



REL-BASED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COMPANY PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN MAINTAINING IMAGE

Ilham Albar Pane, Taofik Hidayat, Agnita Ayucendika Damanik
Universitas Pamulang
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Abstract

Rail-based public transportation companies face increasing demands for service quality and communication transparency, making public relations a strategic function in maintaining corporate image. This study aims to analyze the public relations communication strategies employed by rail-based public transportation companies to sustain their corporate image in the public sphere. The research adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method, with data collected through in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners, observation of communication activities, and analysis of corporate documents and communication materials. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that public relations communication strategies are implemented through systematic message planning that emphasizes information consistency, the utilization of multiple communication channels including conventional and digital media, and proactive relationship management with the media and key stakeholders. In addition, public relations plays an important role in addressing public complaints and disseminating timely and transparent information during service disruptions to maintain public trust. The study concludes that the effectiveness of maintaining corporate image is influenced not only by the frequency of communication, but also by message credibility, responsiveness of public relations practices, and the alignment of communication strategies with the characteristics and expectations of rail transportation service users.

Keywords: *corporate image; public relations communication; communication strategy; public transportation; rail transportation*

Abstrak

Perusahaan transportasi publik berbasis rel menghadapi tuntutan tinggi terhadap kualitas layanan dan transparansi komunikasi sehingga peran humas menjadi strategis dalam mempertahankan citra perusahaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi komunikasi humas yang diterapkan oleh perusahaan transportasi publik berbasis rel dalam mempertahankan citra di mata publik. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, melalui pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam dengan praktisi humas, observasi aktivitas komunikasi, serta analisis dokumen dan materi komunikasi perusahaan. Teknik analisis data dilakukan secara interaktif melalui proses reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi komunikasi humas dilaksanakan melalui perencanaan pesan yang menekankan konsistensi informasi, pemanfaatan berbagai saluran komunikasi baik konvensional maupun digital, serta



pengelolaan hubungan dengan media dan pemangku kepentingan. Selain itu, humas berperan aktif dalam menangani keluhan publik dan menyampaikan informasi terkait gangguan layanan secara cepat dan terbuka sebagai upaya menjaga kepercayaan publik. Temuan penelitian menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan mempertahankan citra perusahaan tidak hanya ditentukan oleh intensitas komunikasi, tetapi juga oleh kredibilitas pesan, responsivitas humas, dan kesesuaian strategi komunikasi dengan karakteristik publik pengguna jasa transportasi berbasis rel.

Kata kunci: citra perusahaan; komunikasi humas; strategi komunikasi; transportasi publik; transportasi rel

I. INTRODUCTION

Rail-based public transportation is a vital part of the urban public service system, supporting safe, efficient, and sustainable public mobility. In the context of public services, the success of transportation delivery is determined not only by technical and operational aspects, but also by the quality of the relationship between the service provider organization and the public using the service. One key indicator of the quality of this relationship is the level of public trust in the transportation company (Cornelissen, 2017).

Public trust is built through a continuous and consistent communication process based on organizational transparency and accountability. Public relations plays a strategic role in building understanding, managing perceptions, and bridging organizational interests with public expectations (Grunig & Grunig, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2019). In rail-based public transportation services, public relations communication becomes even more crucial when companies face operational disruptions, service delays, or safety issues that could potentially impact public trust (Coombs & Holladay, 2021).

The development of digital media has also changed communication patterns between public transportation companies and service users. The public now demands transparency of information, rapid response, and two-way communication that allows for direct feedback (Argenti & Barnes, 2020; Phillips & Young, 2018). Previous research has shown that public relations communication strategies that adapt to digital media contribute positively to increasing public trust in the public service sector (Mathews, 2025; Kurniawan, 2025).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on public relations communication and public trust, research specifically examining the role of public relations communication in building public trust in rail-based public transportation companies remains relatively limited, particularly in the context of public services in Indonesia (Sabila & Saragih, 2025).

Therefore, this study is crucial for analyzing public relations communication practices and their contribution to building and maintaining public trust. This will contribute theoretically to the development of public relations communication studies and provide practical implications for communication management in rail-based public transportation companies.

Problems arise when public relations communication practices in rail-based public transportation companies fail to fully bridge the gap between organizational interests and public expectations. At the normative level (*das sollen*), public relations is expected to maintain symmetrical two-way communication, be responsive to complaints, and proactive in conveying information openly and accurately. However, at the empirical level (*das sein*), public complaints persist regarding delays in information, inconsistent messages, and poor public relations response to service disruptions. This gap between the ideal role of public relations and the reality of communication practices has the potential to impact a company's public image.

Several previous studies have shown that public relations communication strategies significantly influence the formation of an organization's image and reputation, particularly in the public service sector. Previous research has generally focused on crisis communication, the use of digital media by public relations, or the relationship between public relations and customer satisfaction. However, studies specifically addressing public relations communication strategies in the context of rail-based public transportation are relatively limited, particularly those that examine these strategies as an ongoing managerial process, rather than simply a crisis response. Furthermore, some studies tend to be descriptive in nature, without comprehensively linking public relations communication practices to the dynamics of corporate image formation.

Based on this review, the novelty (*state-of-the-art*) of this research lies in its holistic analysis of the public relations communication strategies of rail-based public transportation companies, positioning public relations as a strategic actor in maintaining the company's image amidst the demands of public service and the dynamics of public perception. This research not only captures communication channels and messages but also examines the role of public relations in managing relationships with the public, media, and other stakeholders in daily operational situations.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyze and understand the public relations communication strategies implemented by rail-based public transportation companies in maintaining their corporate image in the public eye and to identify communication factors that contribute to the sustainability of a positive corporate image.

II. THEORETICAL STUDIES

2.1 Public Relations Communication

Public relations communication is a managerial function aimed at building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics through a planned and ongoing communication process (Cornelissen, 2017). In the context of public service organizations, public relations not only serves as a conveyor of information but also as a mediator of interests between the organization and the public (Wilcox et al., 2019).

Grunig and Grunig (2018) emphasize that effective public relations communication is characterized by openness, two-way dialogue, and a focus on the public interest. This symmetrical two-way communication model is seen as an approach capable of building trust and legitimacy in an organization on an ongoing basis. In practice, public relations also plays a role in managing issues and crises that have the potential to impact the reputation and public trust in the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2021).

2.2 Public Trust

Public trust is a psychological state that reflects public confidence in the competence, integrity, and goodwill of an organization (Heath & Johansen, 2018). In the context of public services, trust is a crucial factor influencing user acceptance, satisfaction, and loyalty (Kurniawan, 2025).

Previous research shows that public trust is formed through direct experience with services, perceptions of organizational transparency, and consistent communication quality (Argenti & Barnes, 2020). When organizations are able to convey information accurately, timely, and responsively, public trust tends to increase, even in situations that could potentially lead to a crisis of trust (Mathews, 2025).

2.3 Public Relations Communication in Rail-Based Public Transportation Services

Rail-based public transportation companies are characterized by their mass-market, high-risk nature and their high reliance on public trust. Operational disruptions, delays, or

safety issues can quickly impact public perception of the company's performance (Coombs & Holladay, 2021).

Several studies have shown that proactive and transparent public relations communication contributes significantly to maintaining public trust in public transportation companies (Sabila & Saragih, 2025). The use of digital media, such as social media and official websites, enables companies to establish two-way communication, provide clarification, and respond to public complaints quickly and openly (Phillips & Young, 2018).

However, studies specifically integrating the concepts of public relations communication and public trust in the context of rail-based public transportation are still relatively limited, particularly at the level of strategic analysis of organizational communication in Indonesia.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the public relations communication strategies of rail-based public transportation companies in maintaining their image. The approach employed was a case study, allowing researchers to explore public relations communication phenomena contextually and comprehensively, taking into account the characteristics of the organization and its publics.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with key informants, including public relations practitioners and relevant stakeholders, observations of public relations communication activities, and documentation studies of company documents, policies, and communication materials.

The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods with an interactive model encompassing data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This resulted in a systematic understanding of the patterns, strategies, and practices of public relations communication in maintaining the image of rail-based public transportation companies.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Public Relations Communication Message Planning

The research results indicate that message planning is the initial stage that determines the effectiveness of a public relations communication strategy in maintaining a company's image. Communication messages are designed taking into account company policies, service operational conditions, and potential public reactions. Public relations emphasizes the

importance of consistency and careful message development to avoid misunderstandings among service users. One informant stated that "all information that goes out must be through a single channel and must have gone through internal coordination, so that there are no differences in messages between one unit and another" (H1). This finding indicates that message planning is carried out in a structured manner to maintain uniformity of information and stability of the company's image.

4.2. Utilization of Communication Media

The public relations communication strategy is also realized through the integrated use of various communication media. Digital media, such as social media and the company's official online channels, are used as the primary means of conveying information quickly and reaching a wide audience. Meanwhile, conventional media and relationships with the mass media are still utilized to strengthen the credibility of information.

One informant explained that "social media is now a priority because the public wants information quickly, but we still maintain relationships with the media to ensure the information we convey is legitimate" (H2).

This shows that public relations does not replace old media with new media, but rather combines them as part of an adaptive communication strategy.

4.3. Public Relations Management

To maintain a company's image, public relations plays an active role in managing relations with the public using its services. This relationship is built through two-way communication, particularly in handling complaints, inquiries, and input from the public. Public relations' responsiveness to public complaints is an important indicator of positive perceptions of the company.

One informant stated that "we try to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, because a delayed response can escalate a small problem into a big one" (H3).

This finding indicates that public relations management functions not only as a means of providing information but also as a strategy to maintain trust and a company's image.

4.4. Communication Strategy in Crisis Situations and Service Disruptions

The research findings indicate that service disruptions are crucial for public relations in maintaining a company's image. In these situations, public relations is required to convey

information quickly, transparently, and accurately to avoid fueling public speculation or mistrust.

One informant stated that "when there is a disruption, the most important thing is to quickly convey information and explain the cause and the steps taken by the company" (H1).

This communication strategy in crisis situations demonstrates that a company's image is not only built during normal service times but is also tested through the public relations team's ability to manage communications when problems arise.

The findings of this research reinforce the theoretical view that public relations communication strategy is a continuous process involving planning, implementation, and evaluation of communications. Message planning, media selection, public relations management, and crisis communication management are interconnected in shaping public perception of the company. The research findings also address the gap between "das sollen" (the "sollen") and "das sein," where responsive and coordinated public relations communication practices can approach the ideal role of public relations as a two-way relationship manager between the organization and its publics.

Thus, public relations communication strategy has proven to be a key element in maintaining the image of rail-based public transportation companies amidst the dynamics of public services and demands.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the public relations communication strategy of rail-based public transportation companies plays a crucial role in maintaining the company's image in the public eye. Public relations not only carries out the function of conveying information but also acts as a strategic communications manager, designing planned messages, utilizing various communication channels in an integrated manner, and building two-way relationships with the public using the services.

The success of this communication strategy is evident in the consistency of messages, the speed and transparency of information, and the responsiveness of public relations in handling complaints and service disruptions.

The research findings indicate that a company's image is not formed through momentary communication activities, but rather through a continuous and adaptive communication process that adapts to the dynamics of public service delivery. Therefore, a

professionally and contextually implemented public relations communication strategy can bridge the gap between the ideal role of public relations and actual communication practices, while simultaneously strengthening public trust in rail-based public transportation companies.

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