



An Investigation on Public Relations Activities of Hotel Enterprises

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to determine to what extent public relations activities are carried out at hotel enterprises. In this research, face-to-face interviews were made with the department managers of public relations activities at 16 hotels operating in the North Aegean Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region. Structured interview form was administered between 15 November 2021- 15 January 2022. Content analysis was carried out for the obtained data. The study concluded that while the hotel enterprises in the Southeastern Anatolia Region mostly engaged in the public relations activities of making press statements and giving advertisements, the hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region conducted activities with news contents. It was also found out that all participants attended tourism fairs, did not show much interest in the events such as congresses, conferences, exhibitions, concerts, festivals and did not engage in sponsorship activities and corporate social responsibility practices. It was also concluded that the participants attached importance to in-company communication and tried to manage crisis periods properly.

Keywords: Public Relations, Hotel Enterprises, Tourism, North Aegean Region, Southeastern Anatolia Region

Article Type: Research Article

Otel İşletmelerinin Halkla İlişkiler Faaliyetleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma

Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı otel işletmelerinde halkla ilişkiler faaliyetleri kapsamında yapılan çalışmaların belirlenmesidir. Araştırmada Kuzey Ege Bölgesi ve Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'ndeki 16 adet otel işletmesinin halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerinden sorumlu olan departman yöneticileriyle yüz yüze görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Yapılandırılmış olarak tasarlanan görüşme formu 15 Kasım 2021- 15 Ocak 2022 tarihleri arasında uygulanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular içerik analizine tabi tutulmuştur. Araştırma sonucunda Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'ndeki otel işletmelerinin ağırlıklı olarak basına yazı yazma, reklam verme gibi halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerine katıldıkları, Kuzey Ege Bölgesi'ndeki otel işletmelerinin ise haber niteliği taşıyan faaliyetlerde bulundukları belirlenmiştir. Tüm katılımcıların turizm fuarlarına katıldıkları, kongre, konferans, sergi, konser, festival gibi etkinliklere çok fazla ilgi göstermedikleri, sponsorluk faaliyetlerinde ve kurumsal sosyal sorumluluk uygulamalarında bulunmadıkları araştırmada elde edilen bir diğer bulgdur. Katılımcıların kurum içi iletişime önem verdikleri, kriz dönemlerinde süreci sağlıklı yürütme çabasında oldukları sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halkla İlişkiler, Otel İşletmeleri, Turizm, Kuzey Ege Bölgesi, Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Tourism is an industry playing important roles in the development of a country in political, social and economic respects (Arionesei and Ivan, 2013). Although tourism is generally considered an advantage by many countries for development, some countries do not make due investment in tourism. However, it is of paramount importance to make an investment in tourism industry, especially on the strategic introduction and promotion of touristic destinations and activities, in national and local markets (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018).

Public relations is one of the most effective methods that can be used in the promotion and marketing of touristic destinations and activities (L'etang, Falkheimer and Lugo, 2007; Huertas, 2014). Public relations is generally described in the literature as a management function that establishes and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship between an enterprise and the target audience on which its success or failure depends on (Broom and Sha, 2013). Public relations is a unique way of promoting an enterprise, its products and services by resulting higher visibility in the public area. In addition to gaining insight regarding the understanding and approval of a target audience, it is a strategic communication method to focus on establishing a good relationship between an enterprise and its target group (Petrovici, 2014).

While public relations activities are needed in all industries (Huertas, 2014), it is beyond a need in the tourism industry (Petrovici, 2014). This is based on human being oriented nature of the tourism industry. In the tourism industry with intense human relations, affecting a target audience and being supported by a target audience is more difficult without public relations activities (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006). For this reason, public relations is of more importance in the tourism industry (Ojagov, 2011).

If all enterprises that operate in the tourism industry consider public relations a natural function of management, they will overcome sectorial difficulties more easily. Experts argue that considering public relations activities a natural function of management is a long-term process, however, public relations may contribute significantly to the promotion of an enterprise in the tourism industry (Kotler et al., 2006). The most significant difficulty that can be faced in this process is to determine the most efficient ways to promote touristic products and services, to create a positive image and to increase visibility in order to attract a significant number of tourists. If this is achieved, it is likely to build, develop and maintain an attractive touristic image for an enterprise (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018).

Regarding the enterprises operating in the tourism industry, hotel enterprises are the largest group in terms of quantity. Most of the revenue acquired from tourism activities is directly related to the activities of hotel enterprises (Seçen, 2011; Işık and Eşitti, 2014). Hotel enterprises refer to all destinations built to provide services to tourists and individuals requesting temporary accommodation. In hotel enterprises, in addition to accommodation, services for other needs such as food, beverage and entertainment are also provided. These enterprises have standard rules regarding staff, architecture, applications and guest relations (Kozak, Azaltun, Sarışık, Sökmen and Sökmen, 2008). A guest, who is considered a foreigner with a sociological approach, will mostly demand his/her wishes and needs from hotel management in this temporary accommodation. His satisfaction will increase to the extent that his/her requests are provided, which will result in loyalty. Public relations activities have an important place in achieving all these (Summak, 2007).

Regardless of their status, all staff, managers and employees in a hotel enterprise are responsible for hosting guests and providing a successful holiday activity. Common responsibility requires all hotel employees to feel responsible in the process of implementing public relations

activities (Sabuncuoğlu, 2004). This responsibility covers a wide range of employees from top executives to lower-level employees (Summak, 2009).

Public relations refers to the implementation of communication techniques under a plan, in two ways and based on a management philosophy in order to recognize the environment that enterprises are sensitive to, to be recognized in this environment and to increase their visibility (Sabuncuoğlu, 2004). Hotel enterprises should establish a proper communication network in and out of their organizations. Such a network can be managed successfully by public relations (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018). Thanks to the communication strategies used in these activities, hotel enterprises can establish trust-based connections with a broad target audience in (partners, managers, employees and their families) and out of their organizations (guests, media, general public, government bodies) (Bhatia, 2006; Hudson, 2008; Huertas, 2014).

Tourism industry is a sector that depends on internal and external environmental conditions. After the rapid development of this sector, the increase in the number of alternative tourist enterprises and the growth of these enterprises each passing day, the service fields of hotel enterprises and their consumer environment have also enlarged. This requires hotel enterprises to manage their communications more successfully. Hotel enterprises can have positive results to the extent they attach importance to public relations activities (Maviş, 2006; Summak, 2009). Public relations activities not only convey messages about the current attraction elements, traffic infrastructure and accommodation capacity of a hotel enterprise to a target audience in and out of the organization, but also helps a hotel enterprise to adapt to the changes and needs of a target audience by following their needs (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018).

The tourism industry is a sector that is quite vulnerable to all kinds of risks and crises. Environmental disasters, violence and crime rapidly change the direction of tourism demand (L'etang, Falkheimer and Lugo, 2007). Thus, hotel enterprises need a public relations management that can find solutions or mitigate crises.

A public relations activity that will be implemented in a hotel enterprise should involve research, planning, operation/action and evaluation stages and should be strategically managed in this process (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018). The managers who are responsible for public relations activities should carry out a SWOT analysis of a hotel and develop their strategy in line with this information (Emir, 2016).

Research is the most important process in a public relations process (Suher, 2009). The success of a public relations activity without research and knowledge about the target audience will not be very high (Yavuz, 2008). Yet, collecting all data and information regarding target audience and markets in the research stage, analysis of the collected data and information at micro and macro level will increase the success of a public relations activity. In the second stage of planning, concrete programs and strategic plans are developed in order to specify the needs and problems related to the public relations activities to be implemented and to find solutions to them. These plans should be developed comprehensively by covering the issues such as what needs are, what should be done to find solutions to problems, in which order the solutions will be processed (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018). Although planning does not guarantee success in public relations activities, it may provide an advantage to become successful (Yılmaz, 2009). In the planning stage, it is also important to create messages for a target audience. These messages, aiming to inform a target audience about the touristic products offered, should create positive changes in consumption understanding and habits, and develop a positive attitude towards a product and an enterprise (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018). After developing a plan, the third stage of operation/action starts. At this stage, the messages created in accordance with a public relations plan are transferred to certain targets in certain regions with the

specified tools. This will enable a target audience to keep messages in their mind (Asna, 1998; Emir, 2016). In the evaluation process, the final stage of a public relations activity, it is determined to what extent the targets specified in a plan were achieved and how much progress was taken. In this regard, feedback from the audience is evaluated following the messages conveyed to a target audience (Uyar and Kasapoğlu, 2020). The hotel management should be informed about these evaluation results (Zdravkovska Ilievska, 2018).

As public relations is getting more important in hotel enterprises (Santoso and Negoro, 2019), there is an increase in the number of academic studies in this regard. In his study carried out with the department managers of public relations working at ten five star hotels in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, Ojagov (2011) reports that public relations activities are not adequately implemented in hotels. In his study on 122 five star hotel enterprises with public relations departments in the province of Antalya, Kunaeva (2013) argues that guest relations are considered equivalent to public relations in most of these hotels, while real public relations activities are not implemented. In his study conducted with 109 participants in three, four and five star hotels and boutique hotels operating in the province of Izmir, Erdoğan (2018) concludes that public relations departments in hotel enterprises are not ignored but are considered only in terms of sales increase, marketing and promotion activities. The research, carried out by Akgöz (2009) in a total of 319 facilities of four and five star hotels and first class holiday resorts in Turkey, specifies that public relations activities are carried out by human resources or sales and marketing department at almost half of the accommodation establishments, while they are conducted by public relations department in more than half of them. The investigation, administered by İşık and Eşitti (2014) at five hotel enterprises in Palandoken Mountain in Erzurum Province, concludes that those with executive and senior positions have a positive perspective on public relations, participants do not have proper knowledge of public relations, they do not realize the positive effect of public relations on service quality and the role it can play in the crisis management process, public relations is considered guest relations or promotional event by participants, public relations education is not given due attention. In the case study carried out by Noffytasari (2010) at Sahid Jaya Hotel in Indonesia, Noffytasari discussed the current public relations program in terms of scope, duties and responsibilities. It is also stated that public relations activities are performed by marketing department, and a public relations department, which is independent of marketing and completely functional, should be founded regarding reputation management. Sichula (2020) carried out a case study at Mika Hotel, a hotel enterprise in Zambia Lusaka. The research reports that there is an “established” public relations implementation in the unit of public relations under the department of marketing. In addition, it is urged that public relations activities, if implemented successfully, have positive effects on a hotel's image and growth rate.

Based on the aforementioned literature, it can be argued that the public relations activities in hotel enterprises have a critical importance in the success of hotels. Unfortunately, despite the importance of public relations, it can be argued that a separate, independent and completely functional public relations department could not be established in most of the hotels, and these activities are mostly performed by human resources or sales and marketing departments. Therefore, it can be stated that public relations are considered equal to guest relations in most of the hotels, actual public relations activities (press relations, event management, sponsorship activities, corporate social responsibility activities, lobbying activities, crisis communication, internal communication) cannot be implemented properly. This research aims to what extent public relations activities are carried out in the hotel enterprises in North Aegean Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region. The research is considered to contribute to the relevant literature and provide a data source for the public relations field.

2. METHOD

The interview method from qualitative approaches was utilized in this study to gather data. The structured interview form, developed based on the relevant literature, was revised in line with the opinions of three academics. Before administration of the interview form, an ethics committee approval, dated 09.11.2021 and numbered 2021/169, was obtained from the Harran University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee. Face-to-face interviews were held with the department managers responsible for the public relations activities of 16 hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region and Southeast Anatolia Region between 15 November 2021 and 15 January 2022. While the first part of the interview form involved the variables (gender, position in his/her enterprise) to specify the personal traits of managers, the second part has questions about the current situation of hotel enterprises (type of enterprise, operation period). The third part included the questions regarding public relations activities (press relations, event management, sponsorship activities, corporate social responsibility activities, lobbying activities, crisis communication, in-company communication). In order to get more comprehensive answers to interview questions, they were distributed to the managers in advance and appointments were made for the interviews. Interviews were made on the dates determined.

The data obtained in interviews were analyzed with content analysis. In the analysis, the questions posed to the participants were classified under certain themes. The themes developed are as follows:

“Theme 1: Press Relations

Theme 2: Event Management

Theme 3: Social Responsibility Activities (includes sponsorship and corporate social responsibility activities)

Theme 4: Communication Activities” (involves lobbying, crisis communication and in-company communication)”.

3. FINDINGS

Table 1. Categorical Data for Participants and Their Enterprises

| Participant | Gender | Position | Operation Period of Enterprise | Type of Enterprise |
|-------------|--------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| K1 | Male | Front office manager | 30 years | 4 star hotel |
| K2 | Male | Front office manager | 10 years | 3 star hotel |
| K3 | Male | Front office manager | 16 years | 5 star hotel |
| K4 | Female | Front office manager | 14 years | 5 star hotel |
| K5 | Female | Reservation manager | 21 years | 4 star hotel |
| K6 | Male | Public Relations manager | 20 years | 5 star hotel |
| K7 | Female | Public Relations manager | 10 years | 3 star hotel |
| K8 | Male | Front office manager | 33 years | 4 star hotel |
| K9 | Male | Marketing manager | 28 years | 5 star hotel |
| K10 | Male | Front office manager | 10 years | 3 star hotel |
| K11 | Male | General manager | 15 years | 4 star hotel |
| K12 | Female | Front office manager | 30 years | 4 star hotel (Thermal) |
| K13 | Male | Front office manager | 5 years | 4 star hotel (Thermal) |
| K14 | Male | General manager | 5 years | 4 star hotel (Resort) |
| K15 | Male | General manager | 25 years | 5 star hotel |
| K16 | Female | Coordinator | 25 years | 5 star hotel |

A total of 16 hotel managers, who were working in the hotels operating in the North Aegean and Southeastern Anatolia Regions, participated in the study. As seen in Table 1, 11 of the participants are male while 5 of them are female. Participants worked as general manager, coordinator, front office manager, public relations manager and marketing manager. The operation period of the enterprises ranged between 5 and 30 years, and the enterprises were three, four and five star hotels.

The questions posed to the participants were classified and analyzed under four themes: "press relations, event management, social responsibility activities and communication activities".

Theme 1: Press Relations

Regarding the question "Have you ever executed activities such as sending press releases to a local or national press, or organizing various newsworthy events and broadcasting such an organization in the press?", five hotel enterprises stated that they held no event. One of the hotel enterprises operating in the Southeastern Anatolia Region reported that "It regularly sends articles to a local magazine for the national and international promotion of Göbeklitepe and Şanlıurfa tourism, thus performing an activity with respect to the promotion of both the enterprise and region". Three of hotel enterprises reported that they regularly gave advertisements in the local press. Two of the hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region expressed that they held garbage collection activities on the beach, and this event was made news in the local press. Moreover, one hotel enterprise reported that it built an animal shelter for street animals along with a vocational high school in the region, and this organization was made news in the local and national press. Three hotel enterprises stated that they participated in pine sapling plant event in forestry week.

The findings suggest that especially the hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region were mentioned with the newsworthy events. On the other hand, the hotel enterprises in the Southeast

Anatolia Region carried out public relations activities by giving advertisements or sending articles to the press.

Theme 2: Event Management

The participant 1 responded the question "Did you organize events such as scientific meetings, festivals, exhibitions, competitions, celebrations, trips, participation in fairs, and concert organizations? If your answer is yes, when did you organize an event and with how many people?" as follows: "Before the pandemic, a concert was held in 2019 and approximately 350 people attended the concert". Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7 stated that they participated in tourism fairs in Turkey and abroad, while Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 16 expressed that they attended national and international congresses, such as EMITT, Izmir Fair.

Accordingly, all participants were found to have attended tourism fairs. In addition, it can be argued that participation in scientific events such as congresses and conferences is not at a sufficient level.

Theme 3: Social Responsibility Activities

Participant 1 answered the question "Did you have any sponsorship activities? How?" as follows: "We became a sponsor for the promotion of Sanliurfa". Participant 14, Participant 15 expressed that they sponsored football teams, Participant 10, Participant 11 reported that they became a sponsor for a congress, while 11 participants stated that they did not engage in any sponsorship activities.

To the question "Did you have any Corporate Social Responsibility (such as building schools, aid, environmental practices)"? How?, nine participants reported that they did have no event, Participant 16 stated that they made a donation to a school in their province, Participant 15 expressed that they turned the front office of tourism high schools into a practice room, Participants 11 and 14 stated that they gave scholarships to students, Participants 10 and 12 reported that they had a school painted.

The findings of the research suggest that the participant hotel enterprises did not have a sufficient level of participation in sponsorship activities. Moreover, hotel enterprises sponsored football teams and a congress.

The findings of the question corporate social responsibility activities urge that while most of the participating hotel enterprises did not perform any corporate social responsibility, it was specified that hotel enterprises involved in corporate social responsibility activities mainly helped schools and gave scholarships to students.

Theme 4: Communication Activities

According to the findings of the questions "Did you have any lobbying activities?, If yes, how? When?", while 13 hotel enterprises reported that they did not have any lobbying activities, Participant 10 and Participant 11 urged that "We requested tour operators to give preliminary information to agencies about our region and hotel, by holding meetings with tour operators in advance at the fairs we attended abroad".

To the question "Did you attempt to persuade your existing guests or gain new ones during crisis period? If your respond is yes, what kind of activities did you organize?, all participants reported that they received a "safe tourism certificate" and took all pandemic measures, thus allowing their guests to visit their hotels in a comfortable way.

Only participant 1 stated that the hotel enterprise did not hold any events for the question "Did you organize events such as birthday events, employee of the month, intra-organizational orientation, competitions among employees, trips, intra-organizational communication works prepared by experts? If yes, which activities?". All participants expressed that they gave a present to one staff each month under the employee of the month organization, participant 15 reported that they held a Christmas organization and gave gifts, and 11 participants expressed that they celebrated their employees' birthdays.

The findings suggest that hotel enterprises do not carry out sufficient lobbying activities, they attach importance to inter-organizational communication, and try to manage the process in a proper way in crisis periods.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the global competition, conducting public relations activities have become a necessity for organizational success in hotel enterprises as for all other enterprises. Hotel enterprises can have successful results regarding the issues such as communication management, image management, reputation management, conflict management, crisis management, service quality, guest satisfaction and employee satisfaction, etc. by means of their public relations activities for internal and external target audiences (Akgöz, 2009; Noffytasari, 2010; Kunaeva, 2013; Tandoğan, 2018; Sichula, 2020). Therefore, public relations is getting more important for hotel enterprises.

Department managers who are responsible for public relations activities of 16 hotel enterprises participated in this study aiming to what extent public relations activities are carried out in the hotel enterprises. The findings suggest that especially the hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region have been mentioned with the newsworthy events while the hotel enterprises in the Southeast Anatolia Region have performed public relations activities by giving advertisements or sending articles to press. The press has an important place in the public relations activities of hotel enterprises. The press has a significant effect, which is a crucial tool to reach out target audience (Summak, 2007). For this reason, hotel enterprises should have well-established press relations. In this regard, it may be recommended to the department managers who are responsible for public relations activities at the hotel enterprises both in North Aegean Region and the Southeast Anatolia Region to strengthen their relations with the press, to send press bulletins to the media in this regard, to organize press conferences and press tours. These will enable hotel enterprises to take place positively in the press. As the success of a public relations activity is measured by its rate of being mentioned in the press with positive messages (Peltekoğlu, 2014), it may be argued that public relations activities in hotels will be more successful.

In addition, it has been found out that all participants have participated in a tourism fair, while participation in scientific events such as congresses and conferences is not at a sufficient level. In this regard, the hotel businesses in the North Aegean Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region should be informed about such scientific activities. The hotel enterprises may be informed that scientific activities are not limited to only academic community, but they may also attend such events. Moreover, none of the participating hotel enterprises have not organized the events such as festivals, exhibitions, competitions, trips and concerts, which are considered among the most important mediums of public relations (Uyar and Kasapoğlu, 2020). Thus, it can be argued that such activities should be organized in order to increase the success of public relations activities.

The research also concludes that the hotel enterprises are not sufficient in sponsorship activities. Hotel enterprises sponsored football teams and the congresses. Hotel enterprises support activities that the target audience is considered to be sensitive with sponsorship activities. News about such a support may help hotel enterprises to promote themselves, to increase their recognition, to

develop a positive image by establishing trust (Çoban, 2003). In order to achieve these, the hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region are recommended to increase sponsorship activities (sports sponsorship, culture and arts sponsorship, environmental sponsorship or social sponsorship) both quantitatively and qualitatively. It has been also concluded that most of the participating hotel enterprises do not have any corporate social responsibility practice, and those conducting a corporate social responsibility practice have been mainly found to help schools, give scholarships to students. In this regard, Erdoğan (2018) also reports that five-star hotel enterprises do not carry out corporate social responsibility activities. Thus, it can be argued that hotel enterprises ignore corporate social responsibility practices, which are performed without profit but for contributing to society, due to their commercial way of thinking (İşik and Eşti, 2014). However, corporate social responsibility activities to be carried out by hotel enterprises will develop trust in the target audience and help them create a positive image, which will result in an increase in profitability in the long term. Hotel enterprises may be recommended to increase their corporate social responsibility activities without ignoring the positive relationship between social performance and economic performance (Robbins and Coulter, 2002) and by considering that quality is not the sole determining criterion for guests, but corporate social responsibility activities are also effective in their preferences (Aktan and Börü, 2007). It may be also recommended to become transparent during the implementation of activities, to prefer the activities in line with social ethical values.

Another conclusion is the fact that the participants attach importance to inter-organizational communication, try to carry out the process properly during crisis periods, do not engage in sufficient lobbying activities. However, lobbying is getting used more in public relations activities. The primary reasons for increasing the importance of lobbying activities in public relations are the fact that they prevent any possible negative attitudes, strengthen public reputation, increase and reposition recognition, affect legal decisions (Canöz, 2007). Hotel enterprises may be suggested to increase lobbying activities by considering these benefits.

It is necessary to carry out public relations activities to prevent negative image and reputation in hotel enterprises, to resolve or reduce the severity of conflicts and crises, to increase service quality, guest and employee satisfaction etc. In this process, hotels should pay attention to each public relations activity (press relations, event management, sponsorship activities, corporate social responsibility activities, lobbying, crisis communication and inter-organizational communication) separately. All hotel staff should feel responsible for the implementation of public relations activities. Hotel enterprises should establish a separate, independent and fully functional public relations department. Hotels should also enable internal and external audiences to gain insight into their public relations activities. This will bring along success in the public relations activities of hotels.

The conclusions of this research may apply to enterprises in the service sector and are limited to the administration conducted in hotel enterprises in the North Aegean Region and Southeastern Anatolia Region. Further studies may be carried out by sampling companies in different sectors.

Ethical Statement

Research and publication ethics rules have been followed in the writing and publication processes of the investigation titled “An Investigation On Public Relations Activities Of Hotel Enterprises”. An ethics committee approval was obtained by the decision of Harran University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee dated 09.11.2021 and numbered 2021/169.

Contribution Rate Statement

Each author has an equal contribution to the design, administration and interpretation of the article.

Conflict Statement

There is no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship and/or publication of the investigation.

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