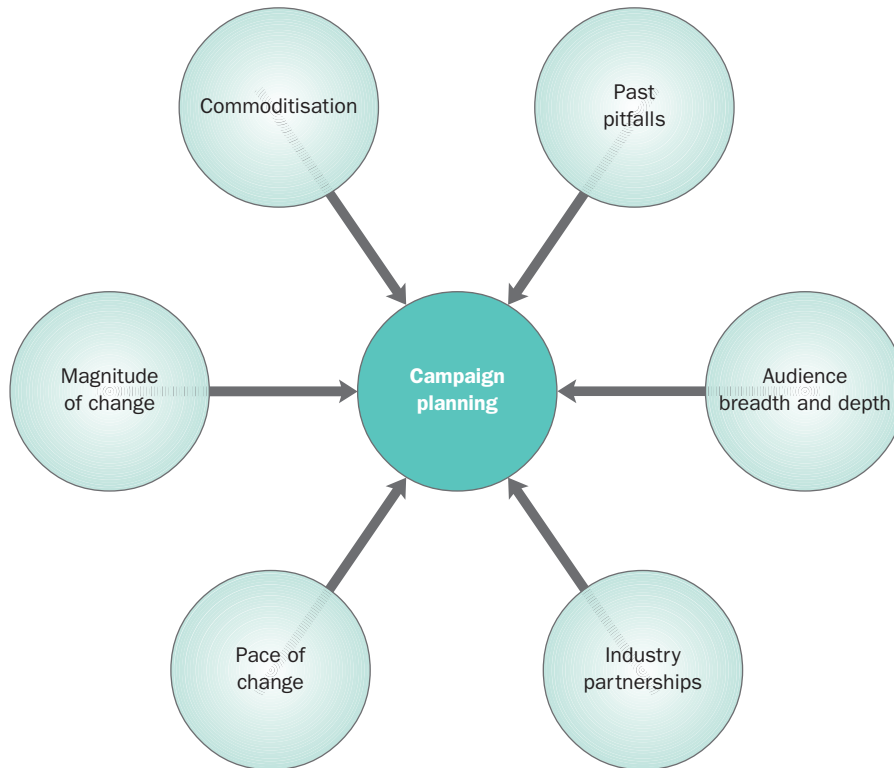


FIGURE 25.1 Industry issues affecting technology public relations

they make sense for the audience. At the same time, managing different interests behind the scenes can be a challenge as each company jostles to get the exposure it wants.

Pace of change

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of ICT products is the speed at which they change. Advances in ICT and related technological industries (e.g. nanotechnology) are rapid as technologies advance and converge. As a result, new products or new versions of products come onto the market every year. Consumers and businesses must follow a continuous learning curve in order to keep abreast of developments. Public relations practitioners must also keep track of developments and create campaigns that help individuals and organisations along this learning curve.

Magnitude of change

The scale of some changes – between versions of products, for example – may be relatively small and perceived to be unimportant by target audiences. This is known as *incremental change*. Staff may not care whether their computer takes less time to boot up and

process information. Consumers may not notice that their mobile phone ‘drops’ fewer calls than it used to. However, manufacturers promote such incremental changes to justify releasing new versions of their products. It falls to the public relations practitioner to make them interesting enough to justify news coverage.

When a product represents a major technological advance, this is known as a *step change*, and it presents a different challenge. The advent of a mobile phone small enough to fit into a handbag or jacket pocket, for example, was the first time that the device really lived up to its name. Combined with user-friendly and reliable software, it resulted in one of the fastest adopted technologies in history. Similarly, reliable email software has transformed the nature of communication both at work and home. In these situations, the value of the product can be hard to communicate because audiences may not understand the technology and cannot envisage the scenarios for its use. Public relations campaigns must generate visions of the future for consumers and businesses in order to create the demand for their products. These visions are potentially extremely powerful and may ultimately become reality, depending on the ability of the technology to live up to the promises made and the way in which people ultimately use the product.

Commoditisation

Basic ICT technologies are cheap to produce and even cheaper to copy. This has resulted in a huge number of devices – mobile phones, computers and laptops – on the market, driving prices down and widening access for consumers. As a result, such devices are no longer the preserve of the rich but are becoming a commodity, a ‘matter of course’ purchase for those with the money and time to access them. As *commoditisation* continues and the flood of products increases, manufacturers have to think of new ways to make a product stand out in the marketplace and public relations campaigns play a key role in this process.

Definition: *Commoditisation* describes the process whereby a new product or service – in this case, for example, a technological device such as the washing machine – becomes an everyday item of purchase.

Past pitfalls

Despite its prevalence in our lives, ICT is very new and can be subject to problems. Its history is marked by mistakes as well as successes. Journalists, consumers and businesses remember errors and broken promises. Public relations practitioners need to know and understand the impact of such stories to foresee potential obstacles and pitfalls in campaigns that might otherwise unconsciously repeat the same mistakes. (See Activity 25.1.)

activity 25.1

How to send an email

Ask an older friend or relative what they were using to communicate when they were your age. The answer will not be email or a mobile, but more likely fax and land-line telephones – and perhaps the humble pen and paper might make an appearance!

Now put yourself in the position of training someone who has never seen an email programme to use the system for the first time. Write down the sequence of events needed to send your first email message, from opening up the email programme, to pressing the send button. Don't just consider the process, but also anticipate the kinds of question they might ask and the confusion they might feel when facing a computer screen for the first time.

ICT audience characteristics

There are three main audiences for ICT public relations campaigns: individuals; organisations; and government or legislative bodies. All consider certain common issues when deciding whether or not to adopt new or existing technologies, although these issues are viewed differently by each group (Figure 25.2). Public relations practitioners must recognise these issues and address them in ways that meet the needs and concerns of each audience.

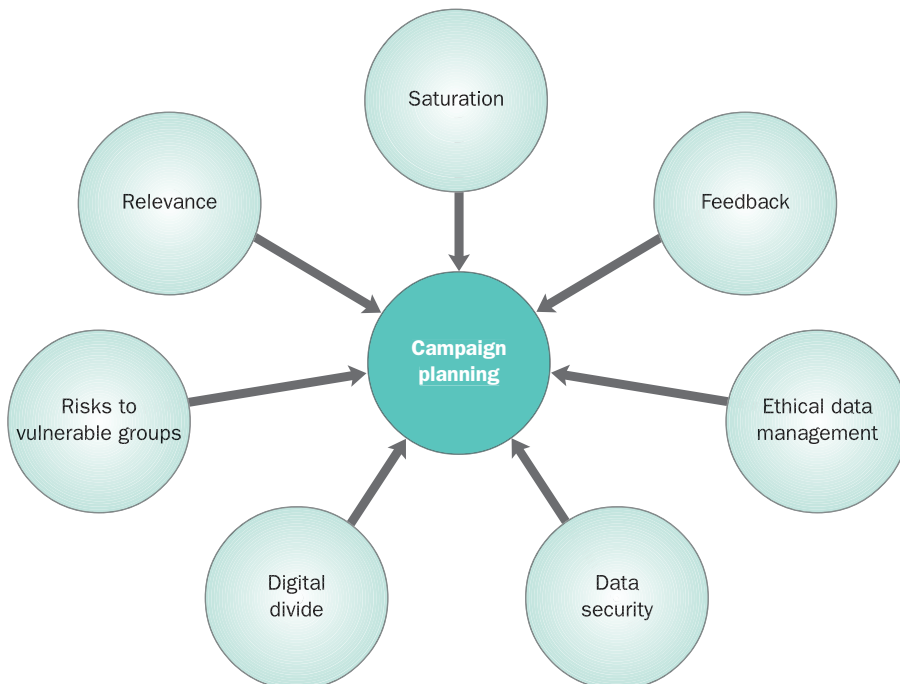


FIGURE 25.2 Audience issues affecting technology public relations

Relevance

Not everyone is interested in new technologies. Unless a product is relevant, individuals and organisations are unlikely to purchase it. New technologies require significant investments in time and effort on the part of individuals and organisations and such investments need to be justified. Moreover, new technologies can create disruption in the workplace as new work practices are introduced, expectations of staff change, information is shared more widely and cultural norms shift. Public relations practitioners have to demonstrate how the benefits of a particular product outweigh these personal and organisational costs, usually making life and work easier and more enjoyable. However, they must balance these inspirational scenarios with the need to manage expectations; often new technologies are flawed and user feedback results in improvements in later versions. If there is too great a gap between anticipation and reality, users may abandon both the current version as well as future, improved products.

Saturation

Attention is a scarce resource. Like other areas of public relations, ICT campaigns compete for attention among their audiences. Their task is made more difficult when they are discussing incremental change. For example, when your audience has multiple mobile phone manufacturers selling them up to 30 different phones at any one time, designing a campaign to promote a new 'look' that offers few tangible improvements in usability can be challenging. Generating the excitement and anticipation that will sell a new product is often easier said than done for public relations practitioners. Often, it involves promoting associations with the product or brand, rather than publicising the product or brand itself.

Feedback

Because technology is a social phenomenon, feedback from users, about how it is being used, what concerns



PICTURE 25.1 Because technology is accessible in many public places, there is often an assumption that this means it is accessible to all. This is often not the case. (Source: Photo Disc.)

are being raised about its use and how those concerns might be addressed, is essential for governments and organisations trying to manage its impact. Public relations is an important tool through which such information can be obtained; a feedback loop should be built in to campaigns wherever possible.

Ethical data management

Through ICT, organisations and government have access to much more data about individuals than used to be the case. Social concerns about the abuse of this data by both government and individual companies echo the 'Big Brother' scenario depicted in George Orwell's novel, *1984*, where all aspects of individual life are scrutinised and monitored. Public relations practitioners must acknowledge and engage in this debate and ensure they observe government policies as well as minimum ethical standards and practices suggested by government and organisations to prevent the misuse of personal data in this way.

Data security

New products may also present new opportunities for abuse of personal and company data by third parties and criminals. More and more organisations and government departments hold information about our personal lives, including shopping habits, home address, banking and credit history and employment details. Governments have realised the need to work together with organisations to set minimum standards for data security in order to avoid misuse of this valuable, but private, information. New legislation can deal with new types of crimes such as hacking (illegally breaking into an organisation's computer network and misusing company and individual data found there). Only when consumers are sure that their personal information will not be compromised will they be comfortable using new technologies. Public relations practitioners can advise on what levels of security are possible and what kinds of limitations are acceptable to industries interested in using data legitimately to meet commercial objectives. Campaigns should ensure such concerns are addressed and educate individuals and organisations in the need to adopt proactive practices to protect their own data (for example, regularly updating anti-virus software or not opening emails from unknown parties).

Digital divide

The use of technology is now a route to accessing information, social networks and social provision.

However, not everyone has equal access to technology. Financial resources, time and skill levels all affect the ability of individuals to use and benefit from new developments in ICT. Older people find it harder to learn new skills; poorer families find it difficult to finance a computer at home; single mothers in a full-time job may not have time to use the internet to find out about new benefit entitlements. Generally, people who are already financially and socially disadvantaged are unlikely to have the same access to technology in the home or at school as more privileged individuals. This not only affects their ability to engage with each other effectively in a technology-driven world, but also has the potential to affect their ability to engage in society and social networks (Norris 2000). For example, as email becomes an increasingly popular mode of communication, those who do not have a computer at home may start to lose out on social contact with their families and friends.

The exclusion of certain groups from new technologies has led to the spectre of the 'digital divide' – a world of technology 'haves' and 'have nots' where social participation is dependent on involvement with technology (Warschauer 2003). Public relations practitioners can act as advocates for these groups with organisations and government, communicate private and government-led initiatives that might help improve their access to technology, and promote the important debate about the social impact of technology. (See Case study 25.1, overleaf.)

Risks to vulnerable groups

The advent of new technologies has also led to new types of risk in society. For example, children using the internet may be exposed unwittingly to pornographic sites while surfing. The lack of safeguards on the internet also means they are more vulnerable to predatory adults than would be the case if they met face to face in the company of others. Elderly people, by the same token, might be susceptible to unscrupulous individuals offering to help them through a new, technology-based process for claiming benefits, while simultaneously gaining access to their personal finances. Society struggles to come to grips with these new risks and expectations weigh heavily on manufacturers as well as policy makers to improve security and protection. Public relations practitioners must engage with government, organisations and individuals to explain the nature of the risk and outline potential solutions, such as filtering websites, improving parental control or introducing new security requirements. (See Case study 25.2, overleaf, and Mini case study 25.1, p. 492.)

case study 25.1

AVANTI–Fujitsu consulting and Fox Parrack Hirsch

In 2001, Fujitsu, in conjunction with Microsoft, started work on a new technology project – AVANTI – for the London Borough of Lewisham. AVANTI (added value access to new technologies and services on the internet) was designed to help Lewisham residents use the internet and to address some of the problems of the ‘digital divide’, helping people who find computers difficult to access, such as elderly people, disabled people and minority ethnic groups, to access e-government services.

The AVANTI technology is built around an avatar called Andrea – an intelligent personal assistant that guides people through online transactions and services.

Fox Parrack Hirsch (FPH), as Fujitsu Consulting’s retained public relations consultancy, was tasked with launching AVANTI in Lewisham in collaboration with ISIS, Microsoft’s public relations company. As the lead agency, FPH advised all parties on the launch plan and took responsibility for driving the ongoing public relations campaign and coordinating activities with the e-government unit of the UK government. The main objectives of the public relations activity were:

- to highlight the many benefits that the London Borough of Lewisham and its citizens would reap from AVANTI
- to illustrate how the technical framework developed by Fujitsu and Microsoft enabled AVANTI to work and the advantages that avatar and AVANTI technology could deliver to sectors other than government
- to communicate the benefits and functionality of AVANTI to other local authorities, positioning it as an example of public sector-led innovation.

At an early stage, FPH liaised with all the parties to devise a strategy for launching AVANTI and to push the key messages associated with the project.

The initial activity involved registering Lewisham as a UK government ‘centre of excellence’ with UK Online,

to showcase the AVANTI project and illustrate how other local authorities could replicate the model to achieve electronic service delivery.

To create awareness among Lewisham residents, AVANTI was launched via a roadshow staged on an electronically enabled bus. The AVANTI bus was based in Lewisham town centre and formally ‘opened’ by the Mayor of Lewisham. Residents were invited on to the bus to try out Andrea and AVANTI for themselves, to learn more about how it worked and what it could offer. The bus also travelled to other locations in Lewisham, including residential estates.

The launch was organised in conjunction with Lewisham Council’s press office and a joint press briefing was hosted for the key target media including government media, local and national media and IT specialist publications.

To stimulate interest among Lewisham residents, on the day prior to the AVANTI bus launch FPH arranged a radio interview with BBC *London Drivetime*. The radio interview also included recorded clips from Andrea, the avatar. The press briefing attracted several media titles, including *Government Computing*, *Computing*, *BBC Online*, *The Guardian* and the *Lewisham Mercury*. The story was covered the following day by *The Guardian*, with Andrea described in the headline as ‘The UK’s first virtual council worker’ (26 July 2002).

FPH subsequently worked with Lewisham and Fujitsu to enter the project into the Information Management Awards 2002, where it won the award for Best CRM Project, and the NabarroNathanson Technology Awards 2003, where it was recognised for the Most Innovative Use of Technology in a Project.

Source: www.fphcom.com/home.html

Public relations in the ICT industry: a model

Having seen all the different elements that create the context for, and requirements of, public relations in the ICT industry, we can propose a basic model that illustrates the connections between public relations, audiences and their adoption and shaping of technology (Figure 25.3, overleaf).

Following Figure 25.3 from left to right, the process of public relations in the ICT industry begins with the creation of a new product or service, based on new

technology. Marketing campaigns are initiated to promote the product, targeted at individuals and organisations. These individuals and organisations take into account a number of factors while considering whether or not to adopt the new product or service.

At this point the role of public relations is three-fold. Campaigns must complement marketing campaigns in the messages they communicate about a product or service (shown by the dotted line connecting public relations campaigns and marketing and sales). They also address some of the concerns of organisations and individuals, through education and clarification about the product and how it can be

case study 25.2

Vodafone – Working Nation

Having established itself as a credible market leader in mobile voice and data communications, Vodafone UK wanted to broaden its reputation by addressing broader lifestyle changes that the use of its technology had introduced, particularly in the workplace.

While changes in working lives were relevant to all businesses, not least to Vodafone itself, the company had to find a credible way of discussing them. As a market leader, the company was generally recognised for its expertise in producing mobile products and services – but not for its understanding of broader business issues. Given this gap, the objective of the chosen activity was to establish the company as a thought leader on changing working practices affecting UK businesses, to highlight potential issues arising from these changes and to establish the real-life context for Vodafone products and services.

Vodafone decided to initiate a two-stage research project, called Working Nation. The first stage, carried out in early 2004, involved qualitative interviews with industry and opinion leaders, politicians and academics to establish exactly what issues businesses faced, particularly in light of new technologies being used in the workplace. This first stage was so productive that Vodafone decided to extend the second planned stage of research and execute a series of quantitative surveys over a period of time, which would provide more in-depth information about specific issues raised in the qualitative interviews.

The first Working Nation report, 'Young Guns, Mature Minds', was launched in September 2004 and addressed generational differences in the workforce, how businesses could ensure they valued the skills of both young and old employees and bridge the generation gap between the two groups so that each could learn from the other.

The Working Nation report was launched using four simultaneous public relations strategies.

The formal launch event was hosted by the company's new Chief Executive, Bill Morrow, for media, industry leaders and other opinion leaders. Father and son broadcasters, Peter and Dan Snow, complemented

the presentation of results with anecdotes about the differences between their roles and how they perceived each other from different ends of the age spectrum.

At the same time a regional radio campaign was conducted across the country, fronted by James Cracknell, a member of Britain's Olympic rowing team. He discussed the survey results, which included regional data relevant to regional media, and also talked about his own experience in an industry where youth, rather than age, is assumed to be a prerequisite for success. Some stations were so taken with the topic that they created an extended feature, using their reporters to source additional material for the story.

The needs of national broadcast media were met throughout the day, with features on CNN, BBC *Breakfast*, BBC *Radio 4* and BBC *Radio 5 Live*, among others. Finally, national and regional print media were offered material for more in-depth coverage of the Working Nation report to create follow-on stories in their next-day editions.

The report itself was sent to 1000 journalists, key influencers, company stakeholders and organisations who would be particularly interested in the topic – such as the Third Age Employment Network.

The response to Vodafone's initiative was positive, generating interesting debate both internally and externally. The issue of the ageing workforce was particularly relevant to UK businesses, which ensured that the approaches made to journalists were productive – even if they knew little about the company beforehand. Extensive coverage was generated as a result of the different public relations tactics employed, and the inclusion of opinion leaders and personalities who were not linked to Vodafone gave the story additional interest and credibility. The report itself has been circulated beyond even Vodafone's expectations – some organisations have proactively made contact with Vodafone to express their enthusiasm for the initiative.

Source: vodafone.co.uk

used. Finally, practitioners become 'organisational activists', communicating back to the manufacturer those issues that can only be solved by concrete action (for example, ensuring employees in developing countries enjoy fair working conditions).

At the same time, issues such as access and security are also affected by government policies and legislation, which can, in turn, affect the decision-making process.

If the efforts of public relations and the effectiveness of government policies are not sufficient or credible enough to allay concerns or generate enough interest in the product, target markets are

unlikely to use the product. However, if they are successful, individuals and organisations will decide to take up the new opportunity that the product or service presents.

At this point, the technology itself becomes modified by its social implementation. Public relations plays a part in gathering and communicating feedback about these changes back to the manufacturer through research on target audiences and, increasingly, media feedback. This is then taken into account both in marketing campaigns and in new product development.

mini case study 25.1

‘Women in IT’ 2002 – e-Skills UK and AxiCom

e-Skills UK (<http://www.e-skills.com>) is the UK Sector Skills Council responsible for developing the country’s IT skills base. One of its biggest challenges has been to raise awareness of the need to attract more women into IT careers and to work with government, employers and educators to address the problem.

AxiCom, as the public relations agency for e-Skills UK, was charged with developing public relations strategies that help e-skills UK address the need to attract more women into IT careers. Although e-skills UK has a clearly defined audience to reach, the problem it faced was that this audience was so varied it required a wide range of media to report on the issue if it was to reach its target groups.

The agency proposed focusing public relations activity around a high-profile conference, ‘Women in IT’, held annually and attracting the required breadth of audience. The ‘Women in IT’ event 2002 was the second time the event had been staged. The main objectives of the public relations activity were:

- to gain press coverage and recognition among government, employers and educators of the need to attract women into IT careers and to announce programmes that would go some way towards achieving this goal
- to communicate the messages of the conference and gain support for the programmes launched

from a wide-ranging target audience, including other government departments, NGOs, employers, educators, women and schoolgirls.

AxiCom developed a range of press releases appealing to a wide selection of press. Working alongside the DTI press office, the public relations team set up over 30 high-profile press briefings before, during and after the event for many of the speakers. Patricia Hewitt MP, then UK Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Minister for Women, provided the conference keynote speech and was available for a photocall.

More than 20 press attended, resulting in over 40 substantial news stories. Most of the attending press conducted multiple interviews, with some journalists conducting as many as six on the day. The audience of the publications that reported on the conference directly matched the target audience, with BBC *Online* (whose audience includes women and schoolgirls) in particular reaching a significant number of the UK population.

Other coverage included the front page of *Personnel Today*, multiple mentions in *Computer Weekly*, *Network News* and *Managing Information Strategies*, business press reports in the *Financial Times* and the (London) *Evening Standard*’s ‘Just the Job’ section.

Source: www.axicom.com/micro/cases/index.asp?c=6#IBM

The model, and the preceding discussion, illustrates the complexity of the process of public relations for ICT companies. This model illustrates only campaigns that relate specifically to promotion of a product or service. Practitioners are often also required to conduct educational campaigns, focused specifically on shifting an audience’s position on a particular issue (e.g. security or ease of use). Alternatively, they may be asked to reposition a product or service, to refresh perceptions or highlight a new feature that may improve relevance to certain audiences.

Because they have such influence on the way we live, companies that produce ICT products are heavily scrutinised and have particularly high demands placed on them in terms of their contribution to society. This emphasis on social responsibility has meant that companies like Microsoft, Compaq and Dell are increasingly investing in corporate-level public relations campaigns, aimed at improving the image and reputation of their organisations.

While this image and reputation is linked to the products and services companies produce and the image presented by marketing and branding campaigns, the dynamics of public relations here are different. Campaigns working on reputation must be longer term and flexible, constantly catching up with society’s expectations. The opportunity for practitioners to be organisational activists (see definition of this in Chapter 9) is even stronger in these contexts, since knowledge of public perceptions is invaluable in helping organisations to modify their behaviour – and their products and services – to be more acceptable to audiences across the world.

Principles of ICT public relations practice

In practical terms, public relations practice in the ICT industry must take into account all these considerations

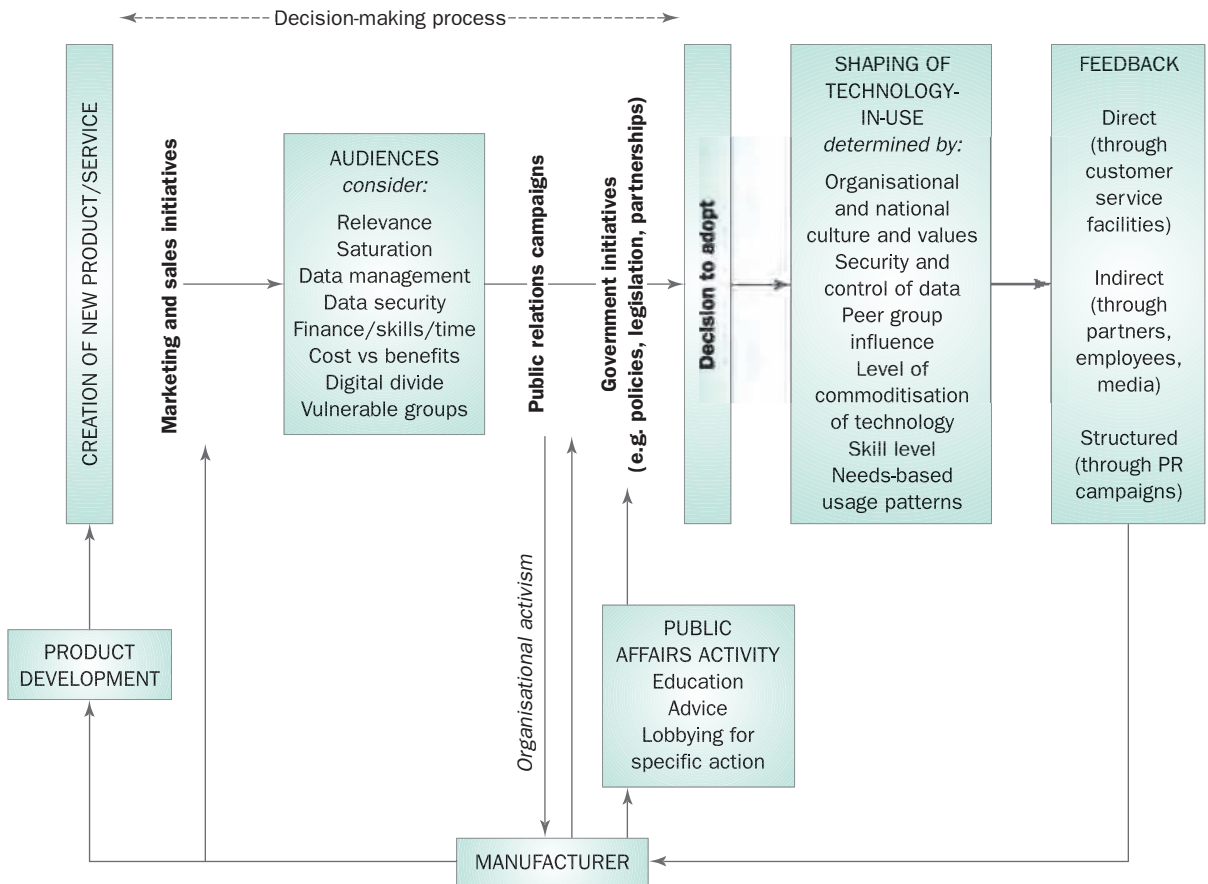


FIGURE 25.3 Public relations in the ICT industry

when planning and managing campaigns. Some generic principles of operation can be applied to the process, as well as actual steps in planning ICT campaigns. These are now outlined.

Principles of operation

Recognise the power of ‘futurology’

Chapter 9 on public relations theories outlined the power of public relations as a mechanism through which reality is constructed, by dint of public relations materials being used as a main source of news by journalists. This argument becomes even more important for public relations practitioners in the technology industry, who are often required to ‘invent’ scenarios that highlight product capabilities in as yet unknown situations. This ability to paint a credible yet inventive picture of the future is fundamental to selling new products, particularly in step change scenarios. Public relations practitioners must recognise the influence they have here in creating possible futures and be particularly careful about the multiple implications of

these possible scenarios, including effects on the way we socialise and interact, conduct relationships and control our lives.

Centrality of ethics

Technology never operates in isolation but has knock-on effects on the way we live and work. Public relations practitioners are therefore not simply promoting an ICT product or service, but must recognise that new ways of being are fundamental to the emergence and evolution of their products and services. As proponents of these new ways of being, practitioners have a responsibility to encourage ethical use of technologies and protection for those who may be made vulnerable as a result of their introduction.

Focus on education

The breadth of skill level and range of uses for a single technology among different audiences means



PICTURE 25.2 Technology is increasingly an integrated part of our lives and it has a major influence on how we work and spend our leisure time. (Source: © Simon Marcus/Corbis.)

activity 25.2

Technology public relations consultancies

Search the internet for technology public relations consultancies. Visit four or five sites and look at their case study archives. Take two or three case studies and, in light of the considerations discussed in this chapter, ask the following questions about each one:

- 1 What industry, audience and/or organisational characteristics might have affected their perception of the product being promoted?
- 2 What techniques did the public relations practitioners use to address these characteristics, either to minimise their impact or to make the most of them?

Now go to the homepage of the company featured in each case study:

- 3 How do the messages on the website try to differentiate the company from its competitors?
- 4 Is there anywhere on the site that mentions issues related to the social impact of their products, either in a positive way or by addressing some of the potential issues it might raise, such as digital divide-related problems?

that ICT public relations campaigns frequently revolve around education. Explanations of the technology as well plain benefit statements can be part of the core messages in the campaign or may evolve as the campaign continues over time. A practitioner's ability to translate complex situations and provide simple explanations is fundamental to the success of these campaign elements.

Create active audiences

ICT public relations practitioners must educate their audiences not only in the benefits of the technologies, but also in their responsibilities in using the technologies. For example, they may encourage audiences to use a free email system developed by their client, but they also need to explain how to avoid spam and prevent viruses by using appropriate spam-blocking and anti-virus software. They may vigorously promote a new internet site for children, but should make parents aware of the dangers of letting children use the internet unsupervised and exposing them to undesirable or unsuitable sites. In this sense, ICT public relations

demands an active response from audiences – one of the hardest things to achieve through a public relations campaign.

Complex simplicity

ICT products and technologies can be highly complex yet are often targeted at different audiences whose understanding and skill levels range from absolutely nil to extremely good. At the same time, these companies must engage with government and policy makers, since new technologies have new implications for society. One campaign, therefore, may need to encompass a whole spectrum of messages, each of which needs to be simple and relevant to a particular audience segment. Public relations strategies must be versatile and adaptable, keeping core messages consistent but allowing enough flexibility for each audience clearly and consistently to understand the relevance to them.

Campaign planning

The generic principles just outlined provide guidance for decisions about how to develop campaigns. In addition, the considerations outlined in this chapter can be interpreted as practical steps in the campaign planning process. Figure 25.4 outlines these steps.

The process of analysis following the receipt of the campaign brief from the client is equivalent to the PEST (EPISTLE) or SWOT analysis that should be carried out as part of the campaign process (see Chapter 2). ICT campaigns have specific considerations that should always be taken into account based on the three main areas: audiences, industry/product and the clients involved. Once this analytical stage is complete, the development of the actual strategy for the campaign and the tactics to address each audience must be done on a tailored basis. At this point, ICT practitioners can revert to standard public relations planning processes while taking the generic principles of operation into account. (See Activity 25.2 and Case study 25.3, overleaf.)

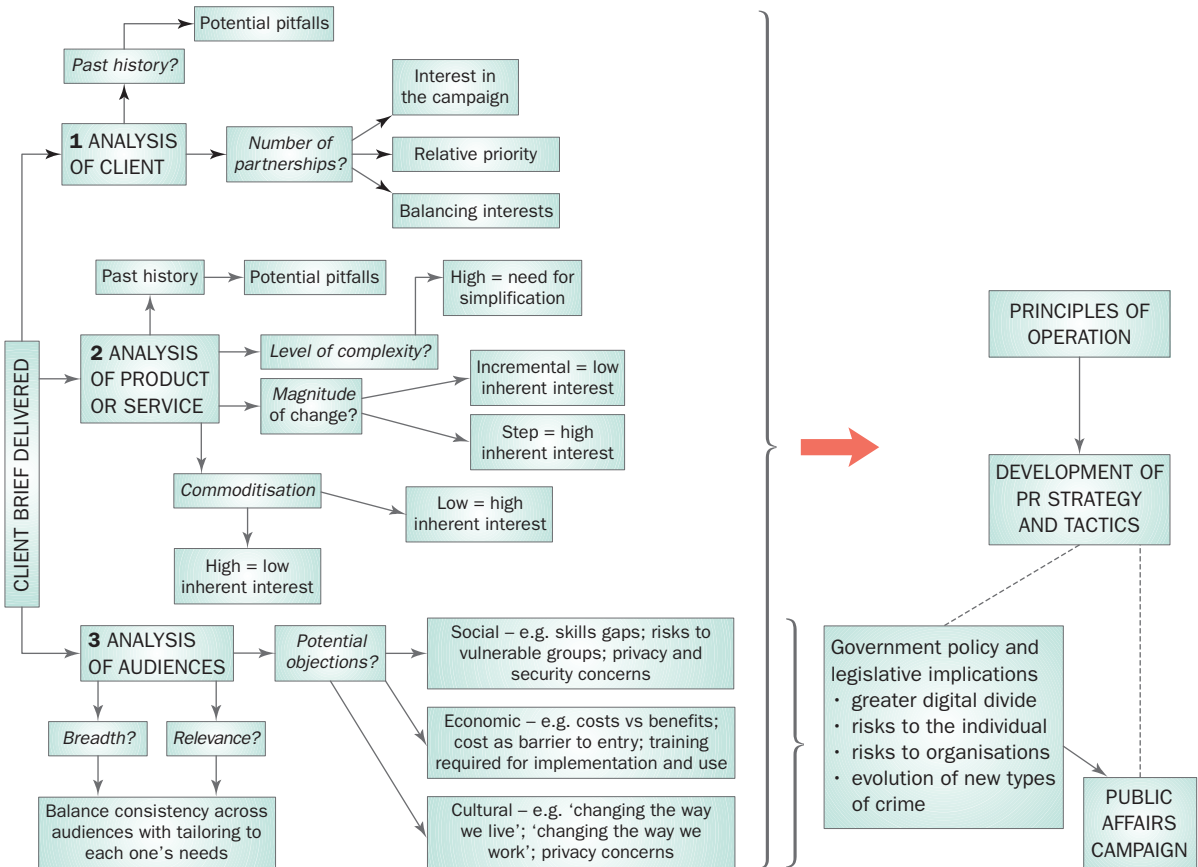


FIGURE 25.4 ICT campaign planning

case study 25.3

Microsoft UK launches Office 2003

Microsoft produces software for businesses and individuals around the world. One of its flagship products is Microsoft Office, a suite of applications for desktop and laptop computers including Excel (numerical spreadsheets), Word (text documents), Outlook (email) and Powerpoint (presentations). The first version of Microsoft Office was introduced in 1990; by 2005 10 versions of Office had been launched in total.

Office 2003, launched in October 2003 in the UK, was a different animal from previous versions. Microsoft's research had found that integrating information and pooling intelligence across organisations was one of the biggest barriers to improving productivity for many businesses. Genuine teamwork was relatively difficult to achieve, particularly across offices in different geographical locations.

Based on these findings, Microsoft's software development teams had focused in particular on the ability of Office applications to 'talk' to one another and to external software. While there were some new 'bells and whistles', the greatest innovation in Office 2003 was the integration between the different applications.

The nature of the changes made in Office 2003, and the history of the product itself, meant that Microsoft UK was faced with a number of challenges for the launch. Office 2003 was the tenth version of Office in 14 years. Both users and journalists were suffering from 'launch fatigue', characterised by cynicism about yet another version being released and scepticism about its capabilities.

Office was perceived by users and journalists as a suite of tools that made desk-based work simpler. It was not recognised as software that could revolutionise information sharing and teamworking. Microsoft UK had to change the way people thought about and used Office, working against 13 years of history to broaden perceptions of its value to individuals and businesses.

Previous launches had focused primarily on 'bells and whistles', based on the improved content and capabilities of the software applications. However, innovations in Office 2003 were more to do with the way the different software applications worked together, rather than with visible changes in the applications themselves. The old product-based strategy was not effective – a new way of discussing Office had to be found.

The changes in Office 2003 were highly technical – senior, non-technical managers and business media would find it difficult to understand. Microsoft UK had to find a way to explain the technology in terms that were meaningful for these business audiences, but without alienating software experts, who would still be interested in the launch.

Microsoft had to start moving away from its image as a software production and sales organisation, in-

stead presenting itself as an organisation in touch with business needs in the twenty-first century. It had to discuss business and market dynamics, rather than product characteristics. Only then would people believe that it could produce a tool like Office 2003, designed first and foremost with business needs in mind.

In light of the launch challenges, the strategy and tactics adopted by Microsoft UK represented a new departure for the company's product public relations.

Education, education, education

Given the need to change perceptions of Office, the campaign had to educate audiences on changes in business and highlight how Office could help meet new organisational challenges. Education takes time, so regular contact with key media and analysts began early. Workshops, media tours, press releases and face-to-face interviews were used in tandem to ensure audiences understood the relevance and quality of Office 2003.

Change the perspective used to discuss the product

For Office 2003 product promotion began not with the product but with the customer. Spokespeople explained how business had changed since Office was first developed. Instead of just talking about email, spreadsheets and documents with media, analysts and customers, they discussed new business needs: sharing information in real time, teamwork across remote sites, combining ideas from all areas of the organisation and creating competitive business strategies.

Address new audiences

Historically, IT managers – the holders of IT budgets – had been the core audience for Microsoft's product launches and were very familiar with the company. In contrast, Office 2003's success depended on its credibility as a strategic business tool. Senior business managers, who would understand the wider relevance of Office and drive demand among IT managers, became a key audience. However, they had no detailed knowledge of Microsoft or its products. Communications with them had to be on target and credible.

Tailor the media mix and the story

Corresponding to the change in audiences, Microsoft UK also had to change its media targets, integrating publications read by senior, non-technical managers. For the first time, business media such as the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* were part of the core



case study 25.3 (continued)

media for the product launch. Spokespeople had to discuss business issues rather than product features when they met business journalists.

Use partners and customers to 'translate' jargon

The launch of Office 2003 incorporated participation from partners who had deployed Office 2003 early and could explain the difference it made in simple terms. By putting Office 2003 in a familiar context with meaningful examples, their stories demonstrated how technology could address business objectives effectively.

Retain technical interest and reputation

While the business argument would drive take-up of Office 2003, it could not do so unless the software were effective and reliable. The interest of the technology media in the nuts and bolts of the product still had to be met in order to generate a solid reputation for the new product prior to the launch.

The campaign build-up included:

- opinion pieces and feature articles about business challenges, placed in business and IT publications
- a business workshop, emphasising the relevance of Office 2003 to business issues
- feature stories on the successful early adoption of Office 2003 in partner organisations
- regular press releases highlighting different capabilities of Office 2003
- a series of tailored, face-to-face interviews with all target media
- a live demonstration of the product for all media prior to launch
- a product review program for technical and business media
- a technical workshop on the product, held in the USA and examining the nuts and bolts of the software.

Ongoing dialogue was maintained between the US-based development team and key technical journalists in the UK. In addition, senior business managers were individually briefed by senior managers from Microsoft, who often held similar positions in the organisation and could speak from experience about the dilemmas they faced.

The launch event continued and extended the educational theme of the build-up. Representatives from Henley School of Management and the London School of Economics discussed how technology could change the business landscape and open up new opportunities for people to relate to each other. Partners who had trialled the new software joined Microsoft to explain how Office had removed barriers to cooperation within their organisations, improving teamworking and productivity.

The structure of the campaign was effective: press coverage was plentiful among business and technical publications, containing clear messages about the value of Office 2003 from a business perspective. For the first time, business journalists featured Microsoft spokespeople expressing their views on the challenges facing UK organisations and potential solutions for those challenges. Technical journalists covered the launch extensively and generally produced favourable reviews of the product.

Discussions about the product moved towards an issues-based agenda rather than being led purely by product features. This simultaneously created a new role for Microsoft as an organisation with important views about the business landscape. The involvement of academics and customers in the campaign also helped reinforce Microsoft's credibility as a source of intelligent opinion on general business issues, not just technology. (See Think about 25.3.)

Source: used with kind permission of microsoft.co.uk

think about 25.3 Microsoft case study

- 1 To what degree do you think Microsoft's strategy was based on recognition of the social impact of Office in the workplace?
- 2 If you were launching a new mobile phone, which, like Office, had many previous versions, how would you address the issue of 'launch fatigue' among audiences and the media?
- 3 Which of the industry characteristics outlined in the chapter can you identify in this case study as factors that affected the launch of Office 2003?
- 4 In your own words, and based on the organisational context outlined in the chapter, explain why customers might object to adopting a new version of Office in their organisations.
- 5 This case study outlines Microsoft strategy to attract the attention of businesses which might be interested in Office 2003. Based on the individual context outlined in the chapter, what problems do you think it might face when launching a new version of Office to home computer users like you, your parents or your fellow students? How would you make the product more appealing to them?
- 6 Microsoft was asking people to use Office to change the way they worked, in order to improve business outcomes. How ethical do you think its strategy is?

Summary

This chapter has outlined the particular circumstances surrounding public relations in the ICT industries. The social nature of technology means that this area is not as straightforward as it might seem for public relations practitioners. While their role may be ostensibly to promote a product or service, they are, in fact, charged with offering new ways of living. They must:

- manage highly varied environments
- be completely at ease with complex technologies
- discuss them with experts and novices alike
- offer relevance and create desire across a very broad range of audiences

- constantly feed public concerns and perceptions back to the organisation
- make ethical, responsible use of the power they wield, putting education and simplicity at the centre of their campaigns and generating active engagement from audiences.

Practitioners have already recognised technology public relations as a specialism, but few scholars have engaged with this area in any depth. This chapter represents a first attempt to make sense of the technology context for public relations in practice.

Bibliography

- Dutton, W.H. (2001). *Information and Communications Technologies: Visions and realities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Freeman, C. (2001). 'The two-edged nature of technological change: Employment and unemployment' in *Information and communications technologies: Visions and realities*. W.H. Dutton. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hearit, K.M. (1999). 'Newsgroups, activist publics and corporate apologia: The case of Intel and its Pentium chip'. *Public Relations Review* 25(3): 291-308.
- Mattelart, A. (2003). *The Information Society: An introduction*. London: Sage.
- Miles, I. (2001). 'The information society: Competing perspectives on the social and economic implications of information and communication technologies' in *Information and Communications Technologies: Visions and realities*. W.H. Dutton. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, M. (2000). *Communications Technology Explained*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rosenberg, R.S. (1997). *The Social Impact of Computers*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Rowe, C. and J. Thompson (1996). *People and Chips*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
- Warschauer, M. (2003). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the social divide*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.
- Williams, R. and D. Edge (2001). 'The social shaping of technology' in *Information and Communications Technologies: Visions and realities*. W.H. Dutton. New York: Oxford University Press.