

PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY OF THE V HELVETIA FIRE DEPARTMENT IN IMPROVING THE INSTITUTION'S IMAGE IN THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the public relations strategies implemented by Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V to enhance the institution's public image, examine the communication program planning process, and evaluate the mechanisms used to address public complaints. The study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with institutional leaders, public relations staff, and community members, supported by observation and documentation. Data analysis involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while data validity was ensured through source and methodological triangulation. The findings indicate that the public relations strategies of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V successfully fostered positive public perceptions and strengthened public trust through rapid emergency response and communicative, free educational programs. Communication program planning was oriented toward the actual needs of the community, employed accessible language, and utilized a media-mix approach. In addition, the evaluation process was conducted transparently by treating public criticism as constructive input for the continuous improvement of operational performance. The study concludes that adaptive and responsive two-way communication is a key factor in maintaining accountable public service quality and strengthening the institution's positive image.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Communication constitutes a strategic element in the delivery of public services because it determines how institutions convey information, understand community needs, and account for the implementation of their responsibilities. Public communication is no longer understood merely as a one-way dissemination of information, but as a managerial function that enables institutions to listen, respond, and involve the public in improving service quality. Open, honest, and dialogue-oriented communication can strengthen transparency, accountability, and public trust in government institutions (Lattimore et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). This function becomes increasingly important in emergency service institutions, such as fire and rescue services, because communication takes place in situations that require speed, accuracy, and clarity of information. Communication errors or delays may not only generate misunderstanding but also affect public safety and the effectiveness of emergency response. Therefore, the quality of communication within fire and rescue institutions should be regarded as an integral component of service quality rather than merely as an operational support activity.

Public relations in public organizations serves as a strategic management function that connects institutional interests with public expectations through planned and continuous communication. Its role is not limited to publicizing activities or enhancing institutional popularity, but also includes information management, relationship building, the reception of public aspirations, complaint handling, and the evaluation of public perceptions. Relationships between organizations and their publics that are founded on trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality tend to produce stronger and more sustainable relational quality (Lee & Kim, 2021). These relationships subsequently influence institutional image, understood as the overall public perception formed through service experiences, received information, employee conduct, and direct or indirect interactions with the organization (Parapat et al., 2023). In fire and rescue institutions, institutional image is primarily shaped when members of the public are in vulnerable situations and require immediate assistance. Consequently, rapid response must be accompanied by courtesy, empathy, information transparency, professionalism, and the ability to provide explanations that are readily understood by the public.

A relevant theoretical framework for analyzing this relationship is the two-way symmetrical communication model developed by Grunig and Hunt. This model positions organizations and their publics as relatively equal participants in the communication process. Accordingly, the purpose of communication is not merely to influence the public, but to establish dialogue, foster mutual understanding, and adjust policies and actions in response to public feedback (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In practice, symmetrical communication is manifested through openness to questions, willingness to respond to criticism, the provision of clarification, and the use of public input as a basis for service improvement. Social media may also facilitate symmetrical communication when institutions do not merely upload information but also foster interaction, respond to messages, and position the public as a communication partner (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021). For fire and rescue institutions, this approach is particularly relevant because communication takes place before, during, and after emergencies, ranging from preventive education and the receipt of emergency reports to response coordination and the evaluation of public complaints.

The development of an institutional image through effective service and communication also has a moral foundation in Islamic teachings. This principle is reflected in the word of Allah, the Exalted, in Qur'an, al-Qalam [68]: 4:

وَأَنْتَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

"And indeed, you are of a great moral character" (Qur'an, al-Qalam [68]: 4).

This verse emphasizes that honor and positive judgment are shaped not merely by words, but primarily through noble character and observable conduct. In an institutional context, moral values may be manifested through honesty in conveying information, promptness in service delivery, empathy toward victims, openness to criticism, and responsibility in responding to every public report. A positive image is therefore not the product of symbolic image-building but the consequence of consistency between the messages communicated and the quality of services delivered. For emergency service institutions, this principle requires the public relations function not only to build reputation but also to ensure that communication reflects integrity, professionalism, and a service-oriented commitment to the public.

Previous studies have demonstrated that public relations communication contributes to the development of a positive image among public institutions. Research on the Bogor City Fire and Rescue Service, for example, found that the use of social media and collaboration with communities and various institutions could strengthen the positive image of the fire service (Maola et al., 2025). However, that study placed greater emphasis on media use and public participation at the institutional level in general. Research examining public relations strategy as an integrated communication management process encompassing program planning, communication implementation, complaint management, and service evaluation within local operational fire and rescue units remains limited. Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V possesses important characteristics for investigation because it interacts directly with the public through emergency response, rescue activities, fire-prevention education, the use of multiple communication channels, and coordination with neighborhood-level government networks. The intensity of these interactions means that the institution's image is shaped directly through public experiences of officers' speed, accuracy, openness, and communicative conduct. The research gap

therefore lies in the limited understanding of how the overall public relations strategy of a local emergency service unit contributes to public perceptions and trust.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze the public relations strategies implemented by Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V to enhance its institutional image among the public. The analysis focuses on three principal aspects: the planning of communication programs based on community needs, the implementation of communication strategies through service delivery and media use, and the mechanisms for evaluating public criticism and complaints. The study also examines how staff responsiveness, educational programs, information transparency, and two-way communication shape public perceptions of and trust in the institution. The novelty of this study lies in the application of the two-way symmetrical communication perspective to interpret public relations strategy as a process integrated with emergency service delivery rather than merely as an activity of publication or information dissemination. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich public relations scholarship concerning local emergency service institutions. Practically, its findings may provide evaluative input for Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V and similar institutions in designing communication that is responsive, participatory, transparent, and oriented toward strengthening public trust.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the public relations strategies implemented by Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V in enhancing the institution's image. The research was conducted at Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V in 2026 over a period of one to two months, encompassing the stages of preparation, data collection, and conclusion drawing.

The research participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby informants were chosen on the basis of specific considerations relevant to the research objectives. The informants consisted of public relations officers, institutional leaders involved in communication policymaking, and community members residing within the Helvetia service area. Data were collected through three principal techniques: in-depth interviews concerning public relations programs and their implementation challenges, direct observation of service activities and public interactions, and documentation in the form of official reports, activity photographs, and social media publications.

Data analysis was conducted continuously through the stages of data reduction, systematic narrative presentation, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data credibility, the researcher applied source and methodological triangulation, enhanced the adequacy of supporting references, and conducted member checking to verify the accuracy of information obtained from the informants (Sugiyono, 2013).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Public Relations Strategy in Shaping Public Perception and Trust

The findings indicate that public perception of and trust in Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V are primarily shaped through direct public experience of the institution's service responsiveness. Based on an interview with the head of the unit, every report concerning fires, rescue operations, or other emergencies is immediately forwarded to the relevant personnel for prompt action. Mr. Hendri, as the unit head, explained:

"Whenever we receive a call or a report from the public, whether concerning a fire or a rescue situation, we respond immediately."

This statement demonstrates that the rapid receipt of reports and personnel preparedness constitute important components of the institution's communication practices. In this context, communication does not end with receiving messages from the public but continues through operational actions that can be directly observed. The public therefore evaluates the institution not only on the basis of the information it communicates but also on the consistency between its communicative response and the actions of officers in the field. These findings show that positive perceptions of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V are formed through a combination of accessible communication channels, follow-up action on public reports, and personnel readiness to provide assistance.

The findings also reveal that public trust is strengthened through the Balakar program, or Fire Awareness and Assistance Program, as well as educational activities concerning the prevention of gas leaks, electrical short circuits, and other fire risks in residential areas. These programs have transformed the perceptions of some community members who previously understood the fire service merely as an institution responsible for extinguishing fires. After participating in or becoming familiar with these outreach activities, the public began to regard Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V as an institution with educational, preventive, and protective functions. One resident, Irfan, stated that the officers responded rapidly, communicated courteously, and regularly conducted public outreach activities, thereby making residents feel closer to and more trusting of the institution. Rescue and educational services provided free of charge further reinforced the perception that the institution exists to serve the public interest. The officers' courtesy, openness, and willingness to explain fire-related risks in accessible language created communicative experiences that reduced the psychological distance between the institution and the community. Public trust in this study was therefore derived not only from the successful management of emergencies but also from consistent social interactions before emergencies occurred.

These findings indicate that public relations strategies in emergency service institutions cannot be separated from the quality of service performance. A response perceived as rapid provides concrete evidence of institutional competence, reliability, and commitment to meeting public needs. From the perspective of strategic public relations, public trust develops when organizational communication is supported by transparency, public engagement, and positive service experiences rather than merely by symbolic image-building activities (Kurniawan & Wijoyo, 2025). This interpretation is consistent with the institutional trust framework, which identifies reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness, and integrity as important factors in relationships between the public and government institutions (OECD, 2024). Immediate action following the receipt of a report may therefore be interpreted as a form of performative communication, in which communication acquires meaning and credibility through tangible action. For members of the public, a rapid response signifies that their reports have been heard, regarded as important, and acted upon. In emergency situations, such experiences exert a stronger influence on institutional image than promotional messages because the public evaluates the institution according to its capacity to provide protection when needed.

The Balakar program and fire-prevention education may be interpreted as representing a shift in public relations strategy from reactive communication toward proactive and preventive communication. Reactive communication is conducted only after a fire, complaint, or crisis has occurred, whereas preventive communication seeks to develop public knowledge, preparedness, and institutional relationships before risks escalate into emergencies. Apriliani et al. (2024) demonstrate that disaster communication conducted in a planned, consistent, and community-oriented manner contributes to building trust while strengthening community capacity to manage risks. In the context of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V, public education concerning gas leaks and electrical short circuits does more than transfer technical information to the community; it also creates opportunities for interaction between officers and residents. These interactions allow community members to ask questions, share experiences, and receive direct explanations. This finding is consistent with Aji et al. (2023), who emphasize that public institutional communication becomes more effective when the community is positioned not merely as a recipient of information but as a participant in an interactive relationship. Educational activities therefore serve a dual function as instruments of risk mitigation and as relational mechanisms for fostering proximity and public trust.

Public trust in Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V is formed through the consistency of three elements: messages that are easy to understand, courteous and open officer conduct, and responsive service delivery. These elements demonstrate that a positive institutional image is not merely the outcome of information management but rather the accumulated result of public experiences when interacting with the institution. Officer courtesy creates a perception of closeness, open communication reduces uncertainty, and service responsiveness demonstrates institutional capacity. Kumalasari et al. (2024) explain that communication transparency does not automatically produce effective crisis communication when it is not accompanied by public engagement. In this study, such engagement was manifested through the receipt of public reports, dialogue during outreach activities, and direct interaction between officers and residents. The public relations strategy of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V can therefore be understood as a relationship- and service-based strategy in which trust is built through listening, providing explanations, delivering education, and taking tangible action.

These findings reinforce the argument that, in emergency service institutions, sustainable reputation depends substantially on the consistency between institutional communication and the quality of service experienced by the public.



Figure 1. Documentation of Interviews with Mr. Irfan (left) and Mr. Hendri (right)

Public Relations Program Planning Process in Building Institutional Image

The findings indicate that the public relations program planning process at Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V begins with the identification of community needs and the characteristics of the service environment. Planning is directed not only toward disseminating information about the duties of the fire and rescue service but also toward addressing problems frequently encountered by the public, including gas cylinder leaks, electrical short circuits, delays in reporting emergencies, and limited understanding of the initial actions required when a fire occurs. Communication materials are subsequently adapted to residential conditions and the public's level of understanding so that the information provided can be applied in everyday situations. Mr. Nanda explained that communication is planned using "language that can be easily understood by people from all backgrounds," while emphasizing clear and useful messages. These findings demonstrate that program planning is not solely oriented toward the institution's publicity interests but also seeks to address the community's need for safety information. Accordingly, the identification of public problems and needs forms the basis for determining the content, types of activities, and methods of message delivery employed by Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V.

The findings further reveal that public relations planning is implemented through preventive educational and outreach activities. The Balakar program, or Fire Awareness and Assistance Program, is designed to introduce fire-prevention measures, the use of basic firefighting equipment, procedures for handling gas leaks, and emergency-reporting protocols. The outreach materials are prepared in a practical manner so that community members not only receive information but also understand the actions they should take before emergency personnel arrive at the scene. This program planning reflects an expansion of service orientation from a reactive approach toward a preventive one. Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V does not merely respond after a fire has occurred but also seeks to reduce risks by strengthening public knowledge and preparedness. Educational activities simultaneously function as spaces for direct interaction between officers and residents, enabling community members to raise questions, share experiences, and communicate their information needs. Such interaction assists the institution in identifying public concerns more concretely while fostering its image as an open, caring, and accessible institution.

Information dissemination is also planned through a media-mix approach that combines digital channels with direct communication. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X, and WhatsApp, are used to deliver information rapidly, broaden message reach, and facilitate public access to emergency service numbers. Nevertheless, the institution does not rely exclusively on digital media because community members differ in their ability and customary practices in accessing information.

Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V therefore coordinates with neighborhood heads and Babinsa personnel—Indonesian military officers assigned to village-level community supervision—to communicate information directly to residents. In addition to strengthening communication channels, operational planning is reflected in the establishment of additional service branches in the Helvetia area to reduce response distances and accelerate the handling of public reports. These findings show that communication channel selection considers speed, accessibility, audience characteristics, and social proximity. The combination of digital media and neighborhood communication networks enables safety messages to reach both active social media users and groups that rely more heavily on interpersonal communication.

This community-needs-based planning reflects an audience-oriented approach to public communication. Communication planning becomes strategic when it is founded on an understanding of the target groups' perceptions, behavior, information needs, levels of trust, and preferred communication channels (OECD, 2021). In the context of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V, the use of simple language demonstrates an effort to translate technical information into messages that are relevant, accessible, and actionable for the public. This practice is also consistent with the principles of risk communication, which position information exchange as a means of assisting people in making preventive and protective decisions when facing threats (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). The adaptation of communication materials is therefore not merely a matter of linguistic style but a strategy for improving message accessibility and reducing gaps in understanding between officers and the public. Interpretatively, this orientation indicates that institutional image-building begins at the planning stage, when community needs are treated as the primary consideration in determining the objectives and content of public relations programs.

The use of a media mix and local government networks may be analyzed as a multichannel communication strategy that expands public reach while strengthening participation. Salsabila et al. (2024) found that government public relations strategies become more effective when communication channels and partners are selected according to audience characteristics and program objectives. However, the use of multiple media platforms does not automatically strengthen institutional image when communication remains one-directional. Digital transparency must be accompanied by public engagement to generate more effective crisis communication and strengthen public trust (Kumalasari et al., 2024). In this study, such engagement is reflected in coordination with neighborhood heads and Babinsa personnel, direct outreach activities, the dissemination of emergency contact numbers, and the reception of community feedback. The public relations planning process at Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V may therefore be interpreted as an integration of needs assessment, message simplification, media selection, local network strengthening, and operational preparedness. Nevertheless, the planning process should be further developed in a more measurable direction by establishing communication objectives, audience segmentation, reach indicators, levels of public understanding, and behavioral changes so that its contribution to institutional image can be evaluated systematically (OECD, 2025).

Public Relations Strategy Evaluation and Improvement Efforts

The findings indicate that the evaluation of public relations strategies at Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V is primarily conducted by treating public criticism, complaints, and negative responses as sources of information for service improvement. Feedback received from the public is not immediately regarded as rejection of the institution but is jointly reviewed by the leadership and personnel to identify the underlying causes of the problem. Mr. Nanda explained that every criticism received is discussed with the team to determine its root cause and used as "input for improving services and communication in the future." This finding demonstrates that evaluation has become part of the internal decision-making process, particularly when discrepancies arise between the services expected by the public and those delivered by personnel. In practice, public feedback is used to reassess the accuracy of information delivery, response speed, coordination patterns, and officers' conduct when interacting with community members. Evaluation therefore functions not only to identify weaknesses in communication programs but also to understand the experiences of the public as recipients of the services provided by Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V.

The findings further reveal that complaints concerning delays in officers' arrival are followed up by examining the process through which reports are handled. The leadership and operational team evaluate the time at which information was received, travel-related obstacles, personnel readiness,

accessibility of the incident location, and coordination among the parties involved during the emergency response. Mr. Hendri explained that delays are not always caused by a lack of personnel readiness because, in some cases, "the public sometimes reports the fire too late." Nevertheless, the institution continues to conduct an internal evaluation and explain the circumstances to affected residents. Such clarification is intended to ensure that the public receives comprehensive information and does not form judgments solely on the basis of the officers' arrival time. This finding indicates that the evaluation mechanism comprises two interrelated dimensions: an operational dimension involving an examination of response-related obstacles and a communication dimension involving the provision of explanations to the public. Transparency concerning the causes of delays also serves to maintain relationships, prevent misunderstandings, and preserve institutional credibility.

The evaluation process has generated several improvement efforts, particularly in relation to team coordination, responsiveness to public reports, and openness in communicating with the community. Problems identified through public complaints provide a basis for the leadership to reinforce personnel preparedness and improve communication practices during service delivery. However, the available research data do not indicate the use of systematically documented evaluation instruments, such as the classification of complaint types, records of report-receipt and resolution times, satisfaction surveys, indicators of communication reach, or periodic follow-up reports. Evaluation is still predominantly conducted through internal discussions based on individual cases as they arise. Although this approach offers flexibility and facilitates rapid problem-solving, it may limit the institution's ability to identify complaint trends, compare performance across activities, and measure long-term changes in public perception. The findings therefore indicate the need to develop an evaluation mechanism that integrates internal deliberation with systematic data recording, follow-up monitoring, and continuous measurement of communication outcomes.

The practice of using public criticism as evaluative input is consistent with the principles of public communication that position evaluation as a process of organizational learning. Government communication evaluation is not merely intended to calculate the number of publications produced or activities implemented but to assess whether communication generates public understanding, attitudinal change, improvements in service quality, and stronger public trust (Government Communication Service [GCS], 2024). The measurement, evaluation, and learning framework further emphasizes that data should be collected and analyzed repeatedly to support decision-making during implementation and in the planning of subsequent programs (OECD, 2025). Within this framework, public complaints may be treated as evaluative data connecting communication outputs with service impacts. Complaints regarding delayed responses, for example, should not be addressed through clarification alone but should also be analyzed to determine whether the problem originated from delayed public reporting, ineffective information channels, accessibility constraints, personnel coordination, or limited resources. Through this approach, evaluation does not end with the resolution of an individual case but produces institutional knowledge that can be used to prevent similar problems from recurring.

The openness of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V to public criticism reflects a tendency toward adaptive and responsive two-way communication. Nevertheless, transparency does not automatically produce effective communication when the public merely receives explanations without being involved in providing feedback and assessing the improvements undertaken. Public engagement has been shown to play an important role in strengthening the relationship between transparency, trust, and crisis communication effectiveness (Kumalasari et al., 2024). Trust in public institutions is also influenced by their capacity to respond to public concerns and feedback in everyday service interactions (OECD, 2024). Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V should therefore develop a more structured evaluation system through complaint recording, the establishment of follow-up deadlines, documentation of causes and solutions, public satisfaction surveys, and the communication of improvement outcomes to the community. Such a mechanism would establish an evaluation cycle consisting of receiving feedback, analyzing problems, implementing improvements, communicating follow-up actions, and reassessing public responses. This strategy can strengthen the public relations function as an instrument of strategic management that promotes transparent, participatory, and trust-oriented public services (Kurniawan & Wijoyo, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the public relations strategy of Helvetia Fire and Rescue Service Unit V in building its institutional image is implemented through three principal processes: shaping public perception and trust, planning communication programs, and evaluating and improving service delivery. The institution's positive image is primarily formed through rapid responses to emergency reports, courteous and free-of-charge services, and the implementation of fire-prevention education programs that broaden public understanding of the fire and rescue service as an institution with not only reactive but also preventive and protective functions. Public relations programs are planned by adapting communication materials to community needs, using accessible language, and combining social media with direct communication through local government networks. Meanwhile, strategy evaluation is conducted by treating public criticism and complaints as input for identifying operational constraints, improving internal coordination, and providing transparent clarification to the public. These findings demonstrate that an effective public relations strategy in an emergency service institution depends not merely on the dissemination of information but also on the consistency between institutional messages, personnel conduct, and the quality of services experienced by the public. Nevertheless, the evaluation mechanism requires further systematic development through complaint documentation, public satisfaction measurement, the establishment of communication indicators, and the recording of follow-up actions so that the contribution of public relations strategies to institutional image and public trust can be measured on a continuous basis.

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