The influence of public relations on relationship content: A content analysis of community foundation annual reports

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Abstract

This study investigates the influences on organisational–public relationships (OPRs) in terms of how organisations express relationships as a value in community foundation annual reports. While much attention recently has been given to social media as a form of dialogic communication, the depth and genuine nature of an organisation’s value of relationships is revealed in traditional communication where the nature of the forum is not dialogic and there is not an expectation of relational content as there could be in an online or social medium. A content analysis of community foundation annual reports shows that the presence of a public relations staff position can make a difference in whether organisations stress relationships with their publics in their self-evaluation. Specifically, when an organisation has a staff position designated as a public relations or communication role, and when this person is accredited in public relations (APR), there is a greater likelihood the organisation’s annual report will stress relationships to the same or greater degree as financial metrics. The relative organisational power of the public relations function and the asset size of the organisation did not appear to cause a difference in relationship content.

Introduction

The evaluation of public relations and its role in organisations have both been of growing interest among scholars and practitioners. Central to that debate is the variation in the definition, and thus the practice, of ‘public relations’. Some conceive of public relations as merely a media relations and publicity-seeking or communication–dissemination function. Others assert that public relations is a management function engaged in setting organisational policy, with a focus on relationship building that leads to organisational success.

How managers define public relations is obviously linked to their perception of public relations within their organisation. Managers who see public relations as a media relations function will evaluate it by counting the amount and nature of publicity they receive. Managers who view public relations as a management function will evaluate their public relations efforts as part of a measure of overall organisational success, including financial and/or reputation measures. In the latter case, there often is tension between public relations professionals and their management colleagues about whether public relations can and should be measured in financial terms or whether some aspect of relationships with publics should be evaluated to determine the success of public relations and the organisation. This particular tension has not been studied extensively.

The focus of this exploratory study is to determine if the presence of a public relations/communications staff position, the power of that position, and the public relations perspective of that person is associated with the degree to which the evaluation of organisational success focuses on finances or organisation–public relationships (OPRs). Since there is little research on public relations in non-profit organisations, they are the focus of this study. In particular, community foundations were analysed. Community foundations, most common in the United States but rising in Europe and elsewhere, are local or regional organisations that accept charitable contributions and make grants to non-profit organisations in the community where they are
based. This study contributes to the understanding of public relations as an evolving management function and its influence on non-profit and foundation administration. If the difference in the way organisations evaluate their success can be associated with the presence and power of a public relations person, it will be an indication that the public relations profession is moving past a mere publicity or tactical role and that its participation in management is instrumental in leading organisations to value relationships—the essence of public relations—as well as or more than only financial motivation. This would add empirical evidence to the normative assertions that public relations should be a management function and that it should be measured in terms of relationships.

**Literature review**

*Evolution of public relations evaluation and consideration of relationships*

Several authors have addressed the changes in public relations evaluation over time. In a review of public relations between the 1970s and 2000, Sinickas (2002) found a progression from measuring communication activities themselves to measuring changes in audience perception and behaviour, culminating in a correlation of communication to achieving organisational goals and return on investment (ROI) calculations for public relations activities. Lindenmann (2006) notes that academics have studied communication effectiveness since the 1940s and 1950s. In a detailed chronology of public relations measurement, he illustrates that much of the focus was on media coverage or publicity until the 1990s when the emphasis turned to measuring the effects of the broader range of public relations activities.

Today, public relations measures still focus largely on resulting publicity, but the measures are more concerned with the value of that publicity. Often, value is measured numerically, and in particular, financially. The public relations measurement company PRTrak developed a tool to relate the ‘share of discussion’—of a particular industry or product category—to the rate of sales. Angela Jeffrey, who developed PRTrak, asserts that evidence shows sales numbers rise and fall with a company’s share of discussion (Jeffrey & Getto, 2003). Rockland (2005) contends that evaluation must show how expenditure on public relations yields a positive financial return on investment, or ROI. Although the causal connection between public relations and financial returns has been challenged, Pohl (2002) developed a spreadsheet and formula to calculate a ‘public relations return value’ (PRRV) which included a targeted publics’ behaviour toward the organisation (i.e., spending habits), the income flow of the organisation, the contribution margin, and the organisation’s communication investment. This formula was an effort to quantify public relations to prove its worth to CEOs.

Others have stressed that since public relations is about building relationships, non-financial evaluations are more appropriate. A study of 250 executives and board members of large companies around the world revealed that 73% of executives and board directors are under increasing pressure to measure non-financial performance indicators (Deloitte, 2004). The communication research firm Delahaye Medialink developed a ‘Media Reputation Index’ to correlate the impact of the media and publicity on corporate reputation (Delahaye–Medialink, 2002). Similarly, David Phillips, founder of Media Measurement, advocates content analysis of media coverage as well as consideration of semiotics and reception analysis in the work of public relations that goes beyond publicity (Phillips, 2001). Henderson (2005) reviews the communication audit as a useful public relations evaluation tool, highlighting its ability to determine whether an organisation’s communication goals are being met.

J. Grunig and Hon (2004) were among the first to demonstrate measuring relationships in public relations, pointing out that doing so was appropriate because relationships—not publicity or financial indicators—are at the heart of public relations. Their six indexes—
trust, control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationship, exchange relationship—for measuring relationships were identified as part of a booklet produced for the Institute for Public Relations Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation (J. Grunig & Hon, 2004). Grunig later added ideas for qualitative measures of relationships (J. Grunig, 2005). Other studies moved beyond measuring the nature of organisation–public relationships (OPR) to measuring how these relationships affect the attitudes and behaviours of key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007). However, in media studies, most often in journalism, the focus can be on the sociology and causes of content being of a certain nature or the effects of that content on the consuming public. The purpose of this study is on the former, to determine what causes public relations content to be more or less relationship focused.

**Public relations roles and power**

Most significant for this study, J. Grunig and Hung (2002) point to a link between public relations’ role and power in an organisation and its resulting reputation:

> We theorize that reputation cannot be managed directly. Rather, it can be influenced by affecting the behavior of management—when public relations executives participate in the strategic management of the organization. (p. 1)

The notion that treating public relations as a management function significantly improves organisational effectiveness emerged originally in the Excellence studies (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002). For this reason it has been stressed that public relations must be a strategic management function rather than a strategic messaging function (J. Grunig & Hung, 2002).

Typologies of public relations roles have been developed over time (Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 1995, 2006; Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998), but the public relations literature consistently describes two primary public relations roles: manager and technician (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992). Studies have also addressed a variety of factors that determine whether a public relations professional enacts primarily a technician or manager role (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Moss & Green, 2001; Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000; O’Neil, 2003). The roles were determined by surveys of practitioners and subsequent factor analyses to arrive at these definitions: a manager makes decisions and works with the management of an organisation; a technician writes and produces communication tactics (Dozier, 1992). Practitioners often perform tasks associated with both roles, but perceive their role as predominantly one or the other. In other words, manager and technician roles are different but not mutually exclusive (Dozier & Broom, 1995). The enacted role may not necessarily be consistent with the practitioner’s own perceived role, given other organisational factors (Moss & Green, 2001; Toth et al., 1998).

Key among the organisational factors affecting the role of public relations is the dominant coalition, defined as “the group of managers who hold the most power in an organization” (White & Dozier, 1992, p. 94). Berger emphasises that the power of the dominant coalition comes from a variety of sources, including authority, coercion, charisma, expertise, information, reward, and sanctions (Berger, 2005). Dominant coalitions rely on informal interaction to define their membership, which can shift rapidly (L. A. Grunig, 1992). The way that members of the dominant coalition view the role of public relations in the organisation has been described as the dominant coalition’s schema (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992) or worldview (J. E. Grunig & White, 1992) about the purpose of public relations in an organisation. A set of studies related the concepts of power (Berger, 2005; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Lauzen, 1992; Plowman, 1998; Serini, 1993) and structure (Dozier & Grunig, 1992; Ehling, White & Grunig, 1992; Heath, 1994; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003) in organisations to the place of public relations in a dominant coalition (J. E. Grunig, 1992; Hutton, 1999; Serini, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2000) and the participation
of public relations professionals in making key decisions (Cheney & Dionisopolous, 1989; White & Dozier, 1992). Essentially, the more power a public relations professional has and the more often they are included in the dominant coalition, the more likely they are to affect organisational policy, including the measures to be used to evaluate public relations and organisational success.

Research has identified several ways to assess the power of public relations in an organisation. One indicator is the location of a public relations department within an organisation’s hierarchical structure or flow chart (van Ruler & de Lange, 2003). Public relations professionals can be placed in other departments or divisions of an organisation, such as development or fundraising, as opposed to an autonomous public relations or communications department. Structure is often visible in the manner of who gives whom direction of work tasks (Heath, 1994). For this reason, a person’s job title, such as vice president, manager or director as opposed to coordinator or assistant or specialist, can also be an indicator of the role and power of public relations in an organisation. The reporting relationship, or whether the top public relations person reports to the CEO or a lower level executive, is a similar power and role assessment (O’Neil, 2003). Others have considered how encroachment (Ehling et al., 1992; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Hutton, 1999; Lauzen, 1992) by individuals in other professions, including marketing, development, and law, has usurped the power and affected the practice of public relations in organisations.

Non-profits and public relations evaluation
Historically, non-profit organisations have lacked sophisticated evaluation methods for their public relations or they neglect to do it at all (Rouner & Camden, 1988). Currently, these organisations are increasingly expected to show the effectiveness of their programmes and services. A 2000 study showed that non-profits measuring the outcomes of their programmes is a relatively recent activity (Fine, Thayer & Coghlan, 2000), although the same study showed that determining programme outcomes was the most common reason cited for conducting an evaluation. Although conducting and communicating programme effectiveness is increasingly expected, Hoefer (2000) found that the quality of research methods employed by non-profits is low and stresses that stakeholders should demand greater accountability, which he defines as a willingness and invitation for public scrutiny. Another form of accountability besides programme effectiveness is financial performance. One study of data from IRS Form 990s (US-based non-profit tax forms) categorised non-profit financial performance into three factors: fundraising efficiency (a ratio of dollars raised to money spent on fundraising), public support (ratio of revenue received from the public to total assets), and fiscal performance (ratio of total revenue to total expenses) (Ritchie & Kolodinsky, 2003).

Meanwhile, several case studies have shown that some non-profits do measure the effectiveness of their public relations. Henderson (2005) noted that healthcare non-profits have used communication audits as evaluative measures to determine whether their communication influenced public attitudes and behaviour. A case study of Habitat for Humanity conducted by Delahaye Paine and Bender (2006) introduced the idea of ‘dashboards’—a set of evaluation indicators for an organisation—in a non-profit context. A survey of donors of a specific non-profit organisation examined the degree to which strong public relationships influence fundraising, and found that relationships are associated with continuous donating over time, but not the amount of a donation (O’Neil, 2007).

Normatively speaking, public relations scholars have advocated practicing the two-way symmetrical model of public relations in a fundraising context (Kelly, 1995). This would mean non-profits should strive towards building relationships of mutual benefit. This implies that evaluation should take relationships and public benefit into account, and not just finances or other organisational objectives. But this distinction has rarely if ever been studied.
Research questions

On the basis of research, this study will examine the association between the power and role of a public relations professional in an organisation and the focus of organisational evaluation on financial/numerical metrics versus measures of relationships. This association will be examined for non-profit organisations.

Community foundations are a particular type of non-profit that receive donations from local individuals and organisations and make grants to projects and organisations within their community. Their programme and organisational evaluation can be observed in the form of their annual reports. While much of the content in these reports is pro forma (lists of donations received, grants made, etc.), there is variance in what organisations stress in the narrative introduction to the reports.

Community foundations also vary in whether or not they have a position dedicated to public relations. There is additional variance in the power of the public relations function in the organisation, as reflected in whether the position is at the vice president, manager, or director level, as well as whether or not public relations is in an autonomous department in the organisation. Of course, not all people occupying public relations positions necessarily have an education in public relations, or a perspective that indeed views the public relations profession to be about relationship building. Therefore, accreditation (APR) of the public relations staff person could also be a factor in how much an organisation stresses relationships in its content. If public relations as a profession is moving from financial measures toward relationships as the focus of evaluation, it would be interesting to see if those organisations with strong public relations influence in fact stress relationships over finances as a measure of community foundation success. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

*RQ1:* Do community foundations with a position called ‘public relations’ or ‘communications’ differ from other community foundations in their annual report emphasis on relationships vs. finances?

*Job titles often are less a reflection of a person’s background than of the organisation’s perspective on the purpose of the position. An organisation that has a ‘public relations/communications’ position is possibly more likely to see the position to be one of relationship building, whereas an organisation that has a ‘marketing/development’ position instead may expect fundraising or financial return from that position, regardless of how the person occupying the position views their role. If community foundations with a staff position designated to public relations or communication place greater emphasis on relationship content than foundations that have no such position, it would indicate that the presence of a public relations perspective, i.e., focus on mutually beneficial relationships, is influential in the organisation and its evaluation.**

*RQ2:* Do community foundations whose public relations position is at a management level differ from community foundations whose public relations person is at a lower staff level in their annual report emphasis on relationships vs. finances?

The presence of a public relations staff position may not necessarily have an influence on the relationship orientation of a community foundation’s content. The public relations person may not be part of the dominant coalition or have final say in editing and creating the annual report. Therefore it is also interesting to consider the power of the public relations position, as reflected by whether they are at a management level or not. Public relations professionals at management level are more likely to have the authority to determine their role and control the annual report’s content, and if so, to stress relationships over finances as a measure of organisational success.

*RQ3:* Do community foundations whose public relations person is accredited in public relations (APR) differ from other community foundations in their annual report emphasis on relationships vs. finances?
It is also possible that a public relations person on staff merely holds the title because of his or her writing skills or general ability in communication and does not necessarily have a background or education in public relations. Thus, it becomes important to consider this variance among public relations professionals. To earn accreditation in public relations (APR) in the U.S., a professional must be a member of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), have a minimum of five years of experience and pass a comprehensive exam about public relations. Being accredited therefore becomes a useful variable to consider since accredited professionals have a broader understanding of the profession and its emphasis on relationship building. It is more likely that foundations that employ an accredited public relations professional will stress relationships as an evaluative measure.

RQ4: Does the variation in asset size affect the way community foundations differ in their emphasis on finances versus relationships in their annual reports?

While there is little if any literature on the subject, it is interesting to see if current asset size affects whether or not community foundations stress the growth of assets in their annual reports. Intuitively, it is plausible that community foundations with lower assets face more pressure to grow and thus are likely to stress the increase in assets or asset size goals in annual reports. Foundations with a larger asset size, by comparison, have a less obvious need for revenue and thus may stress relationships and relationship building as much as or more than finances.

Method

This study will use a quantitative content analysis of sections in community foundation annual reports: the letters of the president and/or board chairperson, the financial summary, and the staff listing. Annual reports are a common public relations tactic, which serve to report publicly on the organisation’s achievements, thus allowing for evaluation. Content analysis has been found to be an appropriate method to collect data about annual reports (Guthrie, Petty & Yongvanich, 2004). While a significant portion of annual reports comprises straightforward numerical and financial data, many annual reports include creative themes that serve to communicate the organisation’s own values. Themes are usually articulated in the letter from the president and/or board chair. One international study used content analysis to study thematic differences by focusing on the statements from CEOs and chairmen of Dutch–English and British companies (de Groot, Korzilius, Nickerson & Gerritsen, 2006). It is in these letters that the most variance of content is found from one organisation to another with regard to their emphasis on financial matters, relationships, or the accomplishment of organisational mission as the most important measure of an organisation’s success. In a similar study, Hooghiemstra (2008) used content analysis to reveal that both U.S. and Japanese companies explain company results in a self-serving fashion. One study of annual report content resulted in a three-part typology of annual report content: traditional, characterised by language with determined and predictable effects; enlightened, in which the language mirrors reality; and interpretive, in which language constructs reality (Simlowitz & Pearson, 1989).

Sample

Community foundations are a focus for this study for several reasons. As non-profits their annual reports are not regulated and do not have costly requirements by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). For example, public businesses (those that sell stock) in the U.S. have high compliance costs with laws that require detailed reporting of financial information. Therefore, there can be greater variance in the language non-profits use to indicate how the organisation evaluates itself and why it is producing the annual report. They also serve multiple publics with whom their relationship may not be only financial. In fact, community foundations must work hard to ensure their annual reports gain attention (Mittoo, 2007). This greater potential for variance with regard to an emphasis on

relationships finances makes them an interesting focus for this study.

Community foundation annual reports were solicited via a request on an email listserv of community foundation employees whose job includes communication. The members of the listserv could include public relations practitioners as well as development and marketing staff. There are 905 community foundations in the United States, or 635 not counting ‘affiliates’, which are small start-up community foundations associated with a more established foundation nearby. The response included 45 annual reports, or 7% of the sampling frame, to be analysed in the study.

Variables
Most community foundation reports contain content that is pro forma. This includes a roster of board and staff members, letters from the president and/or board chair, a list of donations received and grants given, profiles of donors and funded projects, and financial statements. The greatest difference is found in the thematic and summative narrative in the introductory letters. In this study, these letters from the foundation president and/or board chair were analysed for content to determine what extent the content, as measured in number of sentences, is financial in nature (stressing and highlighting donations received, grants awarded, accountability, total assets, investment, etc.) as opposed to relational in nature (stressing and highlighting specific persons or organisations, community projects and needs, partnering, collaborating, etc.). A ‘relationship ratio’ was calculated by dividing the number of relationship sentences by financial sentences for each annual report. Thus a 1 indicated an even amount of financial and relationship content, numbers lower than 1 were more financial, and numbers higher than 1 were more relational. However, since annual reports must have at least some financial content, the degree of relational content relative to other annual reports was of interest in this study, not necessarily values greater than 1.

The prevailing type of content or relationship ratio as dependent variable was tested for association with the independent variables: presence of a public relations position in the organisation, determined by consulting the annual reports’ staff listing (since few organisations included ‘public relations’ verbatim, the term ‘communication’ was also counted because it is a common synonym for public relations and it is distinct from ‘marketing’ and ‘development’); the degree of management power of the public relations position, as determined by the title of vice president, manager, director or indication in the staff listing by department of an autonomous public relations/communication department; accreditation (APR) of the public relations person, as determined by the APR designation after a person’s name in the staff listing; and asset size, found in the financial summary statement. In some cases where the annual report was not clear, the foundation’s website was consulted. Since not all annual reports included courtesy titles, the PRSA member directory was consulted to verify whether or not persons were accredited (APR). More details about the content analysis method can be seen in the protocol included at the end of this article.

Copies of the introductory letters, financial summary, and staff listing were made from each annual report received. Three coders were used to review the content, each receiving 30 annual reports. The overlap of 15 annual reports allowed for tests of inter-coder reliability.

Since the sample was small and data was nominal as well as interval, Krippendorff’s alpha was used to test inter-coder reliability. The test showed values above .98 for all the independent variables (public relations position, power, APR, and assets). The alpha for the total number of sentences was .9663. The variables number of relationship sentences and number of financial sentences had lower alphas, at .7248 and .7714 respectively. While inter-coder reliability of .8 is normally the minimum, Krippendorff (2004) noted that values of .667 and higher are useful for tentative conclusions, especially in this case where the variables include interval level data.
Independent sample t-tests were used to compare the mean relationship ratio based on whether an organisation had a designated public relations position or not (PR Position), whether or not the position had power in an organisation as determined by whether or not it was an autonomous department (PR Power), and whether or not the top public relations person was accredited (APR). Finally, a multiple regression was run to control for each independent variable.

**Results**

As shown in Table 1, 34 community foundations (75.6%) had a position with public relations or communication in the title, compared with 11 that did not. Of the 45 annual reports analysed, 18 (40%) indicated the public relations/communication department was separate, or autonomous. Eight (17.8%) had a staff person who was accredited in public relations (APR).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Frequencies of PR Position, Power, APR</th>
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<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>PR Position</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR/communications in title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/communications not in title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Power</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR/Communications in autonomous dept</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR/Communications not in autonomous dept</td>
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<tr>
<td>APR</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR/communications person APR</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR/communications person not APR</td>
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N = 45

The dependent variable of asset size, coded in millions of dollars, showed a minimum of U.S. $11.8 and a maximum of U.S.$2,135.6, with a mean of U.S.$263.3. The total number of sentences in the president and/or board chair letters ranged from three to 66, the number of financial sentences ranged from zero to 20, and the number of relationship sentences ranged from zero to 17. But the key independent variable was the relationship ratio, calculated by dividing the number of relationship sentences by the number of financial sentences for each case. This value ranged from zero to 5, with an overall mean of .724.

**Mean differences**

Since the study had a small, non-probability sample, tests of significance would not be appropriate. However, independent t-tests to compare means of each independent variable with regard to the relationship ratio did show large mean differences with regard to two
independent variables that provide answers to the research questions.

Table 2 shows that the mean relationship ratio for organisations that have a position with public relations/communication in the title was .822, nearly twice as high as the mean of .420 for organisations that do not have a position with public relations/communication in the title. The mean difference is even greater when considering organisations that have an accredited staff person. The mean relationship ratio for community foundations with an APR staff person was 1.55, nearly three times that of the mean of .546 for other community foundations. The mean difference for the variable power was not as significant. The mean relationship ratio of .825 for foundations that have an autonomous public relations/communication department was only slightly higher than the mean of .657 for organisations with no autonomous public relations/communication department.

Table 2. Relationship ratio mean differences for PR Position, PR Power, and APR

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<tr>
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<th>Relationship Ratio Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PR Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/communications in title</td>
<td>.822</td>
<td>.944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/communications not in title</td>
<td>.420</td>
<td>.402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PR Power</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/Communications in autonomous dept</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/Communications not in autonomous dept</td>
<td>.657</td>
<td>.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APR</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/communications person APR</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR/communications person not APR</td>
<td>.546</td>
<td>.484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( n = 45. \)

In order to control for the influence of other variables on the relationship ratio, a multiple regression was run that included public relations position, power, APR and assets as independent variables. As mentioned earlier, tests of statistical significance have no meaning because of the small sample. However, regression is useful as a predictive tool. The equation (\( F (4, 44) = 2.81, p < .05 \)) had an R-square of .219 and an adjusted R-square of .141 (more relevant because of the small sample), showing that 14% of the variance in relationship content (relationship ratio) in the community foundation annual reports can be explained by these variables. As Table 3 shows, APR appears to be the dominant predictive variable, accounting for a 104% increase in the relationship ratio when that variable is present. The variables PR position and PR power show lower predictive value (17.9% increase and 12.9% decrease in relationship ratio, respectively), likely because of the small sample size as well as the wide dispersion reflected in the high standard errors. The asset size of a community foundation seems to have no influence on predicting relationship content.
Table 3. Regression of PR Position, Power, APR and Assets on Relationship Ratio.

Conclusions

This exploratory study provides interesting answers to two of the four research questions. Specifically, results indicate that when community foundations have a staff position designated as ‘public relations/communication’, in addition to or instead of ‘marketing’ or ‘development’, the content of their self-evaluation in annual reports will emphasise relationships to a greater degree. Titles of positions in organisations are more often determined by the dominant coalition and management than by the person who applies for and holds the position. This lends support to the notion that when an organisation’s dominant coalition values the public relations profession enough to designate a position as such, the resulting organisational content will be more reflective of the relational focus of public relations.

In addition, the presence of a public relations professional on staff who is accredited (APR) seems predictive of much more likelihood of relational content in organisational annual reports. While the first variable is about the organisation’s value of the public relations profession and its role, the APR is indicative of the level of experience and knowledge that the professional has about the public relations profession. This is also an important finding in that it suggests that the various ways public relations is practiced, i.e., the ways organisations communicate, is dependent in part on the public relations training of the public relations practitioners on staff.

While there was a mean relationship ratio difference for organisations that had an autonomous public relations/communication department and those that did not, it was not a large difference. It is therefore hard to conclude from this study that the place of the public relations function in an organisation’s structure makes a difference in the degree of focus on relationships in its self-evaluation and the nature of its content output. The asset size of a community foundation also had little bearing in this study on the nature of its evaluation and emphasis on relationships in its content.
Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. The sample size of 45 was small, at 7% of the population, and it was not a purely random sample given the convenience method of solicitation via listserv. Future studies could persist for a larger random sample or examine publicly accessible content on foundation websites (though not all foundations share annual reports online, it is possible that enough do to gain a larger sample). Also, while annual reports are a good subject of content to focus on because of their purpose of organisational self-evaluation, future studies could consider a broader range of content to include newsletters, news releases, special reports, and other forms of public relations output in addition to annual reports in a broader assessment of public relations content.

Meanwhile, content analysis may not have been the best measure for all independent variables. For instance, the actual educational background of the person, i.e., in public relations, marketing or some other discipline, might be more instructive than the organisation’s name for a position. Also, since dominant coalitions are not fixed in organisations, it would be worth knowing the de facto reporting relationships of the top public relations person in an organisation, as opposed to ascertaining the power of public relations by looking at job titles or department structure. Both of these types of data may be impossible to gather through content analysis. Therefore, future studies could consider a mixed mode of research including surveys of public relations practitioners to learn about their educational background and immediate supervisor, as well as who has final editorial control of the annual report. This data could then be compared with the results of a content analysis similar to the one done in this study to determine the relationship ratio of each practitioner’s corresponding organisation and how they are correlated to educational background and actual public relations power in the organisation as indicated by reporting relationship.

In spite of these limitations, this exploratory study is instructive to public relations researchers and practitioners as a good indication of a relationship between the presence of a public relations function in an organisation, the sophistication of the practitioner’s understanding of public relations, and the resulting degree of emphasis on relationships versus finances or other factors as a measure of organisational success. The study is also of value to those in the non-profit and foundation community, who may consider the results as a starting point for future research or as a guide in the production of future annual reports and other communication tactics.

References


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Appendix

Coding protocol

Introduction
This annual report study protocol is designed to determine what community foundations emphasise as an evaluation of their success. It examines the letters from the president and/or board chair of each community foundation—in some cases both sign the same letter, in others there are two letters. The language in these letters will be assessed to determine if they primarily stress finances or relationships. This study also seeks to determine if there is a relationship between the emphasis in the letters and the influence of a public relations person on staff. Therefore the content analysis will seek to determine if the community foundation staff person responsible for the report is considered a public relations person, and if that person has the power to influence the emphasis in the annual report. The study will also consider whether that person is accredited (APR), as well as the organisation’s asset size.

The following definitions are important to understand in order to mark and count content relevant to this study.

Variable definitions

PR Staff – How the community foundation characterises the role of the top staff person likely to be responsible for the annual report. This will be determined by looking at the list of staff members in the annual report and at their job titles. Look for the presence of a staff member who has ‘public relations’ and/or ‘communications’ in their title. ‘Community relations’ is considered a variation on public relations. Enter the following code based on what you find:
1 = ‘public relations’ or ‘communications’ included in the title;
0 = ‘public relations’ or ‘communications’ NOT included in the title
PR Power – If you identified a public relations/communications staff person above, this study is interested in their relative power. This will be determined in part by whether the public relations/communications staff person identified is a ‘vice president’, ‘director’, or ‘manager’. Additionally, look at the way the staff directory is divided in categories to determine if the public relations/communications function is in an autonomous department. Enter the following code based on what you find:
1 = PR/communications is in autonomous department.
0 = PR/communications is NOT in autonomous department.
APR – This variable simply considers whether or not the public relations/communications staff person is Accredited in Public Relations (APR):
1 = PR/communications person is APR
0 = PR/communications person is NOT APR
Assets – The total amount of assets on the balance sheet for 2007 in the annual report. This will be listed on the financial statement, as the bottom line of the assets column. This study is interested in total 2007 assets in millions, rounded to one decimal. (e.g., $256,197,000 = $256.2)
Total Sentences – The total number of sentences in the letters from the community foundation president and board chair. If two letters, include both. On the code sheet, enter the actual number of sentences. (Do NOT count sidebars, pull quotes, or salutations.)
# Sentences Finance – The total number of sentences that primarily emphasise finances. Highlight these sentences in green. Sentences that emphasise finances will typically include one or more words such as:
• Money
• Assets
• Support
• Resources
• Grants
• Donors
• Donations
• Gifts
• Funds/funding
• Investment
• Shareholders
• Economics
• Endowment
• Philanthropy/philanthropic
• Capital
Count all the sentences you have highlighted in green and enter the number on the code sheet under ‘# sentences finance’ (if sentences seem to have elements of both finance and relationship, count it as finance)
# Sentences Relationship – The total number of sentences that primarily emphasise relationships. Highlight these sentences in yellow. Sentences that emphasise relationships will include words such as:
• Community
• Partner
• Collaborate
• Friends
• Listen
• Respond
• Names of specific individuals
• Names of specific organisations

Count all the sentences you have highlighted in yellow and enter the number on the code sheet under ‘# sentences relationship’.

Relationship/Financial Sentences Ratio – This is computed by dividing the number of relationship sentences by the number of financial sentences, determined previously. Enter the figure on the code sheet.

**If sentences are neither emphasising finance nor relationships, do not highlight it or count it other than in the total sentence count.