
Small business, shifting boundaries: A case study of strategic communication in the digital age

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Abstract

Small and medium enterprises are important contributors to most national economies but their use and practice of public relations is under examined. Arguing that a robust discussion of strategic communication in the digital age requires scholarship to move beyond a fixation with the corporate managerial context, this paper presents a localised case study of entrepreneurial public relations and organisational half-life at a New Zealand sustainable fashion business, Starfish. The case study explores the ways that Starfish designer and owner, Laurie Foon, operating across shifting organisational boundaries linked by a concern with sustainability, practises public relations in a socially responsible way, enacting key principles around excellence such as dialogue, relationship building and authentic leadership. Further, the study extends beyond the demise of the Starfish business in 2013, to also capture the existence of an organisational half-life for this eco-driven fashion label. By turning attention to the non-corporate environment, and documenting an entrepreneurial response to an increasingly volatile and fast-changing business environment, the article offers an inclusive reading of what it means to be strategic in the digital age.

Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make up the majority of firms in most countries around the world, including New Zealand, and are important contributors to many national economies, but their use and practice of public relations is under-examined. Instead, “theory development in public relations has focused almost exclusively on examining the role of public relations within large corporations, governments and public sector organisations and, to a lesser extent, in the volunteer sector”

(Moss, Ashford & Shani, 2004, p. 197). The few studies that do exist suggest that public relations is understood and practised differently in the small business context. The International Association of Business Communicators’ (IABC) study *Thinking big, staying small*, a follow-up to the landmark excellence studies in public relations, found “Small organizations approach public relations holistically from a variety of perspectives [and]...practice public relations based more on instinct and personal feeling than on formal training” (Small business study, 2005). Moss et al. (2004) also note that small businesses tend to view public relations as an “implicit part of their everyday approach to building and sustaining business relationships” (p. 208).

Such findings go some way towards explaining public relations scholarship’s apparent lack of interest in the small business setting. An informal, instinct-based approach is at odds with the dominant paradigm of contemporary public relations, which “constructs public relations as a management function operating in a corporate environment” (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013, p. 1). Despite occasional reminders of the value of using ‘community embedded’ SMEs as benchmarks of best practice (e.g. Schoenberger-Orgad & McKie, 2005), including in developing economies and small nations (e.g. Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014), and of studying public relations practices within under-researched industries such as fashion (Beattie, 2009; Cassidy & Fitch, 2013, 2014) and sport (Coombs & Osborne, 2012), public relations remains wedded to a corporate, formal, organisation-based mind-set and the notion that size and maturity make public relations practices in the corporate context more salient and consequential (Men & Stacks, 2014).

This paper argues that the field of public relations and strategic communication would benefit from widening its focus to encompass a

broader range of entrepreneurial or small business contexts, and offers up as an example, a dual-focus case study of entrepreneurial public relations and organisational half-life in a New Zealand SME, sustainable fashion brand Starfish. That Starfish went into receivership and closed – after 20 years of operation – during the case study period, offers a unique opportunity to explore both the forms public relations takes in a small business setting, and the fluidity of stakeholder and organisational identity and roles through periods of volatility and change. Thus, the case study does two things: first, it captures the ways in which Starfish owner-designer-entrepreneur Laurie Foon, operating in a small business context concerned with sustainability, performed public relations in a socially responsible way, enacting key principles around excellence such as two-way symmetry, collaboration, authentic leadership and relationship building; and second, it documents the existence of an extended organisational half-life for those operating in a rapidly changing, digital environment. The implications of both are addressed in terms of our understanding of strategic communication.

Public relations outside of the mainstream: Starfish, small business and fashion

Starfish (1993-2013) was a small New Zealand fashion design and retail business employing approximately 20 people, full and part-time, in design and retail roles across three stores and a Wellington workroom. Headed by owner-designer Laurie Foon, its catchphrase was “everyday splendour, telling New Zealand stories, enduring style, well made in New Zealand, and sustainable business practice”. Starfish stores (in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch) carried the label’s full seasonal ranges, designed and manufactured in New Zealand, and stocked a small range of imported products from companies with a strong commitment to ethical principles. In 2013 the Starfish business closed after 20 years in operation, one of a number of Wellington-based clothing companies that folded in this period, due to the difficulties of operating a boutique retail model in competition with cheap imports

and online shopping, and the impact of the Canterbury earthquakes on the company’s Christchurch store and long-term development (McBride, 2013).

The terrain of this case study sits outside mainstream public relations research in two ways. Starfish was a small business, in a discipline preoccupied with the corporate, managerial context, practising a form of fashion public relations, marked as “low status due to its close association with marketing, promotion and publicity” (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013, p. 1). Cassidy and Fitch, in their work on fashion public relations in Australia, argue that the fashion industry’s association with marketing and promotion has created a strong association with the low-status, press agency model of public relations, which is amplified by popular understandings of fashion as glamorous and superficial. They write that: “the professionalism drive of public relations results in the framing of public relations as a strategic management function, and, in tandem, the marginalisation of fashion public relations” (p. 10). Among the scant empirical evidence that does exist around public relations and related practices in the fashion industry is Borgerson, Schroeder, Magnusson and Magnusson’s (2009) study of Benetton, which documents various ‘blind spots’ in ethical brand-building activities undertaken by the global retailer, and provides a useful corporate counterpoint to this case study of Starfish, a small, New Zealand-only business.

Cassidy and Fitch’s (2013) argument that the drive to professionalism effectively marginalises fashion public relations is also applicable to the small business or entrepreneurial public relations setting. As already noted, entrepreneurs or small business owner-operators tend to practise public relations in informal and holistic ways. That both of these contexts – small business and fashion – tend to be marginalised in public relations literature is linked to the prevalence of excellence theory, and its associated emphasis on public relations as a distinct profession. This long-term, Grunig-led research study funded by the IABC through the 1980s and 1990s has now firmly established the dominant paradigm of public relations research and practice.

Excellence in public relations, defined as “a set of attributes and practices that helped to ‘build quality long-term relationships with strategic constituencies’” (quoted in Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 328), was used to explain the value of public relations in an organisational context, and to identify which characteristics of the function are particularly valuable for organisational effectiveness. The extensive qualitative and quantitative data showed that the inclusion of public relations in strategic decision-making was the strongest predictor of excellent public relations. While there is clearly value in a well-articulated and widely accepted set of characteristics around communication and strategic excellence, the accompanying development has been a narrowing of attention to that which does not readily fit its parameters – resulting in a narrow conceptualisation of practice and profession, and a lack of diversity in scholarship.

This case study, then, seeks to redress some of this imbalance, in line with critical researchers’ observations that public relations is more diverse than presented in the literature. Here, ‘excellence’ provides a useful, albeit limited, theoretical framework in which to explore Starfish’s communication activities. It is useful because it connects with commonly held and widely understood characteristics against which to benchmark Starfish (such as symmetry, leadership and social responsibility), and therefore to establish commonly understood hallmarks of best practice, as they exist in a New Zealand case study of small business. It is limited in that core excellence theory is heavily predicated on organisations being sufficiently large to contain functional departments and support structures and processes around decision making that are not generally relevant to the small business setting. Even the IABC’s proposed new benchmark of excellence in small business – the ratio of communication staff to organisational workforce – is somewhat at odds with the finding that the public relations function is regarded **holistically** by small business leaders.

Research design

This article reports on qualitative data gathered from case study research, using an embedded, single-case design (Yin, 2009). The case study has been employed in the few studies into fashion organisations’ communication and public relations activity (e.g. Beattie, 2009; Borgerson et al., 2009) and permits an in-depth, contextualised exploration of Starfish and its sustainability mission. In particular, a single-case design is appropriate given the unique and critical value of Starfish’s modus operandi, which was locally regarded as breaking new ground in ethical fashion and sustainable business leadership (e.g. Ahwa, 2015), and the need for research into SMEs which addresses the specific nature of context and distinctive organisational characteristics (Pang, Mak & Lee, 2011; Spence, 2007).

Consistent with the ‘how, what and why’ focus of case study approaches, the research questions are: how do Starfish and Laurie Foon ‘do’ public relations?; in what ways are these small business public relations practices consistent with characteristics of communication excellence; and what are the implications of this case study for public relations research and our understanding of what it means to be strategic in the digital age?

In keeping with case study protocol, this study includes data gathered from multiple sources: an in-depth interview with Starfish owner-designer Laurie Foon (in 2012), on-site and in-store observations, the author’s direct experiences as both a retail and wholesale customer, Facebook, website and media monitoring, and physical artefacts. Data from these various sources are presented throughout the following case analysis of how the Starfish story exhibits the hallmarks of communication excellence such as authentic leadership, relationship building, dialogue and social responsibility. Digital evidence is also used to make a final point about the ‘post-Starfish’ experience, where the existence of an organisational ‘half-life’ further pushes the boundaries of established public relations practice into new territory.

The empirical reality of Starfish’s context, captured in the various forms of case study data, permits an exploration of aspects of communication excellence identified by James

Grunig and others in their landmark studies. It is relevant to note here that the Starfish mandate around sustainability, with its emphasis on the combination of environmental and social issues, means that the version of public relations documented through the analysis is intrinsically a socially responsible one. If, as Grunig and Hunt (cited in Grunig, 1992) claim, public relations is the practice of social responsibility, the Starfish story alone demonstrates, by virtue of its existence through the case study period, the value of small business case studies such as this, showcasing small scale but well integrated business strategies that provide insight into best practice often lacking in larger scale exemplars.

Case study analysis

Reflecting the tendency for small business to practise public relations in a holistic way, the case study analysis is presented around four inter-related themes of excellence, namely leadership, relationship building, dialogue and social responsibility.

The Starfish story and authentic leadership

The IABC's four-year study, *Thinking big, staying small*, found that "the success of a small organization's public relations often rests in the communication skills and perseverance of the top decision makers" (Small business study, 2005). The role of leadership is also acknowledged in the broader public relations literature, with recent work arguing that authentic leadership, in particular, should be regarded as a hallmark of communication excellence (Men & Stacks, 2014). Starfish's deep commitment to sustainability, and the ways this was communicated (especially through digital channels), demonstrates that small business does practise a form of public relations. The case study captures various ways in which Foon demonstrated leadership and commitment, illustrating the value of the entrepreneurial setting for exemplars of communication excellence.

Starfish's journey towards embracing sustainability as a core business principle was driven by owner Laurie Foon, who was at the fore of the sustainable fashion movement in New Zealand, influenced by visionaries such as

Body Shop founder Anita Roddick, European bloggers, and a strong set of personal values. Foon, who worked in the clothing industry since leaving school and whose first business foray involved remaking secondhand clothing, has always been uncomfortable with fashion's ability to alienate:

I loved it [fashion] but it didn't sit too well, it seemed like this eternal need for things and this eternal unattainable beauty and size...and the extreme wealth and the extreme poverty...

After the birth of her children, Foon realised that despite strong initial growth, her brand was no longer speaking to her: "it wasn't telling me anything, it wasn't moving me – it was just a pretty girl in a nice outfit". This realisation set her on a trajectory of change that led to Starfish being the first fashion label to win a New Zealand Sustainable Business Award, in 2007.

Four years later, in 2011, Starfish achieved another first, when it became the first label to stage an 'eco' runway show at New Zealand Fashion Week, an important milestone given the strategic communicative importance of shows within the fashion industry (Beattie, 2009; Borgerson et al., 2009). A further updated business direction, announced in November 2012 through a 'soft' launch to CielPR, featured a fresh catchphrase for the label ('the new materialism') accompanied by a poster and social media campaign. Covering this development, fashion blogger Anya Brighthouse (2013) identified Starfish as one of three key fashion leaders doing things differently in New Zealand, and quoted Foon's explanation of the new tagline as an attempt to refocus on the qualities that make material things truly beautiful: "It's about celebrating the interconnectedness of things with people, the community, and the environment with the ultimate aim of adding positive lasting value through the creative act of producing something beautiful."

Through this period from 2007 on, Foon acknowledged that she personally was increasingly driving the sustainability message and becoming more vocal, influenced by global trends which had convinced her of impending change, for fashion and business generally. In a

2012 interview she said: “I know that in Europe there is a strong movement and a lot of blogging around the whole sustainability and clothing thing. To me, I just see it as an essential part of going forward. For any business that hasn’t got a sustainability strategy, it’s not going to get any easier.” However, while determined to lead change from the front, on the premise that this would create the demand for sustainable clothing, Foon also acknowledged the roadblocks for early adopters, such as difficulties with sourcing component products. Foon referred to her undertaking as a ‘labour of love’, with the commitment to sustainable fabrics and dyes, and upcycling (reusing old materials in new creations), adding financial and time pressures to her business.

Foon’s strategic commitment to sustainability was also grounded in a strong sense of localness, which undergirded the authenticity of Starfish’s leadership message and vision. That Foon gained strength from her environment, rooted in the bicultural space unique to Aotearoa/New Zealand, was clear through various strands of case study evidence. For instance, in a 2008 newspaper article Foon referred to the Maori concept of whakapapa (genealogy) to explain the decision, made alongside her staff, to stay in their original Wellington store rather than move to a higher profile shopping precinct: “We were looking [to move]...but it didn’t feel right to us...the final straw was when our store manager, Rena Kohere, said ‘all our whakapapa is here’. At that moment I made the decision to stay where we were.” Foon’s final Facebook post about the company’s closure, in mid-2013, was addressed to “our beloved Starfish Whanau” [extended family] and closed with “Arohanui” [much love]. Even after the closure of Starfish, in a 2015 article celebrating iconic New Zealand imagery in fashion, Foon described New Zealand as her ‘turangawaewae’ (place to stand) and spoke of her earlier motivations: “I wanted to see Starfish show a stronger reflection on what it was to be a New Zealander. I wanted to see ourselves, the realness of what it meant to be a Kiwi” (Ahwa, 2015).

‘Connected energy’: Relationship building, collaborations, and strategic partnerships

“Communication excellence describes the ideal state in which knowledgeable communicators assist in the overall strategic management of organizations, seeking symmetrical relations through management of communication with key publics on whom organizational survival and growth depends” (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995, p. x). While the excellence study scholars go on to argue that public relations departments are the obvious mechanism for the interaction required to build long-term relationships with strategic publics and hence enhance organisational effectiveness, this section documents ways in which Foon herself fulfilled the proactive dimension of this role, aided by her strong sense of organisational mission.

In a 2012 interview, Foon talked about the importance of having the right mix of people around her, on multiple levels – for the retail interface, for business success, and her personal sense of connection with others. She said:

it makes sense because you’ve got other people doing great stuff, so would we want to bring you into our world? Of course we would, we love what you’re doing. It’s all about having business pluses as well but it’s about community...and connected energy.

In the post-2007 years of Starfish operations, these stakeholders increasingly shared an interest in sustainability rather than simply design or fashion (although the latter remained important, with Foon stressing that her commitment to style would not be compromised). While collaboration is increasingly common in the fashion industry, driven by both economic factors and an understanding of potential branding and creative synergies (Woulfe, 2012), and is also a hallmark of small business (Spence, 2007), Starfish’s collaborations were strategically and **visibly** connected to its sustainability mission. Like other high profile fashion designers in New Zealand and Australia (Beattie, 2009; Webster, 2013), Foon aligned Starfish with external organisations and products with a fashion connection (including an ongoing

relationship with the Body Shop), and instigated a number of joint venture 'pop up' stores with smaller local designers, but her interest in sustainability also resulted in less traditional strategic partnerships for Starfish, including with Electrolux (Foon designed an environmentally friendly vacuum cleaner, using plastics from the sea, which featured in her 2011 Fashion Week show), conservation organisation Project Crimson, and renewable electricity retailer, Powershop.

Other relationships, such as with grassroots cycle advocacy group Frocks on Bikes, resulted in innovative events and activities for Starfish, all connected by a concern for sustainability and well publicised on social media. For example, in Auckland, Starfish offered a discount to customers who biked to its store during the annual Newmarket Festival, and the Wellington shop supported Spinning Top's 2012 initiative, selling locally-made necklaces as a fundraiser to help transform a children's shelter in Samoa. Starfish's support of local branches of international charities (including the One Percent Collective, Oxfam, and Dress for Success) took the form of donated clothing and fundraising through community fashion shows and in-store events. An experimental approach to in-store discounting, prompted by internal discussion at Starfish about how to reconcile style changes and sustainability, also ended up benefitting a local charity. Explaining The Great Starfish Exchange on the Starfish website in 2012, Foon wrote:

When I'm designing a collection I'm always thinking of ways in which I can create a garment that will be loved for years to come – not thrown out next season. However, when chatting about this we realised that sometimes our tastes and body change, and sometimes you just need a bit of a refresh. This got us thinking – how can we increase the life of Starfish garments beyond their design – and we came up with THE GREAT STARFISH EXCHANGE, which works like this: if you have a past season Starfish or Laurie Foon garment hanging in your wardrobe that you haven't worn for a while – but think that

someone else might love – bring it into Starfish to receive 50% off our Lunatopia winter collection sale...we'll be cherry picking key pieces that you bring in and adding them to our in-store Vintage Rack. The remainder will be donated to Dress for Success, a Wellington-based initiative to promote the economic independence of disadvantaged women.

Foon's personal and business philosophy was that Starfish clothing should be loved, if not by the original purchaser then by someone new: effectively, customers could become suppliers, and the traditional distinctions between producer and consumer blurred in a new model of sustainability. Such operational shifts, away from established business models and practices, influenced by both external and internal organisational forces, are consistent with principles of symmetry, a hallmark of excellence in public relations. In embracing a sustainable approach to fashion, Foon addressed her long-held concerns about alienation and created a range of new community stakeholders – across like-minded individuals, movements and organisations – for Starfish. Clearly then, this was strategic positioning, aligned to a consistent organisational mission around sustainability and supported by strong instincts for relationship building, strategic partnerships, and collaborations. But, while sustainability provided the central strand to Starfish's organisational mission and a coherent way to strategically position Starfish in the fashion landscape, this alone does not fully capture this case study's contribution to our understanding of strategic or public relations excellence. Borgerson et al.'s (2009) study of Benetton operations in Stockholm shows how a strong global business identity and brand was not necessarily fully realised in communicative terms, particularly due to operational blind spots. One of the real contributions this case study of Starfish makes to our understanding of communication excellence comes through documenting the accompanying use of social media dialogue.

Dialogue

For Foon, communicating around sustainability, and being visibly connected to others with this interest, became an increasingly important part of the Starfish business model. As she observed in 2012, “it’s not a world of advertising anymore; it’s how do we talk to more people, different groups of people, how do you get them talking to each other?” The world of social media, noted by Foon as a “steep learning curve” and a challenging overlay onto her business responsibilities, led to a gradual change of perspective reminiscent of the public relations literature around two-way communication, symmetry, and dialogue:

I really am quite proud of our Facebook page because whilst we do advertise our sales and normal business activities, it’s really more about cool things. It’s an exciting forum having all that dialogue on display...building that culture...you do more and you realise that a year ago we wouldn’t have been thinking the way we’re thinking.

Examples of Starfish dialogue around its commitment to sustainability include interaction with various organisational publics about ‘what next?’ for the business. The Starfish Facebook page was used to invite the sharing of eco-tips, to solicit feedback on colour and print choices for the coming season, and permit customers to vote for the return of particular ‘old favourites’ in forthcoming ranges. Foon also used social media to invite stakeholder feedback on Starfish’s strategic direction, as in this December 2012 link posting about cycle-friendly clothing: “Interesting blog about stylish cycle wear. I know that I’m wearing more and more Starfish when riding my bike but would love to develop this area further. Is Starfish + Cycle Wear of interest to anyone?”

Starfish also demonstrated a willingness to be open and transparent about its efforts to become more sustainable in its internal business practices, using social media to extend the reach of private conversations and decisions. For instance, Foon used an in-store query about the use of tencel in her range – a manmade fabric which requires toxins in its processing – to invite Facebook feedback:

“This [query] made us take another look at it and we’ve come away thinking that the pros still outweigh the cons”, was accompanied by a link to the eartheasy website, and “what do you think”?

Foon described herself as realistic about what could be achieved in sustainability terms, and said she was open with her publics about the limitations of her efforts. Social media played an increased role in this dialogue around change: “what types of fabrics can we get, what buttons can we get, the whole idea that it would create the demand...[but] it’s a dialogue – even on social media – about ‘is that **better**?’ There is no perfect and there’s not going to be”. This level of organisational transparency and openness is also a hallmark of Foon’s authentic business leadership and is in marked contrast with other fashion brands’ use of social media, which tends to be ‘top down’, with little attempt to meaningfully engage: “predominantly used for promotion...Few attempts...made to encourage user engagement and interactivity” (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013, p. 13).

Shared commitments to sustainability and community also trumped conventional business practice in a January 2013 Facebook post where Starfish commented positively on, and linked to, attempts by fellow eco-retailer (and effectively, competitor) Sitka to create a community space outside its Auckland store. When Sitka was required by local council to remove the couches it provided outside its store, Starfish posted: “Great vibe and great vision from the team at Sitka-New Zealand, helping to make Osborne Street feel more like a community. Unfortunately very average vision from the Auckland Council”.

Using social media to express commitment to the wider community and shared ideals is indicative of socially responsible communication practices, and the case study provides other examples of how Starfish positioned itself on the sustainability stage. Facebook postings also engaged with environmental news stories about Nike (“nice to hear Nike are making moves to better their dyeing processes”), and a review of a new Honda Civic car, which Laurie gave a “big thumbs up”, alongside a commendation for

their environmental work: “Good on you for planting over 500,000 trees in New Zealand”. This focus on social responsibility is explored more in the following section.

Social responsibility

For Foon, Starfish’s values resonated first and foremost with New Zealand society. Her interview comments suggest an intuitive understanding of the need for business to be sensitive to and reflect community standards (in social responsibility terms, what is known as the social licence to operate): “we’ve got values that people respect even if they know we’re not perfect...we’re getting that deep loyalty because the values of the business are...true New Zealand”. In committing to mission statements including “well made in New Zealand”, Foon positioned Starfish as upholding the best of established New Zealand business principles, with reference to the traditions of quality, local manufacture and strong design. Starfish’s undertaking to locally manufacture all its clothing, at a time when many of its counterparts were at least partly manufacturing offshore, illustrates ethics-driven decision-making in its approach to social responsibility. This was not, however, without its challenges, expressed by Foon as an “ongoing dilemma” between the financial cost and limitations of local manufacturing (and exacerbated by local facilities becoming increasingly scarce due to established outsourcing practices by many other New Zealand designers), and her personal conviction that this was the most sustainable and environmentally friendly course of action.

As noted earlier, Starfish’s official communications referred to and reflected a broad sense of ‘New Zealandness’ (e.g. through telling New Zealand stories, promoting New Zealand-made, etc.), but importantly, from a strategic perspective, this mission was integrated into operational practice. Case study interview material, other documentary evidence and artefacts captured Foon’s strong personal desire to be connected locally, particularly in her hometown of Wellington: she talked of opening her first Starfish store in Willis Street because her first job was there, she advocated for local city markets (which tend to provide a space for aspiring fashion designers), she protested against the Wellington City

Motorway extension (and subsequently used displaced residents as models in an early Starfish fashion shoot), and featured neighbourhood state housing as a backdrop for campaign imagery (Ahwa, 2015; Laugesen, 2010; New store, old location, 2008).

The case study also captures a telling example of how businesses (of any size) can exhibit social responsibility by **exceeding** normative societal expectations. While New Zealand law requires all new clothing to come with country of origin, fibre content and care labelling, in keeping with Foon’s personal and business ethics, Starfish garment swing-tags demonstrated much greater transparency, including information about dye products, organic components and fabric origins. These physical artefacts were supported by store spaces guided by Starfish’s sustainability mission and featuring recycled materials, sustainable wood and energy-minimising lighting, alongside visual material promoting company standards and values with, for example, displays of “our top ten commitments to sustainability” and posters promoting the One Percent Collective. Starfish’s modelling of the principles of integrated communication and organisational storytelling is in contrast to the ‘blind spots’ captured in Borgerson et al.’s (2009) case study of global retailer, Benetton, serving as a further reminder of the value to public relations of turning to understudied sectors and contexts for benchmarks of best practice.

Fluid stakeholder and organisational boundaries: The Starfish half-life

The case study analysis establishes how Foon and Starfish engaged in a version of excellent public relations despite operating in a non-corporate, small business context, with no specialist communication staff. Compared with the limited fashion examples documented in the literature, it appears that they exceeded the practices of at least some of the larger players in the industry. But in addition to demonstrating an entrepreneurial application of public relations, the partnerships and stakeholder relationships documented in the previous sections also hint at a fluidity in

organisational and stakeholder boundaries (for example, the customer becoming a supplier in the Great Starfish Exchange, and competitors such as Sitka becoming allies in community change). This organisational fluidity was also apparent in the closing days of Starfish business operations and has continued since its closure, helping to extend our understanding of strategic communication in the digital age.

For example, in the final days of business trading, a group of Starfish ‘friends’, including Wellington-based businesses and supporters, arranged a benefit screening of a local film, *Ruby and Rata*, at locally owned Paramount Cinema. Promoting this online, the organisers wrote: “one of our leading fashion labels has had to close their doors. Starfish has always involved and chosen local sub-contractors and suppliers which will now be left out of pocket. Help us to help the little guys – come to the pictures!” This form of community-based crowd funding captures a shift in organisational responsibility, from a limited liability-style business model to a more collective approach – a shift which remains apparent in the new ‘half-life’ form subsequently taken by Starfish.

Although Starfish closed in June 2013, its organisational half-life sees the sustainability journey and mission continue through its Facebook page (which still exists despite the company itself no longer operating) and indirectly, through Foon’s involvement in Wellington community radio. These two platforms exemplify Foon’s ongoing connection to the global issue of sustainability, and the new reality of hybrid organisational forms (Stohl, Stohl & Townsley, 2007) and fluid organising structures. While Starfish-the-business no longer exists, Starfish continues to have a Facebook presence, where fashion collaborations and sustainable events and developments are highlighted. For example, in August 2014, Foon wrote:

Our friend Jess has started muka kids to change the kids clothing industry to a more ethical and sustainable one. Muka kids has been selected as 1 of 11 projects to be launched on a brand new platform designed to help inspirational projects fly. This weekend all pledges

made to help start muka kids are MATCHED by the platform. Have a look at her site and her video, she explains it all <http://sparkmypotential.co.nz/project/mukakids...>”

Foon herself is now involved with ‘B side stories’ at Wellington’s Access radio station, where she writes, in a 2015 comment which is clearly an extension of her Starfish mandate: “My mission...is to highlight and gain a snapshot of the unique Wellingtonian community who are creating the essence of the capital. Also to observe the changes and effects of the current environmental and social issues facing us and how we are responding to them.”

That Starfish continues to maintain its Facebook presence, sharing information and links about sustainable fashion and local initiatives, after the demise of its stores and clothing production, indicates the limits of confining public relations analysis to the traditional organisational box, particularly at a time when the very notion of organisation and organisational boundaries is being questioned by organisational communication scholars (May, 2011). Documenting the organisational half-life of Starfish reinforces the limits of a fixed organisational view in an increasingly online world where entrepreneurs exhibit professional practices and instincts that are no longer only the realm of a bounded public relations profession. As Cassidy and Fitch (2013) argue, public relations is overdue for a reconceptualisation which acknowledges the diversity of practice and extends beyond the constricted remit of its professional associations. This new understanding would also usefully consider the shifting organisational terrain of a digital environment, where brands such as Starfish continue to have an online, if not physical, existence.

Conclusion

While both fashion and small business have been marginalised within mainstream public relations research, localised case studies such as Starfish usefully contribute to the diversity of public relations scholarship, and extend our understanding of public relations practice and strategic communication outside the corporate

managerial context – to the terrain of entrepreneurs, operating in relational networks which are dynamic, diverse, multilevel, flexible, authentic and opportunistic. The argument that a lack of resources, absence of specialist expertise and a preoccupation with day-to-day issues means that micro and small businesses tend not to perform public relations is belied. Starfish demonstrated collaboration, two-way symmetry, engagement, authentic leadership and relationship building in its socially responsible journey towards sustainability. Its five guiding principles were – up until the business’ demise in 2013 – strongly supported by in-store and online communication, strategic partnerships, and transparent business practices. This, then, is a form of public relations, practised by an entrepreneur with a passion for eco-fashion and strong instincts for community engagement.

While small business case studies offer fertile sites in which to explore aspects of communication and strategic excellence, and to embrace the fluidity of organisational existence in the digital age, there are important limitations to the Starfish story and this case study analysis. The Starfish case does not demonstrate the sort of systematic planning, research and evaluation expected of formal public relations practice, and required for replicable strategic communication (see Beattie, 2009, for similar findings about other New Zealand fashion designers). As is true of small business more broadly, there are organisational risks in the reliance on visionary individuals. Second, the case study’s longer-term meaning is less clear given the subsequent closure of Starfish. While the business’ demise was the outcome of a complex series of events which hint at the tensions between normative ideals and economic realities in the highly competitive and unforgiving fashion industry, it is also, in many respects, an unsatisfactory ending to an exploration of strategic communication excellence – even as the resulting ability to document the half-life of Starfish has allowed further exploration of the opportunities for public relations to engage with more diverse understandings of organisation.

The small business sector undoubtedly poses a challenge for public relations’ quest for a professionalism that demarcates the roles, responsibilities and achievements of specialist communicators. But an opportunity exists for public relations to become more inclusive of non-mainstream settings, including small business and fashion, to both strengthen its scholarship and make a genuine contribution to upskilling a diverse range of ‘practitioners’, both within and outside the established profession. The dominant paradigm of managerial public relations risks stagnation by failing to recognise and learn from other sectors and settings, and continuing to be heavily invested in a model of organisation increasingly being eroded by new technology and practices. The Starfish story is a reminder of what can be learnt from studying creative acts that occur outside the margins.

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