

ABSTRACT

PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIRECTORS' VIEW OF BUSINESS-MEDIA RELATIONS

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In significant degree, the role of public affairs departments in the large corporation is to represent the corporation to the public. Public Affairs staffs are frequently in the unenviable position of having to mediate between senior executive demands that a good corporate "image" be maintained and an always inquisitive and sometimes hostile press.

A primary objective of the public affairs function is to represent the corporation to the public in as favorable a light as possible. The assumption is that a favorable representation will enhance long-term profit or at least minimize its erosion. Because this representation requires exceptional ability in written and verbal communication, the educational background of public affairs staffs tend to be less in the functional areas of business and management, and more in such non-business related areas as the social sciences, humanities, and journalism. In terms of educational background, the public affairs director is as likely to resemble the journalist he communicates with as the senior executive he works for. The public affairs staff is in the middle in another sense as well. Unlike most other functional areas of business, it is extremely difficult to measure the contribution of public affairs to profit. Public affairs directors, although in frequent contact with senior management, are seldom considered part of the "management team." And a career in public affairs, while offering rapid advancement to middle management, is seldom a path to the top.

The public affairs staff has been characterized as a sort of "fifth column" within the corporation. It has been said that they identify more with the press and academia than with the corporation that employs them. This raises a se-

rious potential problem: public affairs staff are employed to represent the corporation to the public; the question is do they do this adequately?

Given the intermediary role of public affairs staff (between senior management and the press), combined with their educational backgrounds and ambivalent status regarding the profit concerns of the corporation, we wanted to know if there were significant differences of opinion between public affairs staff and senior corporate management on issues related to business and the media.

This study attempts to partially answer this question by comparing the responses from public affairs staff and chief executive officers of the nation's largest publically held corporations. Both groups were asked a number of questions relating to business and the media. The sample was derived from a mailing conducted between September and December 1982 to 1098 of the Fortune 1000 largest industrial firms and the 300 largest nonindustrial firms. Responses included 206 chief executive officers and 236 public affairs staff.

The findings indicate that with a few qualifications, the public affairs staff hold views of business and the media very similar to that of the CEOs. Thus while the educational and other background characteristics of public affairs staff combined with their intermediary position in the firm, would lead one to hypothesize that their views on business and the media might differ from the CEOs, this does not appear to be the case. This conclusion should be of some relief to those who are concerned that public affairs staff do not adequately represent corporate interests.