



# Public relations aspects of brand attitudes and customer activity



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## ABSTRACT

Featuring the role of public relations in brand equity research and best practices, this study investigates how product, non-product, and customer–business relationship attributes affect customer-based brand equity (i.e., brand attitudes and customer activity). Analysis reveals customer–business relationships are central to a causal model linking evaluation (brand attitudes) and activation/motivations (customer activity). Findings demonstrate that for service businesses (e.g., banks), customer–business relationships are the primary, rather than minor, predictor of brand equity. These findings demonstrate how public relations scholarship and practice plays a central rather than peripheral role in customer satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

In the introduction to section one of the *Handbook of Public Relations*, Heath (2001) mused about the growing list of molar topics that authors were using to build 21st century public relations. Among those vibrant and promising topics was relationship building. About that topic, he postulated that although the house of public relations was set on constantly shifting sands, it was increasingly putting down some solid footings:

The heart of the new view of the practice of public relations is the mutually beneficial relations that an organization needs to enjoy a license to operate. Instead of engineering acceptance of a product or service, the new view of public relations assumes that markets are attracted to and kept by organizations that can create mutually beneficial relationships. Likewise, activists are less likely, as is government, to punish organizations that establish mutually beneficial relationships with them. (2001, p. 3)

That observation was based not only on various discussions in the *Handbook* but also on a tradition of thought extending back at least to the 1950s that featured perceptions of mutual benefit as a lynchpin in successful and ethical public relations practice and research (Cultip, Center, & Broom, 2006).

One of the articles that contributed to such 21st century discussions was Broom, Casey, and Ritchey's (1997) call for a working definition of relationships that allows "the development of valid operational measures" of OPR "with measurable

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properties distinct from their antecedents and consequences and independent of the parties in the relationships" (p. 83). The last part of that observation is particularly important because it calls for a theoretical contextualization of relationship as a concept, one that is defined by the variables relevant to antecedent conditions, to the nature and quality of relationships as such, and to outcomes both positive and negative based on the quality of relationships. The paradigm for such analysis was increasingly been based on speech communication studies in interpersonal communication. In that tradition, relationship quality is a central problematic of the human condition, in many contexts such as friendships, marriages, superior–subordinate exchanges, and even between organizations and customers as well as other stakeholders.

Over the years since the 1990s, conceptualization in public relations research has led to research focused more on taxonomies of relational variables with little sensitivity to the contextualization of those variables. As is evident in the interpersonal communication literature, the speculation about lists of variables that differentiate relationship qualities is often similar to a dog chasing its tail. Many variables are proposed by various theorists but those that truly differentiate the enactment of successful from unsuccessful relationships continue to be more speculative than definitive. And, such pursuit is often confounded by a tendency to not anchor the discussions in antecedent conditions or attach them to outcome variables, despite the wisdom of Broom et al.'s challenge. According to Broom et al. (1997), relationships are "properties of exchanges, transactions, communication, and other interconnected activities" (p. 94). Such challenges result from the fact that as in interpersonal communication the types, contexts, and expectations of relationships vary leading researchers to conclude that lists of variables can help but are likely to never achieve universality and predictability with strong ability to account for the variance in successful relationships.

The purpose of this current research is to explore aspects of relationships in a contextual framework that associates them with brand equity as predictive of the kind of customer satisfaction that leads to current customers' recommendations to prospective customers. In this effort, the current research project examines relationship quality as one of the three variables predictive of brand equity and propensity to recommend; the other two are the product offerings of the company as well as non-product attributes that are relevant to its brand equity. Finally, this research is contextualized in terms of a service industry, a member of the banking industry (for instance, see this context in Bruning & Ledingham, 1999).

In this tradition, studies such as that by Waters and Bortree (2012) assume that the kind of organization seeking to build relationships is a factor; they also found that the array of relationship types may differ by organization; one size does not fit all. Finally, they revealed that their study, because of the number of variables used to define relationships, employed "23 questions to measure each relationship, resulting in 69 questions simply looking at the established relationship scales." They speculated that "most telephone, Internet, or street intercept survey participants would not be willing to give the time needed to answer these questions" (p. 127).

So, not only did this current project seek to use fewer, and more manageable measures, but ones that were conceptually defined to account for, as modeled, substantial and valuable variance to predict outcome variables. This study did so from a public relations perspective that features relationship quality rather than product marketing or advertising as key to brand equity. It also presumed that relationships and publicity were compatible not mutually exclusive (Hallahan, 2010).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Brand equity and relationship building

Each day marketing, advertising, public relations, and integrated marketing communications (IMC) professionals work to create, increase, maintain, and even repair various brands' equity because a well-established brand is a business asset. Despite its importance, the meaning of "brand" is imprecise and complex (Keller, 1993, 1998; Moore, 1993) as are the factors that influence it. Consensus suggests that each brand is a composite of several elements, such as name, logo, symbolism, package design, and product lines as well as service quality, customer relations.

A brand is ostensibly characterized by differentiating attributes that can affect as well as reflect customers' perceptions and attitudes; thus, for instance, brand equates with the value-added attributes a product name evokes in a consumer's mind (Achenbaum, 1993; Keller, 1998) and how such evocation differentiates companies, and other types of organizations, as well as products, services, and other aspects of stakeholder/stakeseecker and organization relationships. This topic, therefore, is fundamental to an organization's ability to gain stakes it needs to achieve its mission and vision; but it does so in partnership with customers and other stakeholders. By that reasoning, relationships should be predictors of organizational success, not only to be investigated in terms of the logics of neo-institutional theory, but even more specifically guided by theories of resource dependency and reflective management which traditionally include principles of corporate social responsibility and legitimacy.

Advertising and marketing are often seen as the disciplines driving brand equity, but increasingly scholars address the roles public relations plays in brand-related activities. For example, publicity can help shape new brands (Ries & Ries, 2002). Public relations supports IMC to build brand awareness and knowledge that affect brand image (Anantachart, 2004). Publicity can help a company "create value, build its assets and constantly create and recreate your organization's brand" (Marken, 2001, p. 33). This claim may especially be true if public relations, as Kim and Chan-Olmsted (2005, see also Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Kim, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) demonstrated, can foster organization–public relationship satisfaction. When customers perceive that they have beneficial, pleasant, professional and productive interactions with a company, that perception is likely to foster favorable brand attitudes.

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