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Defining public relations roles in the U.S.A. using cluster analysis

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study attempted to discover key public relations (PR) practitioner roles through a survey design using factor-cluster analysis. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) partnered with the researchers by inviting PRSA members to complete a survey in which 256 members participated. Although different items were used, the results of this study were similar to the findings of a study conducted on European PR practitioners by Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, and Meckel (2009) thus suggesting concurrent validity. Five PR roles were found incorporating personal characteristics, modes of communication, management and technical functions, perceived level of respondent strategic planning process involvement, and attitudes about communication goals and PR measurement (including perceived competency). The roles were labeled negotiator, policy advisor, brand officer, internal communicator, and press agent. The negotiator and policy advisor roles, which were management positions, viewed measurement research as important in the practice of PR.

1. Introduction

In a world extensively immersed in communication technologies, it is not surprising that human interaction is becoming more global involving the considerations and transference of diverse cultures and perspectives (Sriramesh, 2009). This trend does not escape the public relations (PR) practitioner (Conrad & Poole, 2012), who is in the business of communicating to internal and external audiences in a dynamic world where the nature of PR roles shift to keep up with technology and a changing world.

The PR organization essentially consists of practitioners who possess technical and managerial skills and responsibilities and where one of the two roles may be dominant, whether managerial or technical (Hogg & Doolan, 1999). The technician utilizes technology to execute communication tactics and the technician/manager oversees technicians, maintains a level of technical expertise, and deploys technologies in the service of PR.

Technology today allows us to easily measure PR effectiveness and related activities (Moreno, Verhoeven, Tench, & Zerfass, 2010). We can measure targeted publics' attitudes, values, and beliefs, as well as their "online" behaviors through numerous web analytics. Therefore, the importance and ease, with which we can now measure PR effectiveness will undoubtedly affect some PR roles because it can inform strategic planning and assessment (James, 2007).

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Another important consideration is the internal or external nature of communication and how it relates to PR roles. Internal communication has become increasingly important due to increased competition and a desire to seek internal audience feedback in an ever changing and fast-paced world (Arif, Jan, Marwat, & Ullah, 2009). External communication comes in various forms such as interpersonal lobbying efforts, corporate image building, and positive brand development. Depending on circumstances, the economic climate, organizational reputation, and governmental regulations, the emphasis on external communication can shift.

In sum, a PR role classification system should differentiate the technical and managerial aspects of the position as well as the importance ascribed to measuring PR communication effectiveness whether the focus is internal and/or external audiences. Considering the movement to globalization, perhaps this and other classification systems should be tested for their similarities and difference across national boundaries and cultures.

A review of the extant literature did not produce many PR role classification studies incorporating PR assessment. However, classification research is beginning to include the PR measurement function in Europe (Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, & Meckel, 2009). A United Kingdom study by Moss, Newman, and DeSanto (2005) identified five PR roles: monitor and evaluator, key policy and strategy advisor, trouble shooter/problem solver, issues management expert, and communication technician. This study was replicated in the U.S.A. (DeSanto, Moss, & Newman, 2007). The three major differences between these studies and the present research is that we incorporate strategic planning; include PR measurement, which is now an area of increased focus and more assessable today; and differentiate between internal and external communication.

Along these lines, this research utilizes the Beurer-Zullig et al. (2009) European PR practitioner classification system henceforth called Beurer-Zullig. The Beurer-Zullig system comprises essentially two managerial roles and three technical roles representing a wide cross-section of PR roles including senior management, strategic management and development, those responsible for the organization's overall image to the publics, marketing related customer communication, and internal operational communication. The survey from which the typology was based comprises 14 items, including 1–3 item measures.

The researchers sought to test the Beurer-Zullig (2009) classification system using a sample of American PR practitioners employing a different and more extensive instrument that not only captures the five PR roles, but also incorporates PR measurement and a number of additional demographic and organizational characteristics not examined by Beurer-Zullig and which builds on their framework. Principal components analysis (PCA)-clustering was utilized to differentiate roles (Dash, Mishra, Rath, & Acharya, 2010) followed by analysis of variance and cross-tabulations to further explore the relationships among characteristics and PR roles. Finding roles similar to the European-based Beurer-Zullig framework using a different instrument supported and provided concurrent validity for their classification system as it applies to American PR practitioners, and potentially provides more descriptive information about these PR roles. Similarities might also suggest how technology operates in conjunction with globalization in moving to a more standardized approach to PR roles.

2. Literature review

Classifying public relations practitioner roles has been approached from different perspectives. These efforts have increased our understanding of the PR professional's functions (DeSanto & Moss, 2004; DeSanto et al., 2007; Hogg & Doolan, 1999; Moss et al., 2005; PRSA, 1993; Toth, Serine, Wright, & Emig, 1998). Many of these classifications have one important characteristic in common (Austin, Pinkleton, & Dixon, 2000; Dozier & Broom, 1995). That is, practitioners largely fall into the overall roles of technician, manager, or some combination of the two (Hogg & Doolan, 1999). The technician focuses on creating and disseminating messages; whereas, the manager serves as a problem-solver and go between sometimes moving from internal to external audiences (Beurer-Zullig et al., 2009; Dozier & Broom, 1995; White & Dozier, 1992) scanning and collecting information from the external environment or stakeholders, which is then used in planning.

Beurer-Zullig (2009) developed a European PR practitioners' classification system based on two managerial roles and three technical roles. It represents a wide cross-section of PR roles ranging from senior management to tactician. The *negotiator* is a strategic management function and equates with reaching out to all stakeholders internally and externally. This role provides strategic planning and management input. The negotiator recognizes the value of PR measurement and its relationship to PR strategy as well as understands and facilitates speaking in a single voice. The person in this role engages in such tasks as lobbying and interacting with many internal and especially external stakeholders. Negotiators typically have seniority and 5–15 years of professional experience. They usually are men between the ages of 41 and 45. Their degrees commonly are in the humanities, communication, or business. Next, there is the *policy advisor*, who serves in a management and often technical capacity. This person develops overall plans and policies with other executives such as negotiators exercising advisory and control tasks. Most of the policy advisor's activities are internal unlike the negotiator. The policy advisor typically has over 11 years of professional experience and is an over 40 year old male. He is responsible for providing communication risk assessments and communication opportunities targeting internal and external audiences. He assumes responsibilities for communication planning and outcomes. He provides decision-making advice, contributes to strategic planning, is comfortable with PR measurement, and sees the value of measurement. Policy advisors typically hold a humanities, communication, or business degree. Third, there is the *brand officer*, which is a technical role. This role is responsible for specific aspects of marketing communication programs such as event and other customer-related tactics, and may report to the marketing manager. Typically a woman, she is given little opportunity to expand experience and promotion possibilities. She has 5–10 years experience and usually holds a business, humanities, or communication degree.