



The responsiveness pyramid: Embedding responsiveness and interactivity into public relations theory



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ABSTRACT

Responsiveness and interactivity are two terms that play an important part in any communicative process. Nevertheless, both academic studies and daily conversations tend to merge or transfer their meanings. Drawing on Rafaeli's interactivity model (Rafaeli, 1988) the purpose of this paper is to clarify the complex relationship between responsiveness and interactivity and to present the responsiveness pyramid, a model that suggests a clearer theoretical distinction between these concepts. In addition, responsiveness and interactivity are presented as relational maintenance strategies that may contribute to organization–public relationship building. This study is based on a field experiment and a content analysis of 799 organizational responses of Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations. The study reveals that organizational representatives, from both businesses and nonprofit associations, do not utilize the interactive and dialogic potential of their online responses in order to promote organization–public relationship building.

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During the past thirty years, the theory and research of public relations has undergone a major change from a functionalist to a co-creational approach. Relationship-building became a central issue, and various scholars have developed theories, models and measurement scales to analyze and define organization–public relationships. The emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web opened up new opportunities for dialog and relationship-building between organizations and their publics. These technologies thus became an important means of implementing co-creational principles.

The current study embraces the co-creational perspective, since it emphasizes the importance of dialog and two-way communication to organization–public relationship-building. The study argues that although the public relations literature acknowledges the importance of two-way communication to the process of relationship-building, the literature does not sufficiently emphasize two important terms, responsiveness and interactivity (as a process related variable), although these notions provide the very basic conditions for the existence of two-way communication and relationship-building. This paper tries to clarify the complex relationship between responsiveness and interactivity. *Interactivity*, which is one of the main concepts of computer-mediated-communication, and *responsiveness*, which encourages the continuation of an interaction and reinforces commitment (Joyce & Kraut, 2006) are suggested by this work as important contributors to organization–public relationship building. Their contribution is explored while comparing businesses and nonprofit associations, since these organizational types differ in many important aspects (such as aims, structure and ownership), but they share similar public relations needs and they must build and maintain relationships with stakeholders in order to survive (Coombs, 2001;

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Mazzini, 2004; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Whereas prior research focused on the presence or absence of organizational replies to external queries, this study goes a step further and analyses the *level of responsiveness* of organizational replies.

1. Literature review

1.1. The co-creational approach

The co-creational perspective put organization–public relationship (OPR) at the center of public relations research (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The perspective uses research in order to advance understanding between groups and organizations while it uses communication as a means of helping to negotiate changes in these relationships. According to Botan and Taylor (2004), the functional approach values the organization and its mission while the co-creational approach values relationships and publics. The co-creational perspective emphasizes the important role of communication in enabling publics to become co-creators of meanings. Following is a presentation of several co-creational theories.

One of the co-creational approaches is the *relational approach*. The relational approach emerged as a result of Ferguson's (1984) call to focus on OPRs. The relational approach saw the building, management, and maintenance of OPRs as the main purpose of public relations (Botan, 1992; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). According to Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003), relationship theory in the last decade was the second most frequently used perspective in public relations research, while various attempts were made to define the concept of “relationships” (Broom et al., 1997; Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000) and to measure it (Broom et al., 1997; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hallahan, 2004; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Indeed, public relations itself was defined in relational terms as “the management of relationships between organizations and publics” (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000, p. 85). Ledingham (2003) proposed relationship management as a general theory of public relations, while Bruning and Ledingham (2000) argue that the relationship management perspective fundamentally shift the practice of public relations away from manipulation toward mutually beneficial relationships. In 2006 Kelleher and Miller developed and tested operational definitions of relational maintenance strategies appropriate to online public relations.

Another co-creational theory is the *dialogic communication approach*. The dialogic communication approach adds to OPR building the notion of dialog and “dialogic communication” as the theoretical frame guiding relationship building between organizations and publics (Taylor et al., 2001). The term dialog appeared in public relations literature more than four decades ago (Sullivan, 1965), but Pearson (1989) was the first to present dialog as a theoretical construct appropriate to public relations. He argued that dialog is the most ethical form to conduct public relations, suggesting that public relations should be seen as a tool for conducting interpersonal dialectics, while having a dialogic system rather than a monologist policy. Botan (1997) explained that traditional approaches to public relations saw the public as a secondary actor that had to meet the organization's policy and marketing needs, whereas a dialog lifted the public up to the status of a communication equal.

The dialogic communication approach suggests that in order to create effective organization–communication channels, organizations must be willing to communicate with publics in honest and ethical ways (Taylor et al., 2001). The dialogic communication approach does not focus on conflict-solving; rather, it encourages participants to exchange ideas. Dialogic communication looks at the presentation of differences, with struggle and conflict perceived as natural states (Deetz, 2001). Therefore, the aim of dialogic communication is to reveal existing problems, conflicts, and disagreements and to address them without the compulsion to reach an agreement. In recent years, as the relational approach has gained popularity, it seems that the concept of dialog has been joining and even replacing the concept of symmetry as an organizing principle in public relations theory (Taylor et al., 2001). Furthermore, the frequent usage of the term “dialog” often results in confusion between dialogic communication and two-way symmetrical communication (Theunissen & Wan Noordijn, 2012). Whether it is two-way symmetrical communication or dialogic communication, a basic requirement for both communication types is responsiveness.

1.2. Responsiveness

“Responsiveness” does not have a formal operational definition. Kelleher and Miller (2006) defined responsiveness as “an organization's willingness to respond promptly to customer inquiries and complaint.” Stromer-Galley (2000) described responsiveness as “when the receiver takes on the role of the sender and replies in some way to the original message source” (p. 117). According to Davis (1982), responsiveness may be thought of as the probability to which each partner responds to the other, the proportion of relevant responses, and responses that match the demand for appropriate elaboration that the speaker intended to elicit. Davis argued that four factors affect responsiveness in an interaction: attention to the other partner, accuracy of understanding of one another's communication, possession of adequate response repertoires, and motivation to be responsive. The first three factors contribute to one's capacity for responsiveness, while motivation is a choice that is affected by the rewards of being responsive (Davis, 1982).

Various studies point to the importance of responsiveness to the continuation of an interaction. Kelleher and Miller (2006) suggested responsiveness to be one of the organization's relational maintenance strategies. Davis and Holtgraves (1984) argued that as an independent variable, responsiveness has a variety of consequences, both to the process and outcome of interaction. As a process, responsiveness affects the maintenance of the interaction and the focus on particular

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