

# „Green” Public Relations

## Public relations in the sector of products and services for Polish agriculture

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**Summary:** The field of Public Relations has undoubtedly been assuming growing importance in Poland. Understood as an element of marketing communication or a function of company management, it has a significant impact on company's external and internal environment. According to Puls Biznesu<sup>3</sup> the value of the Polish PR market amounted to 250m PLN in 2005, which is a 20% increase as compared to 2004. According to the author Urszula Światłowska, “the turnover of PR agencies is growing and even smaller companies demonstrate their interest in the services”. Considering this, it can be assumed that PR activities will soon be initiated by many smaller Polish companies, often connected with the agricultural sector. The change discussed by the authors of the article reflects the phenomenon of PR's growing importance among other communication channels in Poland.

**Keywords:** public relations, polish agriculture

Activities involving the creation and maintenance of a positive image, aimed at providing constant and consistent communication with the environment, are of crucial importance for companies, such as: Orlen, LOT, PZU or TP S.A. However, the observations made so far and the knowledge of the market allow me to claim that the sector of companies producing for agriculture is delayed in terms of development stage and range of PR activities as compared to other business areas, e. g. IT, pharmaceutical business, power industry, insurance or finance. What is the reason behind the situation? It might be the recent transformation in Polish agriculture following the accession to the European Union, or perhaps it is due to the lack of a certain need? Personally, I would concur with the second argument. In my opinion, EU accession marks the beginning of technological development of the Polish countryside. Obviously, an increased demand for these products and services has to be based on further efforts to improve farmers' awareness as to the need of taking advantage of civilization benefits. New technologies, modern machines, plant protection substances increasing quantity and improving production quality, knowledge on the subsidies system, structural programmes, investment resources, consulting services are only the main of these benefits. The factors enumerated here are in my opinion the basis for the growth of demand. This kind of growth results in increased volume of production as well as goods and services offered, leading to increased competition and the use of sophisticated marketing activities, necessary to support growth. Among the activities aimed to increase

farmers' awareness of the need to benefit from the abovementioned factors are Public Relations. The transformation of Polish agriculture following EU accession has therefore caused a chain reaction, directly translating into activities of companies aimed to manage the growing demand *inter alia* by means of PR.

Analyzing the market sector in question, it is important not to ignore the end consumer of products provided by the companies discussed here, i.e. the agriculture. After EU accession agriculture gained quite a new character. The image of a rich EU farmer possessing modern agricultural equipment, benefiting from EU subsidies, will not scare Polish farmers anymore. Direct subsidies, structural funds and other forms of supporting agriculture have created opportunities for the development of numerous farms in need of capital and support. Until the end of 2006, owing to community policies and structural funds, Polish farmers received approximately 35 billion PLN. Moreover, it has to be noted that the initial subsidy to one hectare of land amounts to 25% of the EU rate (approx. 110 EUR). In 2013 these subsidies will be equivalent to 100% of the rate applied in the “old EU”. If we also consider structural monthly pensions in the gross amount of 2500 PLN which can be obtained under special conditions by farmers who make over their farms to young farmers, the purchasing power of the group grows even more.

As time went by, farmers learnt to appreciate the subsidies, started making investments, thus increasing the demand on the market of goods and services for Polish

<sup>3</sup> Puls Biznesu, Supplement, *Branża roślinna jak na drożdżach (Mushrooming Business)*, Urszula Światłowska, 22.02.06, p. 2.

agriculture. Many investments are financed from EU funds, which amounts to transferring the financial burden onto the EU. The increasing demand, knowledge and increasing specialization of agriculture have caused the market to develop and competition to grow, companies have taken action to improve sales figures and effectively reach the Polish farmers with their offers. As one of the methods for improving sales, marketing has certainly been applied. It has to be noted, however, that in the age of globalizing economies, increasing competition of products and services on the markets and economic cooperation of countries, marketing perceived by means of mix functions (4P) appears to be insufficient to meet the requirements of today's market. Providing an offer based solely on the high quality of products, enhanced by an effective promotion, attractive price and easy purchase is not enough to persuade the consumer to buy a specific product or service. Each case has to be considered taking into account all that which cannot be determined in a clear, rational and obvious way, namely the irrational factor. The result is an internal picture, image and approach of the potential client to the company. It is the emotional factor, significant in supporting and complementing rational decisions, which creates a comprehensive picture of the company's communication with the group of its present and future clients. Summing up, in order to achieve the maximum reinforcement of their activities, companies should apply not only pure marketing tools, but also implement communication based on reliable public relations. This situation has existed for some time now. The only question arising at this point is: what kind of PR do the aforementioned subjects apply in terms of quality and quantity?

### The essence of public relations

Referring to the article by Przemysław Kołak published on the business web portal Proto.pl<sup>4</sup>, I would like to quote a well-known American journalist, Daniel Schorr, who would often say that in the mass media society you do not exist unless you exist in the media. We might argue in favour of or against this statement; one thing is sure, however, communication has always played and will continue to play a crucial role in the history of mankind.

The explanation of the essence of Public Relations proposed by Kołak seems most appropriate. He claims that "PR is a process of shaping communication by developing credibility of a company. As opposed to advertising, credibility cannot be bought; neither is it possible to develop PR in a short period. PR thoroughly examines and analyzes the needs of the environment both inside and outside the company. The implication of these activities is a competent response to these needs. A PR specialist serves as a "liaison" between the board and the public." Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize "credibility" as the main

component of PR activities. Credibility cannot be bought, which is why it needs to be worked out. The implication of this statement is the assertion that if credibility cannot be bought and has to be worked on, PR is a long-term, uninterrupted, coherent and consistent process. It does not include activities, such as buying an ad in the newspaper or unfair practices involving paying journalists for publications. These are activities of one-time effect, which under no circumstances can serve to establish the credibility of a company.

The concept of credibility is strictly connected with ethics. As the author of the article rightly points out, "Perceiving Public Relations from the angle of credibility also means taking into account professional ethics. Lack or abandoning rules of ethics implicates undermining credibility and, consequently, loss of image. It is a very dangerous and crisis-triggering phenomenon, which we often have to deal with."

The above-described examples and phenomena are considered by the author on macro scale, with Public Relations serving a management function. However, there also exists a micro scale, which PR specialists most often deal with in their work.

Considering the micro scale, the author refers to a range of activities, the meaning of which is not less significant than the role of management. The activities include regular contact with the external and internal public, opinion leaders, monitoring and analysing media. Among these is also communication via the Internet and many other types of activities essential for an efficient operation of the company. All such activities require appropriate positioning and a well-thought-out strategy. Otherwise, claims Kołak, the saying: "you pay for advertising, you pray for Public Relations", will assume exaggerated importance and place quantity before quality. One of the board's basic mistakes is to evaluate the PR officer taking into account the number of media materials instead of their quality or usefulness. It also has to be noted that every institution possesses "Public Relations", whether they want it or not – however, not each of them knows how the tool should be applied.

### Defining the term *Public Relations*

It is estimated that approximately two thousand definitions of Public Relations exist today. All of these undoubtedly expand the knowledge on the phenomenon, it is impossible however, to offer a comprehensive outline herein. To provide the Reader with a definitional picture of PR, I would like to present the most essential elements of world-acknowledged PR definitions as selected by Krystyna Wójcik<sup>5</sup>. "Public Relations is a system of activities in the scope of social communication, a social process in the form of a constructive dialogue, and therefore:

<sup>4</sup> [www.proto.pl](http://www.proto.pl), Przemysław Kołak, *Public relations – sztuka skutecznej perswazji (Public relations-the art of efficient persuasion)*, 15.06.2006

<sup>5</sup> Krystyna Wójcik, as above, p. 27.

- conscious, intentional/deliberate;
- methodical and systematic, planned, based on research and analyses, making use of the achievements of all sciences creating chances for effectiveness;
- permanent and long-term, since the nature of objectives requires continuation and longer periods of realization;
- oriented towards shaping the desired relations between an organization which undertakes such activity (business, non-business, institutional, association, etc.) and the part of the environment which is of mutual interest to the organization at present or in the future;
- the quality of these relations is expressed by values, such as: mutual understanding, trust, credibility, support, positive attitude and perception, limited contrariness of relations, balance of interests, society's welfare.”

The above definition is most appropriate. However, it should be added that considering credibility as an attribute of PR and persuasion as a method of influencing the environment, “all sciences creating chances for effectiveness” quoted by Krystyna Wójcik should be thoroughly considered. Effectiveness cannot be based on the well-known assumption “The end justifies the means”. Thus, effectiveness is the end but it has to be assumed that instead of manipulation, previously described persuasion will be applied.

Taking into account all existing definitions of Public Relations, it appears difficult to create one universal and overriding description. However, it is worth pointing out that communication based on PR activities should be that of permanent, continuous and regular nature. PR includes *inter alia* daily contact with journalists. Acting as a spokesperson of a given organization or company, we cannot allow PR communication to take seasonal form. We are the persons who will be addressed by journalists asking for information e.g. on anticipated entrance to the stock exchange. What will be the reaction of media not informed about such an event? Similar is the case with regularity, which enables us to affect the most permanent elements, such as: social and cultural transformations, change of behaviour patterns, attitudes and opinions.

### **Public relations as a management function or marketing mix component?**

During the historic process of developing a definition of Public Relations, two basic trends emerged. The first one presents PR as a management function, the other as a marketing mix component (promotion element). Inclined to agree with the first approach, I think that PR should above all

be seen as an element of a subject's communication with the environment. An element which works both ways. In this approach PR is seen as a mechanism collecting information from the environment to be passed to the company and providing the environment with information about the company. The process of information exchange is of strategic importance and is strictly connected with managing a company or organization.

Public Relations considered as a marketing mix component, a promotion element, significantly narrows the perception of the phenomenon, focusing only on the product or service included in the sales plan. Due to the popularity of this approach, however, it should not be ignored. Aneta Szymańska explains in her book<sup>6</sup>: “The role of Public Relations in marketing mix can be defined as follows: it consists in passing specific information to key target customers within the marketing chain, so as to influence their purchase decision”.

It needs to be kept in mind that in this case PR functions in service of the product, directed by sales objectives. Consequently, it mainly concerns transaction processes between an organization and the environment. Therefore it is often referred to as *Marketing Public Relations*, located within the so-called marketing mix 4P (product, price, place, promotion) as the promotion-mix component. As can be easily noticed, the focal point is the product or service offer of a company, placed before company image. Certain Polish producers of plant protection substances, e.g. Bayer Crop Science can serve as an adequate example at this point. Farmers are familiar with particular brands, without associating the name Bayer with their producer. It is a typical example of the marketing approach to Public Relations.

The marketing approach to Public Relations is more and more common. Taking again the example of plant protection substances producers, such as Bayer Crop Science, BASF or Du Pont, it can be noted that the companies' main objective is to improve sales results or to perform an effective market launch of a new product. In such companies marketing and sales directors are usually responsible for Public Relations. Such persons analyse the results of PR activities basing on measurable effects, disregarding image aspects. PR is then perceived as a tool designed to bring countable results, obtained within a short period. These results are often expected to be shown in conjunction with sales results, which become the basis for evaluating PR activities. Not infrequent is a situation when the person supervising PR communication expresses a negative opinion on its results, quoting sales figures and the number of newspaper clippings lower than anticipated.

Many definitions underline that Public Relations is a management function, which helps define the objectives and philosophy of a company. It entails a process of communication with all groups in the environment, aimed to

<sup>6</sup> Aneta Szymańska. *Public relations w zintegrowanej komunikacji marketingowej (Public relations in integrated marketing communication)*. Wrocław 2005, p. 59

adjust corporate mission to public expectations. This approach to PR is often referred to as *Corporate Public Relations* (CPR).

Public Relations understood as a management function in my opinion most appropriately captures the essence of the phenomenon. In their work, Jarosław Œwida and Dariusz TworzydŁo write<sup>7</sup>: “PR is a management function of a continuous and planned character, owing to which the organization gains and maintains stability, affinity and support of people, for whom it holds present or potential interest, by means of conducting opinion surveys about the organization, aiming for an optimal adjustment of its objectives and activities. Wide, methodical distribution of information aimed at improving cooperation with the society and an effective realization of own interests.” The approach presented by the authors creates a picture of PR perceived as a certain philosophy of the corporation. This philosophy is based on the need to communicate and cooperate with the environment, realizing the interest of both parties with mutual advantage.

Drawing from my own professional experience, I can point out that also in this case it is possible to outline a profile of the person who sees PR as a management function in a given organization.

- usually a person or company department with a strictly defined role in the area of corporate PR (communication department, spokesperson, PR manager) – responsible to the board
- understands that marketing activities only support and complement PR strategy (within planned tasks, not strategic goals)
- perceives the strategy of PR activities as a long-term process, paying attention to the creation of image, trust and mutual positive relations with the environment.

It is therefore worth mentioning that CPR (Corporate Public Relations) is rather connected with the strategic aspect of corporate activity. It is closer to the helm than to the oar. In contrast, PR as a marketing mix component is in my opinion part of the whole strategy, a puzzle element which completes the picture. This whole picture comes under approaching PR as a management function. The ideal communication system could be presented by means of the following equation:

**Ideal communication system =  
PR as a management function + PR as  
a marketing mix component**

## Agricultural media market in Poland

Piotr Czarnowski, an authority in the field of PR writes<sup>8</sup>: „Historically speaking, in the socialist Poland, as in other Eastern European countries, no communication system was required; however, there existed a need for an efficient propaganda apparatus. What is interesting, specialist, professional, technical media – neutral politically, but much-needed in education, were very well developed at that time. The political transformation brought about very radical changes. For the media this meant practical disappearance of professional titles and the emergence of the new general press. However, since both the media and their journalists were newcomers, some essential rules of journalism were lost, such as the absolute requirement of verifying information or the necessity of separating the text from the commentary.

Further in his article Czarnowski points out the reason behind the changes. “Polish companies discovered advertising and came to the conclusion that it is a good method of communication. Advertising was also discovered by the media and once the euphoric perception of the media’s great liberation mission faded away, it quickly turned out that another mission was introduced – that of obtaining advertisement in any quantity and for any price, even at the cost of misinforming the recipient.” The increased importance of advertising, the loss of certain journalism rules and the reluctance to give objective information is in my opinion very characteristic of *inter alia* agricultural media. This opinion is based on the results of a survey, conducted among journalists, to be discussed further in this article.

A similar picture of the situation is drawn by Magdalena Bajer<sup>9</sup>, Chair of the Media Ethics Council. According to her, “The standards of media have considerably deteriorated recently. It is due to the breakdown of a certain set of values which used to be universally applied. Today there is no common acceptance and recognition of particular norms and rules of behaviour. As an example, no general agreement exists as to whether it is always wrong to lie. It is considered justifiable in some circumstances.” Similar to Piotr Czarnowski, the author is painting a rather sad landscape of the Polish media. This is well illustrated by the international study of corruption in media “Cash for News Coverage” (Institute for Public Relations, 2003), where the Polish media came out worst as compared to all media of Eastern Europe, including those in former Soviet republics. The research showed *inter alia* lack of media’s respect for law and ethics as well as relatively poor specialist qualifications of journalists.

I do realize that my criticism is based on the supposition of an ideal media system characterised by high ethical

<sup>7</sup> Jarosław Œwida and Dariusz TworzydŁo *Public Relations*. Rzeszów 2003. p. 123

<sup>8</sup> Piotr Czarnowski, 2005. Text commissioned by Harvard Business Review in April 2005. Withdrawn following editorial modifications changing the sense of the article. This is the original version, prior to editing.

<sup>9</sup> Magdalena Bajer. *Prawne regulacje nie poprawi jakoci mediów (Regulations will not improve media quality)*. Comment for Rzeczpospolita, 18.08.2006. p. B3

standards. Moreover, I am aware that this kind of system is rarely encountered in its pure form. I still think, however, that in order to discuss company PR in Poland, to be able to evaluate and analyse it, one first needs to define precisely the ground on which PR exists. It is sometimes said that “PR is a reflection of the media” and I have to admit there is a lot of truth in the statement. In the course of my professional activity I have often heard a journalist saying: “Indeed you have an interesting piece of information to convey, but please contact the advertising department first,” or “Good morning, we have received your press release. We will be glad to publish it once you have bought an ad with us”.

I perceive this as a media disease which has a destructive impact on the standards and quality of PR services in Poland. Unfortunately, it can also be noticed in the media relations of companies offering products and services for the Polish agriculture, which are the subject of this study.

### Those with a green thumb, or: media dealing with agriculture

Contrary to what might be expected, the range of agricultural media in Poland is quite wide. Titles focused on agriculture can be found on television, radio, in the press and the Internet. Their subject area is very diversified, ranging from magazines targeting small garden owners to those addressing owners of large specialized farms with hundreds of hectares of land, from home gardens to mass-scale plant production, etc. In fact every person in any way connected to a branch of agriculture will find something interesting for himself, especially as regards specialized press. Less optimistic is the case with the television. At the forefront are TVP and TVP3 public television stations, which are obliged to deal with agriculture according to their mission. Other television channels fail to perceive farmers, especially the less affluent group, as potential advertising receivers, and therefore evince no interest in this area of business activity. They limit the range of information provided to the crucial issues, such as EU subsidies, natural disasters, etc.

To begin with I would like to quote results of the AGRIBUS research, conducted by ABM Agencja Badan Marketingowych (ABM Marketing Research Agency)<sup>10</sup>. The research revealed that out of all press genres, agricultural press is the most widely-read type. Nearly two thirds of farmers admit to reading specialist press (63%). The magazines read most regularly are: *Top Agrar Polska* (22%) and *Farmer* (21%). Agricultural press is read more often by farmers based in large farm (over 50 ha). Farmers value these magazines for their expertise (65%), that is reliability and accuracy of the subject matter. Price is most essential to 20% of readers.

As regards television, *Tydzień* (*Week*; 46% regular viewers) and *Agrobiznes* (40% of regular viewers) are

programmes with the largest audience. 44% of farmers listen to the radio. 10% of farmers have access to the Internet and 4% of them have an e-mail account. The larger the farm, the bigger the possibility of its owner having access to the Internet.

According to my own observations, specialist press tends to focus on more advanced issues, such as: new technologies, agricultural machines, plant protection substances and all kinds of case studies, educational and scientific series, etc. Television programmes, on the other hand, deal with agriculture on a more general level, accessible to the viewer. The subject matter is connected with a farmer’s day-to-day problems and is often addressed not only to large-area farmers, but also those running family farms, with less than 50 ha of land.

The market of agricultural media in Poland mainly consists of specialist press, television and radio programmes, and the Internet. There is a lack of strong regional titles or regionally profiled agricultural programmes on TVP. It is also worrying to observe commercial channels showing no interest in agricultural issues. Both TVN and Polsat mainly address big city audience, even though farmers constitute a large consumer group in Poland. As far as specialist press is concerned, in comparison to other business titles there is a striking orientation towards benefiting from the cooperation with companies. This attitude requires producers to “buy” articles and publications on the products and services they offer. Further in this article I will present the results of a survey conducted among journalists writing about agriculture. In some cases respondents complain about companies which “have bad PR, since they buy no advertisements”, but send press releases instead. Such statements give proof of the media’s poor quality and low professional ethics. Reliable communication is not and cannot be based on the rule of barter “article in exchange for advertisement”. This approach to communication necessitates PR activities which contradict PR ethics set forth *inter alia* in the Code of Good Practices by ZFPR (Association of Public Relations Companies), in the Code of Ethics by PSPR (Polish Association of Public Relations) and the Code of Journalism Ethics by the Association of Polish Journalists.

### PR Knowledge

In an attempt to describe the specificity of the PR market in Poland, I will refer to an article by Piotr Czarnowski<sup>11</sup>. The author discusses a study conducted in December 2004 by the The Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics. Its results served as a basis for the report “Public Relations in Polish Economy”. According to the report, 36% of Polish companies neither have a PR department nor a PR specialist. The PR market in Poland was valued at PLN 160 million, an

<sup>10</sup> AGRIBUS Research. Marketing Research Agency. 15.11–02.12. 2002

<sup>11</sup> Piotr Czarnowski, 2005. Text commissioned by Harvard Business Review in April 2005. Withdrawn following editorial modifications changing the sense of the article. This is the original version, prior to editing.

amount which indicates growth as compared to the previous year, but is still less than in the case of much smaller markets – e.g. Czech or Hungarian. Most striking, however, is the fact that the average share of the so-called income fee (remuneration for PR services) in company income amounts to 40–45% only. Real PR, according to Czarnowski, supports itself on income fee, the standing charge for PR services. Polish PR appears to live off something else. The author attempts to explain what constitutes PR companies' income: "In search of an answer, one has to ask about the most popular PR services. These include media relations (80%), event organization (77%), creation of communication strategy (36%) and crisis management (36%). In the Polish market, "media relations" include buying media (advertising), sponsored articles (a category elsewhere perceived as advertising), product placement." It can easily be concluded that Polish relations with the media are not equivalent to the media relations in PR category, recognized elsewhere in the world. Events, so popular in Poland (77%), normally serve as a marginal PR tool, never applied separately, and treated as one of many parallel PR activities. One might wonder about reasons behind the dissimilarity of the Polish PR market. Again I refer to Czarnowski's opinion: "Specific PR reflects a specific demand. Polish companies do not value and do not need communication. Even those companies which are eager to promote the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility – amounting to clear, transparent, but also advanced communication – are not able to communicate on a basic level. Polish companies are not interested in their own image, especially in the long term. This might be due to considerable turnover of management staff, less concerned about building a company which will be appreciated by the public, and rather focused on temporary economic results. Consequently, Polish companies are more determined to sell products than image, disregarding the growing importance of image in the sales process."

Criticizing the Polish perception of PR, the author continues: "According to the Polish interpretation, PR is a cheap substitute for advertising, an occasional activity aimed at achieving immediate results, used mainly to support temporary sales. PR in Poland is performed in campaigns and its basic tool is the so-called promotional "event". In Poland there is a general belief that corporate image does not depend on public opinion, but can be bought in advertising campaigns."

PR activities perceived in this way, as well as the picture of the market presented above, are to be used further as an interpretation tool, especially useful for pointing out weaknesses of PR activities adopted by agricultural companies in Poland.

### **Public Relations of companies offering products and services for Polish agriculture**

In this section of the article I would like to present a summarized analysis of PR activities of companies which offer products and services for Polish agriculture. With reference to the thesis, I would like to prove that corporate

PR in the sector discussed is still in its initial development stage, often failing to respect ethical standards and is in many cases simply underestimated.

The market of companies and institutions offering products and services for Polish agriculture is large and still growing. It is mainly a consequence of changes in demand. Farmers' needs become more and more sophisticated. It seems that a couple of years ago the mobile phone was a rare and expensive commodity in the countryside. The situation is different today. Country inhabitants, especially those who develop their farms, make investments, study, start matching city dwellers in terms of consumer needs. This in turn results in a rapid growth in the number of companies tailoring their offer to Polish agriculture.

In this work I decided not to analyse PR programmes of companies representing all economic sectors present in the countryside. This is due to the fact that the study and analysis of the PR phenomenon can be based on a selection of PR programme examples, representative for the whole group. It is not necessary to describe the specificity of each sector in the light of the subject of this study.

My analysis of the state of PR in the „green" sector in Poland was based on the knowledge on PR communication of two international companies – leading in area of sales of plant protection substances, two producers of forest, park and garden equipment, one of the leading banks offering products and services for farmers, an institution for companies producing plant protection substances and the biggest university educating young farmers and agricultural managers.

However, in order to give a complete picture of the phenomenon, both sides of the relation need to be discussed. On the other side are the media. Media and companies form one communication system, in which both sides affect one another and define one another's way of acting, also as regards PR activities. Therefore it is important at this point to present the media's opinion about the companies' actions and the development stage of the agricultural media market, conditioning these actions. In order to obtain the necessary information, I applied a research tool in the form of a survey, sent out to editorial offices of 25 most important agricultural magazines. These included the following titles: *Agroserwis*, *Poradnik Gospodarski (Farmer's Guide)*, *Owoce (Fruit)*, *Warzywa (Vegetables)*, *Kwiaty (Flowers)*, but also daily papers covering agriculture: *Nasz Dziennik*, *Rzeczpospolita* etc.

The purpose of my research was to obtain journalists' opinion concerning the quality, frequency as well as means and tools used in PR activities by companies offering products and services for agriculture. The questions included in the survey concerned the following issues:

- quality of contacts with the PR sections of companies operating in the agricultural sector
- frequency of using materials received from PR sections of companies operating in the agricultural sector
- quantity of press materials received from companies
- quality of press materials received from companies
- frequency of contacts on the part of the PR section by means of e-mail, phone or directly

- sources of information about companies offering products and services for agriculture
- flaws in PR activities of companies from the agricultural sector
- conformity of agricultural companies' PR with ethics
- general evaluation of PR activities of these companies
- examples of good practices of the companies under research

### **Evaluation of PR's condition based on an analysis of agricultural companies and journalist survey results**

Materials and information obtained in the research from companies offering products and services for Polish agriculture allowed me to draw the following conclusions:

- **Low level of knowledge about the essence of PR**

Companies and their PR sections do not quite realize what PR really is. In most cases PR is perceived as “arranging” publication of articles about a new product, a supplement to advertising and promotion as well as a tool supporting sales plan performance. The situation is much better in corporations, as they operate also in other sectors of economy, where PR-based communication is much better developed. As an example I can take banks or chemical concerns, operating also in the pharmaceutical sector, where reliable Public Relations is the basis for communicating with the environment.

- **Absence of PR strategy – ad hoc activities adjusted to marketing and sales plans, occasionality of undertakings**

None of the companies under survey was in possession of a PR strategy designed especially for the agricultural market. In most cases PR activities are occasional and strictly connected with the marketing plan. Organization of a press conference in connection with the launch of a new plant protection product can serve as an example here. The tool is not further used for other purposes related e.g. to continuous communication with the media and the willingness to maintain close, direct relations with the media. As a result of the absence of a PR activities plan, it is impossible to plan in advance the cooperation with the media, which due to their publishing cycle or the nature of the planned undertaking (e.g. media patronage), need to take decisions about potential cooperation well in advance. Also the creation of corporate image due to its long-term character is usually based on a previously planned, continuous sequence of PR activities. According to the definition of PR, it does not include activities of seasonal nature, typical of promotion, advertising and other marketing mix tools.

- **Underestimation of PR understood as a management function**

Companies do not pay enough attention to their “reflection” in the environment. Instead of planning a long-term PR strategy, aimed at improving or maintaining a positive image, they focus on products, perceiving PR as sales support. As a result, the potential of PR lies fallow. Polish companies are more determined to sell goods than the image, completely disregarding the increasing role of image in selling the products. Considering the development of the products and services market, this situation has to be changed.

- **Gaps in corporate image policies**

Agricultural companies in Poland do not get involved in image-developing activities, such as e.g. CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). Attention paid to natural, economic and social environment creates a positive corporate image in its environment, which is most naturally reflected in the sales results recorded by these institutions. Owing to image-developing activities, companies can gain credibility, trust and liking of consumers, to be followed by their loyalty and brand attachment.

- **Absence of coherent PR activities within one institution**

Initiated activities often lack coherence within one institution. The head office implements its own PR policy, while the branches have their own one. Lack of coherence and coordination of activities in the absence of a joint PR strategy for the whole institution can result in losing control over the communication, information chaos and the loosening of relations with the environment and the media due to lack of transparency.

- **Passivity, reactive PR policy and lack of ingenuity**

Some of the companies analysed made no effort to create information materials for PR purposes, which would take into account local specificity and media requirements. These companies try to draw media attention making use of ready-made materials received from head offices based outside Poland and translated into Polish. Many of these materials are of imitative character, which might discourage those potentially interested in the subject, at the same time resulting in the company receiving poor appraisal as regards quality of communication.

- **Lack of knowledge about PR tools or misuse of such tools**

Some companies analysed revealed lack of knowledge about basic PR tools. One of the companies, a producer of agricultural equipment, provided journalists with reprints of promotional leaflets labelled as “Press release”. This proves

lack of expertise in the area of PR, and is certain to have a negative impact on the relations with media and the evaluation of corporate communication.

- **Absence of crisis communication**

None of the companies offering products and services for agriculture in Poland maintains crisis communication. None of the institutions analysed plans its strategy and procedures for crisis situations, there are no instructions on how to proceed in such cases, no training is organised for crisis team members and the management, there is no crisis management strategy, which would include supporting company management, internal and external communication, managing the website and contacting the media and customers. This results from the absence of a general communication strategy and focusing only on product communication. However, it should be pointed out that crisis can occur in any of these companies. Media crisis can happen to a plant protection substance producer if a product gets into food, or to a company selling a series of defective wood saws which can seriously injure users. Companies should always be prepared to initiate previously established procedures of crisis management.

If we add on top of the above the results of the survey sent out to journalists dealing with the area of agriculture, asked to evaluate the standards of PR activities applied by agricultural companies, we will see a complete picture of PR standards operating in Polish agricultural companies. The main conclusions are as follows:

- **Generally mediocre quality of contacts with the PR sections of companies operating in the agricultural sector**
- **Small or mean frequency of using materials received from PR sections by agricultural press and poor usefulness of such materials at work**
- **Small quantity of useful, high-quality materials sent by companies to agricultural press**
- **Shortage of communication with PR sections of companies by means of phone, direct contact and finally – electronic mail**
- **Internet and occasionally applied PR tools as a source of information about the company – weakness of daily, consistent communication of companies with the media**

- **Lack of knowledge about ethics in PR activities both on the part of companies and agricultural media**

Summing up, it can be stated that PR activities of agricultural companies are characterized by occasionality, poor quality, lack of knowledge as to the meaning and essence of PR and disregard for the rules of professional ethics. PR activities, rather resembling promotion or advertising, constitute one-way communication, making it impossible for the dialogue with the environment to occur. This leads me to assert that PR as a communication tool is either used inadequately or used in a limited way, without complete understanding. I do recognize vast, unused potential in the area of PR, which needs to be activated in the face of future development of the market of products and services for Polish agriculture.

The situation is not being improved by the agricultural media, which partly define the shape of PR activities applied by agricultural companies. Perceiving PR as malevolent activity aimed at publishing company “advertisements” free of charge, hinders reliable communication and requires companies to use unethical tools in order to achieve desired results.

First of all there is a need to educate the market of agricultural media and companies in the field of PR. Furthermore, I do observe shortage of specialists who would provide professional communication based on PR activities and adhere to the essential rules of professional ethics in journalism and PR.

To conclude, a question should be asked about the possible solution of the problem. It appears that only further education about PR and the increasing demand for diversifying communication tools can serve as a remedy to the existing situation. The problem is not connected with a shortage of staff, technology or other means. Problematic is the absence of

a certain awareness and the resulting necessity to include reliable Public Relations into corporate planning. It has to be noted that Polish agriculture is becoming increasingly demanding and beside the colourful leaflets could suddenly request to receive reliable information, more thorough education, and an opportunity of extending the scope of business activity of the company they are interested to cooperate with.