

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HYBRID PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES OF MUNICIPALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Municipalities need to create a positive image by paying attention to public relations activities during their tenure as they have been elected to serve by the local residents. Continuous improvement of the service quality of the municipalities that serve mainly local people can only be possible through getting regular feedback on their public relations activities. In this research, it was aimed to investigate the efficiency of hybrid public relations efforts of municipalities. Operational success of Turunc Desk, which is a comprehensive public relations project of Muratpaşa Municipality that operates in both traditional and digital platforms has been examined. It has been analyzed to what extent the municipality's multi-channel public relations efforts meet the expectations of the residents.

Keywords: *Public Relations, Turunc Desk, Municipality, Muratpaşa.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations efforts have a great responsibility in order for municipalities to introduce the services they provide and to identify the requests, suggestions and complaints of the residents. In addition, public relations, which has an important place in developing a successful corporate image and establishing good relations with all stakeholders, should get to know the citizen by using the right public relations practices while implementing all these activities, important services should be decided by taking the opinions of the citizens, and information and promotions should be made in a timely manner. Well-designed public relations activities that include both offline and online inquiries help municipalities to establish strong ties with the residents to create positive beliefs and actions in the residents.

In this study, the level of satisfaction of the local people with the Turunc Desk program, which has been carried out by Antalya Muratpaşa Municipality since 2014, in order to investigate the effectiveness of hybrid public relations activities of municipalities. In the following sections...

2. BACKGROUND

Since the aim of public relations practices in many organizations differs, depending on the type of the organization as well as their goals, missions and visions, the common view is that it is difficult to make a unique definition of the concept (Verčič et al., 2001). Nonetheless, a comprehensive definition of Rex F. Harlow is cited by Hutton (1999) as follows:

“Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics. Involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.”

According to Ertekin (1995:9), public relations is the adoption of the policy followed by the administration, the full and continuous

announcement of the services and works to the public, creating a positive image against the administration, and knowing what the people think about the administration and what they want from the administration. and cooperation with the public. According to the definition made by Cutlip et al. (1994:6), it is a management function that enables the establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial and communicative relations between an institution and its target groups, which have an important place in the success or failure of the institution, and which is carried out in order to influence opinions and actions.

Public relations is not only the activities carried out to inform the governed, it is an interaction in which communication is in essence aimed at improving the public relations. In other words, it is not the effort of the administration to approve the actions and transactions of the public, but the realization of the actions and transactions by interacting with the governed, thus obtaining a spontaneous approval from the public (Kazancı, 1980: 32). Peltekoğlu (2014:4), on the other hand, defines public relations as planned activities based on two-way communication, in which both parties have mutual interests and try to influence the public with honest and responsible practices.

Harlow (1976) highlights the common characteristics of public relations practices as follows:

- Public relations require expertise and must be managed by experts who know their job well in order to achieve successful results.
- It closely examines and analyzes the behavior of the target audience and shares the results with the management.
- It carries out the research needed by the organization, and presents the policy and program proposals to the management.
- It uses mass media effectively, manages the corporate image and reputation by

establishing healthy and sustainable relationships.

- The public relations unit operates continuously as a part of the management.

The public relations process consists of four major stages, which are research, planning, implementation and evaluation.

Research: Determining the ideas and thoughts of the circles starts with the research phase in public relations practices (Özkan, 2009:47). Therefore, the first step to be taken in a public relations campaign will be information gathering or research. At this stage, information will be collected; It is very important to correctly answer the questions of which audience, by what method, when to reach and what to convey. Targeted with the research phase; is to make an effort to reveal what the public thinks about any person, institution or organization and to ensure the formation of desired attitudes. In order to achieve this result, the first step should be the recognition of the target audience. After all, this is the purpose of research and information gathering. A public relations practice will not be successful unless the characteristics, views, thoughts and tendencies of the target audience are understood in the public relations work (Yavuz, 2016: 91).

Planning: Based on the information and data obtained during the research phase in the public relations process (Çamdereli, 2000:64), the application details about how to solve a topic or problem and how to evaluate the opportunities are included in the planning phase. During the planning phase, strategic considerations are written down and the plan includes operational details, adhering to the strategy. Since it has a direct effect on the implementation of public relations practice, planning should be in an effective structure and should include detailed, goal-oriented research and evaluations that ensure the efficient use of resources by calculating all the variables. The term of the planning can be made as short, medium or long-term,

depending on the perspective of the strategy (Uludağ, 2008: 99).

Implementation: Messages prepared according to the information and data collected during the research phase are delivered to the target audiences during the implementation phase with the previously planned communication tools and techniques. During the implementation phase, the pre-prepared plan should be strictly adhered to. The implementation phase is a process that requires the most attention and does not accept mistakes (Okay and Okay, 2001: 276). The studies carried out at the stage until the implementation have more of a static feature and remain on paper. It is seen that this static structure turns into a dynamic structure with the implementation phase. It will be beneficial to test the plan and the determined messages, which have been prepared in advance, with a preliminary trial for a small audience that will represent them, in the target audience that is intended to be addressed, in terms of providing the opportunity to foresee and correct the problems that may arise in the future. After this trial is done, the prepared plans are put into practice. And in this process, necessary coordination studies should be carried out continuously (Yavuz, 2016:95).

Evaluation: In the public relations process, after the research, planning and implementation phases, the evaluation phase starts. At this stage, the results are evaluated by analyzing the extent to which the public relations activities carried out have reached the planned goals (Kadıbeşgil, 1987:216). Due to these features, the evaluation phase has a very important place in the public relations process. Because communication activities are accepted as successful to the extent that they can be measured, and studies can be carried out to make the activities more efficient and successful with the data obtained after the evaluations (Özkan, 2009:55).

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN MUNICIPALITIES

Municipalism is closely related to public relations activities. Because the organization called the municipality came to the administration with the election of the city residents; It is an institution that provides services under the close supervision and surveillance of city residents and is constantly on the agenda with its services and staff (Ertekin, 1995:8). In addition, municipalities are the closest public institutions to the public in urban life. As long as municipalities adopt the understanding of public service and establish sincere relations with the public, they can gain their trust, love and support. The duty of providing sincere and close relations with the public in municipalities is in the public relations units. However, in some local governments, public relations are not given due importance and they do not have public relations units or public relations staff. For this reason, the bond between the people and the administration is broken, the trust of the people in the administration decreases and the chance of being elected once again decreases (İşçi, 2002: 127).

Public relations identify existing, incomprehensible or misunderstood problems, resolve the confusion and lay the groundwork for establishing good ties between the public and the municipality. Establishing good ties with the public, correct and positive perception of the municipality by the public is possible through well-conducted public relations activities. For this reason, municipalities should first determine what the expectations, requests and complaints of the people are, and then determine their service policies according to the information and data they have obtained. The ability of municipalities to continue their existence and to be supported by the public is directly related to their performance in the field of public relations (Kurt, 2015:234).

In this sense, municipalities, which are loaded with broad authorities and responsibilities related to city administration, aim to explain their plans and programs to the citizens and to gain the trust of the citizens. Because, informing the public about the work of local governments and providing the support of the public in large projects that concern the people of the town are the prerequisites for the success of local governments (Gölönü, 2000: 128).

Public relations in municipalities are important because they fulfill the following functions:

- Determining the views of the target groups served on the municipality, evaluating and interpreting the attitudes of various publics associated with the municipality.
- Increasing the acceptance of the administration and staff in the society with the services provided by the municipality and helping the municipality administration in defining new goals to be created in this direction.
- Combining the objectives, defined by the municipality with the interests, needs and goals of other segments of the society, providing the support of the wider segment of the society to the decisions to be taken and the implementations to be implemented.
- Developing programs, implementing practices and evaluating them to gain the understanding the public regarding municipal services, and providing clues to the administration about the next steps to be taken (Tarhan and Bakan, 2013: 28).

The objectives of public relations activities in municipalities can be given as follows:

- To determine the tendencies, attitudes and expectations of the people regarding the municipality and to make suggestions for the appropriate improvements in the municipality.

- Finding the real reasons for the public's behavior.
- To eliminate the misunderstandings that have arisen in the public regarding the municipality.
- To develop mutual respect and sense of social responsibility between the municipality and the public.
- To ensure harmony between individual interests and public interests.
- Contributing to the improvement of the quality of services offered to the public.
- To inform the public about the service policies and practices of the municipality.
- To give citizens the opportunity to express their views on important and new projects before making final decisions about public service by the municipalities.
- To enlighten the public about the system and functioning of the municipality and their rights and responsibilities (Özdemir, 2016: 34).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One of the most distinctive features of the digital age is that both public and private organizations now offer almost all of their services through digital channels. Considered in the context of public relations, it has become a necessity for the call centers, which are responsible for ensuring the communication of the residents with the municipalities, to offer service alternatives through digital channels.

Turunc Desk, which started its operations in 2014 by the Muratpaşa municipality one of the largest counties in the metropolitan city of Antalya, is one of the important examples of hybrid public relations activities in Turkey.

Turunc Desk is a systematic public relations project (URLı), which provides a direct communication channel where citizens can reach all kinds of requests, suggestions and complaints about the municipality and city

administration, 24 hours a day, seven days a week through both online and offline channels (URL₂).

While offline interaction by the residents can be established through help desk, call center, mobil support team, fax, and mail, online suggestions and complaints could be submitted through website, e-mail, social networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.) and its mobile application. All inquiries are directed to the coordination center, which is considered the heart of the project. As soon as the inquiry is registered, a registration number is sent to the citizen's phone via SMS, to track it on the municipality's website.

Within the scope of the project, it is aimed that the citizens can reach a solution in their inquiry by the Turunc Desk personnel. Inquiries, collected at the coordination center are forwarded to the relevant departments through the system. The project aims to provide feedback about the status of the inquiry within 48 hours after receiving the request (URL₂).

In this research, it was aimed to investigate the efficiency of hybrid public relations efforts of municipalities. Operational success of Turunc Desk, which is a comprehensive public relations project of Muratpaşa Municipality that operates in both traditional and digital platforms has been examined. It has been analyzed to what extent the municipality's multi-channel public relations efforts meet the expectations of the residents.

In this study, a questionnaire was asked to be filled by the residents of Muratpaşa region. The data was collected by the convenience sampling method. The questionnaires were filled by residents over the age of 18 who had previously received service from Turunc Desk, and it was tried to ensure that the percentages of men and women participating in the survey were as equal as possible.

In this study, convenience sampling method was used. A total of 210 participants answered the questionnaire. The first part of the

questionnaire consisted of the demographic questions, aimed at compiling information such as gender, age, educational status and income level. The succeeding section of the questionnaire was about measuring the overall satisfaction level of the Turunc Desk service quality.

5. FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the participants by gender. As seen in Table 1, female participants are slightly higher than males, while 1.4% of the participants did not answer the question.

Table 2 illustrates that the highest number of participants are from the 31-40 age group, followed by 41-50 and 51-60 age groups. Adding up together, these three groups consist of the 53.5% of the total number of participants.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of the participants by gender

Gender	Frequency	%	Valid %
Women	111	52.1	52.9
Men	99	46.5	47.1
Sub Total	210	98.6	100.0
Unanswered	3	1.4	
TOTAL	213	100.0	

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the participants by age groups

Ages	Frequency	%	Valid %
18-30	18	8.5	12.2
31-40	42	19.7	28.4
41-50	36	16.9	24.3
51-60	36	16.9	24.3
61 +	16	7.5	10.8
Sub Total	148	69.5	100.0
Unanswered	65	30.5	
TOTAL	213	100.0	

As seen in Table 3, most of the participants have either high school or bachelor's degree. In total those two groups consist of 60.1 of the total participants.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of the participants by education level

Education	Frequency	%	Valid %
First School	27	12.7	12.9
High School	67	31.5	31.9
Vocational School	37	17.4	17.6
Faculty	61	28.6	29.0
Graduate School	18	8.5	8.6
Sub Total	210	98.6	100.0
Unanswered	3	1.4	
TOTAL	213	100.0	

Table 4 depicts the frequency distribution of the preferred platforms to access Turunc Desk services. As seen from Table 4, majority of the residents prefer traditional ways; dialing call center (43.7%) or visiting the help desk (14.6), both operated in the coordination center of the town hall. The third preferred way to reach Turunc Desk is the official website (14.1%). In total, online users of the Turunc

Desk project consist of slightly over a third of the participants (33.9%).

Finally, Table 5 shows the satisfaction levels of the participants with the Turunc Desk services. As seen in Table 5, majority of the participants are happy with the project. This finding is important in terms of the success of the hybrid public relations efforts.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of the Turunc Desk platform preferences

Preference	Frequency	%	Valid %
Help Desk	31	14,6	15,3
Online Inquiry Form	14	6,6	6,9
E-Government	2	0,9	1,0
Call Center	93	43,7	46,0
Offline Inquiry Form	2	0,9	1,0
Mobil Support Team	4	1,9	2,0
Facebook (Mayor)	8	3,8	4,0
Facebook (Municipality)	4	1,9	2,0
Website	30	14,1	14,9
Secretary of the Mayor	8	3,8	4,0
Twitter	2	0,9	1,0
Other	4	1,9	2,0
Sub Total	202	94,8	100,0
Unanswered	11	5,2	
TOTAL	213	100,0	

Table 5. Frequency distribution of the satisfaction level

	Frequency	%
Not satisfied at all	2	0.9
Not satisfied	4	1.9
None	27	12.7
Satisfied	106	49.8
Very satisfied	74	34.7
TOPLAM	213	100.0

While Table 6 lists the statements of the scale, Table 7 displays descriptive statistics for them. The positive responses to Turunc Desk's accessibility and its willingness to solve problems show that the public relations practices have been successfully implemented by the municipality. Because, being accessible and willing to learn the expectations of the residents are among the main objectives of any public relations department want to achieve.

The statements regarding the operations and the system of the Turunc Desk indicate that the residents of region are largely satisfied with the functioning of the Turunc Desk. However, it is observed that the residents of the region are somewhat dissatisfied with the negative feedbacks that some of their requests, complaints and suggestions cannot be resolved for various reasons.

Table 6. List of the statements of the scale

Item #	Statement
1	Turunc Desk works actively
2	Turunc Desk staff communicate sincerely
3	Turunc Desk informs the inquirers properly
4	Turunc Desk brings solutions to problems
5	Turunc Desk directs the inquiries to the relevant departments
6	Turunc Desk employees have sufficient knowledge about the municipal services
7	Turunc Desk is easily accessible
8	Turunc Desk serves equally to everyone
9	Turunc Desk contains several bureaucratic jobs
10	Turunc Desk aims to help the residents
11	Turunc Desk cannot sufficiently inform the inquirers
12	Turunc Desk staff's diction is adequate
13	Turunc Desk aims to reduce complaints
14	Turunc Desk aims to learn the expectations of the residents
15	Turunc Desk cannot sufficiently help the inquirers
16	Turunc Desk understands the inquiries correctly
17	Turunc Desk helps quickly

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Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the statements of the scale

Statements	5		4		3		2		1		Mean	S.D.
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
1	107	50.2	84	39.4	19	8.9	0	0	0	0	4.42	0.65
2	121	56.8	75	35.2	15	7	0	0	0	0	4.50	0.63
3	91	42.7	101	47.4	11	5.2	0	0	0	0	4.39	0.59
4	77	36.2	99	46.5	32	15	0	0	0	0	4.22	0.69
5	95	44.6	90	42.3	24	11.3	0	0	0	0	4.34	0.68
6	83	39.0	87	40.8	35	16.4	1	0.5	0	0	4.22	0.76
7	131	61.5	71	33.3	9	4.2	0	0	0	0	4.58	0.58
8	104	48.8	77	36.2	20	9.4	0	0	0	0	4.42	0.67
9	19	8.9	34	16	51	23.9	39	18.3	60	28.2	3.43	1.32
10	109	51.2	81	38	17	8	0	0	0	0	4.44	0.64
11	20	9.4	28	13.1	30	14.1	61	28.6	67	31.5	3.62	1.32
12	96	45.1	79	37.1	31	14.6	0	0	0	0	4.32	0.72
13	89	41.8	98	46	15	7	0	0	0	0	4.37	0.62
14	78	36.6	104	48.8	27	12.7	0	0	0	0	4.24	0.67
15	10	4.7	26	12.2	32	15	66	31	72	33.8	3.80	1.19
16	70	32.9	109	51.2	30	14.1	0	0	0	0	4.19	0.67
17	80	37.6	99	46.5	30	14.1	0	0	0	0	4.24	0.69

Before discussing the results of the inferential statistical analysis, the validity and reliability analyses of the scale, consisting of 17 statements have been conducted. While factor analysis is carried out for the validity, the correlation between sample size and components is also important. Therefore, before establishing the factor analysis, sufficiency of the sample size was tested by examining the KMO coefficient and

comparing the correlation between the components with the Bartlett test. Since the KMO coefficient has been found 0.929 in the study, it was concluded that the sample size was acceptable. Since the value of $p = 0.000$ for the Bartlett test, it was concluded that the data was suitable for factor analysis. The component matrix, obtained after conducting the factor analysis is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. The component matrix for the factor analysis

	Components			Components	
	I.	II.		I.	II.
Statement #1	0.760	-0.084	Statement #10	0.761	-0.082
Statement #2	0.824	0.065	Statement #11	0.703	0.530
Statement #3	0.757	-0.189	Statement #12	0.789	0.150
Statement #4	0.771	-0.185	Statement #13	0.775	-0.208
Statement #5	0.820	-0.160	Statement #14	0.773	-0.277
Statement #6	0.759	-0.046	Statement #15	0.616	0.528
Statement #7	0.766	0.041	Statement #16	0.693	-0.338
Statement #8	0.778	0.044	Statement #17	0.745	-0.224
Statement #9	0.723	0.449			

As seen in component matrix in Table 8, the coefficients can be combined into a single factor group, hence the scale consists of only one dimension. In the next step, reliability analysis has been tested. Since the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient has been found as 0.929, the scale found highly reliability.

Then, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test has been conducted to examine the normality of the distribution (Table 9). As seen in the summary statistics, presented in Table 9, $p > 0.05$. Hence, it is concluded that the data is normally at the 95% confidence level.

Table 9. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistics

	test stats	(df)	p
Score	0.103	213	0.122

Then, t-test has been conducted to investigate the differences, based on gender. Table 10 shows that there is a statistically significant difference in opinions about Turunc Desk between women and men at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

Since the mean score of men (4.4986) is higher than the mean score of women (3.9656), it is concluded that men have more positive opinions about Turunc Desk.

Table 10. t-test stats for gender

	n	Mean	St. Dev.	t	p
Women	111	3.9656	0.48298	-8.350	0,000
Men	99	4.4986	0.43670		

The next analysis was the ANOVA for the differences amongst the age groups. The results of the ANOVA test in Table 11 indicate that there is no statistically significant

difference between the age groups about the opinions about Turunc Desk at the 95% confidence level ($p > 0.05$).

Table 11. ANOVA stats for the age groups

	Sum of sq.	df	Mean square	F	p
Between groups	0,992	4	0,248	0,854	0,493
Within groups	41,491	143	0,290		
Total	42,483	147			

Finally, the opinions of the groups with different education levels have been compared. As seen in Table 12, the results of the ANOVA test suggest that there is a

statistically significant difference in at least one learning group in terms of the opinion about Turunc Desk at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).

Table 12. ANOVA stats for the educational levels

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Between groups	4.168	4	1.042	3.914	0.004
Within groups	54.582	205	0.266		
Total	58.750	209			

6. CONCLUSION

In Turkey, municipalities are the legal public entities with administrative and financial autonomy, established to meet the local common needs of town residents and whose decision-making bodies are elected by voters (Turkish Municipal Law, 2005: article 3). Since the municipalities have administrative and financial autonomy, they have a great freedom in meeting the common needs (social and technical) of the residents. Hence, establishing public relations practices correctly, mayors could gain a great advantage to be re-elected by the voters.

In this research, it was aimed to investigate the efficiency of hybrid public relations efforts of municipalities. Operational success of Turunc Desk, which is a comprehensive public relations project of Muratpaşa Municipality that operates in both traditional and digital platforms has been examined. In this study, it has been analyzed to what extent the municipality's multi-channel public relations efforts meet the expectations of the residents.

A questionnaire was formed to compile data for this analysis; Due to the time and financial constraints, the minimum sample size was determined at a certain sensitivity level. The following conclusions were reached with the findings of the analyses:

The residents of the town living in Muratpaşa region feel that it is easy to reach Turunc Desk. None of the participants gave a negative

response to the statement “Turunc Desk is easily accessible”. Hence, it can be said that providing hybrid access options to Turunc Desk by providing multiple (13+) offline and online channels 24 hours a day has the biggest advantage of the project.

Regarding the receipt of the forwarded inquiries, the participants state that they are given a large amount of information. In addition, none of the residents of the town gave a negative response to the statement “Turunc Desk informs the inquirers properly”. This confirms that as soon as the inquiry is registered, the registration number is sent to the inquirer’s phone via text message. At the same time, the participants largely agree with the statement “Turunc Desk helps quickly”.

When a general evaluation is made, based on descriptive statistics, it is possible to assert that the participants of the study largely support the view that Turunc Desk provides equal service to all citizens without discrimination. This situation confirms the effort of Turunc Desk to solve the problems of its residents.

It is widely accepted by the participants that Turunc Desk fully understands the citizens' inquiries, works actively to solve them, uses appropriate approach to welcome the inquirers, hence sincere in communication.

As a result, it can be concluded that such multichannel public relations project may

help municipalities to establish a honest and sincere interaction with the residents to gain trust by understanding and solving the problems or requests.

Further research on this subject may compare different public relations project in qualitative and quantitative analysis. Moreover, a detailed comparison of the efficiency of traditional and digital public relations project can be conducted.

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