UNIT 33 CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Structure

33.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be introduced to:

- the definitions and scope of corporate communications,

- internal and external communications in the corporate sector,

- how communication is organized within a company, and

- different types of written communication in a corporate environment.

33.1 INTRODUCTION

So far we have seen how writing proceeds in a variety of media, but primarily for the purposes of transmitting information, such as through letters, reports and through the newspaper. Writing also plays an important role in organizations, large and small. Until about a decade ago, most writing within companies was done by administrators when it was addressed to others within the company, and by the public relations staff when it was for an external audience. Today, most of the communication tasks within organizations come under the function of corporate

communications. This involves writing, using media such as the internet, video, film and audio, organizing special events, and marketing collateral (materials that support marketing activities).

33.1.1 Definitions

What is today known as corporate communications has its roots in the older discipline of **public relations**. Public relations is defined in many ways, but one of the most comprehensive ways of looking at PR is to see it as

- an organizational activity that helps create and maintain relationships between an organization and its various stakeholders, that is, the various groups of people who are in some way interested in or affected by its work.

- These **stakeholders** are also known as its '**publics**', or **audiences**.

Corporate communications is a more expansive term that covers a somewhat broader range of activities than did most public relations departments. Paul Argenti and Janis Forman describe corporate communications as the "corporation's voice and the image it projects of itself on a world stage populated by its various audiences". While PR has been defined mainly in terms of 'reputation and relationship management,' corporate communications is conceived more broadly, and involves a wider range of functions including

- communicating policies and procedures internally,
- supporting marketing activities with promotional and educational materials,
- training employees to be brand ambassadors,
- creating and managing a company's brand identity, and
- advocacy with key opinion makers.

Corporate communications therefore is a key management activity, not simply a cosmetic one that makes the organization look good, but one that helps it work effectively as well.

33.1.2 Scope of Corporate Communications

Increasingly, corporate communications is seen as a **strategic management** function. In many companies, corporate communications is headed by a senior level executive, often a vice president who reports directly to the chairman or chief executive officer. This reflects the level of importance given to communication in building organizational culture as well as brand identity. The corporate communications function could be centralized or dispersed across an organization. In other words, there may be a central team that handles all communications related functions across the organization, or, as is often the case in large companies, each business unit may have a designated person to handle communications while the overall policies and plans are set by a senior manager who coordinates the different units.

The activities that usually come under corporate communications include the following:

33.1.2.1 Internal Communications

- Setting and implementing policies relating to style and content of messages that are disseminated within the organization

- Preparing standard formats for letters and other official communications

- Managing house journals/intranet content

- Conducting corporate events for employees

- Working with the Human Resources Department to build cohesiveness and camaraderie among employees and fostering employee loyalty

- Training employees and key functionaries to communicate effectively

33.1.2.2 External Communications

- **Media relations**—generating and placing press releases, developing contacts with journalists, finding opportunities to gain media coverage

- **Brand management**—identifying ways in which the company's brand and that of its products can be defined and promoted to best effect

- **Investor/donor relations**—creating reports for those who have a stake in the company

- **Government relations**—maintaining relationships with opinion leaders and policy makers, through a variety of means, including mediated and interpersonal communication

- **Community relations**—developing and maintaining links with the immediate and larger community through a variety of means.

- **Marketing communication**—supporting the marketing team with communications materials such as brochures, presentations, other promotional materials

Different organizations may place varying levels of emphasis on these activities, and may have other specific functions that are assigned to the corporate communications group, depending on the nature of the business.

Essentially, all the activities that are the responsibility of corporate communications serve to create a favourable environment in which the company can function. Internally, it is about setting and implementing communication policies and practices that maximize employee productivity and commitment to the organization. In other words, making employees feel good about their work and their workplace. Externally, it is about creating and maintaining a positive corporate image—ensuring that all the stakeholders have a strong sense of association with the company and its products or services.

As you can see, the scope of activities covered by corporate communications is quite broad, and involves a wide range of skills. Writing is one of these, and in this unit, we will focus on this particular aspect of corporate communications.

Observe and discuss:

Take a look at some organizational web sites. What are the different aspects of the site? Which audiences do you think they address and how can you identify these? Is it primarily meant for external or internal communications?

33.1.3 The Corporate Sector

With liberalization and globalization, the corporate sector in India is a huge employer of technical, managerial and other kinds of professional human resources. While we hear mostly about large multinational firms, the corporate sector comprises a host

of medium and small companies, engaged in a diverse array of businesses from textiles to information technology to financial services to entertainment. They all need to communicate, both internally and externally.

This has meant a growth in job opportunities for those interested in corporate communications, advertising and public relations. While many companies have their own corporate communication units, others hire consulting companies or agencies to handle these functions. When we talk of the corporate sector, we generally mean private companies engaged in the secondary or tertiary sector – manufacturing or services. Such companies operate for profit, and the role of corporate communications is to ease the business environment through a combination of publicity, promotion and relationship building, and foster internal productivity.

Think and discuss:

Consider some of the companies you are familiar with. What is the image you have of them? How did that image come to be? What are the ways in which these companies build their image? What do you think this has to do with their profits? Do you know any people who work for some of these companies? Talk to them and find out how they feel about working there.

33.1.4 The not-for-profit sector

Another significant player in economic, social and civic life is the non-government sector. This comprises organizations that are usually not for profit, and perform functions in what is broadly known as 'the social sector'—activities such as health, livelihoods, education, empowerment of marginalized groups, agriculture and development, and so on.

While non-governmental organizations may have a variety of structures, they are most often run by trusts or societies with members drawn from across different strata of society and different fields. Because they perform functions that contribute directly or indirectly to development and because their aims generally reflect the greater common good, they are also known as **civil society groups**.

Communication in this sector draws on the same broad skill sets as in corporates, but calls for a different approach. Internal communications have the same goals, but external communications are focused less on promoting a favourable business environment than a favourable policy or action environment. For example, while a company that makes biscuits might want to promote the idea of eating biscuits so that it can sell more of them, a non-governmental organization that educates people about nutrition would want to create enough awareness so that people practice healthy eating habits, or would want to influence government to make changes in the food packaging rules that encouraged companies to use safe packing materials for foodstuffs.

In the NGO sector, then, communication is aimed at influencing beliefs, attitudes and practice of certain key audiences, not for the purposes of commercial gain but to achieve certain desirable social goals. In general, if one works in this sector it helps to subscribe to the goals of the organization: in other words, to have similar ideas and beliefs.

Advocacy is a major activity in this sector. Advocacy is an activity that aims to bring pressure to bear on powerful groups such as governments, usually through persuasive communication, so that certain changes happen. Amesty International, a major international NGO that works for human rights and peace, advocates for the

abolition of the death penalty, and runs campaigns aimed at people and governments to bring about a change in laws that favour the death penalty.

√ **Check Your Progress 1**

1. Corporate communications comes from the older discipline of _____ _____.

2. Other ways to describe audiences are _____ and _____.

3. Corporate communications is about the company's _____ and _____.

4. Corporate communications is seen as a _____ _____ function.

5. Two major objectives of internal communications are:

   a.

   b.

6. The corporate communications activity that supports a company's sales is called _____ _____.

7. The branch of corporate communications that handles the company's image in the press is called _____ _____.

8. Companies that manufacture and market packaged foods are part of the _____ sector.

9. _____ is the process of influencing government, public and other policy making groups.

10. The non-governmental sector comprises _____ _____ _____ organizations.

33.2 PREPARING TO WRITE FOR AN ORGANIZATION

Just from the kinds of tasks outlined above, it is clear that the essence of corporate communication is reaching audiences effectively through a variety of means. No matter what the audience and what the medium, writing is an important part of the communication. Even when one is trying to reach audiences through audio-visual media, the production always begins with a written script or outline. So one just cannot get away from writing. It might even be fair to say that **writing is the basic skill that is needed for much of corporate communications**. This is of course complemented by other communication skills such as interpersonal relations and the ability to translate ideas into visual and multimedia formats.

33.2.1 How Writing for the Corporate Sector is Different

The structure of a corporate communications team is much like that of an advertising or public relations agency, particularly in large companies which engage in a huge volume of communications activities. The team is led by a senior manager, sometimes a vice president or director, and is divided into **client servicing** (or account management) and **creative groups**. The writer is part of the creative team, and works with the client servicing people to understand the concept, and with the visualizers and designers in the creative team to develop and implement the concept.

In a corporate setting, the communication tasks range from simple letters confirming appointments, to project reports, articles for the web site or newsletter and scripts for a company video. Therefore you need to be **flexible** and **versatile**, able to turn your hand to a variety of writing tasks, each intended for a different **audience**, covering a range of **style, length, depth** and **tone**.

If there's one thing that is certain about a job in corporate communications, it is variety. A writer who works for a corporate communications department will have to turn her hand to several different kinds of writing tasks. As noted in the earlier section, these range from simple letters and thank you notes to lengthy proposals, to scripts for promotional videos to project reports for a company expansion plan.

The element that binds all these different publications together is **point of view** and **purpose**. Unlike news writing, where the focus is on facts, or creative writing, where the focus is on the writer's perspective, corporate writing is writing with a very clear purpose, and slant—in favour of the company and its broad goals.

Internal communications serve the following objectives:

- To disseminate information about company policies

- To educate and motivate employees

- To keep employees informed of company achievements and changes in the work environment

- To create a sense of belonging and pride .

These are achieved through vehicles such as memos, bulletin boards, newsletters and house journals, internal events and the intranet.

External communications meet the following objectives:

- To publicise important company achievements and milestones

- To generate market interest

- To gain support for actitivies among key stakeholders or the general public

- To build corporate/brand identiy and image

- To manage crises and problems

These are achieved in many ways, both direct and indirect, but writers cater to these objectives through newsletters, the company internet, letters to shareholders and other publics, posters, advertising and marketing materials, company brochures. annual and quarterly reports, and presentations.

33.2.2 The Role of Research

All forms of writing involve some amount of preparatory work. As mentioned elsewhere, the writing process takes place in four stages—conception of idea, collection of material, construction of document and correction of final document. The first two stages are what are known as '**prewriting**', and constitute perhaps the most important stage in any kind of writing.

In corporate writing too, it is necessary to have a keen sense of audience (who are you writing for?) and purpose (what is this document intended to accomplish?).

Both these help you arrive at the appropriate tone, length and detail for each document you are creating. It also helps you evaluate the success of your communication if you have a clear sense of the outcomes you expect.

While shorter, more informal communications with less strategic value (such as intra-office memos about uncontroversial policy or process changes) happen without much advance planning, the longer, more strategic and information-heavy communications that have a longer shelf life (that are used over time, for instance) need more careful thought and make use of research.

Research in this context is mainly of four kinds:

- Surveys, interviews and focus group discussions to assess the audience

- In-depth discussions with management or key groups in the company to understand the purpose of the communication

- Pre-testing of materials to determine their appropriateness

- Post-testing to determine the effectiveness of materials

While the writers may not be involved in actually designing and conducting research, their work is informed by it, and as part of the communications team they may play a role in writing out survey instruments and putting together the research report or the concept note based on the outcomes of the research.

The assessment of audience gives you as a writer an idea of how to 'pitch' a publication.

- Should you use complex or simple language?

- Should a document be largely visual or should it be mostly text?

- Should it be hard sell (very persuasive) or soft sell (more indirect, using emotional appeal, for instance)?

Even for simple communications such as internal memos announcing a policy change, it is important for the writer to know the general mood of the employee body, and the kind of language that they would best understand and respond to. This understanding can be gained just with a few discussions with key employees. For larger groups of people, or for society in general, a writer would have to have a more structured way of gaining an understanding of the audience. Large companies use the services of social scientists to map the audience demographics and psychographics (general attitudes, belief systems, values, religious and group affiliations, for instance) so that they can plan their communications accordingly.

The purpose of the communication is particularly important in deciding the kind of 'slant' you wish to give it, the amount of detail, and the wording.

- Is it meant to persuade or just to inform or educate?

- Does it have to do with a thorny issue that requires sensitive handling to gain support?

- Is it explaining a mistake or a misunderstanding between the management and the employees or to clear up some negative publicity with shareholders?

Developing materials to support marketing efforts, for instance, requires very different handling from making a presentation to the Confederation of Indian Industries or

any other professional association. So the writer needs to understand the purpose, and to do this, he or she must work closely with the technical or the managerial staff or the business development group (whichever team requires this publication to be created) to get their perspective on what they want to say and why they want to say it.

Read and discuss:

Try to find a range of corporate media, such as

- annual reports,
- company brochures,
- product information leaflets,
- articles in the press, and so on.

Discuss the content and style of each. Who are they aimed at, and how can you tell? How does the tone and the level of detail differ across each?

The writer also gains information from pre-testing the materials that have been created, on a small subset of the target audience. This pre-testing could be as simple as showing a memo to a couple of colleagues for their reactions before mass mailing it, or as complicated as showing a brochure to about fifty stakeholders before ordering a final print run of 5000. The feedback from this limited audience sample tells you whether your writing is on target or not, and whether it is understandable and generates the response that is desired. It allows you then to make the changes in your document that will correct any problems that are thrown up by this pre-test.

Despite the pre-testing, it is still important to see how a particular communication has worked across the target audience, particularly for key communications; such as campaigns aimed at

- increasing market share,

- raising awareness of a particular product, service or issue, or

- disseminating information about a certain company activity.

This is usually done with mass mailed surveys or questionnaires administered across selected groups of people representing the target population. While the writer may not gain directly from the results of this research, it provides insights that go into developing future materials.

√ **Check Your Progress 2**

11. _____ is the most important skill in corporate communications.

12. The two components of a corporate communications unit are the _____ _____ and _____ groups.

13. Corporate communication tasks range from _____ to _____ and _____.

14. Each writing task demands a different _____, _____, _____ and _____.

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15. What makes writing for the corporate sector different from news writing is

_____ and _____ .

16. Research in corporate communications usually covers four areas; these are:

a.

b.

c.

d.

17. Understanding the audience for a given document helps you _____ the

publication in the right way.

18. Understanding the purpose helps decide the _____ of the communication.

33.3 WRITING TASKS IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

If you have been through the rest of this course in writing, you are already prepared to be a corporate writer—with a little change in perspective. Writing should be focused on the audience's needs and interests, it should be crisp, clear and engaging.

33.3.1 Media writing

One the main and most visible tasks of corporate communications is media relations, that is, managing the company's image in the mass media. The media is both a channel for your communication with other audiences, such as the government, shareholders, the immediate community and the general public, as well as an audience in itself. At the first level, the corporate communications department must be able to interest the media in its actitivies. Secondly, it must reach out through the media to its other audiences.

Companies do this through various means:

- by issuing and placing press releases,

- by generating feature articles about the company or its key people,

- by holding press conferences,

- by associating oneself with popular causes or with celebrities,

- by encouraging editorial discussion on topics of interest,

- and of course by doing good work.

Perhaps the most important tool in the writer's kit, as far as corporate communications are concerned, is the **press release**. The press release is

communication to the media about a development in the company that is judged to be of interest tzo the public, and is considered newsworthy. That is, it fulfills one or more of the criteria based on which editors judge **news interest** (see Unit 25, Block V, on Writing for print).

The press release must therefore be written in a manner that can be directly used by the media. It must highlight an aspect that is of interest to the larger community and certain key stakeholders. It must be written in a manner similar to a news story, that is, in the inverted pyramid style, going from the most important downward to the least important facts.

Example

FORMAT OF A STANDARD PRESS RELEASE

Date

Place

Suggested headline: NEW GLUCOSE MONITOR LAUNCHED

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AHMEDABAD, March 5, 2008. Blood sugar monitoring doesn't have to entail an early morning run to the nearest diagnostic centre any more. LifeRenew Pvt Ltd has launched an ultra-portable unit that has a built in retractable needle and a pounch to hold testing strips used to collect the blood sample. Priced at an affordable Rs 2500, the unit comes with a 5-year guarantee and a free annual re-calibration service for this period. The unit will be available at all leading medical outlets...

For further details, contact Ms Neeta Ghosphal, Product Information Officer, LifeRenew

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The press release must contain the following information:

- The new information, with all the details of interest to a general audience, written like a news story

- The date of issue

- A headline

- Clear contact information

The release should avoid a promotional tone, sticking to facts. Where possible, it must be supported by a statement from a senior company official. The idea is to provide enough information for the media outlet to use as is, in a manner that discourages too much editing.

News editors receive hundreds of press releases every day, and most end up in the trash can, so if your press release is to catch attention, it should have information that is clearly useful to the reader. While some conscientious editors prefer to use press releases simply as background information for a story that they will assign one of their reporters to, many newspapers use the release as it is, without little or no modification. So to avoid any misrepresentation, the release should be written so that little damage can be done in the process of any modification!

Unless it is a news feature, a press release should be no more than one or two pages long. It should include one or two lines toward the end about the company, a standard statement that goes along with every release or announcement.

The press release should be addressed to the news editor or to a specific reporter or writer on the staff of the media organization, and it should be followed up with a telephone call or email indicating that it has been sent. The corporate communications group should maintain a record of which releases have been used and in what form.

Read and Discuss:

Look through a daily newspaper and see if you can identify any stories that you think have been generated from press releases. How can you tell? Can you recreate the press release from the news item?

Exercise:

Create a press release for a large pharmaceutical company based on the following information:

Modern Medicines Pvt. Ltd has opened a new high-technology plant in Pune, thus doubling the capacity of the company to produce several life-saving drugs. The new facility will focus on manufacturing biotechnology products, particularly drugs for cancer that have been in short supply in the country. The plant has been set up at a cost of Rs.78 crore and the cost recovery is expected to be 100 percent in six months, and over 136 percent by the end of the year. The plant will provide employment to about 600 people at all levels. "This is an exciting new phase of growth for us, and it is going to catapult us into the international market," noted CEO Ramesh Kulkarni. Modern Medicines is one of Maharashtra's fastest growing start up companies in the pharma sector, with plants in Pune and Mumbai. The company employs over 2000 people and had a turnover of close to Rs 224 crore in 2007.

HEADLINE:

In addition to media releases, companies also maintain web sites that serve as a source of current information for its various stakeholders. The web site often incorporates a 'media room' where

- press releases are archived,

- new announcements are made, and

- links are provided to information of interest to the general public or to specific stakeholder groups.

It is the task of corporate communications to maintain the web site and keep it updated.

33.3.2 Internal Communications

A large part of corporate communications is about maintaining a cohesive, productive work environment. This means maintaining open channels of communication between different groups within the company, and making sure that information is shared in appropriate ways. The most common ways of sharing information is through internal memos (when the information is short and needs to be sent around quickly) and a company newsletter or house journal (for longer, less time-bound communications). The house journal also allows employees to express themselves in a more creative manner. Many companies today also have an internal web site called an intranet, which allows for information sharing in a more dynamic fashion. The intranet might include online versions of a house journal, spaces for direct interaction between different functional groups, electronic versions of policy and procedure manuals, formats for letters and applications, and news of interest to employees.

33.3.3 Other Areas in Corporate Communications

Corporate communications also deals with brand management through advertising and special events, as well as crisis communications. In the former function, the corporate communications team liaises with various external creative agencies that might be employed with the company, or independently coordinates corporate advertising. Managing events is also an important part of the function, as is supporting the marketing team by creating presentations for sales events, preparing brochures and leaflets for products and services, or coordinating their production. This is becoming a special function within the corporate communications department called **Mark-Comm** (marketing communications) and is sometimes set apart as a unit in itself.

An emerging specialization within this area is **Crisis Communication**—stepping up in a crisis and communicating to key audiences so that normalcy is restored as soon as possible. This involves juggling several roles: briefing media, allaying fears and concerns of the community and employees, and educating the general public about what went wrong and what the company is doing about it.

33.4 CONCLUSION

We have touched on only a few of the key areas in corporate communications while providing a general overview of what the field covers. Much of corporate communications is learned on the job, as it is a field that is still emerging and open-ended. Strong writing skills combined with flexibility and the willingness to learn and communicate that learning are what it takes to be a good teacher.

33.5 LET US SUM UP

➤ Most of the communication tasks within organizations come under the function of corporate communications. This involves writing, using media such as the internet, video, film and audio, organizing special events, and marketing collateral (materials that support marketing activities).

➤ Corporate communications has its roots in the older discipline of public relations, but it covers a somewhat broader range of activities.

➤ Corporate communications is seen as a strategic management function. The activities under corporate communications include Internal communications and External communications.

➤ The corporate sector in India is a huge employer of technical, managerial and other kinds of professional human resources.

➤ Another significant player in economic, social and civic life is the non-government sector. Communication in this sector draws on the same broad skill sets as in corporates, but calls for a different approach. Internal communications have the same goals, but external communications are focused less on promoting a favourable business environment than a favourable policy or action environment. Advocacy is a major activity in this sector.

➤ The essence of corporate communication is to reach audiences effectively through a variety of means. No matter what the audience or the medium, writing is important: even audio-visual media production begins with a written script or outline. So writing is the basic skill that is needed for much of corporate communications.

➤ The writer is part of the creative team, and works with the client servicing people to understand the concept, and with the visualizers and designers in the creative team to develop and implement the concept.

➤ The communication tasks range from simple letters confirming appointments, to project reports, articles for the web site or newsletter and scripts for a company video. Therefore you need to be flexible and versatile, able to turn your hand to a variety of writing tasks, each intended for a different audience, covering a range of style, length, depth and tone.

➤ Corporate writing is writing with a very clear purpose, and slant—in favour of the company and its broad goals. It is necessary to have a keen sense of audience (who are you writing for?) and purpose (what is this document intended to accomplish?).

➤ Research is mainly of four kinds. Writers may write out survey instruments and the research report or the concept note based on the outcomes of the research.

➤ The assessment of audience gives a writer an idea of how to 'pitch' a publication.

➤ The purpose of the communication is particularly important in deciding the kind of 'slant' you wish to give it, the amount of detail, and the wording.

➤ The writer also gains information from pre-testing the materials that have been created, on a small subset of the target audience.

➤ Perhaps the most important tool in the writer's kit, as far as corporate communications are concerned, is the press release.

➤ Companies may maintain web sites that serve as a source of current information for various stakeholders.

➤ Corporate communications also deals with brand management through advertising and special events, as well as crisis communications.

33.6 FURTHER READING

Argenti, P.A. and Forman, J. 2003. The Power of Corporate Communications. New York: McGraw Hill.

33.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. public relations

2. 'publics', or stakeholders

3. 'voice' and image

4. strategic management

5. (mention any two of the objectives listed in section 33.1.2.1)

6. Marketing communication

7. Media relations

8. corporate sector

9. Advocacy

10. not for profit

11. Writing

12. client servicing creative

13. letters to project reports, articles and scripts.

14. style, length, depth and tone

15. point of view purpose

16. audience surveys, discussions with management, pre-testing of materials, post-testing of materials

17. 'pitch'

18. the kind of 'slant'