

What is public relations?

PR PLACE GUIDE



Edited by: Richard Bailey

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Introduction

It's not hard to grasp what public relations is. 'It does exactly what is says on the tin' according to Professor Anne Gregory.

Nor is it hard to define public relations. Otherwise, why would there be so many definitions to choose from?

Yet there is a problem: in the popular imagination, public relations is a narrow publicity function. Yet senior practitioners talk of reputation management and the contribution PR makes to strategic management, and academics talk about relationships with a wide range of stakeholders – and ultimately with society.

This is an introductory guide in which we summarise existing ideas and previously-published articles. It is not intended for scholars nor for senior practitioners. Rather, we hope to provide a useful summary for the following groups:

- **Public relations students, perhaps tasked with preparing their first presentations or their first essays**
- **Graduates from other disciplines, who might be preparing for job interviews and looking for a quick primer**
- **Managers from other disciplines who may have to recruit and work with public relations practitioners**

Understanding public relations

We can readily understand that public relations involves *relationships* with key groups (often called stakeholders or publics). These relationships will have been cultivated through the *communication* of information, and the outcome of these relationships is often a strong *reputation*.

So most definitions of public relations are based around these core concepts (communication, relationships, reputation). They are not mutually-exclusive, but work together.

The challenge of writing an all-encompassing definition is that it needs to do several things:

- **To describe the practice** (*what public relations does*)
- **To be aspirational** (*by describing what public relations should do*)
- **To be comprehensive** (*to apply to all circumstances*)
- **To delineate the practice** (*to state how it differs from other management and promotional functions*)

This explains why some definitions appear to be long and complex.

ADVERTISING OR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

The question that confuses most students is how to distinguish public relations from advertising. Both are promotional techniques used to inform and persuade, but they have traditionally used different techniques (and different budgets) to achieve this.

In the twentieth century, the distinction was very clear. The advertiser paid for their message to appear in the media while the public relations practitioner sought to cultivate strong relationships with journalists and editors and to persuade them to provide 'free' editorial mentions.

Now, this distinction between paying and persuading has broken down because of the emergence of digital and social media. **Is a promotional video on YouTube a piece of advertising or a piece of public relations?** The advertising team may have produced the video, but they haven't paid for it to appear on YouTube as they would have had to for it to appear on television.

When a product is name-checked by a celebrity or an influencer on social media, money may have changed hands. Technically, it should then be tagged as #ad or #spon. But the relationship with the celebrity or influencer may have been developed and managed by the public relations team.

*So is this **advertising** or **public relations**?*

This means the distinction between advertising and public relations is not one based on textbook principles. It's merely a convenience driven by industry practice. And practice changes over time.

So the answer to the question of the distinction between advertising and public relations is that it's blurring. To explore this further, you need to keep an eye on what is happening in practice (because the textbooks will be a few years, or maybe even a few decades, out of date).

Most of the large public relations consultancies (names you may have heard of such as Ketchum and Hill & Knowlton Strategies) are owned by larger marketing services groups (in this case, Omnicom and WPP). This means public relations works alongside other services such as advertising, market research, media buying and public affairs.

They may be better understood as complementary rather than competing services (hence the phrase full-service agencies). The client does not necessarily specify a need for advertising or public relations. Rather, they start with a problem they need help with: how do we attract more customers? How do we win public support for our plans? How do we prevent government legislation that could harm our business?

MARKETING OR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

The distinction between marketing and public relations can be explored through textbooks as well as through industry practice.

Put simply, there's one camp that views marketing as the larger (or lead) discipline, probably because the budget is held by a Chief Marketing Officer or equivalent. Within this camp, there's a world view that sees everything as marketing: relationship marketing, content marketing, digital marketing, even internal marketing.

Against that world view is the argument that though public relations may command smaller budgets, it has a wider remit. That's because marketing is primarily directed at one group: consumers. By contrast, public relations is concerned with non-market publics such as activists, governments, regulators, investors, local communities and employees (collectively, citizens). Meanwhile, the concept of reputation, central to public relations, has received little attention in the marketing literature.

Those who take the marketing-first approach will often use 'marketing communication' (or marcoms) in place of public relations. Those who take the publics-first approach will often use corporate communication in place of public relations. Those involved in public policy prefer to use public affairs. Clearly, it adds to the confusion that not all who practise what we would recognise as public relations chooses to describe it as such.

MEDIA RELATIONS OR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Those who view public relations as synonymous with media relations will struggle to understand this wider role for public relations. How can a press office claim to manage all these relationships? It's a false question, since press office suggests a very dated view of the media landscape as well as betraying a lack of understanding of the first principle of public relations (that it's about the public rather than the press). Public relations is the end goal; media relations may be one of the tactics (means) used to achieve that end goal.

Editorial content (as distinct from media advertising) may be a persuasive means to reach members of our target publics, but it's not the only one. We can talk to them; we can write to them; we can engage them through social media.

IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

One conclusion from this discussion might be that the term public relations is falling out of favour. One problem is that it's not clearly understood (hence this guide); another is that it's confused with publicity and media relations. So why not choose marketing communication or corporate communication (or plain communication) instead?

This has already happened in some circles. In government and the public sector (where, interestingly, there's little competition from marketing since there are no 'customers' in the conventional sense), communication is routinely preferred in place of public relations.

The public relations specialism that focuses on employees is known as internal communication, and those in this field often reject any connection with public relations (which is assumed to be focused on external media relations).

That was one reason why, in 2016, membership body the PRCA changed its name while retaining its long-established initials. It changed from Public Relations Consultants Association to Public Relations and Communications Association. For the most part, this was to reflect a change in membership criteria (the PRCA now welcoming in-house and independent practitioners, including many working in the public sector). In part, it was to wear more fashionable clothes.

Against this, is the century long heritage behind the term public relations. The UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Public Relations Society of America have been around for over 70 years. There are many books, university courses, professors and academic publications using 'public relations' so the term should not be dropped lightly. This is where the 'body of knowledge' resides, a vital aspect of any profession.

Besides, which part of public and relations is not flexible and relevant today? We know the importance of publics (more widely called stakeholders) to any organisation. We know how fragile reputations are (an organisation is only one tweet away from a crisis), so there's more demand than ever for public relations support. Just look at the number of job ads. Consider how important public relations is for every organisation, whether large or small, whether in the private, public or not-for-profit sectors.

Besides, every organisation (and indeed every individual) has public relations – even though not all may consciously attempt to manage their public relations.

*So, for now we're sticking with public relations.
But what is it, exactly?*

What follows are a series of essays previously published at PR Place, each addressing one view (or 'paradigm') of public relations. If a definition starts with 'public relations *is*', a paradigm explores 'public relations as'... communication, relationships, reputation etc.

The essays (and authors) are:

1. **Public relations as reputation management** (Richard Bailey)
2. **Public relations as communication** (Richard Bailey)
3. **Public relations as relationship management** (Richard Bailey)
4. **Public relations as a strategic management function** (Kevin Ruck)
5. **Public relations as persuasion** (Chris Tucker)

Continued...

This is not a comprehensive list. Advanced students are encouraged to explore *critical perspectives* and ask questions about the impact of public relations on society (through the work of Jacquie L'Etang and Lee Edwards among others).

The *communitarian view* of public relations is gaining currency because of the emergence of community management in the social media age, though it has been championed by US scholars Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck since the late 1980s (long before the rise of the web and social media).

But this is presented as an introductory primer. So, before republishing the PR Place essays, here's a highly selective reading list that should appeal to the following groups.

RECOMMENDED READING

For newcomers considering studying or working in public relations

Leigh, R (2017) *Myths of PR: All Publicity is Good Publicity and Other Popular Misconceptions*, Kogan Page

Smith, R (2013) *Public Relations: The Basics*, Routledge

For public relations students

Tench, R and Yeomans, L (2017) *Exploring Public Relations: Global Strategic Communication* (fourth edition) Pearson

Theaker, A (2016) *The Public Relations Handbook* (fifth edition) Routledge

For public relations practitioners

Morris, T and Goldsworthy, S (2015) *PR Today: The Authoritative Guide to Public Relations* (second edition) Palgrave

Stahl, S (2018) *The Art & Craft of PR: Creating the Mindset and Skills to Succeed in Public Relations Today*, LID Publishing

Public relations as reputation management

By Richard Bailey

The UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) places reputation at the forefront of its definition of the field.

'Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you.'

So there surely can't be any dispute about this. Well...

For a start, reputation was a later addition to an earlier definition (look carefully and you can see the join). Let's review it in its entirety:

'Public Relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.'

This argues that public relations is reputation management – but then goes on to suggest that the end result of public-relations-as-reputation-management is not reputation itself but rather 'goodwill and mutual understanding.'

It's not apparent from this how a strong reputation contributes to mutual understanding. Surely relationship management and communication management (the subject of further essays in this series) are at least as important in this process?

AN APPEALING CONCEPT

Reputation management is an appealing concept for practitioners. It links public relations to the organisation it represents, and suggests a dialogue with senior managers around a topic of pressing importance.

In doing so, it provides an opportunity for practitioners to take ownership of the whole risk-issues-crisis management cycle and help organisations and senior executives steer the ship through treacherous waters.

Given this professional body and practitioner emphasis on public-relations-as-reputation-management, it's surprising how few public relations scholars focus on reputation research. The field is dominated by those from a business, management or corporate identity background – or by universities with no tradition of teaching public relations, such as Oxford University's Centre for Corporate Reputation.

For me, one of the best texts is from a practitioner: *Crisis, Issues and Reputation Management* by Regester Larkin's Andrew Griffin. When published in 2014, it was the first in the long list of CIPR/Kogan Page PR in Practice books to reference 'reputation' in its title.

In making a distinctive claim for public relations to take ownership of reputation, Griffin distinguishes between operational crises and reputational crises. Not all operational crises, up to and including loss of life, have a negative impact on reputation, but some inconsequential-sounding words can have a profound impact (as Gerald Ratner long ago discovered).

Continued...

As Griffin explains it:

‘What identifies a crisis is not the nature of what has happened but what is at stake – reputation, the bottom line, the licence to operate and the future of the organization – and the immediacy of the threat.’

His book shows that reputation is not to be viewed (or managed) in isolation, but as part of a continuous cycle of risks, issues and emergent crises.

It’s an important field – and there will never be a lack of demand for advisers with this expertise. But public relations advisers do not have the only claim on this territory: there are others with greater experience in risk assessment and risk management, as consultant Tim Burt noted in his 2012 book.

It’s a contested area that brings public relations advisers into competition with management consultants and others. (Interestingly, as if to prove this point, Regester Larkin was acquired in 2016 by Deloitte).

Two challenges

Then there are two obvious challenges to the mantra that public relations manages reputation.

The first is that reputation is not under our control. Reputation, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. So we can influence how our organisation is perceived, but can we claim full management control of this process? You would be setting yourself up for a fall by promising to manage a process you do not and cannot control.

There are some well-established models explaining the relationship between corporate identity and corporate reputation in the corporate communication and corporate identity literature to help you understand these concepts (see eg Cornelissen, Hatch and Schultz, van Riel).

The second challenge is that if you say you manage reputation, you will very soon be asked how you measure and value reputation (on the grounds that ‘if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.’)

Reputation is considered an intangible asset. You can’t touch it (unlike property, or furniture, or stock in a warehouse) but it has a value and some auditors will put a value on it (it used to be known as ‘goodwill’, the word that still appears in the CIPR’s definition cited above).

Intangible assets are in fashion. Economists need to explain how a transport service that owns few cars (Uber) or an accommodation service that owns few bedrooms (Airbnb) can have such high market valuations. A recent economics text made the connection explicit: *Capitalism without Capital: The Rise of the Intangible Economy*.

SO WHAT METHOD WILL YOU USE TO**MEASURE REPUTATION?**

There is some help provided by scholars. Charles Fombrun (from the US) and Cees van Riel (from the Netherlands) have developed a model known as the *Reputation Quotient* which measures six drivers contributing to corporate reputation (emotional appeal; products and services; vision and leadership; workplace environment; financial performance; and social responsibility). They are also founders of the Reputation Institute which provides consultancy and tools for reputation measurement.

Private sector businesses with stock market listings already have accurate ways of valuing the business (including goodwill/reputation). The share price is a crude measure, subject to many external factors, but a firm’s market capitalisation (the number of shares in circulation multiplied by the price per share) provides an instant picture of the value the market puts on the business.

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Given the volatility in share prices, executives prefer to talk up 'shareholder value', which contains an assessment of the confidence shareholders place in the longer-term strategy of the management team. Should they sell their shares at the first sign of trouble, or hold on to them in the belief that over a longer period managers will outperform the market? This involves a form of reputation assessment by shareholders.

Another question to ask is which role in an organisation is responsible for reputation. It's more likely the answer will be the chief executive than the chief communication officer.

So should public relations practitioners be claiming to manage a discipline they don't own? In reality, the senior PR manager is more likely to advise on the reputational implications of decisions. There's a difference between being an adviser and being a decision maker.

All this talk of management, management consultants, auditors and share prices may suggest that reputation management is only relevant to the private sector.

This need not be the case. The UK's National Health Service (NHS) has a reputation, though it does not have shareholders or customers. Public sector bodies are accountable to us as taxpayers and service users and so has a reputation that's worth protecting. Yet it's not a reputation that's capable of measurement in purely financial terms.

The NHS, with some 1.5 million employees, is a prime example of an organisation that needs to put internal communication first. Reputation clearly has a place in a campaign, say, to reduce hospital-borne infections. But is reputation the driver (above public health)? If so, it would suggest a tendency to close ranks and protect the organisation rather than open up and expose poor practices.

This does happen, but when made public it tends to be catastrophic for the reputation of a hospital or NHS Trust.

Reputation has a greater resonance with external communicators than those responsible for internal communication, though many will agree with Quentin Langley that employees should always be considered the first line of defence.

In summary, it's not as clear as suggested by the CIPR definition that public relations is (uniquely) about reputation.

Even among practitioners, for everyone talking up the importance of reputation, there will be yet more using 'brand' as their preferred term.

FURTHER READING

Barnett, M and Pollock, T (eds) (2012) *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Reputation*, Oxford University Press

Burt, T (2012) *Dark Art: The Changing Face of Public Relations*, Elliott and Thompson

Cornelissen, J (2017) *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (fifth edition) Sage

Dietrich, G (2014) *Spin Sucks: Communication and Reputation Management in the Digital Age*, Que

Doorley, J and Garcia, H (2015) *Reputation Management: The Key to Successful Public Relations and Corporate Communication* (third edition) Routledge

Fombrun, C and van Riel, C (2004) *Fame and Fortune: How Successful Companies Build Winning Reputations*, FT Prentice Hall

Frandsen, F and Johansen, W (2017) Corporate image, reputation and identity in Tench and Yeomans, *Exploring Public Relations* (fourth edition), Pearson

Griffin, A (2014) *Crisis, Issues and Reputation Management*, CIPR/Kogan Page

Hatch, M and Schultz, M (2008) *Taking Brand Initiative: How Companies Can Align Their Strategy, Culture and Identity through Corporate Branding*, Jossey Bass

Langley, Q (2014) *Brandjack: How your reputation is at risk from brand pirates and what to do about it*, Palgrave Macmillan

Schultz, M, Hatch, M and Larsen, M (eds) (2007) *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand*, Oxford University Press

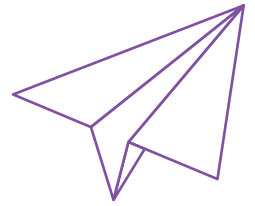
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Public relations as communication management

By Richard Bailey



At first glance, academics and practitioners seem agreed that public relations is communication.

At least, that's how it was defined in the landmark 1984 textbook *Managing Public Relations* by scholars James Grunig and Todd Hunt:

'Public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics.'

Yet there's the sense that 'public relations' has negative associations. Communications (or comms) sounds so much more neutral. Many today will disavow any association with public relations, professing instead to do internal communication or public affairs, say.

This shift from public relations to communication is all around us.

Compare AMEC's Barcelona Principles of 2010 with their 2015 update. The most notable difference was the replacement of 'public relations' with 'communications.' Take the most quoted principle of all – relating to AVEs. In 2010 this read: 'AVEs are not the Value of Public Relations.' In 2015 this was updated to: 'AVEs are not the Value of Communications.'

Like AMEC, the PRCA has changed its name while retaining its letters. So the longstanding 'Public Relations Consultants Association' became, in 2016, the 'Public Relations and Communications Association'.

A SINGULAR POINT

This introduces the first discordant note: there's a difference in the language used by practitioners and by academics.

AMEC, PRCA and most practitioners use the plural: communications. This suggests lots of tools and plenty of channels. Besides, we abbreviate the term in the plural (comms and marcoms, not comm or marcom).

Yet academics prefer the singular form. Look back at the Grunig and Hunt definition quoted above: it talks about communication management, not communications management.

Joep Cornelissen's *Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice* is now in its fifth edition (this suggests a very successful textbook). Few will have noticed the subtle change: in its first edition, it was called *Corporate Communications: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. This was quickly (and quietly) corrected in the second edition.

Then there's another successful textbook, *Exploring Public Relations* from Ralph Tench and Liz Yeomans. In its 2017 fourth edition, this gained the subheading '*Global Strategic Communication*'.

Already, I can sense the protests. This is a purely academic point (with no practical implications). Why insist on singular when the world uses the plural form?

The argument is that we need to distinguish between communications – which also suggests non PR-related disciplines like telecommunications – and communication, the discipline managed for public relations purposes.

Continued...

THE SCIENCE OF COMMUNICATION

The good news for communicators is that the core skills are clear to all (they are often listed in job advertisements), and can be learnt and improved with practice.

So communicators are required to be strong writers - and often to have a mastery of specific writing styles, whether press release writing or speech writing – and persuasive speakers.

Public relations courses and textbooks provide an overview of communication models (the science behind the art of communication), and some sources also discuss the psychology of communication and the psychology of persuasion. We have provided a free downloadable PR Place Guide to Using Communication Theory so won't cover the same ground here.

It sounds easy, in theory. Yet every journalist can recount tales of ill-judged pitches and stubborn persistence. Most employees feel overloaded by internal (rarely external) emails.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH COMMUNICATION?

Draw a simple diagram of your public relations or communication. Now, which way are the arrows pointing?

Communication implies words and messages, and we tend to focus on what we want to say. So public relations has traditionally operated through media relations, often deploying one-way publicity via press releases. It has also conventionally used internal communication (originally known as industrial journalism) as a means of transmitting management messages down to the workforce.

So one problem of using communication to describe your work is that people will quite reasonably expect you to communicate – and will assume this involves the outward or downward transmission of messages.

You know in reality that those arrows are two-way. Maintaining good relationships with the media requires you to know what stories they're looking for, and which pitches they would regard as spam or overly promotional. Good internal communication seeks to engage employees and harness their ideas. It's a two-way street. Australian scholar Jim Macnamara has written about the importance of listening.

In his 2011 book *The Business of Influence*, Philip Sheldrake discusses the complexity of listening and responding given the profusion of conversations and channels:

'Where should I listen and how should I make sense of it, and what demands a response and what should I say and when should I say it, and to whom should I say it and where should I say it, and in which format should I say it? When you multiply these possibilities together it becomes immediately clear that you're trying to deal with massive complexity, at least relative to your colleague from 1991.'

So you may have drawn arrows in two directions: your listening and your communication messages. But did you draw any arrows pointing upwards?

If public relations is a management discipline, then it needs to be used to inform and advise senior executives, not just transmit messages to audiences.

Continued...

COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

I have quoted from a 1984 text, *Managing Public Relations*. Decades on, questions are still being asked about public relations as a management discipline. In their 2012 book *Public Relations: A Managerial Perspective*, Danny Moss and Barbara deSanto list eight key challenges facing public relations managers:

- The ongoing challenge of defining public relations
- Organizational and social ignorance of the value of public relations efforts to organizations
- The lack of a formally recognized managerial-level function for public relations within the organization
- The overlap and/or encroachment of other managerial functions on public relations
- The size of the public relations function/presence in most organizations
- The breadth and variety of public relations practitioner roles
- The varied background of public relations practitioners
- The lack of general managerial/business education for public relations technicians and managers

‘Viewed collectively as well as individually, these eight challenges help explain to a large degree why it has often proved difficult for public relations to be accepted as a mainstream ‘management’ function within organizations, and hence, why it is that senior practitioners have often struggled to gain acceptance as members of the dominant coalition within organizations.’

Yet the broader discipline, variously known as corporate communication or corporate affairs has been growing in status as a means of helping senior managers navigate their complex environments.

*Perhaps the problem is with the name public relations
or the word communication?*

In politics, there’s a sharp distinction between those involved in policy, and those tasked with communication.

Katie Perrior had dreamed since she was young about working in politics. She sold her business to become the first female director of communications in 10 Downing Street (a role normally given to former journalists, not public relations specialists), but then suffered from a lack of access to the Prime Minister and her closest advisers. Having left Downing Street, she has talked about the frustrations of the role and her difficult relationship with the then joint chiefs of staff, Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy.

As Tim Shipman wrote about Perrior in his well-researched book about recent UK politics:

‘When she signed up to work for May – abandoning a public relations company she had sweated blood to build up with her business partner Jo Tanner – Perrior had imagined she would have the kind of relationship with May that her predecessor Craig Oliver had enjoyed with David Cameron – as a trusted adviser and sounding board present in the key meetings.

Without that access a communications chief was next to useless because they could not predict the coming crises or speak with any confidence to journalists about the prime minister’s intentions.’

Continued...

Meanwhile Fiona Hill, who had a background in television, was keen to be seen as something more elevated than a communicator. Communications, 'regarded as integral to policy-making' under Cameron and Osborne, had become a separate, detached, function under May.

MORE THAN COMMUNICATION?

Dr Jon White wrote in **#FuturePProof**:

'Public relations makes use of communication, and is often confused with communication, or mislabelled as communication.'

He argues that public relations is directed at influencing behaviour in relationships, and argues for the continued use of the term public relations. It implies that the public we seek to engage are important, and that relationships matter.

In the previous essay in this series, we looked at **public relations as reputation management**, and quoted the CIPR's definition of reputation as 'the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you'.

If you envisage your role as a communication discipline, you're privileging 'what you say' over 'what you do', yet we all know that actions speak louder than words. You may or may not pay much attention to 'what others say about you'.

Yet if you view yourself as a relationship manager (the subject of our next essay in this series), then you will regard all three dimensions ('what you do, what you say and what others say about you') as important. Having input into 'what you do' implies influence within the senior management team.

Anne Gregory and Paul Willis provide a sensible defence of the continued use of 'public relations':

They write that it 'involves all those deliberate efforts to formally communicate with individuals or groups and includes management or internal communication, marketing and advertising, and public relations...

Communication is the word often used to describe these collective specialist functions, but we will use the phrase public relations because it best describes what happens; the organisation builds relationships in public and with these various publics.'

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

Whether you call it public relations, communication or communications, there's a debate about whether it's a strategic management function. Let's assume that management involves planning and strategy describes purpose.

In one corner is this year's CIPR president, Sarah Hall, who has edited two **#FuturePProof** ebooks to articulate this case. She's joined by academics including Anne Gregory and Danny Moss.

In the other corner are various practitioners, fighting a rearguard action on social media – and some academics who want the focus to be the benefit public relations brings to society rather than to organisations.

Continued...

I think the debate exists because of the confusion between 'means' and 'ends'. **Let me give an example.**

It's possible to accept the logic of 'strategic marketing management' as marketing describes an end point ('the satisfying of customer demands profitably'). But what's the sense in 'strategic advertising management' since we understand advertising to be a means (paid publicity) to an end (such as increased sales)?

But what about public relations? It's most commonly seen as a means (earned publicity through media relations, say). Communication almost defines itself as a means rather than an end.

I accept that most people outside the classroom (and many within it) are bored of definitional debates, but this discussion shows that it remains an ongoing challenge that cannot be avoided.

Perhaps we need to rephrase the question from 'what is public relations?' to 'what is the purpose of public relations or communication?' That should help us clarify our roles and responsibilities.

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Public relations as relationship management

By Richard Bailey

It seems self-evident that a discipline called public relations should be focused on relationships. As a well-known definition from long-established textbook puts it:

‘Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.’

This definition – from Cutlip, Center and Broom’s **Effective Public Relations**, first published in 1952 and still in print in its eleventh (international) edition - presents the discipline as relationship management. What’s more, the definition explains why this should matter: an organisation’s survival depends on these relationships.

There’s a body of scholarship, centred around the work of John Ledingham and Stephen Bruning, arguing for public relations to be understood as relationship management.

Marketing understands that organisations depend on relationships with customers. No customers, no business. But public relations also considers non-market groups such as regulators, politicians, activists, investors, trades unions and employees (collectively, citizens).

PUBLICS, STAKEHOLDERS, CONSTITUENCIES, COMMUNITIES

If relationships are central to public relations, then it also follows that ‘public’ should mean something more specific than ‘the general public’.

James Grunig (with Todd Hunt in 1984 and with Fred Repper in 1992) argued that publics were more dynamic than stakeholders, as they come together when facing a particular issue and deciding to become active on this issue (originally presented as ‘the situational theory of publics’).

Yet from the 1990s onwards, the use of stakeholders has replaced that of publics. It’s a flexible term that allows many different approaches to identifying, segmenting and managing stakeholder groups.

We have provided a downloadable **Guide to stakeholder identification and mapping**, so won’t cover the same ground here.

There are some critical voices, though.

Stakeholder maps tend to depict a static relationship and risk assuming that all those within certain groups (eg shareholders) have the same interests and the same level of involvement in the organisation.

The focus is on organisation-public relationships, and this tends to assume that the relationship is as important to stakeholders as it is to the organisation. This is rarely the case.

Continued...

Millions of us are members of the National Trust, a conservation charity. All will be happy to contribute to preserving beautiful places. Most members take advantage of the 'free' admission to country houses and landscape parks and may welcome (and even read) the member magazine. Only some will volunteer their time and yet fewer will exercise their voting rights at annual general meetings.

Despite paying for membership, this does not guarantee our loyalty. Those with a keen interest in heritage and conservation may well be members of other bodies that may feel themselves to be in competition with the National Trust for funds, for members and for attention.

Maps of stakeholder relationships tend to place the organisation at the centre, rather like the medieval Christian view of the universe revolving around the earth. Yet as my National Trust example shows, most of us do not have undivided attention or fixed loyalties.

A more accurate view would present the organisation as one planet revolving around the sun, which is in turn just one star among many others in the galaxy. It's a much more complex map.

In reconceptualising public relations in this direction, US scholars Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay prefer the word 'constituencies' to 'stakeholders' or 'publics'. Their definition:

'Public relations is the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of constituency relationships.'

It's still centred on relationships, though these are now 'mutually influential' rather than 'mutually beneficial'. The 'web of constituency relationships' reminds us that we may be at times be influenced by the organisation, but we are also open to influence from other sources. This is a very different model to the usual focus on organisation-public relationships.

Others extend this thinking and see public relations as community management. This sounds like a contemporary view, as community management is now assumed to mean social media management. Yet US scholars Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck have long argued for public relations to be seen as 'an active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community.' This argument was made in 1998 – that's before the web and long before social media. By community they mean society, and they later argued: 'We believe that corporations ultimately exist by consent of society, which remains in fact the ultimate stakeholder of such corporations to which these organizations are answerable.'

Today, community management is a distinct area of practice. Some see it as part of public relations (or even as the future of public relations). Others, such as Richard Millington, argue that it's a distinct practice driven by the needs of the community members, not the needs of an organisation.

Influence

Coombs and Holladay talk about 'mutually influential relationships'. Robert Cialdini has written that rare thing, an academic bestseller, exploring what's involved in influence. He identifies six paths to influence:

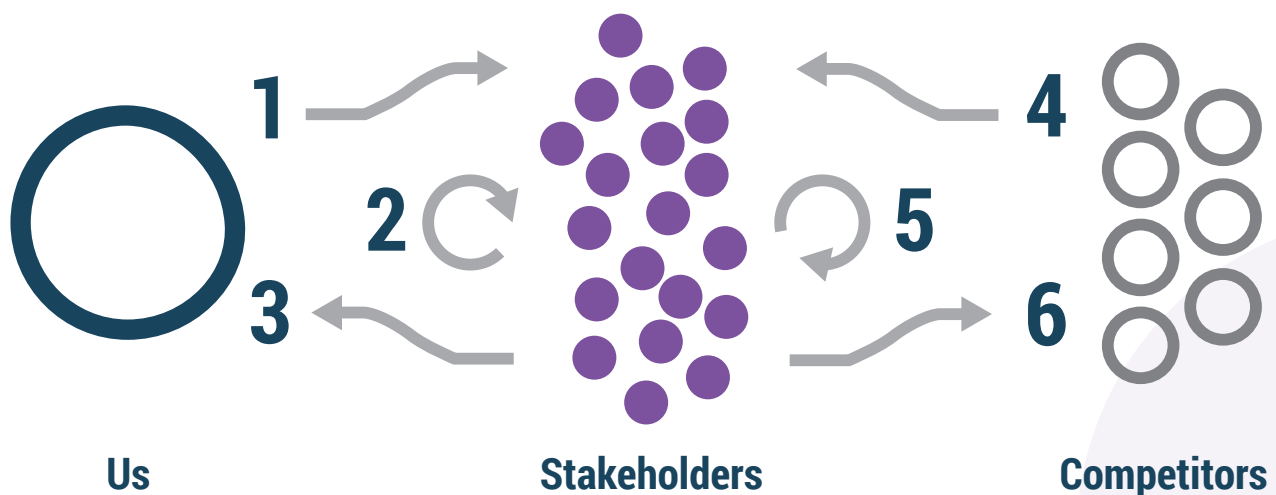
- **Reciprocity:** If you do something for someone, they're more likely to do something for you
- **Consistency:** People act in ways that are consistent with what you have said or done previously
- **Liking:** If people like you, they are more likely to do what you want

Continued...

- **Authority:** If people see you as an authority figure, they're more likely to do what you say
- **Social proof:** People do what they see other people doing
- **Scarcity:** People don't like losing the opportunity to get something

Within the public relations literature, practitioner Philip Sheldrake has written about influence. In *The Business of Influence*, he provides a critique of Grunig's two-way symmetric ideal on the grounds that there are only two influence flows involved: the organisation's influence with its publics, and the publics' influence on the organisation. (Grunig would surely argue that these are the only two we can claim to manage.)

A former engineer, he had identified six influence flows, meaning that four were beyond the control of public relations.



1. **Our organisation's** influence with stakeholders
1. **Our stakeholders'** influence with each other with respect to us
1. **Our stakeholders'** influence with our organisation
1. **Our competitors'** influence with stakeholders
1. **Stakeholders'** influence with each other with respect to our competitors
1. **Stakeholders'** influence with our competitors

Today, influencer marketing is a growth area as public relations teams seek to supplement – or even replace - media relations with influencer relations. This specifically refers to those with niche followings on social media channels such as YouTube and Instagram.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

The concept of social capital is useful for explaining relationship management. Some groups have a financial stake in the organisation: most obviously investors, customers and employees. But many others have non-financial stakes.

As Norwegian scholar Oyvind Ihlen explains it: 'Social capital is seen as a result of a conscious or unconscious investment strategy that involves exchanges of, for instance, gifts, services, words, time, attention, care or concern. It also implies "obligations" or "credit".'

These exchanges are not as crude as a form of hush money, but public relations practitioners hope that by having built up trust (social capital), stakeholders will at least give them an opportunity to explain their position when the organisation faces scrutiny and criticism. In an ideal world, these groups would provide a first line of defence by speaking up in support of an organisation when it's under attack in a public forum like the press or social media. Stephen Waddington and Steve Earl wrote about this first line of defence in #BrandVandals.

Finnish scholar Vilma Luoma-aho defines social capital as 'the extent of the resources available to an organization through networks of trust and reciprocity among its stakeholders.'

So the outcome of relationship management is a form of intangible capital built on trust and reciprocity.

She writes: *'public relations practitioners should be seen as creators and maintainers of organizational social capital' and argues that social capital is the way to connect relationships, trust and reputation into one conceptual framework.*

BUT HOW DO WE MEASURE RELATIONSHIPS?

This sounds rational. It sounds manageable. But is it measurable?

A challenge to the relational view of public relations is the need to measure the value of these intangible relationships in order to demonstrate progress, prove effectiveness and deliver value.

James Grunig and Linda Hon published an IPR paper addressing this challenge.

Having asserted that the value of public relations is in relationships, they provided an analysis of the six factors that can be assessed within relationships:

- **Control mutuality** (the extent to which the relationship is two-way)
- **Trust** (can the organisation be relied on to keep its promises?)
- **Commitment** (long-term orientation)
- **Satisfaction** (do the benefits of the relationship outweigh its costs?)
- **Exchange relationships** (the extent to which gains are expected from the relationship)
- **Communal relationships** (is there concern for the welfare of the other?)

More recently, measurement specialist Katie Paine has followed in Grunig's footsteps, arguing:

“The future of public relations lies in the development of relationships, and the future of measurement lies in the accurate analysis of those relationships. Counting impressions will become increasingly irrelevant while measuring relationships and reputation will become ever more important.”

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Public relations as a strategic management function

By Kevin Ruck

Public Relations has long aspired to be seen as a strategic management function, given the same respect in the board room as marketing and human resources.

However, in 2011 US scholar James Grunig argued that rather than being seen as strategic management, 'public relations has been institutionalized as a symbolic-interpretive activity that organizations use to exert their power over publics and to disguise the consequences of their behaviors from publics, governments, and the media'. This means that public relations is seen as a communication function, not as a management discipline.

Yet as a long-standing proponent of PR as strategic management, Grunig stresses that public relations is not simply a 'messaging activity'. This illustrates the conflict between what some academics and leading practitioners believe PR should be and how it is currently practised.

This has led to many calls from industry bodies to re-focus attention on the role that public relations plays in organisational success, notably highlighted in the Global Alliance's Stockholm Accords in 2010. More recently the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) has again put the focus on strategic management, working with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) to champion the strategic value of PR.

But what does it mean for PR to be a strategic management discipline?

Like many business terms such as culture and leadership, there is no universally accepted definition of strategic management. However, Dutch communication scholar Joep Cornelissen suggests that there is a consensus on three points about strategy:

- **Strategy formation consists of a combination of planned and emergent processes** – in practice communication strategy typically consists of planned programmes as well as more ad hoc reactive responses that emerge in response to issues and stakeholder concerns
- **Strategy involves a general direction and not simply plans or tactics** – strategy concerns the organization's direction and positioning in relation to stakeholders and its environment
- **Strategy is about the organization and its environment - managers who manage strategically do so by balancing the mission and vision of the organisation** – what it is, what it wants to be, and what it wants to do - with what the environment will allow or encourage it to do

The combination of planned and emergent processes is a common theme in the literature. According to Mintzberg and Walters an emergent approach is based upon continuously evolving organisational processes that result from ongoing and complex interactions between groups with diverse interests. It is an approach that may be more likely to lead to strategic learning and adapting and responding to contexts as they develop. Indeed, the complexities in modern, large organisations suggest that strategy-making is always likely to be at least partly emergent.

Continued...

PR scholars have proposed numerous adaptations of strategy making processes for public relations. Danny Moss argues that a communication strategy 'should spell out the purpose, form, focus and direction of the communication strategy – how it will contribute to achieving the organisation's overall and specific goals'. Moss outlines a communication management framework to underpin this thinking which incorporates four steps:

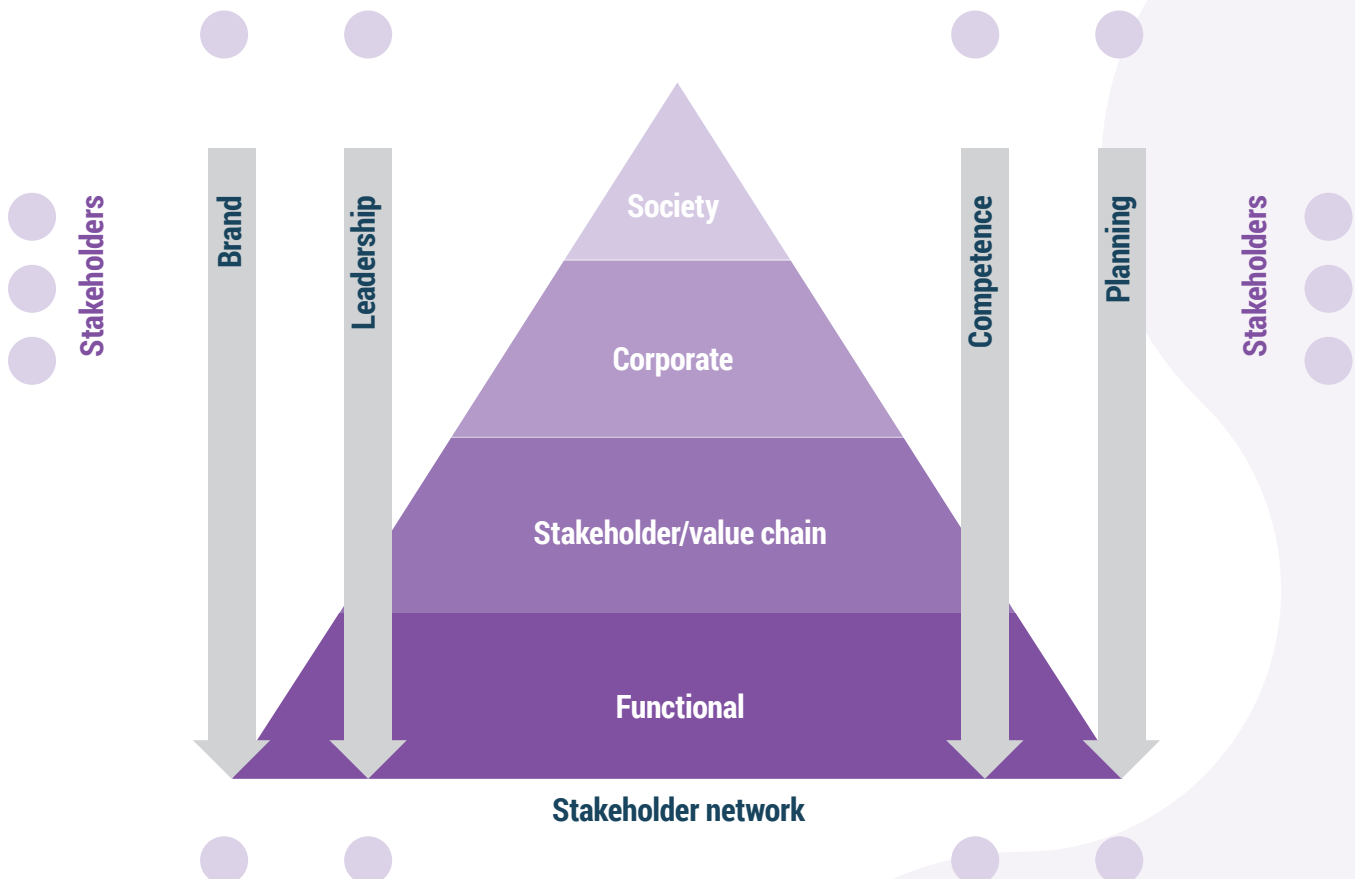
- **Communication Management Analysis** (stakeholder and issues analysis)
- **Communication Management Choice** (priorities and objectives)
- **Communication Management Implementation** (resources and budgets)
- **Communication Management Evaluation** (outputs, outcomes and impact)

Cornelissen also focuses on stakeholders and explains communication strategies as 'a process of bringing stakeholder reputations into line with the vision of the organisation in order to obtain the necessary support for the organization's strategy'.

Anne Gregory and Paul Willis bring together much of the contemporary thinking on strategic public relations in their four-by-four model which maps different levels of an organisation to four attributes that characterise good communication within a stakeholder networked environment.

THE FOUR-BY-FOUR MODEL OF STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS

Stakeholder network



Continued...

Gregory and Willis stress the importance of a 'deep understanding of the brand and what it means to the wide range of stakeholders who associate with it and believe they own it is essential for communicators to undertake their role effectively'. They also highlight the importance of internal communication as the more that employees are 'active advocates and intelligence gatherers, the greater the communicative and reputational impact'. This focus on internal communication is an aspect that is often neglected in wider public relations theory and practice.

Planning is also central to the model, where it is described as 'research, defining objectives, identifying stakeholders, developing a strategy, selecting appropriate channels, crafting suitable content, identifying issues and risks, deciding on the resources needed and monitoring and evaluating programmes and campaigns'. These core components of a strategic approach, or variations of them, are repeated in much of the literature although a critique of them is the weak consideration of organisational listening.

One well-known approach to business strategy and planning is the balanced scorecard developed by Kaplan and Norton. This incorporates four dimensions; stakeholder/customer (expectations), financial stewardship (financial performance), internal business process (efficiency) and organisational capacity (knowledge and innovation).

The balanced scorecard was developed as a way of balancing a financial focus with other important organisational factors. It emphasises three further key dimensions for organisational success: customer/stakeholder satisfaction, internal business process and organisational capacity. Kaplan and Norton's justification for this is outlined as follows:

**The balanced scorecard retains traditional financial measures.
But financial measures tell the story of past events, an adequate story for industrial
age companies for which investments in long-term capabilities and customer
relationships were not critical for success.
These financial measures are inadequate, however, for guiding and evaluating the
journey that information age companies must make to create future value through
investment in customers, suppliers, employees, processes, technology,
and innovation.**

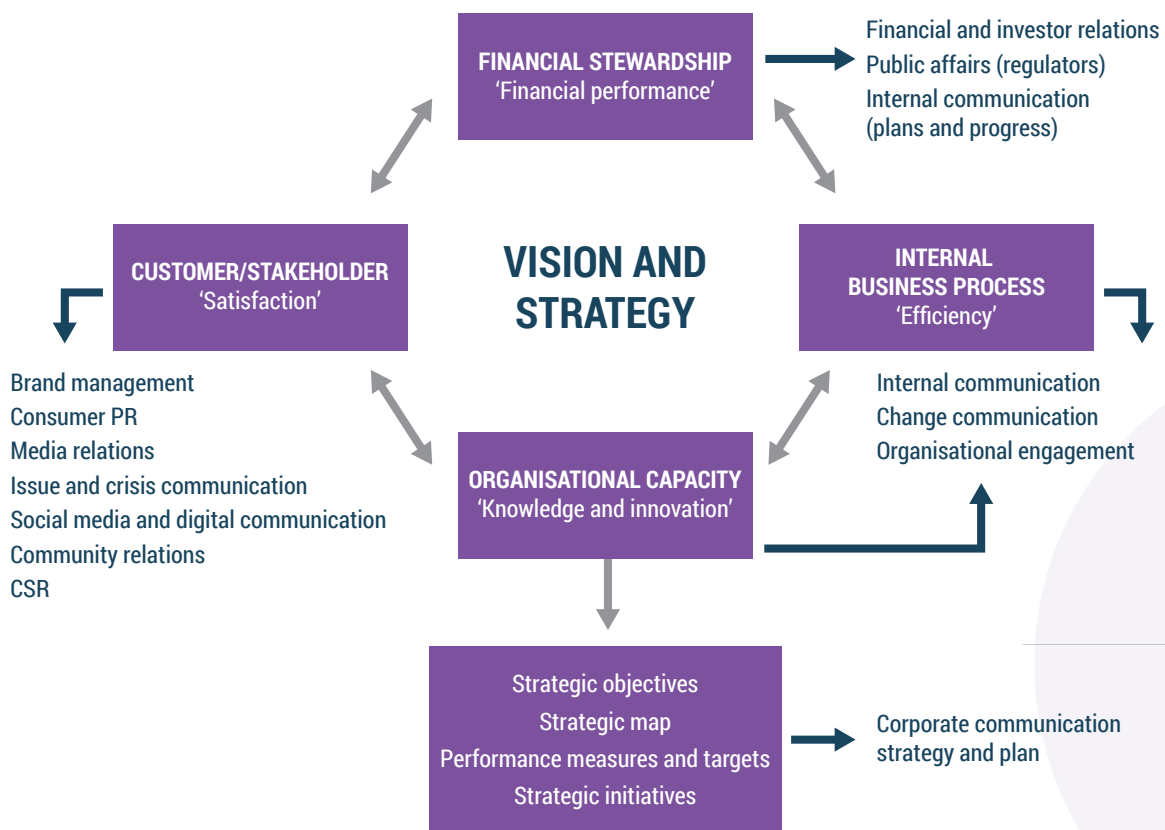
According to the Balanced Scorecard Institute, the balanced scorecard has been reported as fifth on a top 10 list of the most widely used management tools around the world, and it has been selected by the editors of Harvard Business Review as one of the most influential business ideas of the past 75 years.

An alternative perspective on how the balanced scorecard could be used for corporate communication is to consider financial and customers/stakeholders as external communication activities, and internal processes and learning and growth as internal communication activities.

Ansgar Zerfass notes that academics have suggested the use of the balanced scorecard for corporate communications since 1997, and it has been applied by organisations such as Daimler, Bosch, Aventis and Siemens. At a strategic level, a corporate communication scorecard can be used to ensure coherence between the overall organisation goals and the communication objectives. However, it should be noted that adopting a scorecard approach to corporate communication planning is one of the many different methods that can be used.

Moss sees the balanced scorecard approach as one of a number of 'decision support techniques', including other methods such as decision trees and scenario building. Moss suggests that the balanced scorecard approach "allows alternative strategy options to be considered from multiple internal and external stakeholder perspectives. This creates a 'scorecard' that attempts to integrate and balance financial and other performance measures relevant to different stakeholder groups."

An example of how the balanced scorecard can be mapped to a range of corporate communication activities is shown below.



As the balanced scorecard includes an emphasis on internal processes and learning and growth it inevitably leads to more focus on internal communication as a core strategic public relations activity, especially when it is successfully embedded into change management.

Indeed, it could be argued that internal communication is as important, if not more important, than external communication in reputation management as trust in the media remains low and employee trust in their organisations is reported to be relatively high at 72 percent in the latest Edelman Trust Barometer report. There is also a growing body of scholarly work that associates internal communication with employee engagement which is in turn associated with organisational success and employee well-being.

Drawing together some of the common elements highlighted in the literature and introducing organisational listening to the process, a strategic management approach to public relations can be summarised as follows:

- **Formative research to understand an organisation's current situation including assessments of existing stakeholder group perceptions and the quality of relationships**
- **Formulation of measurable communication and relationship objectives that support the corporate business vision, strategy and purpose**
- **Content creation, content curation, storytelling and organisational listening that contributes directly to communication and relationship objectives**
- **Regular measurement of outputs, out-takes and outcomes of communication and relationship building**
- **Evaluation of communication and relationship building, reflecting on what's worked well and what could be done differently**

An observation that can be made about the frameworks and models discussed in this short essay is that they are far removed from day to day practice which is dominated by copywriting and editing.

This critique of strategic management can be dismissive of the importance of formative research and planning. Instead the argument is that practice need only be concerned with the content creation process. However, this is to misunderstand the strategic management process. Tactics are a strategic activity – if they are based on formative research and planning. If they are not linked to carefully researched communication objectives then organisations may well be wasting public relations resources on activities that merely create noise and make no difference to the achievement of corporate objectives.

There is some evidence that current practice does incorporate elements of strategic management. According to the CIPR's State of the Profession Report 2018, more than two-thirds of senior public relations managers spend most or some of their time both on copywriting and strategic planning. However the report does not explore exactly how much time senior managers devote to strategic planning nor how far 'strategic planning' includes formative research, measurable communication objectives and measurement of outcomes.

The Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) paints a positive picture of the industry, claiming in 2016 that it was worth £12.9 billion, up from £9.62 billion in 2013. This growth begs the question does PR really need to become more established as strategic management?

Answering that necessitates the identification of the cost of poor reputation management that could have been prevented through strategic public relations. This can be measured not just in share prices that suffer following poor issues and crisis management but also in brand and reputation equity valuations.

A case can also be made for more strategic internal communication positively impacting productivity which is known to be low in the UK compared to the G7 (a group consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States): output per hour worked in the UK was 15.9% below the average for the rest of the G7 advanced economies in 2015.

To conclude, public relations in the UK is highly respected and valued by many organisations. There is evidence that it is growing, both in terms of people employed and value. Frameworks for strategic practice have existed for four decades.

Despite this, as the CIPR State of the Profession Report 2018 cited above shows, one third of senior PR managers do not spend much time on strategic planning. Further research to explore why this is the case would be useful. And the key question is how much more could PR be contributing to productivity and reputational equity if it was based on higher levels of strategic practice?

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Public relations as persuasion

For British authors Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy, persuasion and public relations are the same:

“Public Relations is the planned persuasion of people to behave in ways that further its sponsor’s objectives.”

For others persuasion is an anathema and it is perceived to be on the slippery slope that skids through publicity and ends up with propaganda.

One of the founding fathers of public relations as an academic subject, James Grunig, argued strongly against persuasion which he sees as being one-way, ‘push’ communications. For Grunig ethical and socially responsible PR can only come out of a two-way ‘symmetrical’ dialogue between the organisation and its stakeholders.

But is he correct? Is it wrong to try to persuade people to stop smoking, eat healthily or buy a certain brand? I know how most of our clients would answer.

As public relations becomes ever more scientific in its practice, especially with the advent of big data and the interest in the links between psychology and communication, it is time to re-evaluate persuasion: how it works and how a study of it can make our practice more effective.

One of the most famous academic models that helps us understand the persuasion process better is the **Elaboration Likelihood Model** (ELM) developed by Petty and Cacioppo in 1986. This model suggests that there are two routes to persuasion – the central and the peripheral. The correct one for the chosen target audience depends on a number of factors such as the audience’s motivation to follow the argument; ability to understand it; and the opportunity to engage.

The central route implies the audience has the motivation, ability and opportunity to carefully evaluate a communication approach based on rational arguments. The peripheral route by contrast suggests a better response can be elicited by the use of cues and symbols.

The ELM model provides insights into how people today are open to persuasion in a world of info-besity.

We can surmise that many of our audiences perceive themselves to be drowning in a sea of data. In addition, the traditional sources of authority that helped them sift what is relevant and true are now in crisis: think of declining trust in government, corporates and even NGOs let alone the rise of fake news.

Audiences lack the time to filter information and they do not know who to trust to help them do it. So, we can conclude the central route to persuasion used by many organisations which would be to state the facts of their case is not going to have the sway such an approach perhaps had in the past.

Continued...

By contrast we can see how the peripheral approach to persuasion is possibly more suited to today's world. Catchy visuals, smart web design, the use of celebrities, hashtags and the viral video are more likely to have the cut-through we need.

This need not necessarily be about dumbing down debate but rather taking it one step further to get quickly to the heart of the matter in an engaging way. After all I have heard more than one journalist remark it is easier to write for *The Times* than *the Sun*.

Many writers suggest we return to the works of Aristotle who was writing in the 4th Century BC if we want to sharpen up our persuasive skills.

RHETORIC TO THE RESCUE

This is a school of thought that sees PR through a rhetorical prism. We are perhaps more used to hearing rhetoric used as a derogatory term but for theorists such as Robert Heath, PR is about the ethical deployment of rhetoric in a search for shared meaning. It is about a two-way communication of ideas where each side presents their case until mutual understanding is attained. But how best to do this in today's world?

The rhetorical tradition puts much emphasis on what is called **Ethos** – or the character of what we would now call the spokesperson. Ron Smith in his book *Strategic Planning for Public Relations* suggests that a credible spokesperson should exhibit the three Cs of effective communications: Credibility, Charisma and Control. This is the thinking that guides the selection of the correct spokesperson in a crisis situation. Look for the person who can be seen as being in charge of the situation and who can put things right but who also can demonstrate compassion for the victims.

Rhetorical thinking suggests that it is important to decide how similar to the audience the spokesperson needs to be. Credible speakers should be like the audience – homophily – unless the subject concerns different experiences or expertise in which case they should be dissimilar – heterophily.

The rise of the influence of popular YouTubers such as DanTDM and Logan Paul demonstrates the importance of homophily amongst younger audiences. We can also see this thinking at work in the recent elevation of Dana Loesch, an attractive mother of two, as the face of the National Rifle Association in the US as it fights against possible gun controls in the wake of a series of school massacres.

Logos, the second plank of this rhetorical tradition, is according to Smith to use an appeal to reason. As we have seen from the ELM model this would be to take a central route to persuasion which as we have seen above can be difficult with some of today's audiences. Smith gives some alternative ways to deploy logic and reason.

For example, we may use analogies, using familiar situations that are analogous to the issue we are seeking to highlight. One example of this is the highly successful campaign around the detection of strokes. The campaign uses the analogy of a fire raging through the brain to illustrate how a stroke, if not diagnosed and treated rapidly, can quickly take out successive cognitive abilities such as speech and movement.

If Logos implies reason then **Pathos**, the third and final plank of this approach, suggests a more emotional appeal. Here we would be following the more peripheral route - if we remember the ELM model - to persuasion.

Smith divides emotional appeals into positive and negative types. Positive appeals involve the deployment of values such as love (which includes compassion and sympathy), virtue, humour and even sex. We can think of many campaigns that deploy such 'warm' appeals from puppy dogs advertising toilet tissue to the jolly Father Christmas in the seasonal Coca Cola advertising campaign.

When it comes to the influence of psychology in recent thinking on persuasion two theories instantly spring to my mind. **The Theory of Reasoned Action**, developed originally by Fishbein and Ajzen in 1967, suggests individuals carry out a complicated process of evaluation of a given communication message weighing up different influences. The recipient will consider, for example, the opinions of friends and family; their existing beliefs and attitudes towards the message subject; and to what extent they believe they can or should comply.

This suggests successful persuasion requires the alteration of one or more of these factors. For example, the introduction of new, more relevant beliefs to replace those already held; attempts to highlight supportive opinions of those the recipient may respect and listen to, celebrity endorsement or peer pressure, for example (changing the 'subjective norm'); and finally, a self-efficacy message component to convince the recipient of an obvious and easily attained positive result for them as an individual. This approach requires us to research extensively before carrying out our communication programme. To change our target audience's beliefs, attitudes and values we first need to know what they are.

The other theory from psychology that has proved its worth time and time again in modern thinking around persuasion and communication is that of **Cognitive Dissonance** which was developed by Leon Festinger in 1957. The theory of Cognitive Dissonance chiefly highlights the human need for cognitive consistency or balance. Dissonance occurs when a person holds two clearly incongruent thoughts that they cannot resolve – the world is a wonderful place but evil people can kill thousands of innocent people in a single day.

We can see how some turn to religion to resolve the big questions such as these, and, to use Festinger's approach, reduce the pain and uncertainty caused by such dissonance. Indeed cognitive dissonance suggests a degree of self-persuasion is necessary as recipients are actively encouraged by successful communication to reduce dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance suggests that behaviour can influence beliefs rather than the other way round. Experimenters were surprised to discover that paying students less to endorse a monotonous task to others was more effective than paying them more. The theorists suggested that earning less made the participants more enthusiastic as they sought to justify the time and effort they had expended which could not be justified by the paltry fee they had been paid.

Similarly, by encouraging people to publicly advocate a position with which they disagree we may find them over time changing their opinion. Or by pushing message recipients into publicly committing to an action we actually encourage them to follow through. This is the type of thinking that underlies the work of Dr Robert Cialdini which in turn led to the rise of **'nudge theory.'**

In one well-known experiment 'no shows' in doctors' surgeries were slashed by simply getting the doctor's receptionist to request that the individual repeat back or write down the time they had been given for their appointment.

In conclusion there really is a science of persuasion and understanding better how this process works can improve our chances of deploying communication techniques to bring about behavioural change.

Effective persuasion can also be seen as two-way as to work it requires a detailed understanding of our audiences and stakeholders and a need to engage with their perception of the situation.

Many of the criticisms aimed at persuasion rest on the idea that our audiences are passive recipients of persuasive messages and lack the resources to challenge what they are being told. Does that sound much like today's audiences? Perhaps the rhetorical tradition's idea of a battle for ideas is a more apt metaphor and public relations as advocacy need not be a concept we should be ashamed of any more.

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