
Country Practice: A case study of regional public relations practice

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Abstract

Research into public relations practice in all settings is vital given the extent and spread of its practice. However, despite the maturity of the public relations profession and the number of public relations practitioners who operate outside metropolitan areas, there has been little research to identify the distinctive nature of public relations practice in regional locations.

This research project begins a dissection of the nature of professional public relations practice in a non-metropolitan setting through the examination of public relations activity, workplaces and interactions in a regional locale. The project seeks to examine the specific nature of public relations practice in non-metropolitan Australia through a case study of two Victorian regional cities; Ballarat and Warrnambool. Analysis of these two sites provides the pilot stage for a larger future comparative examination of public relations practice in regional Australian centres with a variety of economic, demographic and geographic profiles.

Introduction

According to the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), more than 10,000 people now work in and around public relations in Australia (PRIA, 2007). The past 20 years has seen rapid growth in the accumulating body of knowledge of public relations, allowing it to take its place among the professions rather than being regarded merely as an occupation (Harrison, 2006, p.13). This statement is reflected in figures drawn from the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics

Labour Force Survey - Australia DEWR trend data which illustrates dramatic employment growth in the 'Marketing, Public Relations and Advertising' category of professions of over 21.5 percent in the last two years as compared with an average growth of 4.7 percent for the 'all occupations' category. In 2006 in Australia, 61,000 people were employed in the Marketing, Public Relations and Advertising field (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001).

Despite this growth in the public relations profession its practice in regional locations is under-analysed. This research seeks to examine the distinctive nature of regional public relations practice by way of a case study of practitioners in two Victorian regional cities. These cities were selected for analysis for several reasons. They are both geographically distanced from the major metropolitan centre of Melbourne and are both defined as regional areas (Business Victoria, 2006). This study asks the question, "What is the nature of public relations practice in a regional Victorian city?". Through interviews with regionally-based public relations practitioners it begins a dissection of their work practices and associated interactions. The results of the research could be used to compare regional with metropolitan practice in the future.

Identifying the distinctive nature of public relations practice in regional locations is important. The number of practitioners operating in non-metropolitan settings is likely to increase as the trend for public relations uptake in a variety of organisational settings continues. Some regional towns are benefiting from the 'sea change' or 'tree change' phenomena, the results driving their

populations and boosting their economies and infrastructure (Victorian Government, 2003). An expectation, and often statutory requirement, of transparent communication by government organisations provides strong employment opportunities for public relations practitioners in a wide variety of regional workplaces such as local councils, water authorities and not-for-profit organisations. Recent graduates are drawn to non-metropolitan workplaces as a training ground for their public relations careers, aspiring to move into metropolitan positions on acquiring the appropriate experience (Oakham & Kirby, 2006, p.101).

This research project documents the results of interviews with seven regionally-based public relations practitioners. This study is limited by its size and it is acknowledged that regional Australia is not homogeneous in the sense of function, growth, development or well-being (Sorensen and Epps, 1993). In selecting the areas of Ballarat and Warrnambool, it is anticipated that this research may be a primary step in a larger future examination of public relations practice in regional Australian centres with a variety of economic, demographic and geographic profiles.

Literature review

There has been little analysis of regional public relations practice. Part of the problem is that existing research is limited because micro-businesses, those with 19 or fewer employees, are often not considered in the development of public relations theory and research. This is despite the fact that in the United States they constitute about 90 percent of all businesses and are responsible for 55 percent of new jobs in Canada (Small is different, 2002, p.6). It is reasonable to assume the Northern American experience translates into other countries including Australia, and that more is known about the best practices and standards that apply to larger organisations than these micro-businesses. It is also reasonable to assume

that many public relations businesses may well also be small in size.

Jerry Swerling, contact point for the Strategic Public Relations Center at USC Annenberg School for Communication's comprehensive Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) study, advises that he has no specific data on regional public relations practice (pers. comm., August 23, 2006). Andrew Parkinson, past Executive Officer of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, also advised that he was not aware of data relating to regional public relations practice (pers. comm., August 18, 2006).

Petroot (1998) provides a regional perspective on the relationship between public relations firms and the local media, stating regional firms are historically dependent on newspapers and that "the Chinese wall between advertising and editorials is thin at best" (para. 5).

Oakham and Kirby revealed the more pressing need for public relations practitioners to be on good terms with the local journalists in a regional working relationship than in a metropolitan setting (Oakham & Kirby, 2006, p.103). Kirby found a similar attitude when researching public relations practice in the regional area of Geelong, quoting a practitioner, "We have easy access to [potential clients], we know them from networking and social circles" (2005, p.92). Kirby identified that regionally-based public relations practitioners may deal with a heightened sense of community in their publics, who felt a strong sense of ownership over locally-based organisations (2005, p.92). She also recorded that whilst the regionally-based practitioners interviewed stated that similar skills were needed in regional and metropolitan workplaces, a different, less corporate approach using more accessible language was required when communicating with the regional community (Kirby 2005, p.92).

Dotson expands on the notion of the public relations practitioner as a community member in a regional location, through a relationship with media representatives:

Business people who live in small to mid-sized markets... can enjoy a whole different kind of relationship with the local media. Here, reporters and writers are likely to have children in the same schools as your kids. Their wives and husbands may work in the same place where you or your spouse works. (Dotson 2006, para. 7)

Petrook contends that practitioners in regional public relations practice are promoted on a different basis from their metropolitan counterparts, rewarded for loyalty and tenure rather than ability (1998, para. 9-10). Petrook states these regional organisations believe that the right person (in terms of personal fit with the organisation's culture) can be trained to do any public relations function (1998, para. 10). What Petrook doesn't identify or address is whether there is a lack of choice in terms of expertise available to the regional organisation, with many talented practitioners lured to metropolitan practices' major clients and higher salaries (Hugo, 2001, p. 67).

Outmigration of young adults from the non-metropolitan sector is an issue in regional Australia (Hugo, 2001, p.64) which could affect the availability and 'quality' public relations staff available to regional employers. So too could the higher fertility rate in non-metropolitan Australia (Hugo, 2001, p.64) which may affect the availability of staff in regional public relations given what is known about the 'feminization of public relations' with approximately 60% of Australian practitioners now being female (Singh & Smyth 2000, cited in Motion, Leitch & Cliffe 2003, p. 124).

Differences in the psyche and lifestyle of regional-dwellers may have an impact on any research into the distinctive nature of regional public relations practice. Robinson (1990, p.13) notes distinctive characteristics of people who live in regional areas despite the convergence of economic, social and demographic characteristics of rural and urban populations. The 1998 Australian

Community Survey, funded by an ARC SPIRT grant and conducted in co-operation with Edith Cowan University, shows a variety of differences between urban and rural dwellers (NCLS Research, 2006). Rural dwellers have a differing age profile, with 20-29 year olds being under-represented. There are only half as many people with a university degree in rural areas compared with urban areas and blue-collar workers are over-represented (21 percent compared with 16 percent in urban areas). (NCLS Research, 2006)

The contention that life and work in regional settings differs from metropolitan settings is also supported by the survey's finding that rural communities are more close-knit than urban communities, rural communities do more volunteer work, and that rural dwellers have a more local focus than their urban counterparts. Whilst 44 percent of rural dwellers read local newspapers several times a week, only 28 percent of urban dwellers did likewise. Rural dwellers are more likely to be interested in local events (54 percent) than urban dwellers (49 percent) (NCLS Research, 2006).

Research methodology

This project adopted an idiographic, explorative approach by way of a case study. The research was conducted in two phases: a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with public relations practitioners in the regional centres of Ballarat and Warrnambool in September 2006, and a follow-up questionnaire.

Tench and Yeomans classify the locations where public relations people work into three categories; in-house, consultancy and freelance (2006, p.44). Interviews were conducted with seven public relations professionals, ensuring each of these categories was represented. Respondents were drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds; consulting, local government, private enterprise and statutory authorities. Participants in the interviews were coded as P1, P2 and so forth to preserve anonymity. The research sought individual practitioner responses, rather than those representative of an employer.

The small sample size was deemed appropriate due to the comparatively small populations of the cities used in the project and the small numbers of public relations practitioners operating in each. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that Ballarat's population is 88,777 whilst Warrnambool's is 31,083 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). In Ballarat there are four public relations operators listed in the Yellow Pages telephone directory and in Warrnambool there are three (Telstra Corporation Limited, 2006).

Analysis of the data

Working in a regional community

Without exception all research participants stated they were actively involved, and loved living in, their respective regional communities.

Of the seven public relations practitioners interviewed, six stated they had purposely chosen to live and work in a regional location. The exception was an early career practitioner who had taken an available job opportunity in a regional location upon graduation. The public relations practitioners' reasons for enjoying their regional location were all lifestyle-related:

“I'm enjoying the surfing”

“I've never been a city girl, I grew up in the country and I never really enjoyed the city life even though I had a brilliant job.”

“Ballarat has the best of both worlds. It's small enough to be friendly but it offers lots in terms of work, friends and things to do.”

“I have [worked in the city] and fulfilled my ambition there. I much prefer being regionally-based.”

“It's all about balance. I never forget how lucky I am to live and work here.”

Three of the respondents cited the fact that it was “easy to get around” as one of the things they liked about working in a regional location. Several of the practitioners drew on their metropolitan work experience as a basis for comparison, stating that it was easier to make the necessary business contacts in a regional location. P6 stated, “It's easier to make contacts here, [work contacts] are more personable”, and P4 concurred, “I like the relationship with community organisations and the media. I like the way I can use word of mouth for securing work.”

When asked about perceptions metropolitan-dwellers have of regional dwellers, P1 said it was all relative, “We don't think we live in a regional location. They [metropolitan-based people] say we're regional, but in Warrnambool, we think of Portland as being regional.”

P6, an experienced practitioner who had worked in both metropolitan and regional locations, said the professional perceptions of metropolitan dwellers may differ according to the type of organisation they worked for and the level of experience they had had with regional dwellers:

“I've worked for two large organisations in Melbourne. One had only sporadic interaction with regional Victoria and made lots of [negative] assumptions about the types of people who lived there and the level at which they were performing professionally... The other was a large charitable organisation which was responsible for organising large-scale fundraising events and the like. Management there had a very different view of regional towns and the people who lived there. They recognised that there was a greater sense of community in the country and had very strategic plans in place for harnessing networks and working together with those communities.”

Each of the participants was actively involved in their respective regional communities; all but one of their responses indicating they did not feel there was any particular expectation on them because of their profession. However public relations practitioner P4 stated:

“As the owner of my business, I want to be a member of the Chamber of Commerce here. It helps me to run the business and also to network. But my company has been employed as event managers for the Chamber of Commerce’s business awards and sometimes I feel a little uncomfortable with the cross-over between my two roles. I suppose this is one instance where the size [of this town] can cause problems. There really is no escaping it here.”

Contributing to the overall sense of satisfaction the respondents had with their lives as part of regional communities may be the fact that all but two of them had families, and one of those two exceptions was pregnant. This fact suggested a settled personal status for six of the seven research participants.

Six of the seven public relations respondents did not have a desire to move out of their established regional location. Whilst they did not necessarily see themselves employed with the same organisations for the rest of their working lives, they did not imagine leaving the region where they currently worked. Again, this is probably a reflection of their established familial situations. The exception was P7, the early career practitioner, who saw his current work as a stepping stone to a metropolitan position.

On the job

In the follow-up questionnaire participants were asked to check boxes relating to a list of 32 ‘typical’ public relations job duties, both technical and strategic. Participants P2, P4

and P6 indicated they undertook a very broad range of the tasks listed, which is not surprising given two worked for relatively small-scale consultancies (five to 10 employees) and the third was the sole operator of her own consultancy. As an indication of the workplace diversity expected of these practitioners, P6 checked 25 of the 32 job duties listed on the questionnaire. Unchecked by these three participants were boxes relating to ‘sponsorship’, ‘open houses’ and ‘stakeholder communication programs’, all three duties typically relating to work undertaken by in-house public relations practitioners.

Using the working definitions provided by Broom and Smith and Dozier and Broom as overviewed by Tench and Yeomans (2006, p.29), three of the practitioners could be classified in the ‘communication manager’ role (P5, P4 and P2) and two could be classified as ‘communication technicians’ (P7 and P1). The remaining two participants indicated that they had responsibility for an incredibly wide range of duties, ranging from the technical (for example writing newsletters and organising events) through to the strategic planning roles that typically define a ‘communication manager’. Of the three practitioners that were classified ‘communication managers’, two regularly performed ‘technical’ duties, pitching in to help as necessary in their small-scale workplaces. Only P5 could remove herself from the technical tasks due to the relatively large size of her department and its administrative support staff. All but two of the respondents checked the task box for ‘media liaison’ and indicated that it was a task they would label as a ‘common’ responsibility.

The downside

Very few negatives of public relations practice in a regional location were identified through the research project, but those that were had major significance for the regionally-based public relations practitioners.

Four of the seven practitioners regularly worked with city-based contacts and it was this contact that pointed to a common theme, the

problems associated with distance. Practitioner P6 stated the problem bluntly, “Travel time to Melbourne for meetings or functions is a real drag. It writes off the day.”

P1 also finds travel a pressing issue in her workplace:

“We work closely with the head office in Melbourne, but with easy communication through email and the phone, they seem to forget how far away we are from them geographically. They will often schedule a meeting for 9am and we have to travel nearly four hours to get there.”

P2 states, “I am incredibly lucky to be able to live here but you really do need to be prepared to travel when you live here. You can’t see distance as an issue.” Public relations consultant P6 sees an irony in the expectations of many of the metropolitan-based clients she deals with:

“With technology, it is easy to work with clients anywhere across the state. The drawback is that often Melbourne-based organisations like to have an agency ‘around the corner’ as they tend to feel more in control if they are in need of project work. This is despite the fact that most of the communication is conducted over the phone.”

To address this client need, P6’s consultancy ensures they service their metropolitan clients in person regularly, noting that many metropolitan agencies would not offer this level of personal contact, “We make sure our Melbourne-based clients do not have a problem with where our address is as we service them face-to-face, often on a fortnightly basis.”

P6 raised the perceptions of her professional capabilities due to her working location:

“Often there’s a perception that regional agencies are not as professional or capable as city-based agencies. I’ve worked there [in a metropolitan location]. I know my capabilities. I know I’m good at my job. It shouldn’t make any difference where I work. It [my capabilities] should be judged on results, not perceptions.”

P4 had experienced a similar attitude from locally-based organisations and found the situation frustrating, stating, “Some large corporate clients believe they need to go to metropolitan areas to receive high quality strategic services.”

The research participants also identified limited job prospects as a significant negative of their regional public relations workplace:

“Lack of career advancement.”

“There are limited opportunities here – we all end up vying for the same jobs.”

“By working for myself I eliminate the problem of having to wait for a job opportunity with someone else to come up.”

“There is a skills shortage in south-western Victoria, but jobs in PR are pretty hotly contested.”

For P1, who was dissatisfied with her current employment, the problem of limited job opportunities was particularly real, “I have to stay even though I’m unhappy here. There are hardly ever any jobs for me advertised here [in the region] and when one is I know exactly who’ll be applying for it.”

P1 also felt that already working in a regional location may go against her when it came to a job application process, “Then there’s the problem that sometimes employers think that

someone not from the region can do a better job than a local.”

Summary

This research project set out to provide a snapshot of the working life of the regional public relations practitioner. It begins the process of working toward determining the specific nature of public relations practice in non-metropolitan Australia. Rather than seeking to provide all the answers, this project is in line with Flyvbjerg’s contention that case studies can provide the researcher with a ‘sharpened’ understanding of why things happen and what might be important to look at more extensively in future research (2006, p. 219).

This research painted a picture of professional ‘contentment’ for the participants. The location of their jobs was seen as a bonus, all citing lifestyle considerations as a reason for their professional satisfaction. Of the seven research participants, only one had an aspiration to work in a metropolitan location upon gaining professional experience. It is likely that this finding of contentment in their regional working location reflects the stage the respondents were at in their career lifecycle. It is likely that metropolitan-based practitioners would also be unwilling to undertake the upheaval that a similar significant relocation would involve.

However there was a sense from the regionally-based practitioners that they felt their metropolitan-based equivalents are able to further their careers without relocating and incurring the related disturbances to their family life. Most of the participants felt they were restricted in their employment options given their regional location and their unwillingness to relocate to the city. There were two practitioners who did not hold this view; one was the early career practitioner, who did not have ‘roots’ in the regional community, the other was the most senior public relations practitioner, who was running a most successful business and who sensed

many alternative job avenues for her within the local business community.

A sense of community belonging added to the feeling of contentment which pervaded the interviews conducted. All respondents enjoyed the relative ‘confines’ of their regional location, citing the ease of making contacts and the inclusiveness of the community in their reasoning. Respondents did acknowledge the need to travel more due to their choice to work and live in a regional location, but there was a sense that travelling long distances was more pleasant or more interesting than the metropolitan equivalent of battling with traffic congestion. There was also a notion that the more senior the regionally-based practitioner, the more expectation there was for them to travel in their work. For practitioners who worked with organisations that competed with metropolitan organisations, the hours lost travelling was a primary concern. This reflects the findings of the ‘Regional Business Development Analysis’ report which asserts that any business or industry established outside a capital city is subject to restraints and difficulties (Commerce Queensland – South West Qld and Growzone Development Network n.d., para. 6).

Whilst an analysis of the actual work conducted by regional public relations practitioners is interesting, of potentially more relevance to this project is an analysis of the nature of their work. Using Broom, Smith and Dozier’s classifications of the two dominant public relations roles, of the three communication managers, one (P5) could clearly be seen to be operating as a communication facilitator, someone who acts as a communication broker, promoting two-way communication between an organisation and its publics (Tench & Yeomans, 2006, p.29). The other two communication managers, P2 and P4, are also clearly problem-solving process facilitators according to Smith, Broom and Dozier’s public relations role types. This research confirms Tench and Yeoman’s contention that the problem-solving process facilitator is commonly filled by specialist consultancies,

with both P2 and P4 working as self-employed public relations consultants (2006, p.29).

Participants P2 and P5 provide an interesting contrast as they each work for their local city council, large employers on a regional scale. P5 is clearly a 'communication manager', assuming responsibility for strategy and policy within the organisation. She advises management and oversees implementation of communication programs. In virtually the same role, however, P2 necessarily remains much more 'hands-on' as she is the organisation's only public relations employee. She is occasionally called on to provide communications advice to management, but is mostly consumed by the technical requirements of her job. The difference in status between these two practitioners was apparent through the interview process. For instance, both P2 and P5 were busy at the time of the interviews; P5 was between meetings with the CEO and a community leader, whilst P2 was facing print deadlines. At the interview P5 wore smart 'corporate' dress, whilst P2 wore the same uniform as the people who worked at the organisation's front reception desk. These observations could point to differing levels of 'public relations power' afforded to the roles in the two organisations. Ultimately public relations practitioners can only be as effective as their respective organisations allow them to be. Management expectations about the actual function of public relations, "whether it is to provide technical services to business units or to serve as a problem solver for management", strongly influences the structure and power of the public relations department (McElreath, 1997, p.20). The Excellence Study found, "...the more management sees public relations servicing a strategic function, the closer and more frequent will be the contact between the senior public relations officers and members of the dominant coalition." (McElreath, 1997, p.20).

Offering an explanation for the different levels of empowerment afforded to public relations practitioners by organisational management, Grunig, Grunig and Dozier propose two possibilities:

"(a) Senior managers with the most power in an organization – the dominant coalition – often fail to recognize and appreciate their dependency on the public relations function, and (b) public relations practitioners often lack the expertise needed to meet that dependency even if the dominant coalition recognizes it." (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p.3)

Further research could compare and contrast the roles of P5 and P2, establishing whether these initial observations of the differing status of the role of public relations within the two organisations are a reflection of the organisational culture, the capabilities of the practitioners, some kind of influence brought about by the regional location, or other reasons.

One of the two communication technicians identified in this research was P7, the recent public relations graduate. His working role supports research findings that indicate entry-level practitioners are more likely to be expected to perform technical tasks, working their way up the organisational hierarchy and assuming more strategic or 'problem solving' responsibilities as they gain experience (McElreath, 1997, p.17).

This project revealed the close working relationship between regional public relations practitioners and their business networks. The practitioners enjoyed being part of a comparatively small community and felt their working networks benefited from being in a regional locale. Of particular relevance was when practitioners involved in the project were able to draw on their metropolitan work experience as a basis for comparison, stating that it was easier to make the necessary business contacts in a regional location.

The project also prompted interesting questions related to organisational size and expertise judged by the practitioner's regionality. It would seem reasonable to suggest that, as with most industries, the smaller the organisation, the more multi-skilled the public relations practitioner must be, turning his or her hand to whatever task must be done at any particular time. Larger organisations, on the other hand, provide an environment which fosters specialisation (Tench & Yeomans, 2006, p.29).

The three public relations practitioners employed in organisations with 10 employees or fewer undertook a wider variety of professional tasks than the four who worked in the larger organisations (100 employees or more). Further research may be able to establish if the variety of work undertaken by public relations practitioners in a regional setting can be related to the size of the employing organisation.

The research also revealed a concern shared by several of the regionally-based public relations practitioners; that their professional skills were not considered to be of the same level as their metropolitan-based counterparts. There was a feeling of frustration from three of the practitioners who expressed a view that the perception exists and that it is unjustified. Their opinion, however, is countered to a degree by the fact that P4's practical experience showed an opposing reality, with metropolitan organisations employing P4's consultancy and recognising the benefits of engaging a regionally-based public relations organisation.

Conclusion

According to Babbie, a review of journal articles will indicate a frequency of the concluding statement, "It is clear that much more research is needed" (2001, p.431). It is a statement, he contends, that is of little value unless it comes with pertinent suggestions about the nature of that future research (2001, p. 431). This research project has, indeed,

prompted many questions in the search to define the nature of public relations practice in regional Australia. These questions point to the future research that is needed in order to properly examine the subject. This future research should establish:

- Whether the importance of networking differs between the regional and the metropolitan contexts.
- How limited are the employment opportunities in regional public relations practice, and do these limitations affect the nature of the work environment for the regionally-based practitioner?
- Is there more multi-skilling and less specific expertise in regional public relations practice due to the generally smaller size of the employing organisation?
- Do metropolitan-based employers of public relations practitioners have a preconceived perception of the capabilities of the regionally-based professional?

It should be acknowledged that the results of this research project may have been skewed by the participants' stage in their career life-cycle. It should also be noted that the two regional centres examined in this case study had similar demographic, geographic and economic profiles. Exploring public relations practice in regional areas that contrast with Ballarat and Warrnambool would be beneficial.

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