

**Editorial:** Nonprofit Relationship Management and Public Relations: History and Future Directions



**By:** Richard D. Waters, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, North Carolina State University and Denise Sevick Bortree, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, College of Communications, Penn State University.



Richard Waters (top) and Denise Bortree

In 1984, Dr. Mary Ann Ferguson first suggested that public relations scholars pursue relationship management as the disciplines guiding theoretical and practical framework. It took nearly 15 years for Dr. John Ledingham and Dr. Stephen Bruning (1998) to conceptualize a working definition of relationship management, and Dr. Linda Hon and Dr. James Grunig (1999) followed suit by outlining measurements for organisational relationships and suggesting strategies that could be helpful in understanding these relationships in their monograph, *Measuring Relationships in Public Relations*. The burst of excitement around the emerging relationship paradigm at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to a significant amount of scholarship dedicated to understanding the role relationships play in public relations.

Scholars have studied relationships in a variety of settings, ranging from government and community relations (Hall, 2006; Huang, 2001; Ledingham, 2001) and membership organizations (Ki & Hon, 2009; O'Neill, 2008) to corporate public relations (Jo, 2006; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000) and university affiliations (Ki & Hon, 2007; Bruning, 2002). Our scholarship has accomplished a great bit detailing how relationships can be measured and exploring the role of relationship maintenance and cultivation strategies; however, the relationship management paradigm is vast, and many questions remained unanswered.

Although the editors of this special issue have explored various aspects of relationship management in volunteer management and fundraising (Bortree, 2010, Bortree & Waters, 2008, Waters & Bortree, 2010, Waters, 2008), scholarly research opportunities are plentiful in this sector. Perhaps more so than other types of organisations, nonprofits would not exist without the careful cultivation of relationships with individual, foundation, corporate, and government donors; with volunteers who help organisations carry out their programs and services each day; with lobbyists and activists who advocate for their individual causes at the local, state, and national political levels; with the communities where nonprofits carry out their work and with the clientele that they seek to assist. The manuscripts published in this special *PRism* issue on nonprofit relationship building represent a wide variety of these stakeholders, and we hope that their research questions and findings will stimulate additional research into the nonprofit sector.

One year ago, we first distributed our call for papers to a variety of academic listservs and used social media and personal connections to expand the calls reach. Little did we know what we were in store for at that time. When the deadline passed, we had more than 40 submissions that represented every continent on Earth except for Antarctica. The scope of the studies was as great as the geographic reach. Every possible methodology was represented, and the contributors interpreted the call in exciting ways that we never imagined when we were putting together the call for papers.

The manuscripts in this special issue offer tremendous promise for the future study of public relations in the nonprofit sector. After triple-blinded peer review, authors of accepted manuscripts represented well-known scholars in the discipline as well as emerging scholars and doctoral candidates from some of the leading public relations programs around the globe. Accepted manuscripts represent quantitative (e.g., surveys and content analysis), qualitative (e.g., interviews and focus groups), case studies, historical methodologies, and insightful commentaries.

We encourage you to examine all 13 accepted manuscripts for this special issue as they each offer new insights and perspectives on relationship management. Briefly, we want to highlight unique contributions of each of the manuscripts:

- **Bortree & Waters adopt Zaichowskys involvement scale from advertising literature and explore its power in predicting behavioural intent among youth volunteers.**
- **Park & Rhee use structural equation modelling to examine the predictive power of relationship maintenance strategies for donors and volunteers in South Korean nonprofits.**
- **Branston & Bush explore the usefulness of emerging online networks, or social good networks, through a triangulated approach using surveys, in-depth interviews, and content analysis.**

- Weberling explores how Danny Thomas tapped into his personal connections and relationships within Hollywood and the healthcare community to help make St. Jude's/ Children Hospital an internationally known nonprofit leader in children's health.
- Auger explores how Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory of communication is applicable to the under-studied relationship between grant-making foundations and nonprofit organisations seeking funding.
- Rausch explores how nongovernmental organisations in Africa are using relationship cultivation strategies to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS in tribal communities.
- Austin uses a case study approach to examine a partnership between a national and local nonprofit organisation and identify two new relationship strategies, customer service and attentiveness, that were fruitful for organisational success.
- Taliaferro & Ruggiano examine the critical role of lobbying among nonprofit organisation leaders using focus groups and conclude that relationship maintenance strategies are critical for advancing an organisation's mission in state legislatures.
- Chung, Lee, & Humphrey examine how universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Korea attempt to build relationships with diverse populations through Web site recruitment strategies.
- Watson & White use in-depth interviews to explore how nonprofit organizations in the United Kingdom manage their reputation as a nonprofit organisation while conducting commercial activities.
- Sisco used in-depth interviews with nonprofit public relations practitioners to explore how well the Situational Crisis Communication Theory describes nonprofit crises.
- Williams & Brunner conducted a content analysis of nonprofit organisation Web sites to determine which cultivation strategies are most often used to foster relationship growth with virtual stakeholders.
- Strauss discusses the links between social capital and nonprofit public relations and offers insights on how traditional public relations tools and strategies can be used to create positive relationships within the public sector.

The findings from these studies suggest that future research should test theoretical assumptions built on the study of for-profit and government organisations for their application to nonprofit organisation relationships. The study of social media and new media technologies would be a particularly fruitful area of research for nonprofit relationship building, as would the study of antecedents of nonprofit relationships. Little is known about why people initiate relationships with certain nonprofit organisations and not others. It is imperative that scholars explore what the motivations mean for the nature of the relationships with all organisation types. Further study into corporate-nonprofit partnerships and the use of cultivation strategies to strengthen these relationships would help bridge two areas of research and build useful knowledge in an understudied area. In addition, the exploration of Dr. Kathleen Kelly's (2001) stewardship strategies as a means to cultivate relationships is still an untapped area of study. We hope the articles in this issue encourage scholars around the world to continue their pursuits of understanding relationship management in the nonprofit sector.

Finally, we would like to say thank you to everyone involved in the production of this special issue. We are grateful to the *PRism* editorial board and Dr. Elspeth Tilley for allowing us to serve as guest editors for this issue. We would also like to take a moment to thank the many authors from around the globe who submitted manuscripts in response to our call for papers in 2009 and the many reviewers who volunteered their time and expertise to provide comments and insights into our examination of nonprofit relationships.

## References

- Bortree, D.S. (2010). Exploring adolescent-organization relationships: A study of effective relationship strategies with adolescent volunteers. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 21(1), 1-25.
- Bortree, D.S. & Waters, R.D. (2008). Admiring the organization: A study of the relational quality outcomes of the volunteer-nonprofit organization relationship. *Public Relations Journal* 2(3), 1-17.
- Bruning, S. D. (2002). Relationship building as a retention strategy: Linking relationship attitudes and satisfaction evaluations to behavioral outcomes. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 39-48.
- Bruning, S. D., & Ledingham, J. A. (2000). Perceptions of relationships and evaluations of satisfaction: An exploration of interaction. *Public Relations Review*, 26(1), 85-95.
- Ferguson, M. A. (1984, August). Building Theory in Public Relations: Inter-organizational Relationships, paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, FL.

Hall, M.R. (2006). Corporate Philanthropy and Corporate Community Relations: Measuring Relationship-Building Results. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18(1), 1-21.

Huang, Y. H. (2001). OPRA: A cross-cultural, multiple-item scale for measuring organization-public relationships. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13(1), 61-90.

Jo, S. (2006). Measurement of organization-public relationships: Validation of measurement using a manufacturer-retailer relationship. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18(3), 225-248.

Kelly, K. S. (2001). Stewardship: The fifth step in the public relations process. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 279-289). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Ki, E.J. & Hon, L.C. (2007). Testing the Linkages Among the Organization? Public Relationship and Attitude and Behavioral Intentions. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 19(1), 1-23.

Ki, E.J. & Hon, L.C. (2009). Causal linkages between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 3(4), 242-263.

Ledingham, J. A. (2001). Government-community relationships: Extending the relational theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 27(3), 285-295.

Ledingham, J. A. & Bruning, S. D. (1998). Relationship management and public relations: dimensions of an organization-public relationship. *Public Relations Review*, 24, 55-65.

Oneil, J. (2008). Linking public relations tactics to long-term success: An investigation of how communications contribute to trust, satisfaction, and commitment in a nonprofit organization. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 14(3/4), 263-274.

Waters, R.D. & Bortree, D.S. (2010). Building a Better Workplace for Teen Volunteers through Inclusive Behaviors. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 20(3), 337-355.

Waters, R. D. (2008). Applying relationship management theory to the fundraising process for individual donors. *Journal of Communication Management*, 12(1), 73-87.

### Author contact details:

Dr. Richard D. Waters Assistant Professor Department of Communication North Carolina State University 201 Winston Hall, Campus Box 8104 Raleigh, NC 28697-8104 [rdwaters@ncsu.edu](mailto:rdwaters@ncsu.edu)

Dr. Denise Bortree Assistant Professor College of Communication Penn State University 106 Carnegie Building University Park, PA 16802 [dsb177@psu.edu](mailto:dsb177@psu.edu)