
Back to the future: Is strategic management (re)emerging as public relations' dominant paradigm?

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Abstract

Most public relations practitioners and scholars agree that public relations' functions include communication, stakeholder relationship management, reputation management, and strategic management. The purpose of this position paper is to continue the discussion on the current and future directions of the public relations discipline, which impacts both the practice and education of public relations. We start with a brief overview of the history of public relations and investigate the four functions of public relations (which have been suggested as paradigms) via an examination of seven studies on public relations practitioner roles in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. After examining these studies, we suggest that there seems to be an increasing practitioner focus in Europe and Australia on public relations' strategic management function, which marks a return to public relations' earlier, more solid foundations. We contend that the professionalisation of the public relations industry is assisting its return to a more strategic area of practice.

Introduction

Public relations has passed through several iterations, starting with a publicity or press agent function (Seitel, 2011) at the start of the 20th century, to later functions of corporate communication, relationship management, reputation management, and strategic management. Each of these later functions has been suggested as a paradigm for public relations. A paradigm comprises taken-for-granted values, assumptions, and approaches to the world, acting as a sense-making tool, while the dominant paradigm comprises the

framework and methodologies that guide most research in the field and are regarded as the most important ideas (L'Etang, 2007).

The purpose of this position paper is to continue the discussion on the current and future directions of the public relations discipline, which impacts both the practice of public relations and its education. We start with a review of the history of public relations. We investigate the four suggested functions of public relations via an examination of seven studies on public relations practitioner roles in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. After examining these studies, we suggest that there seems to be an increasing practitioner focus in Europe and Australia on public relations' strategic management function.

Using the four cornerstones of professionalism identified by de Bussy and Wolf (2009) to evaluate practitioner roles, we contend that the professionalisation of the industry is assisting public relations' return to a more strategic area of practice. Public relations is strategic when it helps to formulate organisational goals, balances these with the requirements of stakeholders, and then supports that effort (Plowman, 2005). Significant elements of the managerial role include trend identification and management of response, identifying and managing issues and problems, research, strategic planning, counsel, and emphasising corporate responsibility (Harlow, 1976 cited in Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Plowman, 2005). The internet and social media are further empowering public relations practitioners by providing opportunities to assume powerful decision-making roles in organisations (Sallot, Porter & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004).

As the managerial role seems to be emerging as one of the leading functions in public relations practice, adding legitimacy to the profession, we suggest that some consideration should be given to further evaluation of this function as a dominant public relations paradigm. This strategic management role was conceived early in public relations' evolution and we suggest that this function may form the solid foundation required for public relations' further evolution. This was lent credence by a 2007 international Delphi study conducted amongst academics, practitioners, and senior executives of professional and industry bodies on 14 public relations research topic areas which identified that public relations' contribution to strategic decision-making, strategies, and efficient operation of organisations was the top priority (Watson, 2008).

A brief history of the public relations functions

Modern public relations practice began in the early 1900s, with publicity-seeking press agents and publicists practicing one-way communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984 cited in Clark, 2000). Public relations took on a strategic management function under the aegis of United States (US) pioneer, Ivy Leadbetter Lee, during World War I in the US (Seitel, 2011). Lee acted as a counsellor to management, advising on both internal and external policies and procedures and communicating with diverse publics (Seitel, 2011). Until Bernays introduced the "public relations counsel" concept in 1923 (Johnson, 2005), most practitioners were known as publicists or press agents (Cutlip et al., 2000).

Evidence of public relations' strategic management function can be traced back to Lee's position as counsellor to management (Seitel, 2011). Recognition of this function was confirmed following public relations pioneer Harlow's 1976 synthesis of 472 definitions of public relations which defined it as a distinctive management function (e.g., see Cutlip, et al., 2000; Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman & Toth, 2007; Seitel, 2011), with strategic communication being one function amongst other managerial functions. By the 1920s,

practitioners considered themselves to be responsible not just for communicating with the press and public, but also for educating management about public opinion, with textbooks of the era stressing the integration of public relations with general business activities (Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997). At this time, practitioners also became interested in the concept of social responsibility, realising that, as it was good for public relations, it was also good for business (Golden, 1968, cited in Clark, 2000). By the late 1920s, Page, one of the first in-house public relations experts and AT & T vice-president (Clark, 2000), contended that public relations departments should have real influence with top management (Newsome, 2000 in Clark, 2000).

Following the Great Depression in the 1930s, public relations slipped back into the role of one-way communication, focusing on conveying that the needs of business and society were synonymous (Clark, 2000). However, according to Steinberg (1975, p. 27 cited in Clark, 2000), in the 1940s public relations became a "full-fledged profession" using public opinion research techniques, with the first university public relations course established.

In the 1950s, public relations study flourished along with the rise of TV with its ability to shape public opinion (Clark, 2000). By this time, Bernays was practising two-way communication focusing on scientific research, audience feedback, and the evaluation of attitudes, with public relations practitioners counselling corporations on the need to gain public consent for their operations (Heath, 1990 cited in Clark, 2000). In other words, the 1950s saw a further development of public relations' strategic management function.

During the 1960s, the surge of consumer activism, public scepticism, and anti-business sentiment in the USA demanded that public relations professionals develop management skills and an understanding of psychology. The 1960s and 1970s also saw the rise of corporate social responsibility in response to social activism and regulatory activity (Wood, 1991 cited in Clark, 2000). In the early 1970s, public relations gradually developed into a fully-fledged managerial discipline (Olasky, 1987).

In response to powerful groups in society, including governments, trade unions, and investors (Broom, Lauzen & Tucker, 1991), areas of expertise such as investor relations, government relations, issues management, and employee communications were added to public relations' early specialties.

The turn of the 21st century saw the emergence of relationship management and reputation management as important areas to public relations. Relationship management has been the focus of substantial research by public relations scholars (e.g., Ledingham, 2003; Hutton, 2007) with its focus on trust as the basis for relationships. Reputation management arose in response to corporate actions that damaged public perception of reputations.

The first decade of the new century saw the rebranding of public relations as "corporate communication" (e.g., Argenti, 2007; Cornelissen, 2004) and a shift in focus to a strategic communication role. However, others (e.g., Burson cited in Seitel, 2011) have instead advocated public relations' strategic management function. Indeed, Lattimore et al. (2007, pp. 12-13) suggest that "PR leaders can help organizations set policy and make strategic plans, establish philosophies, achieve objectives, adapt to changing environments, and successfully compete in today's markets."

Because public relations has passed through various iterations (Clark, 2000) from its focus on one-way communication in the 1900s to strategic management counsellor in the 1920s, two-way communication in the 1940s, along with regular forays into strategic management areas, some confusion arose regarding public relations functions. The lack of one standard definition of public relations has added to the confusion, despite Harlow's (1976) efforts. All professions and disciplines have struggled with a multiplicity of often contradicting definitions, some attributed to the youth of the profession, and some to their maturity (Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi & Flodin, 2001). The lack of one widely accepted definition has meant that there is no set of unquestioned presuppositions that provides an intellectual framework for public relations, that is, no one dominant paradigm. Due to the lack of a dominant paradigm, public relations is still in an evolutionary state,

redefining itself, which in turn affects its teaching, research, and practice.

In the next section, we discuss the four functions suggested as dominant paradigms for public relations and their inherent limitations. We investigate their dominance in public relations practice via an examination of seven studies which have examined public relations practitioner roles: the 2010 survey of 731 New Zealand practitioners by PRINZ, the New Zealand industry body; Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler and Meckel's 2009 study of 1410 practitioners from 30 different European countries; Byrne's 2007 survey of 107 Australian practitioners; Bartlett and Hill's 2007 study of 79 Queensland (Australia) practitioners; de Bussy and Wolf's 2009 study of 322 Australian practitioners; O'Dwyer's 2004 longitudinal study of 109 Irish practitioners, and Van Gorp and Pauwels' 2007 study of 750 Belgian practitioners. Practitioner roles indicate whether public relations units participate in the strategic decision making of the dominant coalition, or simply execute decisions made by others (Broom & Dozier, 1986 cited in Dozier & Broom, 1995).

Public relations as a communication function

It has long been considered that public relations has a communication function. In fact, Grunig (1992) considered that public relations was the oldest concept used to describe the communication function of organisations. According to Ewen (1996) and Cutlip (1995), public relations refers to communication activities undertaken by an organisation to inform, persuade, or otherwise relate to individuals and groups in its outside environment (cited in Cornelissen, van Bekkum & van Ruler, 2006). In more recent times, Botan and Taylor (2004) described public relations as a professional practice and a subfield of communication. Both Argenti (2007) and Cornelissen (2004) believe that public relations has now evolved into corporate communications, with Cornelissen citing the widespread adoption of a corporate communication vocabulary which includes such terms as stakeholders, identity, and reputation.

The predominance of the communication function in public relations is evident in the

terminology used to describe practitioner roles. For example, in Europe, public relations is being replaced by terms such as communication management, corporate communication, and integrated communication (Van Ruler & Verčič, 1992). However, this may be because, in many languages, there is no direct translation of the term, “public relations” (Verčič, et al., 2001). In Australia, public relations practised in the corporate arena was frequently termed ‘corporate communication’ and Queensland public relations practitioners most frequently reported that their job title incorporated the term ‘communication’ (Bartlett & Hill, 2007). Indeed, de Bussy and Wolf’s (2009) study found that only 20.8% of practitioners had the words public relations or public affairs in their title. In New Zealand, ‘communication management’ was the most commonly used term to describe the function (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2010). In Ireland, ‘public relations’ was still the main descriptor for the public relations function (used by 35% of companies), although it has decreased in popularity since 1993 with ‘corporation communications’ (used by 25% of companies) increasing in popularity.

The use of such terms, as well as others like corporate affairs, corporate relations, and reputation management, may have emerged from the desire to bury the negative connotations associated with public relations (Hutton 1999, in Hutton, Goodman, Alexander & Guest, 2001) and distance it from its derisive association with ‘spin doctoring.’ As de Bussy and Wolf (2009) found in their study, practitioners were “almost embarrassed” to identify themselves as working in public relations and reported that public relations continues to be poorly regarded, and is looked as a job that anyone without training can do, despite its professionalisation (p. 380).

Several studies indicate that communication is a major area of public relations work activity. In the PRINZ (2010) New Zealand study, practitioners identified corporate communications as their second strongest area of work involvement; in Europe, Beurer-Zuellig et al.’s (2009) study identified strategic communication planning as the second strongest area of work activity, following press and media relations; in Australia, Byrne’s

(2007) practitioner survey identified it as the equal strongest work area alongside media relations; O’Dwyer’s (2004) study of practitioners in leading Irish companies indicated that the leading public relations activity was communication liaison; in Belgium, Van Gorp and Pauwels’ (2007) study found that practitioners performed both communication and managerial roles, however women were more likely than men to occupy jobs that were exclusively communication-oriented.

Congruent with Cornelissen et al.’s (2006) claim that corporate communication heralded public relations’ arrival as a management function, Cornelissen (2004, p. 10) considered corporate communication “essentially a management function” which is used strategically. This communication perspective views publics and communication as the means or tools to achieve organisational ends, with the focus generally on techniques and production of strategic organisational messages (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Thus, communication management includes mastery of a range of writing techniques, media relations, and event management (Cornelissen, 2004). Although the public relations manager fulfils an advisory role and acts as counsel to management, communication is viewed as a staff function, with no direct executive power or responsibility, except for core responsibilities linked to strategic communication programmes, research, environmental scanning, and relationship management (Cornelissen, 2004).

Some practitioners argue that this focus on public relations’ communication function has had a detrimental effect on the practice. In fact, Harold Burson (founder of Burson Marsteller public relations agency) believed that “public relations started down the slippery slope to the functional (technical) rather than meditative counsel when it compliantly accepted the term ‘communicator’ to define its role” (Budd, 2003, p. 379). Conceptualising public relations as a strictly communication function has led many to regard public relations practitioners as communication technicians, not managers and facilitators (Dozier, 1995 cited in Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). As the major relationship of concern is that between the public relations

practitioner and the media, there is an emphasis on the use of journalistic techniques and production skills (Botan & Taylor, 2004). This threatens to undermine the position of public relations by encouraging a retreat to its role as an applied technical area with a substantial focus on techniques and production of strategic organisational messages.

A further concern raised by Steyn (2007, cited in Benn, Todd & Pendleton, 2010) was that discussion of communication problems and activities, without identifying underlying management or business problems, limits both public relations' effectiveness and advancement of the field. Thus, current job titles using 'communication' may reflect the practitioner's actual role in the organisation, which some practitioners view as a return to the early style of practice.

Public relations as a relationship-building function

In recent years, a theoretical shift has occurred from public relations' emphasis on managing communication to an emphasis on communication as a tool for managing relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2001). Ferguson (1984, as cited in Bruning & Ledingham, 2000) was one of the first scholars to propose that public relations research should focus on the organisation-public relationship. Public relations scholars and practitioners were increasingly defining public relations as the management of relationships between organisations and publics (Ledingham, 2003). In this perspective, public relations is viewed as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip, et al., 2000). This focus on the importance of relationship was evident in Grunig and Grunig's (1998) IABC Excellence Project, which indicated that public relations made an organisation more effective when it identified strategic constituencies in the environment and then developed communication programmes to build long-term, trusting relationships with these constituencies.

Relationship-building has been the focus of a substantial body of scholarship (Ledingham,

2003), including work by public relations scholars (e.g., Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Researchers (e.g., Heath, 2001; Hutton, 1999, 2007; Ledingham, 2003) have suggested relationship-building as the dominant paradigm for public relations, with Ledingham (2003) arguing for relationship management as a general theory of public relations.

Hutton (2007) suggested that the first step in making relationship management a credible paradigm for public relations is a solid theoretical foundation. However, being a relatively new discipline, there is no existing established theory on 'relationship management'. Consequently, public relations scholars have revisited the field of interpersonal communication to better understand relationship-building, including the construct of trust, often seen as an important part of the relationship between publics and organisations (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Hutton (2007) suggested Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory as the theoretical basis to be used in public relations. However, this marketing theory was designed with the relationship between a company and its customers in mind. For example, it includes as a key construct "relationship commitment", defined as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" on the part of both partners in the relationship, and other constructs as "relationship termination costs" as a precursor to this commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which can be exemplified by a customer considering costs associated with exiting a bank loan before taking one out. With its strong marketing basis and customer-centric focus, it is contended that this theory has limitations for application to organisational relationships with multiple publics.

Further, although there is much discussion in the public relations literature over the nature of relationships, scholars generally do not specify the key publics with whom these relationships are established and maintained. Because relationships are difficult to measure, public relations practitioners often have struggled to demonstrate the influence that public relations activities have on consumer perceptions, evaluations, and behaviours (Bruning &

Ledingham, 2000). Further, only one reviewed practitioner study (Bartlett & Hill, 2007) identified relationship management as a work area. This study of Queensland practitioners' work activities identified relationship management as the seventh most frequently performed work (Bartlett & Hill, 2007), although these relationships were not specified. Relationship management is therefore problematic when considered as the dominant public relations paradigm.

Public relations as a reputation management function

Numerous crises involving leading companies such as Nike, Shell, and McDonald's have contributed to corporations suffering a credibility loss (Benn et al., 2010). This has resulted in cynical public perceptions of corporate reputations (Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007, in Benn et al., 2010). A corporate reputation is a collective representation of the firm's standing with both internal and external stakeholders resulting from a firm's past actions and results (Fombrun & Rindova, 1996, cited in Gardberg & Fombrun, 2002).

Watson (2007) explored reputation and reputation management and proposed a new definition of reputation as, "The sum of predictable behaviours, relationships and two-way communication undertaken by an organisation as judged affectively and cognitively by its stakeholders over a period of time" (p. 373). In contrast, Seitel (2011) defined reputation as "the ability to link reputation to business goals, to increase support and advocacy and increase organisational success through profits, contributions, attendance and so on" (p. 128).

Hutton (2007) identified reputation management as public relations' emerging paradigm. Public relations firms' interest in reputation management and measurement originated in response to CEO demand (Argenti, 2007). Following the launch of Fombrun's (1996) book, *Reputation*, and the 1997 launch of the academic journal, *Corporate Reputation Review*, the annual *Chief Executive magazine–Hill and Knowlton Corporate Reputation Watch* survey was established in 1998, placing reputation on the corporate

agenda. From 1999 to 2000, the number of CEOs identifying their use of formal corporate reputation measures in this survey doubled from 19% to 37% (Haapaniemi, 2000, cited in Argenti, 2007, p.79). Hutton (1999, cited in Hutton et al., 2001) suggested that the rise of reputation management has come into favour in part from managers who lack public relations training and who think in superficial terms of "image" and "perception," and from the large number of major public relations firms that are owned by advertising agencies which are comfortable with the use of such terms.

PR practitioners often view themselves as guardians of corporate reputations (Fombrun, 1996) and practitioner surveys have identified reputation management as a public relations activity. In the PRINZ survey (2010), reputation management was listed as the third most common area of work involvement after media relations and corporate areas and, for work activity level, was listed first for in-house consultants and second for external consultants. In a study of Queensland practitioners' identification of work tasks, reputation management was identified as the tenth most frequently performed work activity (Bartlett & Hill, 2007).

Hutton (2007) provided a number of arguments against reputation management as the new paradigm for public relations, suggesting it is fraught with risk of failure for practitioners. Hutton (2007) used Therkelsen et al.'s (2006) findings to warn that, although 46% of public relations practitioners viewed reputation management as their domain, only 4% of business executives agreed, with 61% of top executives considering it their purview. Hutton (2007) also noted that reputation measures are unreliable and that reputation cannot be managed directly, but is the result of the entire organisation's performance. Hutton (2007) claimed that many of those driving the reputation management concept were ill-equipped to speak. He suggested that Fombrun, who he identified as "perhaps the single greatest force behind the rise of reputation management...has made numerous claims that are highly questionable and sometimes demonstrably false" (Hutton, 2007, pp. 48-49). These factors undermine the legitimacy of

reputation management as a public relations paradigm.

Public relations as a strategic management function

Public relations' strategic management function has been recognised and acknowledged in past public relations definitions, as established earlier in this paper. This function emerges when it helps to formulate the organisation's approach to accomplishing overall goals, and then supports those goals in a coordinated and consistent way (Plowman, 2005). As Burson (cited in Seitel, 2011, p. 51) noted, "public relations has, over time, become more relevant as a management function for all manner of institutions... CEOs...have come to recognize public relations as a necessary component in the decision-making process". Public relations' participation in strategic management not only enhances organisational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1998), but also elevates public relations from its more reactive function to a proactive, responsive role of anticipating and reducing emerging conflicts (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Congruent with Harlow (1976 in Cutlip et al., 2000; Johnson, 2005), areas of strategic public relations include issues management, crisis management, strategic planning (Lattimore et al., 2007; Seitel, 2011), research, and corporate social responsibility (Lattimore et al., 2007) planning.

Practitioners must demonstrate their value in helping senior management better implement its decisions, thinking in their terms and understanding their priorities, so as to become a participant in corporate decision making (Budd, 2003). However, Grunig (2009) went further to suggest that public relations scholars and practitioners must reinstitutionalise public relations as a strategic management paradigm, rather than just a functional approach. This then embeds the practitioner as a participant in organisational decision-making, with public relations practice which is (a) research-based, (b) emphasises two-way communication that builds relationships with stakeholders, and (c) acts as a mechanism for organisational listening and learning (Grunig, 2009). Grunig (2009) proposed an iterative model depicting the role of a public relations department in the overall

strategic management of an organisation and included strategic public relations programmes. This model incorporated communication programmes as relationship cultivation strategies, with these strategies impacting, and impacted by, stakeholders, management decisions, issues, and crisis management strategies, with flow-on effects for organisational reputation, relationship outcomes, and achievement of organisational goals.

Such a strategic function requires close alignment with an organisation's dominant coalition, senior management, and involves reclaiming key areas of professionalism. The strategic management paradigm provides an organisationally- and socially-valued approach to public relations practice, which is necessary for the discipline to reach its full potential as a profession (Grunig, 2009). This 'professionalisation' of the industry may also assist public relations practice to regain some of its lost legitimacy. De Bussy and Wolf's (2009) study identified four cornerstones of professionalism: the CEO/PR relationship; the quality of strategic planning; ethics and professional development, and the use of research. As we contend that professionalisation of public relations is crucial to the emergence of this strategic function, each of these four cornerstones is now explicated and examined against findings from the seven practitioner studies. These studies highlight the fact that practitioners appear to be taking a more strategic role within organisations.

The CEO/PR relationship

The relationship between the CEO and the public relations practitioner has long been identified as crucial to the practitioner role in the organisation, as it determines whether the practitioner is viewed as a skilled technician or strategic counsellor. The power of public relations managers is also represented by the value and support their department receives from the dominant coalition, with much of this value and support coming from the use of skills to resolve problems in the organisation's environment (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995). Of the seven practitioner studies, six (Bartlett & Hill, 2007; Byrne, 2007; Buerer-Zellig et al.,

2009; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; O'Dwyer, 2004; and PRINZ, 2010), examined the CEO-practitioner relationship, indicating that public relations practitioners were mostly either reporting directly to CEOs of organisations, and/or acting as counsellors. O'Dwyer's (2004) investigation of 109 Irish practitioners identified that the majority reported directly to the managing director, and regularly attended meetings with the organisation's dominant coalition, albeit not as a member. Further, their second most common role was as problem-solving process facilitator, indicating a progression towards managerial roles (O'Dwyer, 2004). De Bussy and Wolf's (2009) investigation of 322 Australian practitioners found that counsel to management, along with strategic planning, ranked as the participants' second most prominent daily activity. Beurer-Zellig et al.'s (2009) study of 1410 European practitioners also reported that advising and consulting to senior management was the third most common work activity. Byrne's (2007) investigation of 107 Australian practitioners indicated that counselling management was ranked seventh overall in public relations duties. In contrast, the 2010 PRINZ survey of 731 New Zealand practitioners found that only 46% of in-house department heads directly reported to the CEO, down from 62% in 2006. Bartlett and Hill's (2007) study identified that 50% of 79 Queensland practitioners surveyed were in roles that reported to the CEO, although only 19% identified their role as "counsel to management" (p. 114).

Quality of strategic planning

The second cornerstone of professionalism identified by de Bussy and Wolf (2009) was the extent of strategic planning inherent in a role, with Plowman's (2005) study of managers and practitioners finding that practitioners became part of the dominant coalition via strategic planning involvement. This involvement was dependent upon the practitioner background and was determined by their ability and expertise in solving organisational problems (internal and external), their use of strategic thinking, and their demonstrated sound judgment over a period of time once a trust relationship had been established (Plowman,

2005). Although part of the experience factor was expertise in public relations tactics and tools such as writing and media relations, the dominant coalition required expertise in two-way communication, negotiation, and strategic planning (Plowman, 2005). Indeed, Grunig's (2006) Excellence Study in the early 1990s with CEOs and public relations chiefs found that CEOs saw, "value in hearing external voices in the strategic management process – voices amplified by public relations professionals who scan the publics in the organization's environment" (p. 162). Most good public relations departments were greatly involved in strategic management to bring external perspectives into strategic decision making (Grunig, 2006).

Several practitioner studies identified strategic planning as a core public relations activity. De Bussy and Wolf's (2009) Australian practitioners reported that strategic planning, along with counsel to management, was participants' second most common daily activity. Beurer-Zuellig et al.'s (2009) European practitioners reported that strategic communication planning was their second most important work task. Bartlett and Hill's (2007) Queensland practitioners identified strategic planning as their fourth most common work practice, with 35% involved in this work. Van Gorp and Pauwels' (2007) study of Belgian practitioners found that almost half of the sample were located in integrated marketing communication departments, with these practitioners (predominantly male) being members of the executive committee and fulfilling more managerial (rather than communication technician) activities, specifically determination of a communications strategy, formulation of policy and policy statements, and developing communications plans.

Although the 2010 PRINZ study of New Zealand practitioners did not investigate strategic planning per se, issues management (a key strategic planning area) was the fifth-most-important area of work involvement. Both issues and crisis management were identified as the sixth-most-prominent daily work activity of de Bussy and Wolf's (2009) practitioners, and

the eighth-most-common work by Bartlett and Hill's (2007) practitioners.

Further, a USA study (Kim & Reber, 2008) noted that public relations played a role in the planning of corporate social responsibility strategies, rather than just communication about these. In their survey of 313 US public relations practitioners, of the respondents who had a managerial role, 33% ($n = 57$) identified that public relations played an important role in advising clients on, or advocating to management, corporate social responsibility, or involvement in strategic corporate social responsibility planning (Kim & Reber, 2008).

Ethics and professional development.

The third cornerstone of professionalism identified by de Bussy and Wolf (2009) was use of ethical codes and access to professional development. Professional industry bodies with codes of ethics specifying members' required ethical conduct have played an important role in professionalising the industry and setting ethical standards (Johnston & Zawawi, 2003, cited in Bartlett & Hill, 2007). Setting and upholding a set of ethical standards is crucial to establishing trust and confidence in the public relations discipline. In Australia, the professional industry body is the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA); in New Zealand, the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ); in the USA, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA); in Ireland, there are a number of professional bodies (O'Dwyer, 2004); and in Europe, the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). Each of the studies of practitioners (Bartlett & Hill, 2007; Buerer-Zuellig et al., 2009; Byrne, 2007; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; O'Dwyer, 2004; PRINZ 2010) drew on, or included, participants from the professional membership of these bodies, indicating that participants adhered to this aspect of professionalism.

Professional development was also identified as a cornerstone of professionalism. L'Etang (1999, cited in de Bussy & Wolf, 2009), in her discussion of the key traits possessed by professions, identified education as a means of testing competence and maintaining standards. According to L'Etang

(1999, cited in de Bussy & Wolf, 2009), education had the potential to increase respectability and status which practitioners desire, and produce theoretical knowledge to underpin a specific expertise.

In Europe, Beurer-Zuellig et al. (2009) reported that the majority of respondents held a university degree, with those from Mediterranean countries holding the highest percentage (92%) and those from German-speaking countries the lowest percentage (76%). In the US, DiStaso, Stacks and Botan (2009) surveyed practitioners and instructors to gauge how well public relations students were prepared for practice; they found that, of the 500 executive-level practitioners drawn from the PRSA, 46.6% reported that they held a bachelor's degree, while 44% held a master's degree and 8% held a PhD; many respondents also viewed public relations as an area of graduate study with interdisciplinary and management focus. This is an important finding given the projected 18% increase in the need for public relations specialists by 2016 in the US (DiStaso et al, 2009).

In Australia, de Bussy and Wolf (2009) reported that almost 91% of their respondents held tertiary degrees, with 42% attaining postgraduate qualifications. Bartlett and Hill (2007) reported that more than 50% of their Queensland respondents held undergraduate degrees, with 30% holding a postgraduate degree. In New Zealand, 75% of respondents reported holding a university degree, with 41% of these being postgraduate degrees (PRINZ, 2010). Further, more than 95% of New Zealand respondents believed that professional development was very important (PRINZ, 2010) while, in Ireland, attendance at seminars and workshops was predominantly monthly, with annual attendance at conferences (O'Dwyer, 2004).

Research

The fourth and final cornerstone of professionalism was the use of research (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009). De Bussy and Wolf (2009) identified research as the seventh equal duty and responsibility of Australian practitioners, while Bartlett and Hill's (2007) Queensland practitioners ranked this as their

14th most common work task, with 13% of the sample involved in this task. O'Dwyer (2004) also identified use of research by Irish practitioners, finding it was primarily used to assess public opinion and public relations impact. However, Van Gorp and Pauwels' (2007) study found that research was communication-oriented and belonged to the communication technician role. In summation, the studies examined here provide some evidence that public relations practitioners are starting to reclaim a strategic role within organisations, particularly in Europe and Australia. Further, these roles appear aligned with key cornerstones of professionalism. In particular, the high incidence of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees amongst surveyed practitioners may be key to public relations practitioners' acceptance as strategic counsellors to management.

How the internet and social media enhances practitioners' strategic role

Use of the internet and new media provides numerous opportunities for public relations practitioners to assume powerful decision-making roles within organisations (Porter, Sallot, Cameron & Shamp, 2001; Springston, 2001; Thomsen, 1995; Wright, 2002, cited in Sallot et al., 2004). Firstly, the web can be used to identify and intercept issues earlier, allowing practitioners to develop more proactive strategies, and gain autonomy and decision-making power as information brokers or "entrepreneurs" (Thomsen, 1995 in Sallot et al., 2004, p. 270). Secondly, the internet and new media empower practitioners by providing the means for them to communicate directly with their publics, bypassing information gatekeepers such as news editors (Sallot et al., 2004). Interactive communities allow practitioners to log on, locate their publics, and communicate directly with them (Sallot et al., 2004). During crises, the internet allows practitioners to disseminate messages directly to concerned publics via web broadcasts (Sallot et al., 2004) on live streaming, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, during the devastating January 2011 floods in Brisbane (Australia), although many power lines were out of action, the phone towers

remained operational; this enabled the Queensland police, Queensland's lead agency for disaster management, to communicate directly with the community and the media through their Facebook and Twitter postings on websites or smart phones (Charlton, 2011). Thirdly, public relations practitioners are not only expected to be web experts, lending credence to the importance of expert power, they can also use the internet to disseminate information online directly to opinion leaders in an easily digested form (Sallot et al., 2004).

PR practitioners are also taking advantage of the web's capabilities for research purposes, which structurally empowers them to better evaluate their programmes and campaigns (Sallot et al., 2004). When the web makes public relations more valuable to their clients or companies, practitioners' prestige and expert power grows, strengthening practitioners' relationships with managers and clients (Sallot et al., 2004). Thus, use of the web may enable practitioners to obtain membership in top "inner circles" in their organisations, enhancing their power and earning a management role (Porter et al., 2001 cited in Sallot et al., 2004, p. 271).

Discussion

Despite the increasing use of the term 'corporate communication' to rebrand public relations, recent practitioner research provides indications that public relations' fourth function, strategic management, seems to be emerging in practice in Europe, Ireland, and Australia as an increasingly important public relations activity. The strategic management focus aligns the practice and discipline as a whole with the dominant coalition within organisations, thereby increasing its legitimacy. This realignment is consistent with the professionalisation of the practice and congruent with calls by researchers such as Grunig (2009) for a retreat from the focus on communication in the symbolic, interpretative paradigm and by others, such as Hutton (2007) for a move away from reputation management as a leading paradigm. The strategic management paradigm provides an organisationally- and socially-valued approach to public relations practice which is necessary

for the discipline to reach its full potential as a profession (Grunig, 2009).

Claim a counselling and strategic role

Budd (2003) suggested that the field's true prospects lay in the demonstration of core values that can set apart public relations functions from conventional management functions. The need for practitioners' participation in management was also a central theme running throughout the IABC-sponsored study of excellence in public relations (Grunig, 1992). However, in order to become a participant in corporate decision making, Budd (2003) posited that practitioners must demonstrate their value in helping senior management better implement its decisions, thinking in their terms, and understanding their priorities. Practitioners can play a valuable role in management if they focus their influence on encouraging more responsible behaviour from organisations, particularly in an environment of public mistrust and hostility towards organisations (Budd, 2003).

Thus, the public relations practitioner could provide strategic input into the selection, design, and communication of corporate social responsibility activities due to their understanding of stakeholder expectations and relationships (Benn et al., 2010). Corporate social responsibility incorporates a strategic role for public relations at top management level (Benn et al., 2010). The public relations practitioner also has the capacity to create competitive advantage for the organisation through proactive environmental scanning and boundary scanning activities (Steyn, 2007 cited in Benn et al., 2010). Also known as issues management, this function was identified by both New Zealand (PRINZ, 2010) and Australian (Bartlett & Hill, 2007; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009) practitioners as being core to their role, yet not by European practitioners. To institutionalise strategic public relations as actual practice in organisations, Grunig (2006) suggested that we move forward by investigating:

how public relations can be institutionalized more broadly as a bridging activity so that public relations

as a strategic management function becomes standard operating practice in most organizations and that most people think of public relations in that way. (p. 172)

Continuing education and professional development

Crucial to the 'professionalisation' of public relations is the increase of highly educated practitioners and the drive towards continuing professional development. This highlights the importance of continuing education and professional development to ensure public relations' legitimacy and seat at the management table. However, in order to realise entry to the highest level of corporate decision making, there exists a need to educate upper management in public relations through courses embedded in MBA programmes (Pincus, Rayfield & Ohl, 1994). This requires public relations faculties to champion the recognition of public relations topics in MBA programmes, fighting the trend for public relations to be viewed by business schools as a 'soft' staff function that adds little to the bottom line of an organisation (Pincus et al., 1994, p. 56). Further, McNamara (2010) states the need for public relations educators to train students in strategy and leadership, thereby leading both practitioners and the discipline towards professionalism. A quick web search indicated that there are numerous Master's degree public relations programmes across the world which incorporate in their titles terms such as organisational communication, communication management, professional communication, strategic relations, strategic communication, strategic public relations and corporate communications (also see PRIA, 2010). This is reflective of the state of flux regarding the positioning of the public relations discipline.

Reclaim the use of the term 'public relations'

De Bussy and Wolf (2009) noted practitioners' hesitance in identifying themselves as working in public relations and stated that, "the more public relations becomes indispensable to the strategic management of major private and public sector organisations, the more reluctant

practitioners become to use the term itself” (p. 380). Public relations is stymied by its own poor public image and lack of recognition as a management function (Benn et al., 2010). There is cynicism about activities labelled as public relations, fuelled by negative media portrayals and public scepticism (Coombs & Holladay, 2007 cited in Benn et al., 2010). The wider understanding of the function as being publicity and puffery limits public relations to the role of technician and restricts its elevation to higher levels of management (Benn et al., 2010). As Tilley (2005) noted, “as a profession, public relations still struggles badly to address its own reputation” (p.1). Tilley (2005) suggested hopefully, tongue firmly in cheek, that a more accurate nomenclature for the organisational public relations role should be “the Transparency, Consistency, and Responsiveness Manager (TCRM)” (p. 4).

The trend to re-label public relations departments as corporate communications (Seitel, 2011) does the discipline a disservice and locates practitioners in the communication paradigm, with the danger of being positioned within the organisation in a ‘technician’ role. Therefore, it is suggested that, for a discipline that is still struggling to establish an independent identity (Matchett, 2010), practitioners need to work collaboratively to refurbish the image and reputation of their profession and reclaim the use of the term, ‘public relations’.

Clarify public relations functions and work areas

As discussed earlier in this paper, the lack of one standard universal definition of public relations is largely to blame for the current state of confusion regarding public relations’ functions, even among practitioners themselves. As Gower (2006) stated, “one of the biggest problems facing the field [public relations] today continues to be its lack of definition” (p. 180), and lacking a single definition, “allows the work that we do to be co-opted by others” (p. 181). Verčič et al. (2001) have called for a global approach to the definition, dimensions and domain of public relations. Gower (2006), on the other hand, said we need to articulate what makes public

relations different from other functions such as marketing, human relations, etc.

However, the review of the practitioner surveys also highlights some inherent problems in the understanding of typical public relations work areas and what practitioners mean by these terms, in particular their connotative and denotative meanings. For example, reputation management was listed as a work area only in the surveys by PRINZ (2010) and Bartlett and Hill (2007), but what work practices are considered to fall under the term, ‘reputation management’? This lack of standardised terminology to describe practitioner roles means that accurate comparisons of practitioner perceptions of the roles of the profession cannot be reliably made in practitioner surveys. It may very well be that such roles that were considered as “reputation management” or “issues management” (e.g., as per the 2010 PRINZ survey), may in fact incorporate strategic management roles. Therefore, an understanding of what practitioners mean by each of these roles firstly needs clarification in any study of the profession.

Food for thought – where to from here?

Heath (2006) succinctly sums up public relations as being, “a piece of some whole. The challenge is to continue to search to discover the whole and public relations’ place in it” (p. 110). Gower (2006) suggests that, “we need to critically examine what it is that public relations practitioners do and the consequences of that practice for society” (p. 180). Heath (2006) disagrees and suggests that we are moving into more fog by investigating whether and how public relations can add value to society, but, “we also need a paradigm that acknowledges that all types of organizations engage in and have need for public relations” (p. 95).

We agree and raise the question of whether public relations practitioners spend too much time ‘navel gazing’, investigating who we are, worrying about how we are perceived, and how other areas are encroaching on what we do. Does embarking on this line of thinking and practice keep us engaged in an unending, cyclical argument during which time we fail to contribute theoretically to the public relations

discipline by advancing our own space? We suggest that we should look beyond our own literature to broader principles about other disciplines and professions so we can understand more about ourselves, but also have stronger foundations upon which to contribute to lively academic and practical debate about our work.

Conclusion

In closing, the public relations discipline has been faced with challenges and opportunities since its birth and as the field evolved over the past few decades. This has resulted in changing foci and functions ranging from communication and reputation management to relationship management and strategic management. Following a review of the current major functions of public relations, this paper posits that communication, reputation management, and relationship management all have inherent weaknesses as paradigms for public relations. Instead, the discipline needs to view itself and sell itself as playing a more strategic role in organisations. This move is congruent with recent practitioner surveys which indicate that practitioners are, in actual fact, taking this more strategic role, counselling CEOs and aligning themselves with the dominant coalition. This role is in line with the current professionalisation of public relations and with it, the development of a highly educated body of practitioners. In fact, the public relations discipline has already embarked on that process over the past 20 years, with many practitioners moving into highly paid advising or decision-making roles in the public and/or private spheres (DiStaso et al., 2009).

The discipline also needs to be bold in reclaiming the term ‘public relations’ in job titles and other fields of practice, as opposed to using the term ‘communication’, which takes the discipline back several decades and limits not only itself, but also how others view the discipline. In this way, public relations practitioners will, in time, learn to expect a seat at the management table.

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