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Public relations and social businesses: The importance of enhancing engagement

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Public relations is usually practiced within three clearly defined organizational settings: the public or governmental sector, the private or business sector and the social nonprofit sector. Over the past few decades, the boundaries between the three sectors have blurred, and new types of organizations and initiatives that combine environmental aims with business approaches have emerged. These new organizations and initiatives create a challenge for public relations practitioners: practitioners need to raise awareness among various publics to a new type of organization that combines both societal and business-like characteristics, and they need to promote dialogue and engagement with these publics.

This study focuses on social businesses—that is, self-sustainable businesses that address social goals (Yunus, 2007). Based on a representative sample of 202 respondents, this study utilizes the Diffusion of Innovations theory (DOI) (Rogers, 1962) to argue for the importance of engagement to a successful process of diffusion and to demonstrate how DOI theory might enrich public relations theory and practice.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, new types of organizations and initiatives have emerged. These organizations and initiatives combine environmental aims with business approaches, and they include corporate social responsibility (CSR), social marketing, cause-related marketing, social businesses, and others. Previous studies have shown that nonprofit organizations, as well as organizations involved in corporate philanthropy and CSR, try to utilize blogs and social networks to grab the attention of their publics and to cultivate relationships with members, donors, and volunteers, although these efforts have not always been successful (Duhé, 2012; Merrit, Lawson, Mackey, & Waters, 2012). Nevertheless, these studies have emphasized the important role that public relations plays in these endeavors, arguing that "the development of digital communication presents an opportunity for public relations to evolve in order to apply its existing strengths in earning coverage, building online relationships and managing corporate reputation" (Yaxley, 2012, p. 431). In other words, new types of organizations and initiatives have created a challenge for public relations practitioners who need to find out how to better utilize new media (i.e., social networks and mobile telephony) to raise awareness to their ideas, products and services and to promote public-organization engagement and relationship building.

One of these new types of organizations that combine business and societal characteristics is social businesses—that is, self-sustainable businesses that address social goals (Yunus, 2007). Referring to social businesses, this study will discuss the centrality of engagement to a successful process of diffusion and will argue for the relevancy of DOI theory to public relations theory and practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relationship-building and engagement

In recent years, *engagement* has become a buzzword in public relations research and practice. The idea that organizations and publics can and should engage with each other in 'real conversations' seems to be a natural development of the *relational approach,* which emphasizes the building, management and maintenance of the organization–public relationship (OPR) (Botan, 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) and the *dialogic communication approach*, which adds to OPR building the notion of dialogue and 'dialogic communication' (Botan, 1997; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Pearson, 1989). According to Taylor and Kent (2014, p. 384), "engagement is part of dialogue, and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital." They also suggest that dialogic engagement has many advantages for organizations and stakeholders because it improves understanding among participants, assists in making decisions that benefit all parties involved and encourages a fully functioning society whose decision making is based on information. According to Devin and Lane (2014), stakeholder engagement creates a network of mutual responsibility through relationships, while organizations involve their stakeholders in decision-making processes and dialogue. The result builds the legitimacy of an organization. Johnston (2014) suggests that 'as a multidimensional concept, engagement offers a foundation for building organizational relationships, and provides a means to facilitate community–organization interaction' (p. 381), while Ariel and Avidar (2015) add that online engagement enables publics to become co-creators of meanings.

The Internet, and mainly social media and mobile platforms, opened up new opportunities for OPR building and engagement. According to Sweetser (2014) "…social media has quickly grown into an organizational tool used to create a more human face and foster a relationship with stakeholders" (p. 205). Social media enable not only interaction among organizations and publics but also interaction among members of the public who consume, produce and share online information and become co-creators of meanings (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). Nevertheless, Yang and Kent (2014) note that "traditional" media and mainstream coverage still play an important part in raising the social media visibility of organizations.

One topic that has become popular in recent years as a platform for OPR building and engagement is organizational concern of society and the environment (Dhanesh, 2013; Du-Plessis & Grobler, 2014). The next section will explore societal and environmental engagement.

2.2. Societal and environmental engagement

Public relations is usually practiced in three clearly defined organizational settings: the public or governmental sector ('first sector'), the private or business sector ('second sector'), and the social nonprofit sector ('third sector').

Over the past few decades, the boundaries between these sectors have blurred, and many organizations have started to blend social and environmental aims with business approaches (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Berg & Sheehan, 2014; Young, 2001). This amalgamation, in addition to a growing demand from the public that organizations should take responsibility for their actions and provide transparent communication (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014), led organizations, and mainly businesses, to add two additional "P's" to the line of "Profit": Public and Planet (Du-Plessis & Grobler, 2014). Thus, various companies and firms have become more 'socially involved businesses' and have created positive social change through CSR programs. Although CSR activities were always present among businesses, the use of CSR as a marketing tool has increased over the years (Berg & Sheehan, 2014). CSR is defined as a "commitment to improve societal well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources," (Kotler & Lee, 2005), and CSR programs are aimed at reducing environmental and societal concerns, such as pollution, exploitation, poverty and crime. Indeed, CSR has been recognized by public relations professionals as a strong public relations tool that enhances mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, and CSR programs are now globally implemented (Dhanesh, 2013; Du-Plessis & Grobler, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2012; Trapp, 2014).

Various other forms of organizational social engagement that emerged in the second half of the 20th century include cause-related marketing, socially responsible investing, corporate philanthropy and social marketing. Social marketing was first presented by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), who defined the field as "the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving consideration of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and market research" (p. 5). According to Andreasen (2006), "Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of the society in which they are part" (p. 91). Social marketing uses marketing techniques to achieve social change and promote social causes, such as health, environmental protection, animal welfare, freedom and human rights (Toledano & Riches, 2014). Although social marketing is part of the discipline of marketing, McKie and Toledano (2008) argue that uniting public relations and social marketing might benefit both fields.

Both CSR and social marketing focus on an organizational contribution to society and the environment, and they are conducted by one of three sectors: CSR is mainly conducted by businesses and the private sector, and social marketing is mainly conducted by the governmental and the nonprofit sectors (McKie & Toledano, 2008). However, in recent years, a new type of organization has emerged (i.e., the *social business*), which is part of a new sector: the *fourth sector*. The fourth sector utilizes the strengths and resources of all three sectors to achieve social purposes through business methods. Thus, businesses take care of people and the environment, nonprofits look for new ways to become financially self-sustainable, and governmental agencies work to actually promote the benefit of their citizens (Smartrade, 2015). This study will focus on the fourth sector and mainly on social businesses.