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Corporate public relations dynamics: Internal vs. external stakeholders and the role of the practitioner

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ABSTRACT

Most public relations research advocates for stronger organization-public relationships and the implementation of dialogic theory to advance the practice and elevate the status of the public relations practitioner. However, this study reveals that internal relationship dynamics can prevent corporate public relations practitioners from carrying out this function of the public relations role. Twelve weeks of observation and eleven interviews were conducted at a Fortune 1000 technology company to gain insights on how corporate PR practitioners build relationships with external publics, to gauge practitioners' orientation to dialogue, and to identify challenges to external relationship building. Results show that internal relationship management is a prerequisite to corporate public relations practitioners' success in developing mutually beneficial relationships with key publics. These findings have implications for both the theory and practice of public relations especially when considering the discussion of the technician versus strategic manager role of public relations and the advancement of the field to a professional status.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of social media, digital content and mobile devices has created a knowledge society of publics who expect constant communication. To meet this demand, corporate PR practitioners are expected to be active on Twitter, LinkedIn and corporate blogs; to respond to media inquiries in time frames that are increasingly becoming shorter; and to create and support corporate narratives that generate news coverage, all while protecting the organization's brand (Waters, Tindal & Morton, 2011; Zerfass, Schwalbach, Bentele, & Sherzada, 2014). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) released a modernized definition of PR in 2012 that states, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA Staff, 2012). In order to build these mutually beneficial relationships with publics, most corporations and larger companies enlist the support of external PR agencies to help the in-house team handle the demands of the job. As Forbes contributor Cheryl Conner (2013) noted:

> Some companies do great PR with the help of agencies. Some do great public relations in-house. If an organization does PR well, it hardly matters whether it was accomplished from within or without. But it matters hugely, either way, that they do the job well (forbes.com).

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The theory of "doing the job well" in PR is largely evaluated by the quality and success of relationships external to the organization (Ferguson, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2003; Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004; Smith, 2012). Much scholarship focuses on building theories to enhance the PR practitioner's ability to build mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its external publics, yet little research has explored the internal communication processes that corporate PR practitioners face on a daily basis and how those internal interactions shape the practitioner's role. External relationship building certainly constitutes a large part of the corporate PR job function. However, practitioners, much like other internal departments such as human relations or purchasing, are also faced with internal stakeholder demands on a daily basis (Jones, 1996; Goebel, Marshal and Locander, 2003). As many corporate communications departments turn to a more integrated communications approach, PR practitioners must establish quality relationships with cross-functional teams in marketing, advertising and product development (Moriarty, 1994; Niemann-Struweg, 2014). Corporate PR practitioners are also tasked with communicating the policies and strategies of the leadership, collaborating with other members of the communications organization, and working with external agency partners to develop cohesive corporate messaging (Gallicano, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2014; Men, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2014). These dynamics constitute an entirely different realm of relationship management in the PR role that has yet to be fully explored in the literature.

To address this research gap, this study analyzes 11 in-depth interviews with corporate and agency PR practitioners to identify and describe the complicated relationship dynamics that practitioners face in their daily roles and how those dynamics affect their performance. As Conner (2013) noted, the bottom line in PR is to do the job well no matter how it is done. However, this study argues that the way the job is done may be affecting the practitioner's ability to do the job well.

2. Literature review

2.1. The call for dialogic public relations

Since the late 1990s, public relations scholars have perpetuated the concept of dialogue established by Ron Pearson in 1989 (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Botan, 1997; Kent & Taylor 2014; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, 2008). Pearson (1989) positioned dialogue as an ethical approach to public relations saying, "It is morally right to establish and maintain communication relationships with all publics affected by organizational action and, by implication, morally wrong not to do so" (p. 329). Building on this idea, Botan (1997) pushed for practitioners to transition from a one-way transactional model of communication to a more ethical, two-way, dialogic communication process. Botan (1997) argued, "Traditional approaches to public relations relegate publics to a secondary role, making them an instrument for meeting organizational policy or marketing needs, whereas dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization" (p. 196). This relational framework marked a major shift in PR theory, encouraging the field to argue for the PR role as an ethical backbone to the organization rather than a mere organizational support system transmitting corporate messages with no consideration of stakeholder needs.

Kent and Taylor (1998) developed the first framework for fostering dialogic relationships between organizations and publics on the World Wide Web. In 2002, they followed with a comprehensive theory of dialogic communication in public relations, building on the symmetrical model of public relations theory. Kent and Taylor (2002) defined dialogue as an orientation to communication saying, "Dialogue is not a process or a series of steps. Rather, it is a product of ongoing communication and relationships" (p. 24). Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed five tenets of dialogue: mutuality (an inclusion or collaborative orientation), propinquity (consulting publics on issues that may affect them), empathy (supportiveness and acknowledgment of the other), risk (vulnerability and unanticipated consequences) and commitment (holding conversations for mutual benefit rather than exploitation). According to Kent and Taylor (2002), these five tenets work together to "change the nature of the organization–public relationship by placing emphasis on the relationship" (p. 24). Overall, Kent and Taylor's (2002) concept of dialogue in public relations is characterized by a willingness to accept, understand, consider and involve the "other" (or public) in organizational communication and decision-making.

More recently, Kent and Taylor (2014) have focused on the principle of engagement as a way to clarify and facilitate dialogue in public relations. They argue, "Dialogue is the product of a particular type of relational interaction, not just any communicative interaction. Engagement is a necessary part of dialogue for, without it, there can be no real dialogue" (p. 390). This concept seems particularly relevant with the advances in social media communication and new media technologies as a resource for facilitating engagement in a way never before possible. However, many studies have found that practitioners are not using social media to foster dialogue in the way scholars have hoped (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Waters & Williams, 2011; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Macnamara (2006) expressed frustration over the lack of audience-centric, two-way communication in the field of public relations arguing that practitioners have ignored 10–15 years of professional and academic advice and continue to focus on outputs-oriented, transactional communication. He urged, "New routes to audiences are being constructed; new social networks are being built. We face a necessity and a great opportunity to chart a new course" (Macnamara, 2006, p. 10). A decade later, most corporate public relations departments have come to the realization that utilizing new media and social networks is a necessity—this evidenced by the proliferation of corporate blogs, Twitter accounts and digital content creation.

However, simple adoption of social media and digital tools does not necessarily result in the two-way, audience-centric communication Macnamara (2006) argued for, or what Kent and Taylor (2002) would call dialogic public relations. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that Fortune 500 companies underused Twitter in facilitating dialogic communication, similar to