

## THE ROLES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGN: A CASE STUDY OF SWM ENVIRONMENT SDN BHD

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### Abstract

Conducting an environmental awareness campaign by using the qualitative research method exemplifies how public relations (PR) can boost the impact towards audience's behavior. Generally, PR practitioners have their own strategies in delivering messages, but there are certain roles that influence the audience's behavior, attitude and mentality. This warrants further investigation on the failure factors of current environmental awareness campaigns which revolve around communication theories in obtaining more enlightening and reasonable facts. This study examines the professionalism of PR practitioners and personnel using in-depth interviews and content analysis by reviewing related documentation to understand underlying dynamic practices. The findings will construct the real challenges that implicate the PR practitioners' role and the audience's reaction towards environmental awareness campaigns in Malaysia.

Keywords: Public Relations, Practitioner, Professionalism, Environmental Awareness Campaign

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### 1.0 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The main goals of public relations are to basically create, maintain and protect an organization's reputation, enhance its prestige and project a favorably positive image. Effective public relations requires knowledge, based on analysis and understanding, of various factors that shape public attitudes towards an organization. It is an important tool to deliver public awareness programs. The establishment of an overall policy with respect to any campaign involves defining goals and desired outcomes, as well as the constraints within which the campaign operates, in order to achieve its overall success.

PR practitioners play a vital role in an organization. Besides to upkeep the images and reputation, they are the key individuals who strategic the planning and road map to achieve organizational goals. Yi Luo (2014) found out that they also need to play the role of "rational analytical planners", "decision makers", "issuers of commands" and "incessant negotiators" in a drastic organizational change. The role of PR practitioners in environment awareness campaigns has not been widely explored in Malaysia as we only have non-specific PR experts in local environmental issues. An article, [Environmental Science.org@2018](http://Environmental.Science.org@2018), reported that within the next 10 years, environmental public relations specialists are well poised to form a growing profession, anticipated to increase by an average of 12% compared to other occupations. If we factor in the ever increasing pressure on the environment, heightened public interest and the existence of environment-specific industries, that projected growth is likely to register even more robust figures.

The main reason to conduct the study is to explore the efficiency of PR practitioners' role in an organization in delivering environmental awareness campaign messages within the context of public relations. Why are PR practitioners important in environmental campaigns? Are the PR practitioners harping on the right awareness campaign? This study is set to investigate the critical factors behind the efficiency of PR strategies when executing an environmental awareness campaign in Malaysia. The target is to find out how to reduce the implementation of incorrect or sub-optimal strategies that will give negative implications towards the reputation and image of organizations. Discussion of the roles of public relations practitioners in organizations generally includes a variety of functions. Ji Yeon Jeong (2017) revealed that PR plays its part as a decision maker towards shaping the public's response to awareness campaigns. Anne Gregory (2016, 2017) stressed the needs of several explanations in comparing between the traditional PR roles as a gatekeepers, versus its professional public relations function as a proficient communicators. These are some of the important roles that will give a direct impact to audiences, particularly on environmental campaigns. Dustin Manley (2017) stated that scholars have also highlighted several latest issues on the professionalism or competencies of PR practitioners which are essentially needed in order to face a complex and diverse world.

This case study will further define the importance of PR roles in SWM Environment Sdn Bhd (SWM Environment) in disseminating environmental awareness campaigns. It uses the qualitative in-depth research method to identify all the relevant PR roles so as to unearth a better understanding of various key factors that impact public perceptions. The discussion covers relevant issues from multiple perspectives. Some early researches on PR practitioners has shed insights into how they perceived their roles and identify certain elements in global public relations firms. There is a discernible symbiotic relationship between the environment, society and the economy. This study provides meaningful insights into the professionalism of public relations practitioners in organizations, especially pertaining to decision-making; as well as their entrepreneurial sustainability in global markets. In brief, SWM Environment is a concessionaire company

for the southern peninsular region of Malaysia which is responsible for waste management and public cleansing services, as well as organizing awareness campaigns, namely recycling activities. The PR practitioners of the company will become the informants for this study, with the objective of forming a model based from the research findings.

### **Research statement**

Although the PR strategies and roles have been widely researched, only few studies have investigated the efficiency of PR roles especially in environmental awareness campaigns among the government agencies in Malaysia. According to Helena Stehle (2016) PR roles have been a major topic in research since the 1970s, but no comprehensive discussion of dialogue has yet been undertaken with regard to role typologies. PR roles are becoming very crucial in facing a complex global challenges and environmental issues. The New Straits Times dated 1 December 2015 quoted from Salleh that Public relations must play a dynamic roles in designing reputation and a catalyst for sustainability during uncertainty period. Trust and reputation are two fundamentals that would become the organisation's pillars for sustainable and future growth.

There has been an extended debates among public relations scholars towards diversifying public relations role in Malaysia. Public relations (PR) plays an important role especially in big organizations and businesses in communicating to the audience. It also plays a central function in strategizing the development of environmental awareness campaigns. Mihaela (2014) expressed that the role of PR has changed and evolved. Previously, it was perceived as a tactical tool to influence media coverage as well as the proliferation of communication. Eventually, the need to engage with multiple stakeholders and greater demands for corporate transparency have cemented PR at the heart of strategic management.

In relation with some local environmental issues, a wide-ranging ethnographic study found that the objectives of a policy, of reducing waste sent to landfills and reducing pollution, was not achieved. Another study by Masoumeh (2015) regarding the general perception of consumers has discovered that people were aware of the “go green” or “no plastic bag” policy, but they either did not care, or found ways to circumvent the rule. *The Star Online*, 26 Aug 2016 reported by Brian Martin stated that millions have again been spent on the recyclable bins and these can be seen in housing estates, commercial areas and apartments. Despite having facilities in place, the public have yet to fully embrace the notion of waste separation. Public apathy is arguably the number one reason why “greening” efforts fail. When it comes to plastic bags and waste separation, the government’s awareness campaigns have not nailed the desired impact. Hence, we may need to try alternative means, including a tougher approach to change people’s attitudes.

There is a need to change human behaviour for the sake of protecting their environment or contributing to having a healthy one. Masoumeh (2015) reminded that this is why the “go green” national campaigns of “No Plastic Bag Day Campaign”, “3R Campaign (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle)”, “Environmental Education” and numerous other similar efforts have been organized by non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Malaysia or Malaysia Nature Society (MNS). The effects of such programs on the public have been rather significant but unfortunately, the impact has not been the same for the society as a whole. Meanwhile, Mudiaranan (2015) described there are four environmental behaviours, namely Eco Literacy, Attitude, Subjective Norms and Perceived Behaviour, where only “consumer attitudes” is not the main influence to support the “No Plastic Bags” campaign. The government should co-operate with relevant parties to create better awareness through appropriate channels such as social media, word-of-mouth and road shows. The government and schools should involve and encourage more public buy-in. Eco literacy is identified as exerting the strongest relationship in environmental behaviour development. Therefore, the study on the efficiency of the PR roles in environmental awareness campaign is required to explore the influence factors and to find a mechanism to solve those related issues.

### **Research questions**

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What are the major PR practitioners’ roles in promoting environmental awareness campaigns among agencies in Malaysia?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** What are the major causes of failures in delivering awareness messages in environmental awareness campaigns?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How is the efficiency level of the agencies in organizing environmental awareness campaigns in Malaysia?

### **Research objectives**

The objectives of this current study are:

- 1) To identify the roles of PR practitioners in running environmental awareness campaigns among government agencies in Malaysia.
- 2) To analyze the challenges, strengths and weakness of PR roles in awareness campaigns.
- 3) To investigate the efficiency of various PR roles in organizing awareness campaigns.

## **2.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

It is anticipated that this study will increase the efficiency of PR roles in Malaysian government agencies in delivering more impactful awareness campaigns to the public. It will provide a useful insight in analyzing the development of PR strategies in environmental awareness campaigns among the agencies. The rationale of the study is to clarify the public perception that PR practitioners are seemingly not playing their roles efficiently in conducting environmental awareness campaigns. The findings from this research would be able to address the problems and challenges of PR practitioners in Malaysia. The literature review will next explain the roles of PR and the development of related knowledge from previous scholars.

### ■3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Public relations role which have been described by Alison Theaker (2015), is an involvement from the management function to fulfill basic human needs, changes awareness of public behavior and perceptions as to what PR practitioners actually do. The practitioners' role enactment is recognized as one of the main areas of theory development within public relations by exploring managerial roles with a particular focus on professionalism. Another view by Christian Fieseler (2015) has proved that previous research studied the connection between managerial role enactment and participation in decision-making. The managerial role competencies across public relations department are positively related to the participation of public relations in strategic planning.

Public relations efforts (often called initiatives or campaigns) are communications activities that enhance visibility, sculpt public perception and affect change. Jim Macnamara (2017) explained these activities create a positive public image for businesses, non-profit organizations and individuals. Public relations has changed, not just in the channels used, but also in the very nature of conversations, purpose, reach and effect. This requires communicators to reconsider a range of issues and topics affecting culture. Elina Erzikova (2018) discovered that with the advent of latest sophisticated communication technologies, public relations has changed from the formerly traditional to the modern digital media era. People now sources valuable information from public relations specialists. Meanwhile, Donald K. Wright (2017) added that the impact of social media on public relations has now increased the PR practitioners' roles in the social and digital media.

For instance, communicators have to be more aware than ever that their actual audiences may be far more wide-ranging than their intended audiences. During WPRF 2017 conference, it was found that the digital divide means that additional efforts are necessary to include those who might have otherwise been excluded. Furthermore, the all-embracing and changing nature of public relations and communication means that it is insufficient for professional communicators to maintain a narrow focus on their organizations and cultures; and how they benefit, but also to be aware that communication is changing the very nature of culture and society.

The roles of PR practitioners are somewhat specific in promoting awareness campaigns. Alison Theaker (2015) has clarified that Public relations, from the management role to fulfill basic human needs, changes the consciousness of public behavior and conceptualization of what they usually do. Public relations practitioners in organizations indeed have predetermined roles in a variety of functions. Ji Yeon Jeong (2017) viewed that in order to enhance organizational sustainability, public relations practitioners take roles to respond towards its public in decision-making. Suzanne Benn (2010) added that public relations role is also to provide insights to the higher management leadership regarding the practice of strategic communication, design and implementation of campaigns that were set out to achieve organizational objectives.

By tradition, PR normally deals with press releases, speeches, feeding information to journalists, create and execute events for public outreach and media relations. In this case, many researchers found that there are many other functions that influence their PR roles which evolve in their career. This is supported by Dustin Manley (2017) which stated that by relying on technical communication skills alone is practically impossible in handling crisis management. Senior public relations practitioners help organizations to manage the public strategically; and achieve goals to become effective and strong corporate entities. However, public relations has to extend its expertise as boundary spanners in various skills, resources, strategies, tactics and experiences. Public relations (PR) is no longer a technical role, but described as a necessary and effective strategic management function.

In developing mutual collaborations with key stakeholders in the community, internal relationship management is a basic requirement for PR practitioners' success. In line with the discussion of the technical versus strategic managerial roles of public relations and their professionalism, we ought to incorporate both the theoretical and practical implications for public relations. Lea Anna Cardwell (2017) discovered that communication technology usage of social media, digital content and mobile devices has increased knowledge to the society. It is now much faster to respond to media inquiries even within brief time frames. PR practitioners are expected to be active on Twitter, LinkedIn and corporate blogs to generate news coverage, while in the same token protecting the image and brand of their organizations.

Lea Anna Cardwell (2017) also stated that nurturing relationships by involving and motivating people could be considered as part of the "involving everyone" in the development, as well as the implementation, of a corporate change. It calls for a change agent specialist, and that is an opportunity for public relations or corporate communications managers to extend their sphere to make an vita contribution to the organization. The practitioners' role enactment is recognized as one of the main areas of theory development within public relations. It explores managerial roles while putting emphasis on professionalism. Christian Fieseler (2015) has further elaborated that after previous research studied the connection between the managerial role enactment and participation in decision-making, managerial role competencies in the public relations department are positively related to public relations' participation in strategic planning.

Another views by Ji Yeon Jeong (2017), has mentioned that the managerial role of PR practitioners in previous studies is portrayed as the strategic counselor / manager role in this study as it includes every function related to the execution of public relations strategies for their clients. The strategic counselor / managerial role can be defined as involving research, strategic and creative thinking, objective setting, programming, budgeting and handling or counseling the clients pertaining to communication strategies, and influencing their decision-making processes. Concurrently, it leads to success or failure, influencing public perceptions and maintenance of contact with headquarters and media management role.

The role of PR is changing, formerly perceived as a tactical tool to influence media coverage, the proliferation of communications, the need to engage with multiple stakeholders and demands for greater corporate transparency. As what Mihaela Amalia Petrovici (2014) has explored that people now often places PR at the heart of strategic management. In aspiring to unlock the potential of public relations and development of good practices, the industry has to be part of the internet revolution. Another views by Christian Fieseler (2015) in which described that the PR professionals' self-efficacy scale is developed to measure the ability of PR professionals to execute their duties as they need competencies to effectively carry out their responsibilities as PR practitioners. They should learn more competencies as a way of making their work more sophisticated to match today's highly competitive environment. However, Ahmed Lawal Gusau (2017) viewed that what seems to attract little attention; and thus inadequately studied, is the need to look into practitioners' abilities in carrying out specified jobs.

In terms of intrinsic values relationship, Rosli Mohammed (2017) found out that the best organizations and PR practices is that firmly believe in and embrace trust, commitment, involvement, satisfaction and mutuality control involving contractual stakeholders between the organizations and its public will be better poised to heighten their image, reputation, work efficiency and subsequently performance across the industry. These has to be some differentiation in measuring PR outputs, typically short-term and superficial (e.g. the amount of press coverage received or exposure of a particular message), PR out-takes, usually more far-reaching and impactful (e.g. determining if the targeted activities reached the intended audiences, paid attention to, comprehended and retained particular messages) versus that of PR outcomes, (e.g. did the program or activity change opinions, attitudes and possibly behavior patterns?).

Rosli Mohammed (2017) also added that considerations should be given to media content analysis that rely on observation, participation and / or role playing techniques. PR effectiveness can best be measured if an organization's principal messages, key target audience groups and desired channels of communication are succinctly identified and understood in advance. Tools and techniques for measuring and evaluating the relatively short-term outputs and outcomes of specific PR programs, events and campaigns have existed for quite a number of years. Yet up until now, the measure of success or failure of long-term relationships stemming from PR efforts does not exist. Outputs are usually the immediate results of a particular PR program or activity. The ability to measure whether the communication materials and messages that were disseminated have resulted in any opinion, attitude, and/or behavioural changes on the part of those targeted public to whom the messages were directed are measured. Not only know how to evaluate the effects of PR techniques and programs but also know how to measure the value of PR to an organization and to the society.

Due to respond on the effectiveness, Amy Thurlow (2016) has pointed out how do we evaluate public relations and how can it add to the current body of knowledge? A case study of the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER), a novel evaluation model, sought to provide a normative measure of public relations performance based on Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory. Eight discernible dimensions were identified, which were as follows: Access to the Dominant Coalition, Ethics and Integrity, Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations, Proactive Worldview, Relationship Satisfaction, Requisite Variety, Strategic Communication Planning, and Symmetry and Mutuality.

Creating an environment changes may also consequently trigger our awareness about campaign failures. The effort to drive social change is a critical step in raising awareness about something that was relatively unknown or unfamiliar before. Ann Christiano (2017) responded that we have to consider the scientific analysis that shows there is a more strategic, effective and focused way to drive social change. In fact, research suggests that not only do campaigns fall short and waste priceless resources when they focus solely on raising awareness; sometimes they can ironically end up doing more harm than good. When exploring ways to create awareness, it is important to understand the eventual ineffective or even harmful effects that can emerge. There are four specific risks upon running any awareness campaign; it might lead to no action, reach the wrong audience, create harm or generate backlash.

Another reaction from Julia Fraustino (2015) who quoted that some campaigns fail when people exposed to humorous messages made the campaign so virally popular, so much so that its effectiveness became diluted. Identifying the right target audience and delivering clear messages will have its greatest effect because in theory, any effort to change something needs to have sound objectives, tactics, evaluation and understanding of the issue on hand. Combining that to form solid communication strategies can ensure that all efforts are neatly tied to certain overarching goals, promotion or awareness. It requires clear goals and understanding of what will be different and what will cause it to change; and an inclination of what will influence people to act. Successful public interest campaigns need not only target a narrowly defined audience, clear calls for action and a theory of change; but also the right messenger to inspire and persuade people to adopt a new set of behavior or way of thinking. People who have authority, credibility, influence and trustworthiness connect well when others see themselves, their values and identities are recognized as being important in the audience's world.

Communication strategy defines how to capture the attention of the target audiences and convey a compelling campaign message. In a web article written by Michaela Raab (2011) stated that it must be strategically planned to reach specific target audience and to communicate specific messages that are tailored to that group. Communication campaigns are more successful if they are customized to the context, values, language and resources available to local audiences. Priorities for which audiences to reach are usually set by an understanding of who is most vulnerable. Wording and content of the messages depend on what they are supposed to achieve.

#### ■4.0 METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, the instrument used to collect data involves interviews. Thus an interview protocol was developed that can facilitate a consistent process of data collection across all interviews. There are mainly two types of questions in an interview protocol: (a) the primary research questions, which are not asked of the participants; and (b) the interview questions, based on the primary research questions, which are asked of the participants. It is deemed to predispose a minimal risk to participants, while the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research will not be greater than anything ordinarily encountered in daily life, or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. This section will detail when and how the researcher collected the data.

All the theories have their own strengths on understanding PR and it depends how each of them work in the communication strategies. Some may work effectively at the beginning stage e.g planning how to deliver the right messages. Some theories may view the importance of messages during campaigns, but some may focus on the medium used, the end result or eventual effectiveness of the campaign. This research will concentrate to identify the real situation during awareness campaign. This is how PR strategies could play better roles in making the awareness campaigns to work more efficiently in the future.

##### *Selection of informants for interviews*

The informants for in-depth interviews come from the same department, namely the staffs of Corporate Communications Department, SWM Environment. Eight of the participants were in-house PR practitioners who spanned a range of experience and rank with job titles including all Communications personnel, Managers, Senior Public Relations Executive, and Public Relations Executives. The staffs are

slightly different in term of length of services and qualifications background to understand their PR professionalism level in responding issues.

*Table 1: Selection of Informants*

Department for In Depth Interview – Corporate Communications Department (CCD)					
Informant	Job Designation	Business orientation	Qualifications	Experiences in the field	
A1	Manager of Corporate Communications	Business & communication	Masters in Corporate Communication	15 years	
A2	Assistant Manager, Corporate communication	Public relations	Bachelor in Public Relations	14 years	
A3	Corporate Executive communication	Liaison	Bachelor in Communicatios	13 years	
A4	Corporate Executive communication	Recycling campaign	Bachelor in Multimedia	13 years	
A5	Corporate Executive communication	Media Relations	Bachelor of public Relations	5 years	
A6	Corporate Executive communication	Media Relations	Bachelor in Communicatios	5 years	
A7	3R Assistance	Recycling operation	Diploma in electronics	4 years	
A8	PR Assistance	General admin	Diploma in Multimedia	10 years	

### *Designing In-Depth Interview Questionnaires*

Drawing from the sociological perspectives of the study, the researcher expects to explore and scrutinize the informants on their views that will follow according to the research objectives. They follow a set of unstructured interview questions under three (3) key themes which are:

**Key Theme 1:** The roles of PR in environmental awareness campaigns.

The questions relate to the informants' understanding about PR roles in environmental awareness campaigns. It is a reflection of Research Objective 1 (RO1).

**Key Theme 2:** The challenges, strengths and weaknesses of PR roles.

The questions solicit the challenges, strengths and weaknesses of PR roles in environmental awareness campaigns. It is a reflection of Research Objective 2 (RO2).

**Key Theme 3:** The efficiency of PR roles in environmental awareness campaigns.

The questions zoom towards the efficiency of PR roles in environmental awareness campaigns. It is a reflection of Research Objective 3 (RO3).

Finally, all informants are interviewed to suggest ways to improve the PR roles and strategies in environmental awareness campaigns. It is also a reflection of Research Objective 3 (RO3)

## ■ 5.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Key Theme 1 : The Roles of PR in Environmental Awareness Campaigns**

Most informants interpret PR as the core values which represent good images of certain organizations.

"I can say that PR is the core value of the organization .... it represents the good image and goodwill of the organization. PR is an important tool used to project the company's branding and strengthen relationships with its customer or clients" (Informant A1).

Another informant acknowledged that “PR represents the front line of the organization. Apart from projecting a good image of the organization to the society, PR develops multiple relationships with its public and audiences” (Informant A2).

The informants basically emphasize the main role of PR planning in developing specific relationships with the public, portraying PR practitioners as important people in generating information. “The main role of a PR practitioner is to plan and execute the strategy to build a specific relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. PR practitioners are responsible to generate useful information for the audiences” (Informant A4).

Based on PR issues, several members repeatedly stress on the importance of PR roles in environmental awareness campaigns. They say that “it is very important that as you may need an effective approach to influence the public’s behaviour and inculcate their understanding towards certain environmental issues. It is not an easy task at all. Not only being educators, sometimes PR also play the roles of promoters or brothers to the students” (Informant A3).

One of the informants regards the relationship between PR and the organization as “... actually a medium to develop mutual understanding with the organization. The organization will rely on its PR strategies to enable them to develop social interactions and fulfill specific obligations. You can see how important it is when you really need them” (Informant A7).

Regarding the function of PR in developing an environmental awareness campaign, one of the informants mentioned “Basically, we organize awareness campaigns like talk programs in schools to educate the students during exhibitions, recycling demonstrations, competitions, tree planting exercises, collection of recyclables and many other programs. These can be done in many places such as industries, government offices and public areas” (Informant A6).

Another informant gave some points on PR promotional tools to run awareness campaign, “... among the PR tools which being used in the awareness campaigns are printing materials including brochures, pamphlets, exhibition display materials, advertisement, press releases and articles. Nowadays, we need more sophisticated tools to boost the campaigns such as using the social media, websites and multimedia” (Informant A5).

PR can develop relationships with audiences. One informant expressed that “In this campaign, we usually have our target groups and we develop special networking with them. For school programs, we have to work closely with the State Education Department (PPD) and Department of Environment (DOE) to synchronize and synergize impactful activities that can enhance awareness campaigns. We have to form particular groups and committees in order to do more activities and raise more support from other agencies and corporate companies” (Informant A1).

## **Key Theme 2: The Methods, Barriers and Problems**

On discussing about how PR manages strategies, especially involving public participation in campaigns, another informant highlighted “To develop PR strategies, the first thing that we need do is a long term plan. What are we going to achieve in the future? Of course there will be progress along the way, but at the same time, we must keep the campaign going in order to support the activities. It is important that the PR strategies can win the battle, ensuring a successful campaign” (Informant A3).

An informant also described how the personal characters of the PR personnel influences the public campaign, “Those who are able to apply the best PR strategy can influence the public. Let us say we need to approach students in schools... the campaign must be flexible and able to capture their interest. We must update all relevant information using multimedia support, exhibitions and briefings. Another factor is the PR characters, especially our personal experiences and abilities that will help convey all the messages further and more effectively to the audience” (Informant A6).

Discussing on the primary target audiences for the campaigns, one informant shared, “There are many target groups for the campaigns. As for the recycling activity, we focus on schools and higher institutions because they are the most active and participative groups. That’s why in the long run, we need their support to sustain future recycling practices. Other target groups include the community and industries” (Informant A8).

Touching on the major challenges of PR roles, one informant proposed, “The major challenge in PR roles is how to communicate messages to the public using the right medium. How are we going to influence the public to change their mindset and behaviour towards environment? This is to me, the biggest challenge. The medium used is very crucial to ensure that we can convince them effectively. For instance which type of communication method is usually more practical to educate students in schools? Several PR tools can be used effectively.. for example, special briefings, demonstrations, exhibitions, flier distributions or posters” (Informant A2).

The weaknesses of PR roles are also mentioned by a few informants. One was quoted saying, “The weakness in PR roles is that we cannot rely on just one strategy alone in delivering the messages. Sometimes, we have to use multiple PR strategies to influence the audience or public. Public acceptance is really important to mark the success of any campaign” (Informant A2).

One informant in another session also believed the strengths of PR roles as “... about the flexibility that we may be able to develop the interactions, verbally and non verbally, with the public. We have plenty of choices, depending how we blend the strategies” (Informant A4).

Among the problems impinging PR roles in environment awareness campaigns, one informant insisted, “The common problem in conducting any awareness campaign is on the incentive part, where sometimes it can be helpful to make campaigns run better. When in schools, special incentives or prizes can motivate the audiences to make the campaigns more lively, cheerful and fun. In contrast, we have big problems in spreading environmental practices on a voluntarily basis as compared to other developed countries such as Japan and in Europe. Like it or not, recycling practices also need to show benefits in the form of ringgits and cents” (Informant A1).

Looking at how PR disseminates campaign messages to the primary target audience, one informant responded, “There are many options that we can choose to communicate the messages. What is more important is how effective the medium really is. We participate not just to fulfill the invitation from schools or local authorities, but also to foster relationships with the public in the long term. The messages must not only be delivered verbally, but also using other practical methods to inculcate the adoption of a new culture. For instance, besides having a talk session, we teach students to bring their recyclables to schools so as to familiarize them with the actual recycling culture. They are the one who should later educate their parents and family members” (Informant A4).

Regarding the PR roles by coordinators, educators and professionals in the campaigns, one informant views that “All of them are very important people who support campaigns. PR roles can be transformed into many ways and applicable in their own fields.

Coordinators have their respective initiatives to run awareness campaigns. The educators, teachers and parents have their separate responsibility to help the assimilation of any new culture. The professionals have their own strategies to develop awareness campaigns. All parties must work hand in hand to achieve the campaign objectives” (Informant A3).

### **Key Theme 3: The Efficiency of PR Roles in Environmental Awareness Campaigns**

Discussing about the critical success factors of PR practitioner roles, one informant admitted, “The critical factor for PR roles is to communicate using practical tools in order to deliver practical messages. The application depends a lot on the experiences gained from frequent awareness campaigns. We can’t deliver effectively if we have never faced the real situations before. You may notice that in delivering talk sessions, there will be a lot of obstacles during our presentations. Things can be handled smoothly if we do early preparation and know how to anticipate issues better. In school for instance, look out for feedback and response by throwing occasional random questions and provide some quizzes to the audience” (Informant A2).

In getting feedback of the awareness campaigns, one informant conveyed, “Normally, we can easily get immediate reactions from our audience. If not, we may use different methods of approaching them. For example, using static exhibitions or distributing posters and fliers will take longer to get feedback. Although some teachers or local councilors give some responses, the real audience .. the students, are the best indicators of our campaign. They will react by initiating to collecting litter which mess their school, collect recyclables, plant trees and organize their own awareness campaigns” (Informant A2).

Important tools can leave huge impacts on the PR approaches. One informant clarified, “... as far as I am concerned, the best tool which can give good impact is the public speaking approach. Why? Because we can see immediate impact and reactions from the audience in a two-way communication. We can just tell them what they should know and ask them when they don’t know! When we say something about awareness campaigns, we need some kind of booster reactions to optimize the chances to change when meeting the audience or public” (Informant A4).

In creating more impact on audience attitudes, beliefs, values and intended behavior in the communication campaigns, one informant shared, “Multiple promotion tools are needed to show the real situation and recent cases of environment violations. For example, we need some audio visuals so that they will clearly understand the messages. This will somehow change their attitudes, beliefs, values and intended behaviour. Most importantly, we need practical and hands on approaches in making the campaigns more successful” (Informant A3).

The differences of PR roles in organization were described by one informant as “The differences between PR roles in organizations are their main objectives or goals. PR roles in industries work via promotional and advertisement tools. Meanwhile, the NGO’s work on educating the general public” (Informant A5).

According to an informant, the importance of PR roles in organization is, “... to protect the image of organizations. PR roles can actually develop wide linkage with the outside world. It is actually as an effective change agent” (Informant A4).

Another informant maintained that PR roles in the context of environmental awareness campaigns, “... is actually to enhance public alertness, mindset changes, human behavioural changes, psychology and motivation” (Informant A5).

The environmental awareness campaign is actually quoted by one informant as, “... any form of environment related activities organized with the target audiences such as planting trees, holding talks, exhibition, demonstrations, recycling initiatives, saving natural resources and competitions” (Informant A3).

The reasons for organizing environmental awareness campaigns was quoted as, “... a need to educate our public and to increase everyone’s involvement and participation in a variety of activities towards conserving and protecting our beloved earth” (Informant A1).

The target places, to organize environmental awareness campaigns, as responded by an informant are “There are actually many places that we can conduct environmental awareness campaigns, either in schools, industries, offices, shopping complexes, public places and housing areas” (Informant A5).

The time specifically suitable to organize environmental awareness campaigns is quoted as “... depends on the organizer of the event to decide when is the campaign to be held. As for the schools, they would prefer on co-curricular days (Wednesdays) or schooling period. For community programs, they usually prefer weekends” (Informant A8).

With regards to participation in environmental awareness campaigns, an informant reflected that “Normally during campaigns, the people who participate do not have any limitation. They are the organizers, exhibitors, political personnel and residence associations. They range from the young kids until the elderly” (Informant A4).

The PR tools for the environmental awareness campaigns, as described by one informant, are “The important tools to run campaigns are through multiple strategies, so as to give a very good impact .. This includes talk programs, briefings, competitions and exhibitions” (Informant A3).

## **6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

PR is defined as the core values of an organization in projecting and maintaining a good image and showcase goodwill of the organization. Lenka Mikacova (2014) described that Public relations generally connected with communication activities planned to craft and preserve and organization’s image and relationship with its public. It is an important tool that is also used to project the company branding and strengthen relationships with its customer pool or clients. Saidathul (2017) characterized Public relations as a managerial function that plays important role as a problem-solver in environmental scanning and monitoring to identify issues and synchronize to the organization’s mission to avoid conflict. Other role of PR practitioners is actually to plan and execute the rightful strategies to develop specific relationships between the organization and its stakeholders. PR practitioners are responsible to generate information to the audiences. PR roles is important in environmental awareness campaigns as we need an effective approach to influence the public’s behaviour and inculcate their understanding towards environmental issues. PR roles encompass more than simply as educator, sometimes they also play roles as motivators, promoters or moderators.

Sung-Un Yang (2017) quoted from J. E. Grunig (2000) mentioned that a Symmetrical communication is an approach to public relations practice founded to “serve the public interest, develops mutual understanding between organizations and their public. Public relations and organizations must have a close relationship where PR is actually a medium to develop mutual understanding with the organization that rely on its PR strategies to enable them to develop social interactions and obligations. PR plays its function in developing the environmental awareness campaigns by using a specific approach such as talk programs in schools to educate the students, exhibitions, demonstrations, competitions, tree planting, recycling and many other programs. This can be done in many places such as industries, government offices and public areas. Helena Stehle (2016) supported the statements on ensuring mutual exchange as equals and on mediating between an organization and its public. She also described technician practitioners means be technically skilled, mastering communication tools, and communicating their organization’s messages efficiently and effectively as their most important activities, with mastering instruments. PR tools referred to hands on for running awareness campaigns are printing materials, brochures, pamphlets, exhibition displays and materials, advertisement, press releases and articles.

Nowadays, we need somewhat more sophisticated tools to boost the campaigns, for example by using the social media, websites and multimedia. Relationships with the audience can be developed with the target groups and sharpened further into special networking. For instance, for school program, we have to work closely with the District Education Department (DED) and Department of Environment (DOE) to synchronize activities that synergically impact the enhancement of awareness campaigns. We have to form specific groups and committees in order to carry out more activities and raise support from other related agencies and corporate companies.

PR strategizes available resources to maximize the involvement of the public in the campaigns. Lee Edwards (2017), explained that public relations tactics often address audiences through social media, events, viral videos, and community relations work. To develop that, the first pre-requisite is the vision of long term planning, meaning what are we going to achieve in the future. Of course there will be immediate and tangible progress along the way, but at the same time, we must keep doing the campaigns in order to support its activities. The key objective for triumphant PR strategies is to win the battle of ensuring the acceptance, assimilation and sustainability of its campaigns. PR influences the public via flexible and reliable methods to capture people’s interest. New information ought to be updated regularly using multimedia support, exhibitions and briefings. PR characters who possess related personal experiences and abilities can contribute to convey all the scheduled messages to the wider audience more effectively. The main target audiences for our campaigns, especially recycling activities, need to be focused to the most active groups of people. We want their committed support to practice environmentally friendly initiatives well into the future. Besides that, other likely target groups are specific communities and industries which are involved or related to the campaigns on hand.

There are several major challenges, weaknesses and strengths within PR roles. The major challenge is to communicate salient messages to the public using the right medium. How is best to influence the public to change their mindset and behaviour towards the environment? Indeed this the highest mountain of challenge to scale in PR roles. According to Donald K. Wright (2017), it is important to find out how public are connecting with others online via a variety of messaging apps. The medium used is equally important to ensure that we can convince them effectively. For instance, which types of communication methods are most practical to educate students in schools? An armamentarium of PR tools can be at our disposal, especially briefings, demonstrations, exhibitions, flyer distributions or posters.

The strengths of PR roles are that we may be able to develop the interactions verbally and non-verbally with the public and we have plenty of choices and it is up to the individual campaign organizer to mix and blend the most appropriate strategies that best guarantees positive outcomes. On the contrary, PR roles also possess inherent weaknesses, thus one cannot simply rely on only a particular strategy to deliver messages. Sometimes organizers have to use multiple PR strategies to influence their intended audience or the wider public. The eventual acceptance and internalization by the public is really important to herald the success of any particular campaign. Aida Nasirah (2014) believed that the Internet technology reflected the diversity variety of activities and provided an ideal medium of communication: one-to-one, many-to-many, many-to-few, so was ideally suited to conducting multiple campaigns simultaneously for targeting different publics.

One setback in conducting awareness campaigns is the lack of incentive support which can often catalyze the acceptance and uptake of campaigns. Maria Bada (2015) stressed that among factors which influence the behaviour is incentives in which our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental short cuts, such as strongly avoiding losses. As an example when in schools, specially designed incentive schemes or novel prizes can quickly and strongly motivate audiences, thus invigorating much livelier campaign agenda that are, cheerful and fun. It is a monumental ask trying to drive eco-friendly practices on a voluntary basis rather than being incentivized monetarily, as normally done in other developed countries like in European countries, as well as in Japan. For example, to many people, recycling practice is best to be projected to bring benefits in ringgits and cents.

PR disseminates and cascades campaign messages to the primary target audience, depending on how effective is the media used. It develops lasting relationships with the public in the long term. The messages must not only be delivered verbally, but also using other practical methods that can facilitate new culture inculcation. For instance, apart from holding talk sessions, they can teach students to bring their recyclables to school so as to familiarize themselves with the new culture. After all, they are the ones who shoulder the next responsibility to generate a ripple effect in educating their respective parents, family members and social contacts.

The possibility of PR playing the roles as co-coordinator, educators or professionals are rather important to support the campaigns. Their PR roles can be transformed through several ways to emerge as most applicable in their own field. Coordinators have their own initiatives to run different awareness campaigns. The educators, teachers and parents have their own duty to successfully adapt and adopt new cultures. Similarly, the professionals have their individual strategies to develop better and better awareness campaigns. Ultimately, all parties must work hand in hand to achieve targeted campaign objectives in the most efficient manner.

### *Efficiency of PR Roles Among Personnel of SWM Environment*

The critical success factor for PR roles is to communicate using precise tools to deliver messages. Its precision will depend on past experiences gained from running previous awareness campaigns. Inexperience PR practitioners unable to act effectively because they have never faced the real situation before. In delivering messages during talk sessions, there are a lot of barriers, nervousness and noise that can hamper presentations. The sessions can be handled more smoothly if we were better prepared and are aware how to handle any foreseeable



situation. PR practitioners can experiment a bit on various techniques or styles to deliver presentations by actively look out for audience feedback and response by throwing occasional random questions, trivia or quizzes that attract audience involvement with the aim of achieving better message penetration and buy-in.

Normally, we can get immediate reactions from the audience, though different methods should be deployed to approach different segments of the public. Two of such examples are by using static exhibitions or distributing posters and fliers. Unfortunately, it usually takes longer to get any feedback. Although some teachers or local councilors responded, the real audience, meaning the students, is the best indicator of the success or failure of the campaigns done. They are supposed to react by starting their initiatives to collect litter which messes the schools, collect recyclables, plant trees and run their own awareness campaigns.

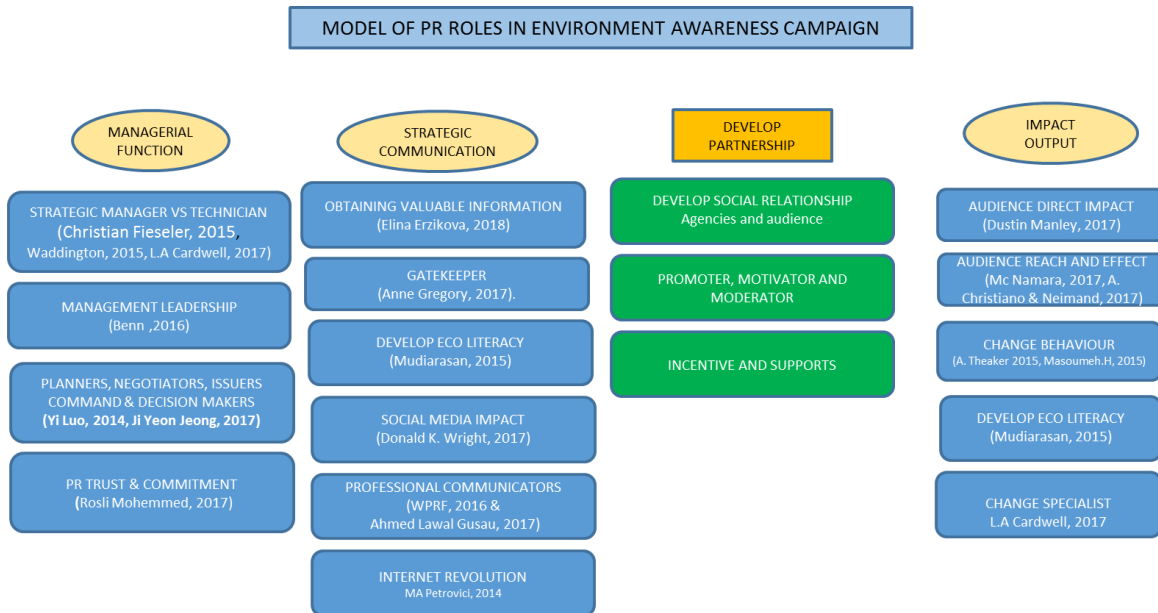
The most important tools which can give good impact is the public speaking approach. Why is this so? This is because we can see the immediate impact and reactions from the audience there and then. When PR practitioners say something concerning awareness campaigns, they need some sort of crowd reactions to optimize and boost the chances of generating active participation and direct feedback from the audience or public. In creating more impact to the audience, multiple promotional tools need to be used. In order to show or disclose real situations and recent cases of environmental violations, we need audio visual support so that they will internalize the messages more meaningfully. This will subsequently change their attitudes, beliefs and values; thus bringing out the intended sets of behaviour. What is important is that PR practitioners need practical and hands-on approaches in making their campaigns more lively and successful.

The roles of public relations in environmental awareness campaigns is something that extend to PR roles, especially towards educating and motivating the general public, especially in schools. Through that, PR conveys environmental messages, promotes awareness, interacts directly with the community, shares innovation and “green” ideas, organizes public clean ups and recycling campaigns, convinces households, studies public behavior, trains the trainers and handles public complaints. The challenges faced when managing environment awareness campaigns are the public readiness, lack of funding support, enforcement by authorities, commitment by communities and organizers, lack of badly needed infrastructure, inconsistencies, short lived program initiators or coordinators, low turnouts during campaigns and incentive mentality.

The strengths of PR roles in fact lies within its flexibility in organizing activities. Big or small, programs must not just be limited to schools, but also expanded to reach various other segments of the community. Some awareness campaigns depend too much on budget allocations as disbursed by the organizers in charge. By using the power of PR influence, PR practitioners can realistically convince countless corporate companies to contribute or support to cattainder campaigns or causes that closely mirror their respective corporate social responsibility aspirations and initiatives. There are some weaknesses in running environmental campaigns. PR practitioners must be competent to deliver the right messages to the public. Some may lack knowledge or confidence to give talks or briefings, especially to larger or more vocal / outspoken crowds. Some merely organize awareness campaigns to fulfill job related requirements, such as Key Performance Index (KPI’s), ISO14000 and departmental dashboards or targets. To them, running programs is only a job that needs to be done, and not their personal passion or conviction.

The effectiveness of any PR approach is highly dependent on the program frequency. The more interactions made with the public or audience, the more likely it shall be to succeed. Continuous campaigns can actually give better impacts as they open opportunities to provide more practical feedback and guidance to specific target audiences. In SWM Environment, the PR roles of activating environmental awareness campaigns include a few supporting elements of managing events or campaigns, media relations, or clean-up and recycling campaigns. These require PR professionals to have adequate knowledge and competency to deliver messages. Thus, it will also inevitably involve community support and positive behaviors.

Figure 1: PR roles in environment awareness campaign



The PR roles of SWM in running environmental awareness campaigns involves planning, executing recycling and clean-up campaigns, as well as handling event management and media relations. These are among the PR roles that have to be played by the SWM corporate communication's personnel. As the major findings focus on developing partnership, this supports Cardwell's study in developing mutual collaborations with key stakeholders in the community. Although managerial function, strategic communication and output impact are important, partnership with external parties, motivation and incentives will complement within each other.

### Summary of Findings

The environmental awareness campaign is conducted because of the need to educate the public and to increase involvement and participation from the audience or community in a variety of activities towards conserving and protecting our beloved planet earth. There are as a matter of fact many strategies available to conduct environmental awareness campaigns, be it in school, industries, offices, shopping complexes, public places and housing areas. Campaigns are any form of environment related activities which are organized with certain target audiences such as tree planting, talks, forums, exhibitions, demonstrations, recycling, saving natural resources and competitions. Their success is highly reliant on the organizers that plan and run the campaigns. Normally campaigns aspire to spark off symbiotic and sustainable participation between the organizers, exhibitors, political personnel and residence associations. In reality, there are so many types of campaigns that usually work closely with local authorities through multiple strategies, primarily talk programs, briefings, competitions and exhibitions.

### The Key Success of PR Roles in Environmental Awareness Campaigns

Having an accurate and reliable source of information is a must in executing awareness campaigns where self drive and motivation are the crucial push impact factors that are capable to inculcate and boost positive behavioral changes. Audience attitudes is very important to infuse the proposed environmental awareness practices. This will also change what they believe regarding major environmental issues. High media exposure will allow the messages to be delivered successfully to the intended audience. As for public engagement, it will largely involve community relations, government relations and mutual understanding with all vested parties. The essential and more important determinants of a satisfactory reach and penetration entails the professionalism of PR power, high competency, well trained PR personnel as well as proactive and journalism. Once gelled together, they will cohesively bring about a successful campaign.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study is to acquire a reliable and valid information by implementing a structured research strategy. The PR roles in an environmental awareness campaign is a field of practice by PR professionals that can only be effectively determined using a case study approach. It is an individual experience, hence a background knowledge of how it is planned and executed will give more insight on the subject matter.

### Future research

The research findings will be able to give current and different views regarding the importance of public relations strategies in disseminating information to create effective public awareness campaigns. This research will benefit those who are involved in PR and researchers who explore various PR activities to enhance public awareness on environmental campaigns. As for future research, there is a need to study the impact of using social media on environmental awareness campaign.

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