

# How to Organize the Public Relations Function

---

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA

Obviously, the public relations *staffing* and *budget* are directly related to the **function** of public relations within an organization.

When we speak of professional public relations, we mean, “The management activity which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the organization’s policies and procedures with the public interest, identifies constituencies or audiences to be reached by the organization’s communications, and establishes channels of communication with these groups of people.”

Whether the organization has “good” public relations, then, is essentially determined by the organization’s senior management. It is they who set the organization’s policies and direct daily practices. If those policies and practices are in keeping with the public interest, then the public relations staff can use professional communication techniques to obtain public understanding, acceptance, acclaim, and, if necessary, defense against attack.

If a public relations practitioner finds himself/herself representing an organization in which top management is short-sighted and less interested in the public interest than in profit or other considerations, then the public relations person has the responsibility to make recommendations for changes known in every possible reasonable manner. Should management choose not to change its policies and practices, then the public relations professional must choose between leaving the organization or staying, depending upon his/her conscience.

## Public Relations Services

The role of public relations varies widely from organization to organization, depending upon the type and size of the organization, the understanding top management has of the proper uses of public relations, and the experience and training of the public relations staff. In many organizations, the person heading the public relations function is a member of senior management and participates as a member of the company’s Management Committee.

Professionally practiced, public relations will provide four basic services to management:

### **I. Fact-finding and research on opinions and attitudes**

It is the responsibility of public relations professionals to anticipate and inform management of trends and coming events which may affect the organization’s reputation and/or operations. To accomplish this function, public relations uses both informal fact-finding tools (such as clipping services, discussions, reading periodicals and telephone interviews) and more formal tools such as opinion research surveys.

## II. Advice and counsel

In organizations where top management is “public relations oriented,” management seeks advice and counsel from public relations professionals and considers public relations’ recommendations as carefully as those from legal, financial, marketing, and operations experts.

Whether or not the public relations professional is held in high esteem by top management, it is his/her responsibility to seek out, identify, and recommend to management policies that will advance the organization toward its objectives. Such advice and counsel ranges in scope from simply assisting the organization by publicizing organizational activities to recommending a change in basic policy or proposed activity to bring it closer into line with the public interest.

## III. Communication services

This is the service most frequently associated with public relations. As a matter of fact, many people who call themselves by public relations titles engage in *only* communication-related activities.

The term, “communication services,” is much broader than simply issuing news releases and newsletters. It includes the *total process of projecting the organization’s identity*, whether through news media, setting corporate citizenship examples, or by preparing and distributing information in the form of videos, Internet and intranet sites, booklets, speeches, institutional advertisements, seminars and other formats.

## IV. Promotional activities

Promotional activities are those programs specifically designed to build the organization’s good will among its constituencies. They may take the form of sponsoring community activities, athletic programs, scholarships, parades, open houses, increasing customer acceptance to indirectly stimulate sales, beauty competitions, charitable acts, and many other types of creative activities.

## Functions of Public Relations

The functions performed by public relations to accomplish the services listed above vary widely, but certain “typical” functions have emerged and exist, with various titles, in most larger public relations staffs. Arranged alphabetically below, they include (but are not limited to):

- *Community Relations*—Coordinating “good neighbor” activities; developing community understanding of organization’s problems, needs and benefits to the communities in which the organization operates; working with groups in areas where organization has major operations; developing a good operating climate for the organization. Sometimes this function includes the media relations personnel who work with media at the local level.
- *Consulting*—Developing and recommending public relations policies; contributing public relations viewpoints in formulation of corporate decisions. In most organizations, this function is provided by the managers/directors who head the department and its various sections.
- *Contributions Programs (sometimes part of the Community Relations function)*—Developing policy for corporate donations; processing contributions requests; administration of a private foundation established to fund charitable, civic, education, and religious causes; conducting United Way and other approved employee solicitations.

- *Customer Relations*—Assuring that the organization’s customers are satisfied. This function includes dealing with customers’ inquiries, responding to complaints and advising senior management on customer-related issues and concerns. This function can be an important “early warning system” that allows other functions within public relations to prepare responses to threats to the organization. When an organization has a facility that is open to visitors, Guest Relations may be a part of Customer relations.
- *Government Relations*—This function is more often called Public Affairs. The function is responsible for monitoring government regulations and legislation affecting the organization; maintaining liaison and good will with appropriate governmental units at the local, state, and national level; reporting trends in government affecting the organization; recommending action as needed; preparing for and directing appearances before investigating bodies or hearings; directing programs designed to promote the organization’s point of view in legislation and elections, and providing information to employees/members and shareholders on pending legislation and regulation. In some organizations, Public Affairs also coordinates employees’/members’ contribution to a Political Action Committee (PAC) which communicates with legislators and government officials to *influence* legislation and regulation.
- *Guest relations*—Conducting office and plant tours; new plant and/or building dedications; guest reception activities. Preparing brochures, tour guides, tapes, videos, maps and other guest-related communications materials. Of course, this is a major function in the tourism and entertainment industry.
- *Internal Communications*—Preparing and publishing employee and membership bulletins, newsletters, newspapers and magazines; Internet/intranet content; videotapes; bulletin board programs; employee and member conferences; teleconferences, and communication with management and board members. In smaller organizations, this function may include tours, open houses and employee recognition banquets and awards.
- *Investor Relations (or Member Relations in membership organizations)*—Communicating with owners of the organization, whether they are shareholders of a corporation or dues-paying members of a non-profit organization; communicating with related groups such as financing institutions, brokers, securities and financial analysts, and preparing and coordinating annual meetings, conferences, seminars and communications materials such as Internet site content, magazines, annual reports, quarterly statements and dividend check inserts.
- *Media Relations*—Preparing position papers on issues of importance to the organization; handling publicity; issuing news of activities to external audiences; establishing and maintaining contacts with the mass media; handling responses to inquiries from the news media; coordinating media conferences and tours; tracking and evaluating media coverage.
- *Product/Service Publicity (often called Marketing Publicity)*— Announcing new products, new services and enhancements in products and services, through editorial channels of mass media; developing and executing promotional programs.
- *Publications*—Preparing and publishing materials for special constituencies including dealers and agents, advisory bodies, alumni and alumnae.
- *Research*—The people in this function are responsible for gathering information needed by writers, editors and other staff members, using libraries, online databases, publications, associations and outside research organizations. They also may oversee the activities of research assistant(s) and/or research firms and direct informal and formal research studies, including surveys, focus group interviews, communications audits and media content analyses.
- *Digital Communications*—Using Internet sites, intranet sites, e-mail and other digital means to prepare and deliver messages to specific constituencies. This activity is normally not a separate function but is an integral part of other functions.

- *Others*—Speakers’ bureaus; audiovisual assistance; public information; organizational history archives or museum; photographic services.

## Organization of the Staff

To operate effectively, the public relations department must fit into the organization’s structure directly under the president, executive director, or other chief executive officer.

The size and organization of the public relations staff naturally varies with the size of the organization and the scope of the public relations program. Departments range from one-person operations in smaller organizations to staffs of more than 100 in some giant corporations. Still, in many larger corporations in the United States, the average public relations department is staffed by 5-15 persons. Small organizations (including businesses, associations, and institutions) usually have public relations staffs of 1-5 persons.

In a one-person public relations function, the person is necessarily a jack/jill-of-all-trades. That person’s activities are likely to center rather heavily in the communication area.

As the department grows larger, the duties and responsibilities increase and tend to be divided among staff members according to function. The first staff member added usually is assigned responsibilities for media relations and publicity, since that is the heaviest area of work load. The department head personally handles all other duties.

Staff additions are assigned such responsibilities as publications, community relations, investor relations, promotion, public affairs and employee communications, according to the needs of the organization at a particular time.

In large, multi-plant corporations, members of the public relations department often are assigned to detached service at various plant locations and deal with plant/community relations. In such cases the staff member has a dual reporting relationship—a direct staff responsibility to the plant manager and “dotted-line” policy relationship to the corporate director of public relations.

As your public relations staff grows, keep in mind the following recommendations:

- The person in charge of public relations should report directly to the chief executive officer of the organization.
- The title “Director of Public Relations,” “Vice President for Public Relations,” or something similar should be used for the person at the top of the public relations staff function. The term, “Corporate Communications” frequently is used rather than Public Relations.
- No staff member should directly supervise more than five other staff members, according to guidelines of the American Management Association.
- Persons in the organization should be assigned appropriate descriptive titles. The following are generally used, in declining order
  - Senior Vice President for \_\_\_\_\_ (perhaps “Corporate Relations,” in which the person holding the title might be responsible for both Human Resources and Public Relations)
  - Vice President for \_\_\_\_\_
  - Director of \_\_\_\_\_
  - Manager of \_\_\_\_\_
  - Supervisor of \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Specialist

OK . . . NOW WHAT?

Following is a checklist that may be of help to you in evaluating or establishing a public relations staff function:

- Study your organization’s objectives (or interview top management and write the objectives, if they do not exist in written form). Remember that to succeed an organization must meet the needs of specific constituencies.
- Study the way people in the organization conduct themselves and the activities of the organization on a daily basis.
- Determine the needs and wishes of the people whom the organization was established to serve.
- Compare the organization’s mission statement, policies, goals, objectives and operations with the interest of the public.
- Recommend changes necessary for the organization to better reflect the needs of its “publics” or “audiences.” An even better name is “constituencies,” since we want members of those groups to “vote” in ways that will benefit the organization.
- Determine how public relations functions can best and most efficiently assist the organization’s top management move the organization toward its goals. Group (below) *public relations services* into *functions* to allow the public relation staff to effectively serve its clients, keeping in mind that *the senior management of the organization* is the public relations department’s most important client. Here are some function areas that may help you get started. Check at the left side if you believe the function is needed at the present time, then list in the spaces provided the services to be included in each functional area:

Community Relations:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Consulting:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Contributions:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Customer Relations  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Government Relations/Public Affairs:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Internal Communications:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Investor Relations (or Member Relations):

---

---

Media relations:

---

---

Product/Service Publicity:

---

---

Publications:

---

---

Research:

---

---

Digital Communications:

---

---

**Then:**

1. Estimate the number of person-hours per week needed for each function.
2. Consolidate related functions, using person-hour estimates as a guide for workloads. Limit consolidations to 40 hours per week.
3. Write job descriptions for each of the “consolidations” of functions listed above.
4. Prepare a public relations budget.
5. List qualifications for each job description.
6. Prepare a public relations organization chart, showing reporting levels, staff functions with titles, and summaries of responsibilities for each function.
7. Secure appropriate management approvals.

## Budgeting for Public Relations

Most organizations are secretive about budgets of all types, and especially those for public relations activities. It has been my experience that corporate public relations budgets usually range between .1 % and .2% of total revenues but may be as high as .5% of revenues, depending upon the type of organization and what is included in the public relations budget. [Ed:That’s **one-tenth** of one percent, not one percent.]

Companies with retail sales generally allocate between 3% and 7% of their sales revenue to marketing communications that include advertising, direct mail, Web and marketing public relations and trade shows.

I wouldn't be at all surprised if public relations budgets in trade associations and other service organizations totaled as much as 5% to 10% of annual revenues, depending upon what is categorized as public relations. However, they ordinarily use such budget categories as "Membership services," "Continuing education for members," "Legislative Services," and other titles, to give clearer definitions of their activities on behalf of members.

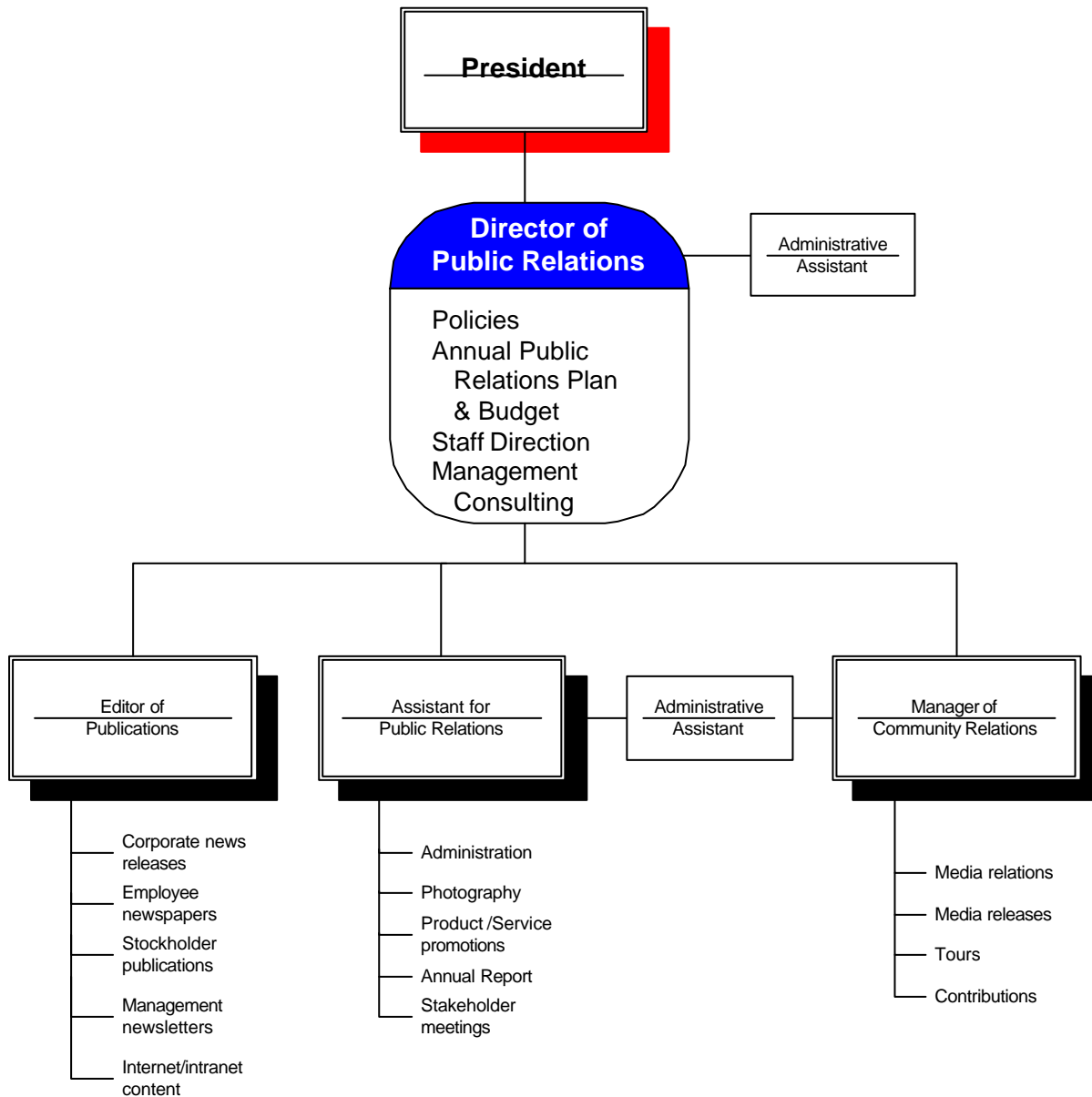
[EDITOR'S NOTE: An informal spot-check of top public relations executives in half a dozen varied fields indicated that these figures were probably valid in 2003.]

## Typical Public Relations Organizations

On the following pages are "typical" public relations functions for small, medium-size, and large organizations. Every organization is unique, but perhaps these illustrations will help you as you analyze your own organization's needs.

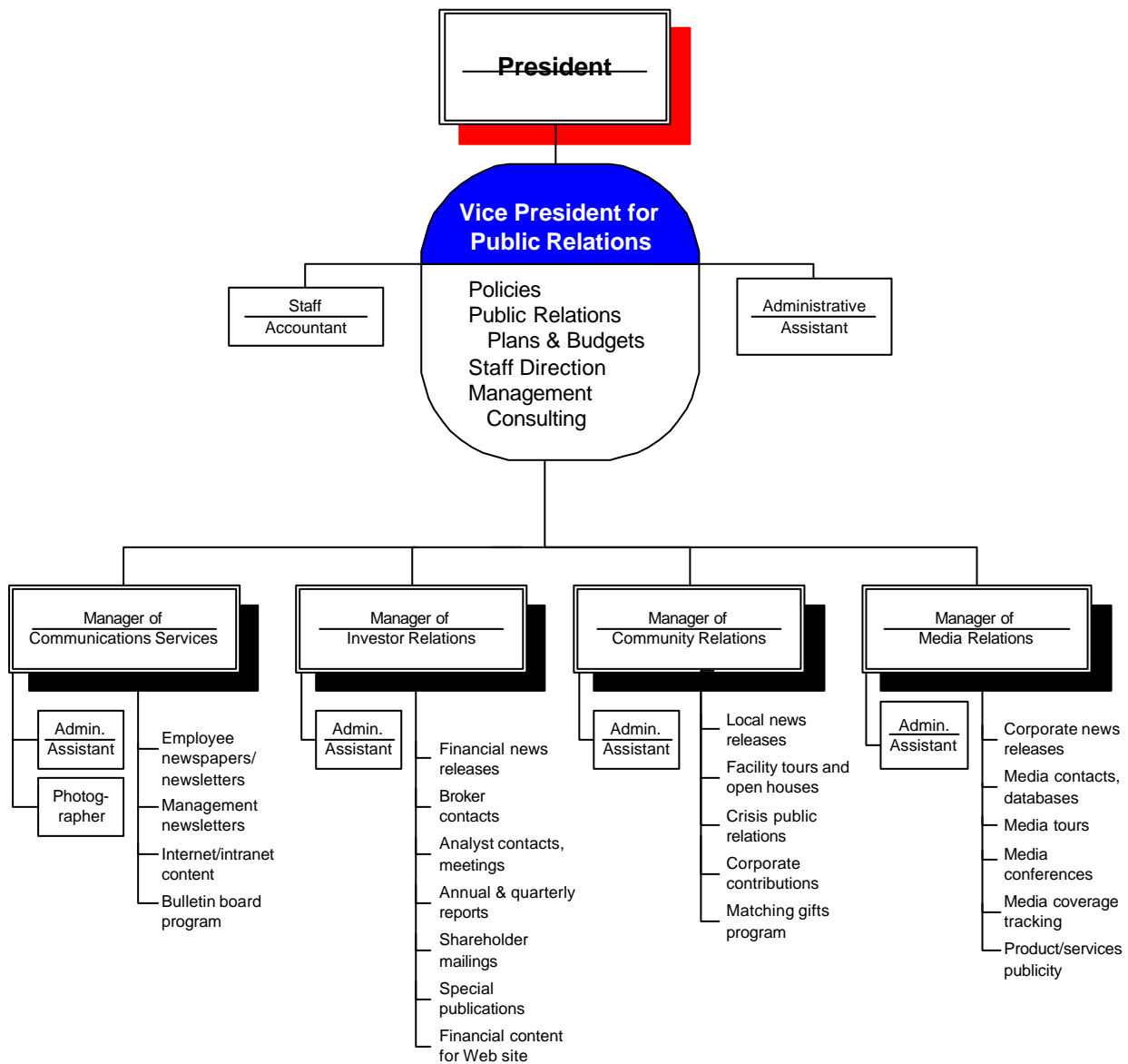
# Typical Small Public Relations Organization

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA



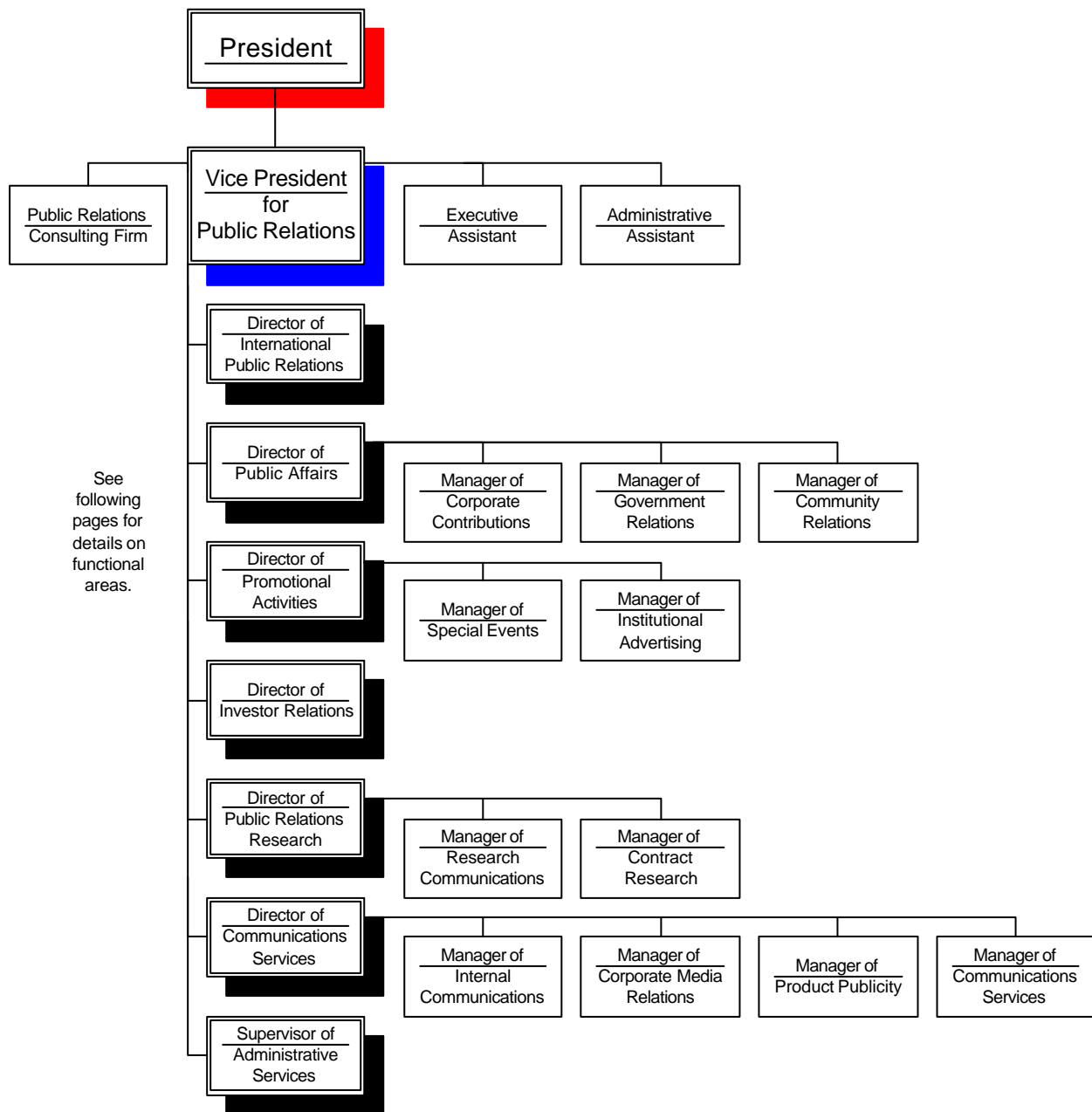
# Typical Medium-sized Public Relations Organization

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA

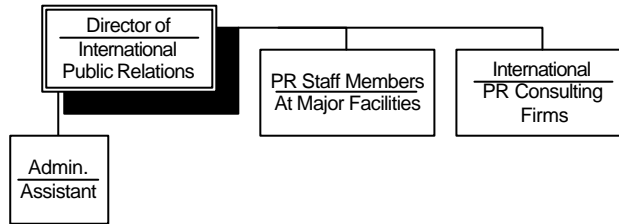


# "Typical" Large Public Relations Organization

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA



## International Public Relations

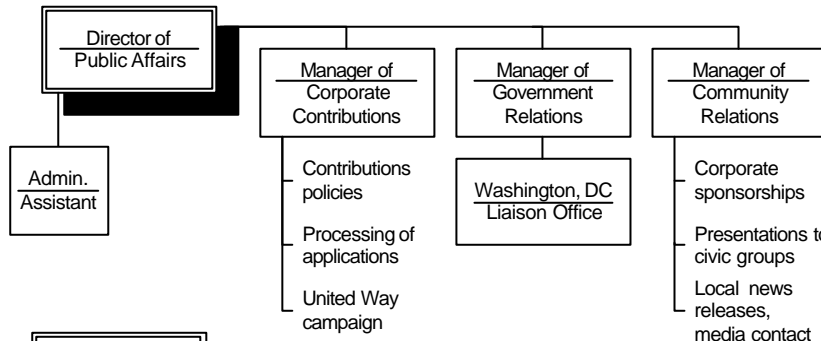


This page contains details on functional areas from "Typical Large public Relations Organization"

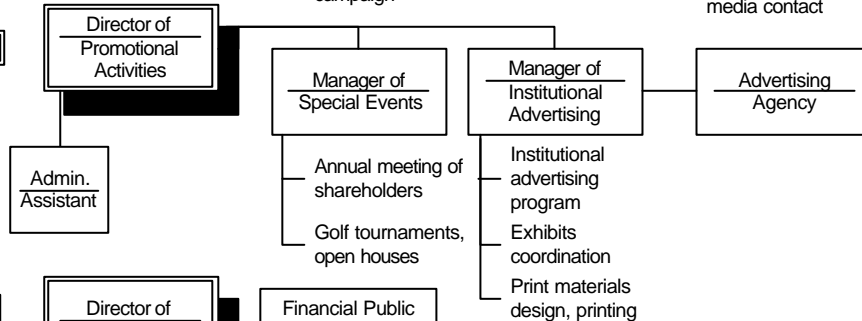
Additional administrative staff members are not shown.

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA

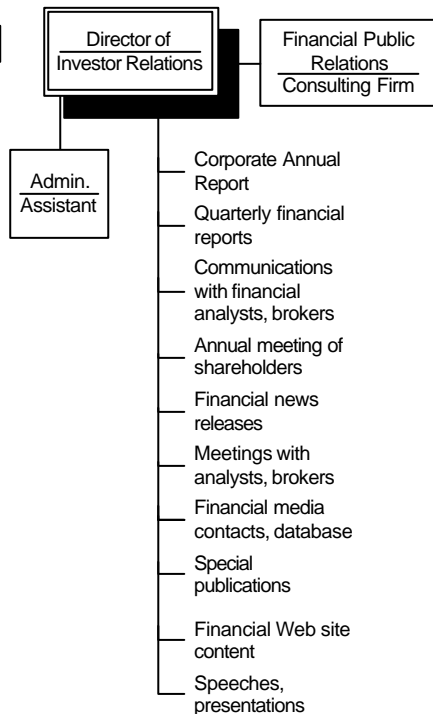
## Public Affairs



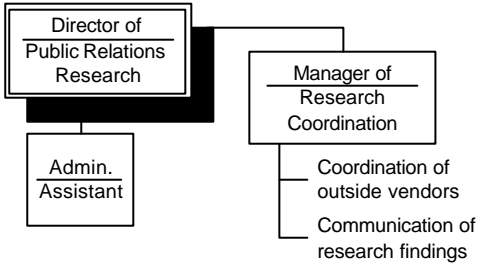
## Promotional Activities



## Investor Relations



## Research

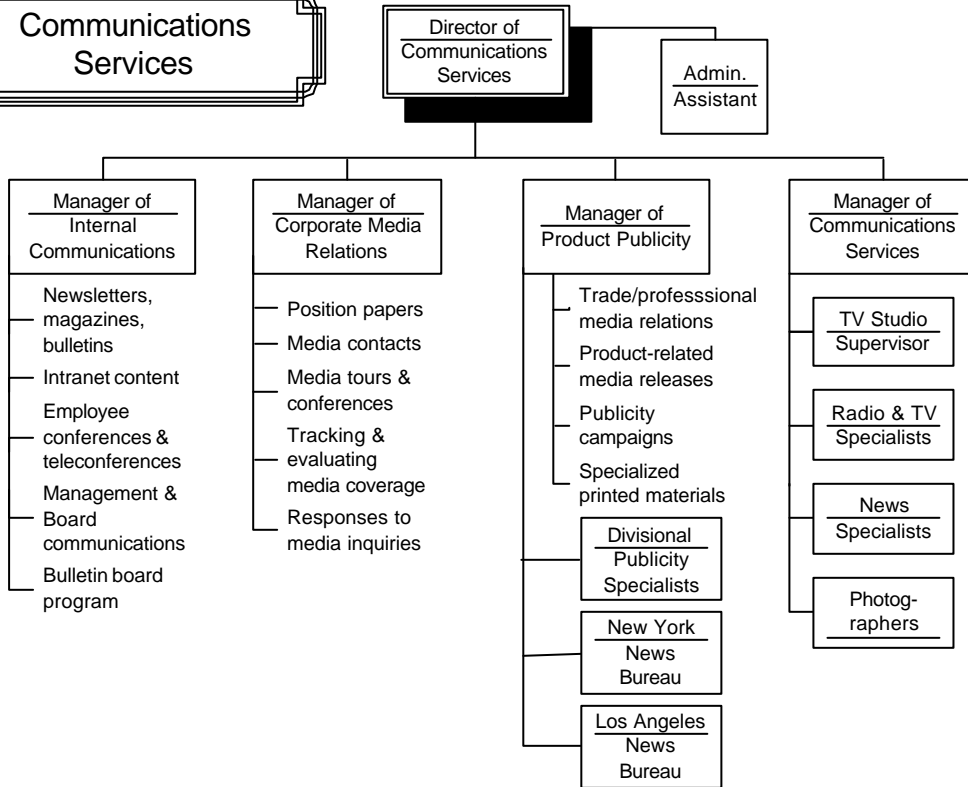


This page contains details on functional areas from "Typical Large public Relations Organization"

Additional administrative staff members are not shown.

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Haynes, APR, Fellow PRSA

## Communications Services



## Administrative Services

