
Ready, aim, fire: Key messages in public relations campaigns

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Abstract

The role of key messages has assumed an almost common-sense status within public relations campaigns. This research examines award-winning campaigns to explore what assumptions and understandings underpin the use of key messages by public relations practitioners. It was envisaged this would help explicate an aspect of practice that is seemingly widespread and ingrained. The findings report in four thematic areas that emerged from the data: environment, development, attributes and context. The concept of a congested and contested messaging environment was found to be the key driver behind the use of key messages. Practitioners saw well-crafted key messages as having the power to cut through the environment to achieve specific outcomes and positively position organisations. The study concludes that although a transmission model/media effects theoretical perspective was evident, practice could also be conceptualised as a social constructionist endeavour in that practitioners worked to create versions of social reality to achieve organisational goals. Further, it was also found that practitioners might benefit from a deeper understanding of how people receive, engage with, and process information in terms of campaign message design and evaluation.

Introduction

Developing and disseminating key messages is central to public relations campaigns (Hallahan, 1999; Mahoney, 2008; Pfau & Parrott, 1993). As part of campaign work, public relations practitioners incorporate key messages into “public relations discourse genres” which include news releases, media

advisories, prepared statements, fact sheets, backgrounders, white papers, meetings, speeches, pitch letters, advertorials, reports and websites (Courtright & Smudde, 2010, p. 68). The role of key messages can be seen to have assumed an almost common-sense status within public relations (Moloney, 2006). This status led me to question what assumptions and understandings about the way key messages work are held by public relations practitioners. It was envisaged that such questioning would help explicate this aspect of practice that is seemingly so widespread and ingrained.

To this end I analysed award-winning campaign case studies and interviewed a sample of the practitioners who had designed award-winning campaigns. This exercise was undertaken to deepen understanding about how practitioners see the role of key messages and how they see such messages working to help achieve their desired campaign outcomes. It is envisaged that the findings will assist educators to more effectively address this area with students, breaking down some of the ingrained practices so that the underpinning theory can be more deeply examined. The findings may also provide researchers with insights into the machinations of practice relating to messaging. This may assist in future research design and inform future examination of practice.

Key messages in public relations

Messages have been defined in a public relations context as the information that organisations want their target publics to know (Mahoney, 2008). Courtright and Smudde (2010, p. 66) expanded this and proposed that “key messages” were a component of strategic communication plans, stating that key messages are comprised of “two basic things”. The first thing is “a theme, thesis or slogan that is the

single idea around which all communications revolve”; the second being “copy points that serve as the basic proof or substance for detailed arguments that support the theme/thesis/slogan”. This provided a working definition of key messages for this project.

Public relations practitioners work within a domain of practice that seems to accept that key messages have the power to do certain things. Moloney (2006) states that “attitudes and behaviours only change after many rounds of messaging” (p. 131) and Wilson (2001) states that messages “are useless if they are not delivering a specific message to a target public so that the public will act to help us meet our objectives and accomplish our organisations’ missions” (p. 217). Key messages can “increase organizational valence in the public domain, to nudge their companies back into the good graces of their primary stakeholders, and to improve or maintain organizational reputation” (Pratt, 2004, p. 15). This purported power of messages to do things sits firmly in the theoretical camp of media effects.

The media effect can be described as “a change in an outcome within a person or social entity that is due to mass media influence following exposure to a mass media message or series of messages” (Potter, 2011, p. 903). From this position, sending effective messages to reach “strategically important audiences” can be seen as a “critical function in public relations” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 463). Practitioners work to ensure that their messages are effective, and Lane (2007) states that practitioners “fine-tune organisational messages to achieve strategic objectives” (p.72).

Key messages are often presented as planned talking points that, far from being “uttered off the cuff”, are “planned carefully, presented strategically” and are underpinned by research (Pratt, 2004, p.15). The analyses of individual campaigns in the academic literature suggest that practitioners subscribe to this way of thinking in terms of their messaging strategies (e.g. Batchelor & Formentin, 2008; Berger, 1999; Henderson,

2005; Jo, Shim & Jung, 2008; Khaja & Creedon, 2010; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Tilson, 2006; Vardeman-Winter, 2010; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). Such thinking links the theoretical underpinnings for public relations practice as suggested by Berger (1999), in that public relations practices “occur in a place, the *site*, in which practices of representation (in the forms of message, images and symbols) meet an ‘other’” (p. 189). The sites, according to Berger, include “locations, forums, channels and contexts wherein virtually every form of human interaction and communication is conducted” and are invariably “congested, with multiple messages and appearances that are contested, fluid, and changing, thereby complicating meaning and understanding” (p. 190). Recognising that the environment into which messages are sent is congested, public relations practitioners can be seen to prepare carefully crafted key messages as part of their campaigns, especially in media relations campaigns or crisis management situations (e.g. Coombs, 2007; Fortunato, 2000; Lundy & Broussard, 2007). There is ample evidence in the campaign literature that the environment in which messaging and counter-messaging is being undertaken by public relations practitioners is congested with other entities trying to promulgate their own messages.

Moloney (2006) suggests that public relations is “conducive to at least one public good” and that is “the sustained and intense scrutiny by third parties of public wrangling amongst PR voices” which “can produce more accurate fact and truth statements in public life” (p. 39). However, he goes on to point out that “while accurate fact and truth statements may or may not be delivered by PR messages, their accuracy and truth components will invariably only be demonstrated to third parties after competitive public challenges from other messages” (p.39). The literature suggests that practitioners expect to have their messages challenged and that they apply resources and effort to minimise or circumvent these challenges. My research sought to examine whether similar findings could be seen in a selection of award-winning campaigns that are

held to be examples of best practice in public relations.

Methodology

An initial content analysis was undertaken to see whether the words “message” or “key messages” were present in (a) award entry texts from campaigns that had won a Public Relations Institute of Australia national Golden Target Award between 1999 and 2008. Entry texts were included in the sample if they were available online at www.lib.uts.edu.au/gta/ and had sufficient information for analysis (n=57). Then, a series of face-to-face key informant

interviews (Margoluis & Salafsky, 1998) was undertaken with practitioners who had designed a national Golden Target award-winning campaign between 2005 and 2009 (n=18). It was deemed unreasonable to ask practitioners to recall campaign details from longer than five years ago. Semi-structured interviews were used where the line of questioning began with a request to describe how they went about designing their award-winning campaign. Topics brought forward by informants throughout the interview were then further probed. The breakdown of interview informants is included in Table 1.

Table 1 – Breakdown on interview informants by state/territory, practice sector and award entry category

Informant ID by City & Australian State/Territory	Sector of practice	Category of award entry
INF1 Perth, WA	In-house, state government	Consumer marketing
INF2 Perth, WA	Consultancy	Health organisation
INF3 Perth, WA	In-house, corporate	Corporate social responsibility
INF4 Melbourne, Vic	Consultancy	Government campaign
INF5 Melbourne, Vic	Consultancy	Community relations
INF6 Melbourne, Vic	In-house, state government	Employee communication
INF7 Melbourne, Vic	In-house, state government	Issues/crisis management
INF8 Melbourne, Vic	In-house, NFP	Public affairs
INF9 Sydney, NSW	Consultancy	Issues/crisis management
INF10 Sydney, NSW	Consultancy	Public affairs
INF11 Sydney, NSW	In-house, corporate	Internal communication
INF12 Sydney, NSW	Consultancy	Business-to-business marketing
INF13 Sydney, NSW	Consultancy	Business-to-business marketing
INF14 Canberra, ACT	In-house, government agency	Government campaign
INF15 Brisbane, QLD	Consultancy	Community relations
INF16 Brisbane, QLD	In-house, NFP	Issues/crisis management
INF17 Brisbane, QLD	Consultancy	Marketing communication
INF18 Brisbane, QLD	In-house, government corporation	Issues/crisis management

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. The entries and transcripts containing the words ‘message’ or ‘key messages’ were then more closely examined and the ways in which the words were used were thematically coded using codes that emerged from the data, together with the categories suggested by the literature. The award entries that did not contain the words ‘message’ or ‘key messages’ were also examined to determine whether there was content present that indicated the use of key messages in spite of those exact words not being used. If this was identified, then the entry was again, more closely examined and coded. The themes identified were grouped under four broad categories that emerged from the data: key message environment, key message development, key message attributes and key message context.

National award-winning campaigns were selected as the sample because these are seen by industry as examples of best practice in public relations and are frequently used for teaching and research purposes. Even though only Australian practice has been included in this research sample, an assumption that such practice is not atypical in the context of how campaigns are designed and implemented in Western countries has been made. This assumption is based on sources including the descriptions of campaigns and the guides to designing, implementing and evaluating campaigns found in textbooks used in tertiary level courses around the world. It is also based on the guidelines for entries into award/prize programmes conducted by public relations professional bodies in many countries including Australia (PRIA), Singapore (IPRS), USA (PRSA), UK (CIPR), New Zealand (PRINZ), and the international association, IPRA.

The following research questions were posed:

RQ 1 What assumptions or understandings are evident about the key message environment?

RQ 2 What thinking underpins practice in developing key messages?

RQ 3 What attributes must key messages incorporate to be effective in the campaign context?

RQ 4 Within what context do practitioners see key messages working?

Findings

Of the 57 national Australian award-winning public relations case studies examined it is notable that 82 percent of these mention key messages or messages being used as part of the strategies and tactics employed to achieve stated goals. It is clear that these terms are used interchangeably and that use of either word in the sample’s text supports the working definition of key messages for this project. The interview transcript data show key messages featuring prominently when practitioners discuss how they approach their campaign work, no matter what type of campaign was being discussed or what sector the practitioner worked within. Key messages are developed as part of all media relations campaigns but are also used in materials designed to directly engage and/or inform publics and audiences – the “discourse genres” as outlined by (Courtright & Smudde, 2010, p. 68). There is only one award entry that actively sought a dialogic exchange in meaning making. This is a case where public relations practitioners were working with indigenous communities in remote Australia and a key message-based approach had failed to achieve a satisfactory outcome (1999, Case 56¹). This was the only award entry that approached applying what could be described as a two-way symmetrical approach (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) in the communication strategy.

RQ 1 What assumptions or understandings are evident about the key message environment?

a) That the environment into which messages are sent and received is cluttered:

All data suggest that award-winning practitioners work with the understanding that many messages from multiple sources are competing for attention. The data point to the efforts made by practitioners to be innovative and creative when working with their organisations to find what it is that will make

¹ A list of all case studies can be found in Appendix 1.

them stand out from the crowd – to find a “campaignable concept” (INF17 interview). This is to achieve “cut through” or to “cut through the clutter” – phrases commonly used in the interview data. For example:

How do we make it new and how do we make it interesting because if we don’t cut through here, it doesn’t matter how good the message is; over here is never going to hear it (INF12 interview).

b) That the role of message dissemination channels is central: The data show that practitioners work to ensure that the materials containing their key messages are as valuable as possible to those controlling the conduits and channels to intended audiences. This relates to both research for message development and tailoring the message themes. Knowledge of the channels of dissemination is shown to be a prerequisite for being able to design and package the messages to best meet the needs of message receivers. It is clear that practitioners hope that message receivers will further disseminate or “amplify” (INF10 interview) the key message/s. Knowledge of the channels of dissemination is shown to be a prerequisite for being able to design and package the messages to best meet the needs of the message disseminators e.g. style and tone of a particular media outlet; localising national stories for regional media outlets. This is seen as a way of maximising the chances of key messages being incorporated into media content.

c) That repetition of the message is necessary for success: Repetition of key messages is seen as a necessary part of campaigns. The congested environment into which messages are sent clearly underpins the practitioners’ thinking when crafting messages. Several practitioners use words such as “getting it into their heads” and “ramming it home” when discussing repetition of messages, for example: “You’ve only got an opportunity to get a few points across, so ram home your messages and a couple of facts to support them” (INF17 interview).

Repetition related to the theme of this cluttered environment where target publics and audiences are potentially exposed to so many messages that it is only when some are repeated

that notice is taken of them. Repetition also related to the importance of the issue, a presumption by practitioners that if people are exposed to something frequently they might start to think it worth noticing or start believing something to be true.

RQ 2 What thinking underpins practice in developing key messages?

a) That research must underpin message development: All award entries identify the research undertaken in the development of their campaigns. This is a mandatory component of the award entry template but the importance of research was addressed repeatedly in the interviews, for example:

Research allows you to fine tune the strategy ... it gives you a chance to look at your messages and say ... we need more of this type of message and less of this type of message (INF5 interview).

b) That messages must be tailored for target publics: All award entry campaigns identify target publics in their campaigns and, in fact, are compelled to do so by the award entry process. All campaigns identify multiple target publics and develop messaging strategies tailored to those publics. The data show that the techniques of framing are widely used and are embedded in key message development. For example:

The battle isn’t just having your message understood the way you intended it to be within somebody else’s frame of reference, it’s also having them judge it to be a fair and true statement and then they might accept it. (INF18 interview)

RQ 3 What attributes must key messages incorporate to be effective in the campaign context?

a) An effective spokesperson: Key messages must be delivered, articulated and attributed, and the issue of spokespersons emerges as a significant component of key message delivery. Media training is seen as the way of preparing people for the role of

spokesperson and is reported as being used in many examples of practice examined in this project. For example: “We took a lot of time in coaching the CEO on how to deliver a message enthusiastically, to show passion in your face.” (INF15 interview)

b) Credibility: Two main factors relating to the theme of credibility are evident and these are (i) that the spokesperson/s delivering the message has to be seen as credible, and (ii) that the consistency of messages being delivered contributes to perceptions of credibility. Practitioners see the need for spokespeople to be trained in media skills that portray and convey perceptions of credibility. For example:

We’ve got them so well trained now... When you’ve actually got people who get it and can have a sophisticated conversation about the issue and how it could be taken and how it could be better framed then they’re completely committed and behind it and believe in what they’re doing. Your outcome is just infinitely better. (INF18 interview)

This then returns to the key message itself. For example, this practitioner sees expertise in message delivery, being consistent, and staying on message as vital:

The other thing is the consistency of message for your spokespeople... with a media who is trying to chase down any inconsistency, if you have an inconsistency of your own making you’re just making more work for yourself... it starts to undermine credibility and then undermines the belief in everything else that you’re saying. (INF7 interview)

c) Consistency: Practitioners identify that the problem with inconsistency in key messages is its potential to undermine or erode credibility or believability, for example: “It [inconsistency] undermines your credibility and introduces distrust and cynicism” (INF18 interview). This would seem to impact on the ability of the message to achieve its intended action. Practitioners describe inconsistencies in messages as either being errors in factual content, a mismatch between what is being said and what can be seen by audiences or publics,

changes in what is being included in messages over a period of time, or differences in what is included in messages being delivered by different spokespeople or through different channels. It is evident that practitioners work to avoid inconsistency and there are numerous references to how public relations practitioners work with executives and staff of their organisations to achieve consensus on the key messages, for example:

Regular meetings were conducted... these meetings also ensured that the key messages were carefully refined and agreed to by all parties involved in the launch. (2006, Case 22)

d) New information should be linked to that which is already understood: Practitioners construct their messages to meld with what research has indicated target publics already understand, for example: “If you don’t go back to where they were and pick them up and bring them along with you, you know, you’re going to have a disconnect forever” (INF6 interview); and:

You could construct a campaign that links into their understanding of the good work the x organisation does and if they believe what they know about the x organisation, that it’s good, then that kind of translates to being able to build, well, a message that this must be okay too. (INF17 interview)

e) Key messages have to be constructed and conveyed but not ‘spun’: Although acknowledging the need to get the best results possible for their clients or employers, no practitioners advocate being untruthful. This seems to be related more to the fact that it is likely that attempts to be untruthful would be discovered by the media or stakeholders rather than deep ethical commitments. For example:

There’s no point putting out a message, or positioning something in a way that it’s not because our stakeholders will always find out. There’s no point us saying okay we’re going to address something and then nothing ever being done about it because then that’ll result in a bigger furore at the end of the

project than you ever had at the beginning. (INF15 interview)

Only one practitioner indicated that work would be refused on the basis of ethical considerations but it should be noted that this was not a particular focus of this study. No data indicate that ‘spinning’ key messages is undertaken or constitutes acceptable practice. There is little data that refers to ethics specifically. Only one award entry (2001, Case 18) expressly mentioned working according to an industry association’s code of ethics.

RQ 4 Within what context do practitioners see key messages working?

a) That key messages have the power to do something: Key messages are ascribed the power to undertake an array of tasks such as dispelling myths, allaying concerns, and instilling confidence. In one instance, promulgating key messages were seen as the way to “fuel a debate in the media” (2006, Case 33), in another a key message was “designed to play on a public feeling” (2003, Case 16), and as part of one campaign, “key messages were developed to bring the objectives to life in communication materials and activities” (1999, Case 21). The efforts practitioners expend on researching intended audiences and crafting the right key messages for them indicates that most practitioners ascribe to these views – as if a correctly crafted message will operate to deliver the desired outcome.

b) That key messages could assist in positioning a product, service or idea positively in the minds of audiences: Of the award-winning campaign entries, 42 percent of campaigns (n=27) specifically mention positioning as a desired outcome of the campaign. Of these, all work actively to use key messages to assist in achieving the desired positioning, for example: “We tend to work on three key messages that are your main themes of how you want to position this initiative.” (INF17 interview)

Messaging strategies are used for various positioning purposes such as when the Child Abuse Trust wanted to “to reinforce its position as an independent advocate” (2004, Case 6), or

when Brisbane Council wanted to position itself as responsibly managing the city’s future water supply (2007, Case 7). Research is reported as informing the positioning strategy, for example:

The RAS commissioned four focus groups among its target markets to inform the positioning of rodeo as an event, and to develop key messages. (2006, Case 46)

c) That the evaluation of public relations can be undertaken through key message reporting: Success is most frequently measured in terms of not having key messages challenged and by their ‘take up’ by media and other channels. This take up is seen as ideal when the key messages appear in the form in which they were constructed by the organisation that commissioned the public relations activity. Success is further measured by having third parties disseminate and endorse key messages in their communication material. Media evaluation is extensively used, for example:

The quantitative and qualitative research was supplemented by an analysis of local, national and international media reports. This was used to determine how the media were interpreting the key messages. Throughout the campaign, the media team recorded that in 92 percent of cases, the media interpreted the key messages and facts correctly. (2006, Case 29)

There are isolated instances of media audiences being surveyed to evaluate recall of key messages, for example: “To determine cut through of the strategy, key message and attitudes towards the meaning of Australia Day, a Newspan survey was conducted” (2003, Case 4). Of the 27 award entries that mention positioning as a desired outcome, only six reported on positioning outcomes in their evaluation/results sections. There is little if any evidence of receiver-centred campaign evaluation being undertaken. One practitioner described the barriers to more thorough evaluation:

With clients, the thing that is really hard to get them to do is to pay for research

or evaluate our programs at the end... So long as they perceive they've got their outcome, they are happy with that; they don't need the documented evidence to back it up, which is quite interesting...We would normally do a level of evaluation for clients just based on deliverables and our quick analysis of did we get key messages across and that kind of thing, but we wouldn't do proper quantitative and qualitative research unless it was engaged by the client. (INF17 interview)

Discussion

It was evident that the sites wherein these campaigns took place were both congested and contested, and that this "clutter" was one of the main drivers behind using key messages as described by practitioners. Factors such as repetition, consistency and credibility of messages resonate throughout the findings. This is consistent with observations about how campaigns have been structured to support message repetition since the early twentieth century (Weaver, Motion & Roper, 2006). Foundational research in this area found that message repetition could have positive impacts (e.g. Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953; Cacioppo & Petty, 1989). The findings from such studies can be seen to underpin the day-to-day thinking and practices in public relations as articulated by practitioners in this study. Their approach can be seen to stem from understandings about the way meaning is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed within the sites where public relations operates. The findings indicate that they believe that consistent and persistent representation is required if they are to have any success in having their intended representation accepted by target publics (Berger, 1999).

The development of key messages in this study sat within the two-way asymmetrical approach "which utilizes research to develop messages meant to persuade publics to the organization's point of view" (Berger, 1999, p. 187). Messages were developed using research findings to increase the possibility of the target publics constructing the organisation's point of

view or meaning. This relates to Heath's (2001) discussion on zones of meaning – the practitioners undertook research to establish what the understandings or attitudes of target publics were before the public relations activity. This meant that the campaign messages could be designed in a way that would blend or meld with those understandings or attitudes. The evidence in this study indicates that this thinking may be firmly embedded in public relations practice.

While there are many ways in which publics can be segmented and defined (e.g. Botan & Soto, 1998; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1997; Verčič, 2008; Walker, 2006), in this study a situational defining of publics was most evident. Key messages were clearly tailored and framed differently for identified publics. This approach has been called best practice by Pratt (2004, p. 18) who advised framing issues "differently for supportive and unsupportive audiences, for friendly or hostile groups". Practitioners segmented target publics for this purpose and, in the public relations field, this practice is seen as essential "to allow a communicator to identify which publics need to be addressed, and to avoid the waste of resources of attempting to communicate with a whole population" (Walker, 2006, p. 398).

The findings show that the techniques of framing as described by Hallahan (1999) and Ihlen and Nitz (2008) are widely used and are embedded in key message development processes. The techniques and theory of framing can be seen to be underpinned by a social constructionist theoretical view of public relations where practitioners work to construct a particular version of reality in the minds of target audiences and publics (James, 2009; Gordon & Pellegrin, 2008). In attempts to structure a version of social reality, practitioners framed content in particular ways but were also very cognizant of the need for effective message delivery.

This was evident is how practitioners supported media training for their campaign spokespeople. Scholars have highlighted that lack of trained spokespeople could compromise the effectiveness of key messages, especially in specific instances such as in crisis management

where people use such messages as a basis for decision-making (e.g. Lee, Woeste & Heath, 2007; Lundy & Broussard, 2007). In this study, media training was mainly instigated in an attempt to control both the content and the delivery of the messages. It is standard fare for media training materials to recommend preparing key messages in such control attempts (Macnamara, 2009). However, as Macnamara (2009) has stated, practitioners may need to rethink their practice to adapt to technological change, and to the social and cultural changes that accompany such change. He has suggested that the “control paradigm practices” could be replaced with “alternative interactive PR strategies” (2009, p. 11), but there is little evidence of these practices emerging in the reports of practice included in this study.

The credibility of the spokesperson delivering the message was shown in the data to be an intrinsic part of key message development and delivery – even with skilful framing of the message it was seen that there was a risk of the message failing in its purpose if not delivered effectively. Reber and Berger (2005) have suggested media training may assist spokespersons in maintaining the integrity of the message frame and this can be seen to be the impetus for media training efforts. Avery (2010) suggested that practitioners should incorporate indicators of expertise, transparency, and knowledge into their messages to enhance the audience’s perceptions of the credibility of the sources they use. It was evident that practitioners worked with their spokespersons in an effort to do just this. The findings suggest that perceptions of credibility stem from of a co-construction of meaning process between the public relations practitioners and target publics, and that this occurs as a result of all factors involved in the development, delivery and reception of key messages.

Being consistent in design and delivery of key messages was also a crucial element in this meaning construction process. According to Bruce and Tini (2008), a consistent message supports believability and the practices described by practitioners support this. They

also support Coombs’ (2007) assertion that consistency is promoted when all spokespersons from an organisation are unified in the manner in which they deliver messages. The findings suggest that practitioners have some knowledge of the tenets of Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory. This theory states that humans are driven towards consistency and “avoid information that is likely to increase dissonance” (Griffin, 2006 p. 205), preferring instead to engage with people, material and opinions that are consistent with their existing beliefs. The findings indicate that public relations practitioners recognise this and so tailor and disseminate messages in ways that are interpretable by audiences in terms of the narratives that are already operating in their communities (Heath, 2001).

Although messages are tailored in this way to forward the agenda of the organisation, no practitioner advocated working with key message material that was not based on facts. Although only one award entry mentioned working within an industry association code of ethics, no practitioner supported unethical practice. The major concern of the single practitioner who reported pressure to exaggerate the facts centred on the organisation being exposed in some way rather than the actual ethics or otherwise of the situation. That no practitioner questioned the ethics behind working to construct particular viewpoints that aimed to control the construction of meaning by publics as tightly as possible is concerning. This perhaps indicates that such practice is indeed ingrained and unquestioned in the industry.

The findings support the view that working with key messages is primarily about self-advantaging communication where attention is drawn to the positive values and behaviours of the interest the practitioner represents, and not the negative ones (Moloney, 2006). The ethics of when such self-advantaging communication is acceptable or not is unclear in this project’s findings but may be related to how individuals interpret the code of ethics they work within and their personal values systems. Given the power of key messages as discussed and described in the data to undertake an array of

tasks, the ethical dimensions of such practices are worthy of future further research efforts.

That practitioners ascribed key messages with the power to do so many things is not surprising given that academic literature supports the view that key messages can do things or enact certain conditions. The efforts practitioners have expended, as described in the data, on researching intended audiences and crafting the right key messages for them indicates that most practitioners ascribe to the view that a correctly crafted message will operate to deliver the desired outcome. There is clearly a media effects model of thinking at work in these instances and Macnamara (2006) has described how such thinking still predominates in much public relations practice. Olson (2001) has stated that “knowing that the audience was exposed to one’s message in the media is no guarantee that it will produce the desired effects” (p. 271). However, the evaluation practices described in award entries indicate that practitioners in the main do not subscribe to such a view and are still focused on outputs as measured in media evaluation, and not outcomes. Media evaluation remains one of the primary methods used in evaluating public relations campaigns and whether an organisation’s key messages were carried by the media is a specific and commonly used measure of public relations success (e.g. Murphee & Rogers, 2004; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault & Agee, 2007). There was little in this project that would dispel this assertion.

This state of affairs is seen as less than satisfactory in many quarters of public relations. Jeffrey, Michaelson and Stacks (2006) highlighted case studies that illustrated

the fallacy of considering a campaign a success if one gets lots of overall pick-up, and even ‘key-message’ pick-up, without checking that the messages delivered were accurate and resonated well with the targeted audience. (p. 10)

This has implications for practice, perhaps exposing practitioners to accusations of false claims of success if they do not undertake such checking and merely report on the ‘pick-up’ of key messages by the media. An alternative way of viewing successful public relations outcomes

could be to measure when the zone of meaning within which the target public is operating and the zone of meaning constructed by the public relations practitioner could be said to have blended or melded. In this way, practitioners could be conceptualised as working to co-construct meaning in tandem with the publics to whom messages are offered. How this could be measured in practice is problematic in terms of how it would be done and who would pay for it.

There may also be a reluctance to be open with the findings of such an evaluation process given that the evidence in this study indicates that the aim of messaging practice in most cases was to influence target publics to move towards the organisation’s view. This is essentially a *strategic* co-construction of meaning, within a social constructionist theoretical framework. It relates to the expectation of practitioners that if key messages are well crafted, delivered and disseminated, members of target publics will process the information in a way that progresses the organisation’s mission.

Within such expectations it was evident that there was some alignment to rhetorical theoretical approaches (e.g. Heath, 1993, 2009) in that there was evidence of a “wrangle” when messages were disseminated into the “marketplace” of ideas (Heath, 2009, p. 23). However, it appears that the majority of public relations practitioners in this study do not think this wrangling is a desirable state of affairs and there is no evidence of intent to embrace a rhetorical approach. If messages put forward by an organisation were found to be unacceptable by the target publics, then those messages and ideas may need to be reconsidered by the practitioner. Adjustments to what is being put forward may need to be made so that intentional representations can be honed, and zones of meaning better blended or melded with those of the target publics. In the data, there is some evidence that campaign monitoring was undertaken in some instances to do just this.

The reception and interpretation of key messages remains a somewhat neglected area of public relations research. This is a significant

oversight given that meaning is the primary concern of public relations and interpretation is a central process within public relations activities (Heath, 2009; Leitch & Warner, 2001). The issue of publics as receivers of messages, and research into how they process messages and construct an image of an organisation, requires attention (Moffitt, 2001). There was little if any evidence in this study's data that a receiver-centered campaign evaluation culture has been taken up in public relations practice. However King (2010) states:

To better understand how or why a reader responds to an organizational text in a particular way, an analyst can focus on the ways in which the audience may or may not identify their interests with those being forwarded in a text. Importantly, even if a particular discursive pattern can be said to represent the interests of its author, there is not necessarily a correlation between what the pattern evoked in a reader and what the author may have planned for. (p. 25)

This leaves open the possibility that the best-crafted messages may not be successful in achieving the construction or co-construction of an organisation's intended meanings. The reasons for this may link closely to the concept of intentional strategic positioning, where messaging is just one aspect of the positioning process (James, 2010, 2011). If the organisation has not determined a viable position or has not enacted its desired position in some way, key messages alone seem unlikely to achieve successful positioning (James, 2011). The evidence in the award-entry data points to the use of messaging as a way of undertaking intentional positioning as it is described in the Halcion case study undertaken by Berger (1999). It can also be seen to link to positioning through discursive strategies as articulated by Motion and Leitch (1996).

Positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) has only recently been applied in a public relations context (James, 2010, 2011; Leitch & Motion, 2010) but its basic premise that positions can be established and maintained through speech acts and supporting

storylines may provide the beginnings of an explanation for why key messages are so central to public relations practice. The theory also provides insights into the concept of the credibility of messages, and of the organisations and spokespeople promulgating such messages. This is because the theory suggests that certain positions hold specific rights and responsibilities in terms of who has the right to speak on an issue and what storylines (i.e. messages) are opened or closed by particular positions taken by an organisation. Further research is required to explore these concepts more fully in a public relations context. The public relations practitioners in this study clearly connected the use of key messages with their positioning efforts. What remains unclear is why such a small number of award entries reported in their campaign evaluation on whether desired positioning was achieved.

Overall there was a strong current of the transmission model of communication being the key driver throughout the descriptions of practice relating to key messages. This was, however, very much tempered with the efforts of practitioners to create zones of meaning for target publics that were informed by research. Practitioners were not just loading up an arrow with a message and shooting it out randomly. They were using a carefully tailored message on the arrow and shooting it out with a finely honed bow (i.e. a trained spokesperson) – the target was not random but clearly scoped out and defined.

It was found in a previous study (Byrne, 2007) that Australian public relations practice was most closely aligned with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) *press agent/publicity model*. In this study, the approach of practitioners aligns more closely with the *two-way asymmetrical model* of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This is where insights gleaned through research were designed to feed into better-targeted strategic communication efforts for the achievement of the organisation's public relations goals. It should be noted that Byrne's sample did not focus on award-winning practitioners or examine notions of best practice. Part of the award entry template for

the campaigns examined in my study asked practitioners to detail the research undertaken for their campaign development. These factors may explain the difference in the theoretical orientations.

Overall, the findings suggest that public relations practitioners are guided by the active message processing model which assumes “that information is the key: that it triggers cognitive responses in people, thereby affecting attitudes and behaviours” (Pfau & Wan, 2006, p. 112). The data indicated that such thinking permeated practices around key messages in what was deemed by the public relations profession in Australia as examples of best practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that key messages featured prominently in descriptions of campaign practice primarily because practitioners recognised the milieu in which public relations operates as a contested and congested site. The site is conceptualised as cluttered and messaging strategies operate to cut through the clutter to reach a target public. Key messages have a perceived power to ‘do things’ – to achieve an outcome or to successfully position an organisation. Although understandings and assumptions of practitioners are based in a transmission model or media effects perspective, the theoretical orientation of messaging practice was a social constructionist perspective. Practitioners did not mention ‘social constructionism’, but all practitioners could be conceptualised as having worked actively with key messages to construct particular meanings in attempts to have target publics construct particular versions of reality.

Practitioners tailored key messages in ways that would facilitate publics constructing the intended meaning of the organisation; they disseminated messages via media and communication channels they thought would best reach target publics and audiences; they used spokespeople who would be perceived as credible and these spokespeople were trained for their role; they saw the need for consistency and repetition in their quest for message success; and they evaluated campaigns to a significant extent through the reporting or, far

less commonly, recall of key messages. It was clear in all but one case of practice examined that key messages either underpinned or were an integral component of campaigns. Success was not seen as having organisational viewpoints challenged in informed debate by an engaged society. Success was measured in terms of not having organisational messages challenged and by the ‘take up’ of key messages by media and in other channels.

The implications of this study centre on the need to better understand the concept of key messaging as a central part of public relations campaigns. Practitioners clearly see key messages as having the potential to achieve an array of outcomes but the findings did not show to what extent outcomes such as behavioural or attitudinal change are achieved. Nor did they show whether any such change could be attributed to the processing of key messages by target publics in any way. Campaign evaluation practices of practitioners were primarily output-focused, rather than outcome-focused. It is suggested that the perpetuation of these practices may be occurring through client reluctance to pay for additional evaluation, and through industry recognition programmes that award prizes to campaigns using such evaluation techniques.

Public relations messaging techniques draw from disciplines such as social psychology and cultural studies but this study suggests that practitioners may be working with only surface understandings of how and why messaging may or may not be successful. I suggest that if public relations practitioners had a deeper understanding of how people receive, engage with, and process information, this could inform not only campaign design but also evaluation techniques. There would be implications for undergraduate course curricula if deeper engagement in related fields of study were to be accommodated. Given the limitations of this study in terms of its method, sample and scope, further research would need to be undertaken to determine whether such changes were warranted or viable.

Key messages were found to be a significant part of campaign practice examined in this study, and the assumptions and understandings

that practitioners held indicate that further research could also highlight ways that practice could engage differently with publics, especially to accommodate a rapidly changing media landscape. Finally, this study's findings may be of interest to those researchers examining public relations from critical perspectives. This could especially relate to studies relating to who has the power and resources to implement campaigns designed to strategically co-construct intended meanings in the minds of target publics.

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Appendix 1 – List of award-winning Golden Target Entries

Case no.	Call no.*	Campaign Title	Client	PR Company
1	1999 A 11	<i>A Prescription For (Disaster) Success</i>	Olympic Roads and Transport Authority (ORTA)	Olympic Roads and Transport Authority (ORTA)
2	2000 A 17	<i>Adult Prisoner Work Camps-Community Communications</i>	Ministry For Justice	Ministry For Justice
3	2005 A 4	<i>Alcan – Local Expansion, Global Reach</i>	Alcan	Rowland Communication Group
4	2003 B7	<i>Australia Day – Celebrate What's Great</i>	National Australia Day Council	The National Australia Day Council Communications and Marketing Team
5	2003 F 5	<i>Bali bombings: Supporting Western Australians after the tragedy</i>	Department for Community Development WA	Department for Community Development (Jane Machin-Everill)
6	2004 G 2	<i>Breaking the Cycle of Child Abuse and Neglect</i>	Abused Child Trust	Rowland Communication Group
7	2007 C6 - 25	<i>Brisbane Aquifer Project</i>	Brisbane Water	Marcom Communication
8	2007 C2 - 4	<i>Campaign to Legalise 'Therapeutic Cloning'</i>	CAMRA	CAMRA
9	2007 C2 - 2	<i>Can you see and hear us?</i>	SOCOM	Eye and Ear Hospital
10	1999 E 8	<i>Celebrating 300 Years of Twinings Tea</i>	Twinings	IMPACT Communications Australia
11	2007 C17-3	<i>Chariots of Thunder</i>	Tracy Jones	Creative Territory
12	2007 C3 - 9	<i>Closure of a Queensland Icon</i>	KR Castlemaine	Rowland
13	1999 E 8	<i>Consulting with Levy-Paying Members</i>	Cox Inall Communications	Horticultural Industry Alliance Steering Committee (HIASC)
14	2007 C7 - 7	<i>Converting Staff Perceptions</i>	Department of Water, Western Australia	
15	2003 E 3	<i>Cryosite - Creating Understanding</i>	Cryosite Limited	Westbrook Financial Communications
16	2003 G 11	<i>Don't Let Another Year Go By</i>	Northern Territory University	Northern Territory University (Tracy Jones)

17	2005 J 3	<i>Douglas Wood Hostage Crisis</i>	The Wood Family	N. Smail FPRIA
18	2001 G 15	<i>Elders Rural Bank Launch</i>	Elders Limited	Turnbull Porter Novelli
19	2004 C 3	<i>Engaging DPI Staff in the White Paper for Water</i>	Department of Primary Industries	Department of Primary Industries
20	2004 D 6	<i>Get Behind The Desk!</i>	AWB Ltd	Red Agency
21	1999 B 3	<i>Good Neighbours Campaign</i>	Australian cotton industry	Cox Inall Communication
22	2006 C15 - 6	<i>Heart Foundation Tick Awarded to Eggs</i>	Australian Egg Corporation Limited	Reed Weir Communications P/L
23	2004 E 2	<i>HY-FIs Strike a Rich Chord</i>	ABN AMRO Bank NV	Financial & Corporate Relations
24	2004 C 4	<i>IBM Intranet Relaunch</i>	IBM	IBM
25	2006 C10 - 3	<i>IBM Small to Medium Enterprise Campaign: Shifting Industry Perceptions</i>	IBM Australia	Text 100
26	2006 C7 - 2	<i>Interactive Internal Communications</i>	Star City	Star City
27	2006 C15 - 3	<i>Kaleeya Hospital Maternity Unit</i>	South Metropolitan Area Health Service	Mills Wilson Communication Consultants
28	2006 C1 - 5	<i>Live in Canberra Campaign</i>	ACT Government	ACT Government
29	2006 C4 - 3	<i>Mars and Snickers extortion threat</i>	Masterfoods Australia New Zealand	Socom
30	2001 B 13	<i>McDonald's & The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games</i>	McDonalds	PROFESSIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS
31	2006 C9 - 1	<i>New students for Old Modern School</i>	Dept of Education and Training (WA)	Dept of Education and Training (WA)
32	1999 C 7	<i>Nippy's – A Salmonella Outbreak & Company Under Threat</i>	Knispel (Nippy's) Fruit Juices	Hughes Public Relations
33	2006 C2 - 4	<i>NoLink! Sorry, no service for outer Melbourne</i>	Interface Councils	Socom
34	2006 C6 - 5	<i>Promising Our Children a World-Class Hospital</i>	Royal Children's Hospital	Socom
35	2001 A 20	<i>Protect Australian Livestock Week 2001</i>	Animal Health Australia (AHA)	Turnbull Porter Novelli
36	1999 E 16	<i>QGGA – Changing the Direction of the Grain</i>	Queensland Graingrowers Association, QGGA	WCG Public Relations
37	2004 B 14	<i>Raising Awareness of Redress for Irish Abuse Survivors in Australia</i>	Campaigning Irish Legal Firm	Professional Public Relations
38	2007 C4-1	<i>Returning Power to Collinsville</i>	Ergon Energy	Powerlink Queensland
39	2006 C16 - 2	<i>Rio Tinto WA Future Fund</i>	Rio Tinto	Rio Tinto
40	2002 A 17	<i>Royal Visit To South Australia By Her Majesty The Queen And His Royal Highness The Duke Of Edinburgh</i>	South Australia, Department of Premier and Cabinet	Public Relations Institute of Australia

41	2004 H 25	<i>Sands of Time Keep Memory Alive</i>	The Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) (QLD Branch)	Rowland Communication Group
42	2002 G 11	<i>Sentek – Salinity Campaign</i>	Sentek	Porter Novelli
43	2000 C 9	<i>Show Cause</i>	University of New South Wales	University of New South Wales
44	2007 C6-26	<i>Sir Samuel Griffith Drive Operation Review</i>	Marcom Communication	Marcom Communication
45	2000 F 8	<i>Sydney Harbour Oil Spill August 1999</i>	Shell Company of Australia	Shell Company of Australia
46	2006 C11 - 3	<i>Sydney Royal Rodeo</i>	Royal Agricultural Society of NSW	Cox Inall Communications
47	1999 H 8	<i>Take Control</i>	Southbank Institute of TAFE	Media Link
48	2001 E 3	<i>The Best Way Forward</i>	Bendigo Bank	Brumfield Bird & Sandford
49	1999 A 16	<i>The Beverley Uranium Project – Getting it Over the Line</i>	Heathgate Resources Pty Ltd	Stephen Middleton MPRIA
50	2001 F 2	<i>The Panadol Crisis</i>	SmithKline Beecham (SB)	Burson-Marsteller
51	2002 F 5	<i>The Tampa Crisis</i>	Wallenius Wilhelmsen	Financial and Corporate Relations
52	2006 C13 - 3	<i>The Telstra Road to Tamworth 2006</i>	Telstra	Telstra
53	2003 A 6	<i>The Writing's on the Wall – Casey stamps out graffiti</i>	City of Casey, Victoria	City of Casey, Victoria (Ros Weadman)
54	2005 D 3	<i>Victoria's Annual Olive Festival</i>	Mt Atkinson Olive Grove	JAM Publicity
55	2001 D 8	<i>WA Farming – An Exceptional Case For Communication</i>	Western Australian Farmers Federation	Western Australian Farmers Federation
56	1999 A13	<i>What do you want to tell the people?</i>	BHP	Queensland Corporate Communications Network P/L
57	2007 C11-3	<i>Woolworths National Drought Action Day</i>	Woolworths	Edelman

*Call no. can be entered into the search at <http://lib.uts.edu.au/gta/> for full entry details.