

Using dialogue to build organization–public relationships, engage publics, and positively affect organizational outcomes

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Abstract

The study and practice of public relations continues to explore the many benefits accrued when organizations adopt a relational approach to public relations management. One area that is relatively unexplored in the relationship management literature is the role of dialogue in organization–public relationships. Historically, scholars have focused dialogic research on either interaction – where an organization and a public exchange information – or a debate – where organizations and public engage in a process of statement counterstatement. The current investigation explores the notion of dialogue and examines the ways in which relationship attitudes and dialogue may positively affect key public member evaluations and behavioral intent. The results suggest that both relationship attitudes and dialogue positively affect respondent evaluations of and intended behaviors toward an organization. The implications of the findings are presented and suggestions for managing organization–public relationships are considered.

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1. Introduction

In today's marketplace, scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize the benefits accrued when relationship management principles guide public relations practice (Ledingham, 2003). The genesis for studying the relationship management perspective traces to a conference paper by Ferguson (1984). Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) began centering the study and practice on relationships by defining public relations as “the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 4). A few years later, Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) suggested that reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding were the key elements of an organization–public relationship and recommended that researchers and practitioners use these concepts when measuring the quality of strategic relationships. Moreover, Center and Jackson (1995) observed that the desired outcome of public relations activity should be enhanced organization–public relationships. The research that evolved from these preliminary investigations has focused on (a) defining organization–public relationships, and (b) relating organization–public relationships to important organizational outcomes and (c) quantifying relationship quality.

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Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) proposed that relationships have measurable properties that are distinct from their antecedents and consequences and independent of the parties in the relationships. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) suggested that an ideal organization–public relationship is the “state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard” (p. 62). Kovacs (2001) reported that identifying the common interests between an organization and public is imperative to effective relationship building. Ledingham (2003) focused the study, teaching, and practice of public relations on relationships when he noted “it is the management of these relationships – through both communication and behavioral initiatives – that is the appropriate framework for . . . public relations” (p. 195).

A second stream of relationship-based scholarship sought to quantify the influence of public relations activity on important organizational outcomes. Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison, and Lesko (1997) examined 17 dimensions of organization–public relationship quality that were derived from personal relationship, public relations, and marketing literatures. The authors reported that many of the factors that influence personal relationships likewise affected organization–public relationships. This finding served as the basis for a series of studies examining the positive influence that trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment have in organization–public relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000a; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000).

Bruning and Ledingham (1999) then created a multi-item, multi-dimension scale that showed that organizations and public have personal, professional, and community relationships. Application of that scale showed that organization–public relationship attitudes affect perceptions of satisfaction (Bruning & Hatfield, 2002; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000b; Bruning & Ralston, 2000), behavioral intent (Bruning, 2000; Bruning & Ralston, 2001; Ledingham, 2001), and actual behavior (Bruning, 2002; Bruning & Lambe, 2002). Bruning and Galloway (2003) expanded the 1999 scale and reported that organization–public relationships focus on anthropomorphism, community improvement, personal commitment, comparison of alternatives, and professional benefit/expectation attitudes. Application of that scale has shown that public member relationship attitudes affect evaluations of satisfaction and behavioral intent (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004; Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004).

A third stream of research built upon the work of Hon and Grunig (1999) quantifies relationship quality by measuring the relationship indicators of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, the exchange relationship, and the communal relationship. Jo, Hon, and Brunner (2004) reported that the scale was an effective diagnostic tool for measuring relationship effectiveness. Huang (2001a) adapted the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale to measure cross-cultural organization–public relationships by focusing on control mutuality, trust, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment and a dimension that reflected eastern culture – the notion of face and favor. Application of the cross-cultural adaptation has been shown to be helpful in mediating conflict (Huang, 2001b).

Kim (2001) developed a scale to measure relationship quality by incorporating information gleaned from the interpersonal communication, relationship marketing, and public relations literatures. Kim (2001) initially hypothesized that 10 relationship dimensions – including trust, mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationship, openness, community involvement, affective intimacy, relationship termination cost, and reputation – were central to organization–public relationships. The results from this investigation showed that four dimensions emerged from the analysis – trust, commitment, local or community involvement, and reputation. Although tests have examined the validity and reliability of the scale, application of the scale in a variety of contexts has not taken place.

1.1. Dialogue in public relations

In public relations theory and practice, scholars examining organization–public dialogue generally focused on either interaction – where an organization and a public exchange information – or debate – where organizations and public engage in a process of statement counterstatement. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that the five overarching tenets of a dialogic orientation include mutuality – acknowledging “that organizations and publics are inextricably tied together” (p. 25), propinquity – assuming that public are willing and able to articulate demands to the organization and the organization is willing to consult the public in matters that affect both parties, empathy – the “atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed” (p. 27), risk – a condition of dialogue because sometimes unexpected and uncontrolled outcomes occur, and commitment – the genuineness, commitment to conversation, and commitment to interpretation of the parties in the relationship. Application of the dialogic approach in public relations research to date has focused on web uses (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Ryan, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) and international public relations practices (Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003).

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