



Private Sector Commission of Guyana

PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY

September 2008

DETERMINATION OF OBJECTIVES

The Private Sector Commission defines itself in its Mission Statement as “The leading advocate of the Private Sector on national issues” and its primary task as “articulating the shared positions of (its) membership” and “to promote socio-economic growth and development through the creation of effective partnerships with government and other stakeholders”.

The Commission sets out its purpose, in summary, as:

- Integrating for the purpose of national representation, sectoral, small business and corporate organisations.
- Vigorous advocacy on behalf of its membership with national and local governments and generally with regional and international stakeholders.
- Providing leadership to its membership by encouraging and facilitating productive partnership amongst themselves as well as with government, other interested parties and international donor agencies.
- Helping to develop, promote and sustain a programme which reflects the vision and goals of its membership and increases the competitiveness of the country’s business community and the nation within the global economy.
- The setting of high ethical standards and encouraging values of accountability, transparency and integrity in conducting business.

The Commission has, further, as a result of a number of retreats, developed a five point Strategic Plan, at least three of which have objectives which require a communications component:

- Building public private partnerships.
- Developing a national economic strategy.
- Ensuring political stability.

The Commission has established several Sub-Committees which, each and in themselves, most frequently represent the public face of the Commission and give meaning to the public perception of the Commission in the implementation of the Commission’s Strategic Plan

The Governance and Security Sub-Committee, for example, maintains frequent and direct contact with the leadership of the country’s political parties and national security agencies and with the Office of the President and Ministry of Home Affairs with regard to the maintenance of national security, a critical objective of the Commission’s Strategy.

Each of these Sub-Committees, therefore, in their respective areas of interest, serves as a public relations arm of the Commission

THE PRIMARY TARGET AUDIENCES

For the purpose of public communications and public relations, the Commission's primary target audiences may be listed as follows:

1. The Commission's membership.
2. The government.
3. Political parties
4. Other private sector organizations.
5. Trades Unions.
6. NGOs
7. Religious organizations and bodies.
8. General public.

Membership

The Private Sector Commission is unique as a representative body for private sector business in that it is an umbrella organisation having within its membership, a number of already well established and independent Chambers of Commerce, professional, cultural and social organizations and a corporate sector representative body, each with its own particular business, professional and sectoral directorships and interests.

A major objective, therefore, of the Commission must be to represent, nationally, those matters and issues which are of common interest and concern to all of its membership, rather than have its individual members taking singular and separate public positions on these issues - issues for instance, such as taxation, national security, governance, national competitiveness and the environment.

A major communications challenge for the Commission in this regard is to maintain continuous consultation, through its Executive Director, with its varied membership. This is best achieved by a regular exchange of information on critical issues of concern which

reaches beyond and cut across the special interest of its members and can be most effectively represented at the national level.

It is important, too, that every effort is made to have the Commission's members attend and play an active part in the Commission's Council Meetings.

Whenever the Commission takes a public position on any matter on which it speaks for its entire membership, it is critical that the membership is consulted, preferably at a Council Meeting, if necessary called for the purpose, and that all the membership is informed prior to issuing a public statement.

The Government:

Effective relationships between government and the Private Sector is best achieved if the government can be persuaded to accept the Private Sector as its most important partner in the economic development of the country. The Private Sector must, however, be able to maintain its independence of position and action when representing its members on matters where there will be, sometimes, serious disagreement and a conflict of interest.

It is, nevertheless, essential for the Commission to remain "engaged" with the government, even at times and on issues where there may be serious differences on matters of economic policy and business practice. Clearly, if dialogue breaks down, no useful purpose is served.

The Commission, however, needs to jealously guard its right of independent thought and action and to ensure that its own membership and the members of that collegiate, who constitute a significant part of the general public, perceive the Commission as a credible independent voice, able and ready, when necessary, to challenge government policy and practice.

The distinction between political and economic policy is often blurred. When the Private Sector takes up a position which is at odds with the government on matters which affect the sector, any government will have the tendency to regard the Commission as "anti government".

It remains, therefore, an ongoing public relations challenge to persuade the government to accept that the expression of a strong opinion by the Commission which is in disagreement with government, is not an expression of political opposition to the government. This task must largely be the responsibility of the leadership of the Commission.

It will always remain the task of the Commission to persuade the government of the day of the value of accepting the Commission's right to be a partner of the government and to

be included at all those levels of governance at which decisions affecting the welfare of the country are made.

Political Parties

The maintenance of frequent and cordial public communications and relations with the separate political parties should be a *sine qua non* of the Commission. Each party needs to perceive and respect the Commission as the face and the voice of the entire Private Sector. Each party needs to understand that the Commission is apolitical.

The Sub-Committees, especially those with respect to governance and security, finance, trade and investment, should be the Commission's public face in meeting with the political parties on the matters which they represent.

Private Sector Organizations, Trade Unions, NGOs and Religious Organisations

The Private Sector Commission is, of course, one of, if not the most, important representative bodies of Civil Society. It is often the case that national issues will arise where good governance requires that the government consults with and involves all of civil society.

It is important, therefore, that the Commission maintains reasonably frequent contact and collaboration with the other major organizations of Civil Society, through its Executive Director as well as, when required, its Executive Management Committee.

Civil Society is too amorphous a body to effectively conduct public relations with the State, unless its various bodies can speak collectively with a strong voice, especially in times of national crisis. In almost every respect, the Commission, because of its organizational structure and administrative strength, is the strongest of civil society voices. The Commission should, therefore, take the initiative and seek common ground in matters of national concern in meeting with the other major representative organizations of civil society.

General Public

The general public, at the end of the day, when the chips are down, represent public opinion. Public opinion can be a very effective force for effective public change. It was Abraham Lincoln who once declared that:

“With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public opinion goes deeper than he who enacts statutes and pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed”.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Issues Management

The report of the outgoing Chairman, Mr. Michael Correia, delivered at the Commission's Annual General Meeting on 14th April, 2008, indicated that while the country's economy and business outlook has performed relatively well, there were a number of outstanding issues deemed essential for the private sector to flourish, with regard to governance and security, competitiveness of the economy, inclusive government, and a meaningful partnership between government and civil society, which continue to need to be addressed by the Commission.

Major Issues

The following are the major issues which remain on the table and will, therefore, need to be on the Commission's Agenda in its deliberations with the Government and other relevant agencies:

1. **The importance of a stable governance and security climate.** At the last National Stakeholders Meeting, there was general consensus that:
 - a Parliamentary Standing Sectoral Committee on National Security with ministerial representation, would be established as a matter of urgency. It is yet to be established;
 - the six Constitutional Commissions would be appointed within 90 days. It remains to be done; and
 - the Parliamentary Constitutional Reform Committee would be convened and activated to examine further areas of constitutional reform. This is yet to happen.

It was also agreed that steps would be taken to ensure the meaningful and effective participation of civil society in the parliamentary process and that an agreed mechanism for the continuation of the National Stakeholders Forum would be explored.

As a consequence, the Commission has written the President asking for a meeting to discuss the reconvening of a National Stakeholders Meeting so that a progress report is provided and a way forward for a continuing national dialogue is reviewed. This matter remains outstanding.

2. **The functioning of the NCSU and the appointment of its Director.** In his address to the Annual General Meeting, the former Chairman noted that most of the Commission's energies were focused, in the previous year, "on moving forward with the implementation of the National Competitiveness Strategy". This remains an ongoing and critical issue.

- 3. The implementation of the Security Sector Reform Action Plan.**
This Plan and its continuing support by the British Government remains an outstanding issue.
- 4. Review of the Disciplined Forces Commission report by the Special Parliamentary Select Committee.** The Commission is on the record as urging government to present a White Paper on the Security Sector to address the need for a comprehensive National Defence and Security Policy and Strategic Plan for the administration of the Security Sector. This has seen a lack of progress.
- 5. Concern at the development of Organised Crime.** The Commission is also on the record of having urged a full examination of the underlying causes which have led to the development of organized crime.
In spite of the achievement of closure to the reign of terror reportedly led by Rondell Rawlins and his gang, the question of heavily armed organized crime, the recruitment of young people into crime, the widespread importation of high powered guns into the country and an expanding narcotics trade and money laundering, all remain major issues.
- 6. Tax reform and a review of the implementation of Value Added Tax (VAT).**
The VAT tax rate and the disposition of the surpluses from the collection of VAT, are all ongoing and of considerable significance to the Private Sector and the public.
- 7. National Broadcasting Act and Authority.** While the Commission has earned the agreement of the President to accept its nomination as a member of Advisory Committee on Broadcasting, the ACB has served its useful purpose. The need, therefore, for legislating a National Broadcasting Act and establishing a National Broadcasting Authority to regulate both public and private broadcasting, remains very much a public issue.
- 8. The Information Act.** This issue will become significantly more important as new General & Regional Elections approach and the Opposition accelerates its demand for equal access to State owned radio and television.
- 9. The Composition and Tenure of The Guyana Elections Commission** This is an issue that should invite the attention of Civil Society and, therefore, the Private Sector Commission.
- 10. The Reform of the Justice System.** This remains an issue for the Commission to continue to address, especially with regard to the delay in the administration of justice.

While the above list is not exhaustive, it probably does represent the major issues which will continue to attract public attention and concern and require the public intervention of the Commission in one form or another.

PUBLIC RELATIONS ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES

The Commission may wish to consider the following recommendations for organizing its public relations and implementing its activities:

- **PR Consultant** - The Commission will need to retain the services of a Public Relations Consultant to work with the Executive Director, the Executive Management Committee, the Council and the relevant Sub-Committees in conceptualizing, planning and preparing the messages and material relevant to the Commission's position on the various issues before the Commission and in managing specific public relations activities.
- **Issue Position Papers** - Given the range of current affairs issues before the Commission, the Commission should adopt a proactive public communications policy in presenting its position on these issues. It is recommended that the Executive Director, in collaboration with the PR Consultant, initiate the preparation of Position Papers on all of the major issues for the consideration of the Executive Management Committee and the Council.
- **Quarterly Press Conferences**- The Commission's Chairman and officers of the Executive Management Committee hold a quarterly Press Conference reporting on the Commission's activities, focusing on the issues of major current concern to the Commission.
- **Fortnightly Television Programme** - The Commission should consider a fortnightly half hour television programme hosted by the Public Relations Consultant and featuring interviews with the Chairman, the Executive Director and the Chairman of the Sub-Committees, focusing on current issues and providing general information about the Commission's activities.

The programme could also provide a forum for its member organisations to address and report on issues of particular concern to them. The programme could also feature prominent "opinion leaders" in the business community addressing issues and matters of public importance to the business community.

- **Bi-Monthly News Bulletin** - The Commission should produce a monthly members News Bulletin prepared by the Executive Director in consultation with the Public Relations Consultant, featuring a message from the Chairman, current news on the Commission's activities and special interest information on the economy and business.

- **Face to face meetings** - The Commission's Sub-Committees should hold regularly scheduled face to face meetings with the government and other agencies relevant to their specific responsibilities and, from time to time, issue Press Releases through the Public Relations Consultant reporting on the progress of these meetings.
- **Profile** - The Commission should prepare a brochure profiling its history, its organization, its management, its membership, and detailing the professional services which it offers. It should be a high quality brochure and updated annually.
- **Annual Dinner** - The Commission should hold an Annual Dinner at which a feature speaker of international reputation and excellence addresses the Dinner on a subject of particular relevance to the country and the business community.
- **Reference Library** - The Commission should develop a reference library of documents and publications providing information essential and relevant to investing and doing business in Guyana. A library would be available to business visitors, its membership and university students. The Commission should employ the services of a qualified Librarian for this purpose.
- **Liaison with Regional Counterparts** - The Commission should establish, through its Executive Director, an active liaison and an exchange of information with its counterpart organizations in the region.
- **Website** - The Commission should establish its own website to be maintained by the Executive Director.

The above recommendations are not exclusive and can, of course, be expanded on as the opportunity presents itself.