

Whither the Public Relations Role?
Exploring the Influence of Integrated Communication on
Public Relations

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Abstract: The integration of an organization's communication functions, also referred to as integrated marketing communication (IMC), may threaten the development of public relations as a professional practice devoted to building and managing mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders through communication and organizational advisory. This qualitative multiple-case study demonstrates that rather than become relegated to marketing support functions, public relations' role in strategic management may increase with higher levels of integrated communication. Public relations as a strategic management function, stands to lead an organization's integrated communication through public relations' emphasis on mutually beneficial stakeholder relationships.

Introduction

A review of public relations literature revealed that public relations scholars consider the integration of marketing and public relations a threat to public relations professional development (Hallahan, 2007). According to scholars, integrated communication, also referred to integrated marketing communication (IMC), stands to encroach on public relations credibility with "unscrupulous marketing practices" (p. 305) and sublimate it as a marketing support function (p. 301-302) and relegate it to "an inferior technical role...divest[ing] public relations of any significant administrative responsibilities" (p. 305).

Such reservations against integrated communication are unproven and may be based on opinion rather than research. This study addresses integrated communication's influence on public relations. This multiple case study of two organizations with differing degrees of integrated communication demonstrates that public relations may not assume an inferior marketing support role with higher levels of integration. On the contrary, integration may raise the importance of public relations. This study also answers Hallahan's (2007) call to conceptualize communication structures and public relations and marketing convergences in an integrated communication setting.

Literature Review

Public Relations

Over two decades ago, Ferguson (1984) declared that an emphasis on relationships would legitimize the field of public relations. From that time, several scholars have sought to establish public relations as a relationship discipline.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000, originally 1985) define public relations as:

“The management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 1).

Research has supported this definition, asserting that the purpose of public relations is to build relationships with an organization's key constituencies (Ledingham, 2003; Heath, 2001, p. 2; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 4; Hon & Grunig, 1999) and that the value of public relations to an organization is in the function's relationship-building capacity (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; p. 548; Grunig &

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Huang, 2000). In fact, Heath (2001) argued that “the emerging vocabulary” of the public relations discipline featured relationship concepts like shared meaning, listening, trust, and collaboration, and that mutually beneficial relationships give organizations “a license to operate” (p. 3).

Strategic relationship management is a focus of public relations research. Scholars have examined the cultivation of relationships (Ledingham, 2006; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Grunig & Hung, 2002; Grunig, 2002) and how relationships facilitate the understanding of an organization’s stakeholders (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Grunig, 2006; Toth, 2006), and have also sought to build models to measure and evaluate relationship-building in public relations (Grunig, 2006; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Hutton (1999) argued that relationships are the only unique organizing structure of the field.

The organizing concept of relationships in public relations, and the role of public relations as a strategic relationship management function, is in influencing an organization’s behavior toward mutual benefit between the organization and its stakeholders. Grunig and Huang (2002) pointed towards public relations’ advisory role in relationships in their argument that “what an organization does (more than what it says) has a strong influence on what people think and say about it and the relationship they have with that organization” (p. 14). To this end, three central areas of public relations’ involvement with developing relationships are: 1) identifying stakeholders vis-à-vis the issues they create, 2) developing communication strategies that cultivate relationships, and 3) evaluating organizational success based on the quality of public relations (Grunig, 2006).

Marketing

Marketing is considered the organizational function that generates market intelligence about the needs of current and potential customers, creates and promotes the value of an organization's offerings, and achieves competitive advantage (Aaker, 2008, Zahay, et al., 2004). Marketing seeks to capitalize on consumer trends and strategize communication for sustained profitability and brand equity (Aaker, 2008, Schultz & Kitchen, 2004, Keller, 2000).

Marketing is commonly considered in terms of the marketing communications mix (or the promotional mix), which includes advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing, and publicity (Kitchen, 1999). The use of marketing communications tools in the marketing mix is influenced by consumer needs and wants, product loyalties, competition, financial risk, and the drive for market-share (Kitchen, 1999). Marketing literature has focused on the importance of a customer-centric worldview because doing so generates competitive advantage and sustained profitability (Dewhirst & Davis, 2005, Rust, Zeithaml, & Lemon, 2004, Schultz & Kitchen, 2004).

Two processes marketing scholars consider critical are branding and relationship marketing. Branding is the process of associating salient characteristics about a product, service, or organization in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 2008; Rust, et al., 2004; Holt, 2003). Through branding, marketers seek to influence the way consumers perceive an organization and its offerings (Keller, 2003) toward purchasing its products and services (Aaker, 2008). The purpose of branding is to

build brand equity—or the value of an organization above and beyond its value without the brand (Keller, 2003).

Relationship marketing comprises marketers' efforts to ensure customer loyalty through exchanges that occur before, during and after a purchase transaction (Zahay, et al., 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship marketing comprises “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22) and “long-term win-win relationships with customers” (Kitchen and De Pelsmacker, 2004, p. 124). Relationships are an emerging focus in marketing (Dewhirst & Davis, 2005, p. 86; Madhavaram, et al., 2005), as marketers now try to “optimize individualized communications and interactions with customers and prospects to develop a long-term profitable relationship with them” (Kitchen & De Pelsmacker, 2004, p. 138).

Integrated Communication

Organizations are integrating their communication functions and coordinating the efforts of public relations and marketing for the benefits of strategic consistency and providing a unified voice to consumers (Kitchen, 1999). Recent surveys by the Association of National Advertisers reveal that as many as 74% of firms are operating integrated communication programs (Liodice, 2008).

Though integration scholars have yet to agree on an official definition, communication integration can be defined as “the coordinated use of a variety of different promotional communication tools toward a single objective” (Hallahan, 2007, p. 299). Communication integration involves the integration of

communication content and messages, channels, stakeholders and consumers, and results (Kliatchko, 2008).

The dominant framework of communication integration considers integration a marketing concept. Integration, often referred to as Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), is “a concept of marketing communications planning that recognises the added value in a programme that integrates a variety of strategic disciplines—e.g. general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations—and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact” (Kerr, Schultz, Patti, & Kim, 2008; p. 515). Some research has dropped the “M” in favor of the term integrated communication (IC), to expand integration to communication tools beyond the marketing mix (Vos & Schoemaker, 2001; Gronstedt, 2000, 1996; Caywood, 1997). Some have even proclaimed that IMC is dead (Grunig et al., 2002), though research continues to refer to integration as IMC, and the term IC is used less frequently or interchangeably with IMC (Kliatchko, 2005, 2008; Thorson & Moore, 1996). This study considers integration of all communication functions, including public relations marketing, and others.

In spite of definitional ambiguities, the purpose of integration appears to be clear—organizations integrate communication to maximize impact (Kliatchko, 2005; Duncan & Caywood, 1996). This impact includes organizational brand and reputation (Kitchen, Schultz, Kim, Han, & Li, 2004; Kliatchko, 2005) and message resonance (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). Pioneers of integrated communication research, Schultz and Kitchen (2001) have argued that the integration of

communication should be dedicated to creating and sustaining relationships with an organization's brand, because "it is the brand with which customers and consumers have ongoing relationships" (p. 90).

Additionally, scholars have proposed that integration involves the recognition that an organization's publics overlap (Kitchen, Brignell, Li, & Spickett, 2004; Reid, 2003; Schultz & Kitchen, 1997; Schultz, 1996)—that is, a customer may also be a stakeholder and vice-versa (Gronstedt, 1996; 2000). Integration scholars, then, argue that integrated communication is a necessity to build relationships with publics because publics are already integrating an organization's messages and behavior, regardless of intended communication strategies (Kliatchko, 2008; Schultz, 1996; Schumann, Dyer, & Petkus, 1996; Duncan, 1993).

Inasmuch as integration represents a coordination of public relations and marketing, it stands to exacerbate a recognized overlap between the two functions (Kotler & Minda, 2000)—both seek to satisfy needs of organizational publics, though from different approaches. In fact, scholars have expressed concern that integration may lead to a dominance of marketing philosophy on public relations, and Grunig (2006a) has argued that it is time to move public relations considerations in integrated marketing communications beyond messaging and publicity to "develop symmetrical principles of cultivating relationships with consumers" (p. 170).

Those who have sought to differentiate the two disciplines recognize public relations in terms of its two-way symmetrical approach to communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Some have distinguished public relations based on the

publics it addresses (i.e. investors, community groups, activists, employees, etc.) and its use of uncontrolled media tools (Weiner, 2006; Gronstedt, 1996). Additionally, the two functions seek potentially incompatible goals, the one looking to make the company more market-oriented, the other, more public-oriented (Kotler & Mindak, 2000, p. 355).

Integration scholars consider public relations from two viewpoints: 1) as a marketing support function (marketing public relations or MPR) and 2) as a corporate reputation tool (corporate public relations or CPR) (Schultz & Kitchen, 2001; Gronstedt, 1996; Hallahan, 1996). Under MPR, public relations supports marketing efforts through promotion, publicity, and media relations (Hendrix, 2004; Keller, 2003). Under CPR, public relations is recognized as a public management function for building favorable relationships between organizations and non-customer publics (Duncan & Caywood, 1996, p. 23) because “non-marketing problems cannot be solved by marketing” (Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1999, p. 344).

Integrated Concerns

Though communication integration may be ideal for message resonance and building brand equity, debate about the appropriateness of integrating public relations and marketing has been a focus of public relations literature (Hallahan, 2007, p. 309). In particular, public relations scholars have expressed concern of marketing imperialism in a model that would combine the efforts of both disciplines (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). In fact, Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, and Genest (2001) have argued that there may be value in keeping the two functions distinct

because research shows that companies that separate non-customer and customer relationships have stronger reputations.

To the concerns of public relations scholars, a majority of research in integrated communication has emphasized marketing perspectives, including evaluation based on marketing's four Ps (product, price, promotion, and place) (Keh, Nguyen, Ng, 2007) and targeted marketing campaigns that consider public relations a marketing function (Kerr, et al., 2008; Stammerjohan, Wood, Chang, & Thorson, 2005; Kitchen, et al., 2004; Reid, 2003; Schultz & Kitchen 1997). For example, Lawler and Torelle (2002) demonstrated how public relations was used to educate and excite a market prior to the launch of a new Microsoft software operating system, thus complementing marketing efforts and creating recognition for the company's products.

IMC scholars also argue for an emphasis in theory development on consumer behavior (Kitchen, 1999) and the impact of message coordination on purchasing (Holt, 2003; Gabbot & Clulow, 1999). Finally, brand marketing is a dominant consideration in integrated communication research, and public relations roles in media relations, promotion, and publicity are emphasized (Kliatchko, 2008, Keller, 2003; Kitchen, 1999, Kitchen & Papasolomou, 1999).

Some IMC scholars have recognized public relations beyond its marketing support roles, including Kitchen (1999), who considers public relations' roles in fulfilling public interests, and Caywood (1997), who argues that public relations should lead integration and establishing organizations as an operational member of society. Their perspectives, however, have need of being evaluated in practice.

Furthermore, concerns about marketing imperialism and threats to public relations roles in strategic relationship management need to be evaluated, as many of these perspectives lack research-base (Hallahan, 2007). In fact, their 2002 report of the Excellence study, authors Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) found that practitioner Excellence scores were above average when marketing and public relations received equal support and were treated as equal partners (cited in Hallahan, 2007 p. 308). Additionally, they found no statistical difference in excellence scores based on department structure or integration of public relations and marketing (Hallahan, 2007, p. 308).

It is apparent that research may be inconclusive on the roles of public relations in integration. Hallahan (2007) ends his review of the literature with a similar statement:

“The key empirical evidence provided is fragmentary, and hardly conclusive to support the argument favoring a single public relations department or the necessity to avoid sublimation by marketing” (p. 308).

Research Questions

This study recognizes the need to provide research-based insight on the roles of public relations in IMC, and it evaluates scholars’ concerns about public relations subservience to marketing in such a structure. The research questions have been developed to fill the gap in research.

RQ 1: How do organizations differentiate public relations from marketing under varying levels of integration?

RQ 2: Does the level of integration influence public relations' activities in strategic relationship management?

These research questions are designed to address the critical needs in public relations research regarding IMC: whether concerns about public relations' subservience to marketing can be corroborated, and to what extent public relations practitioners fulfill research mandates to manage an organization's strategic relationships. Of course, this assumes that strategic relationship management exists, to some extent, at the organizations I studied. To this point, it is my assumption that the goal of communication at an organization is to establish some level of relationship with an organization's stakeholders.

Method

This research evaluates public relations in terms of stakeholder relationships, and evaluates its roles therein against Caywood's (1997) phases of IMC—that IMC begins with awareness and message consistency considerations and progresses to the integration of strategic relationships. Qualitative methodology is most appropriate for clarifying theory through depth of understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), and this study employs a qualitative multiple-case study to compare two organizations: one in early phases of integration and the other in advanced phases of the same.

Case studies, an empirical method of inquiry commonly used to examine organizational phenomena, are designed for exploring contextual conditions using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). This multiple case study comprises three

methods of data collection: interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Table 3.1 (appendix A) outlines my data sources.

Prior to beginning the study, sampling was purposive and theory-driven (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as I selected organizations based on location, availability, willingness to participate, and organizational fit with varying levels of integrated communication (Caywood, 1997). Following a formal email requesting participation (which featured analysis of the organization's communications as incentive) I conducted informal interviews with executives to determine preliminary placement on the Caywood model. Once the organizations were selected, I sampled individuals, documents, and participant observation experiences that would offer as many categorical concepts as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I also used snowball sampling, and sought saturation in data.

Interviews

Interviewing is the most direct way to understand reality and involves the creation of meaning through conversation (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Kvale, 1995). I conducted 20 in-person and over-the-phone informant interviews (Lindlof, 1995) across the two organizations. Interviews were conducted with both marketing and public relations professionals with varying levels of tenure, position, and responsibility, and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were purposive, conversational and loosely structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and were based on an interview guide I pretested with three professional contacts. Interviews, which featured discussion on communication roles and implementation, were recorded,

with participants' permission, and transcribed. During interviews, I noted reflections, themes, and patterns.

Participant Observation

Participant observation, which is based on the notion that enacting roles provides understanding (Sanday, 1979; Lindlof, 1995), was used to confirm interview findings. In this study, I conducted 13 hours of participant observation. Experiences included attending communication meetings, organizational events, and working with communication teams to analyze communications. To secure observation experiences, I requested opportunities to work with organizations from my interviewees, offering my services as an unpaid intern and promising transparency and a comprehensive analysis thereafter.

Document Analysis

Finally, I collected and analyzed organizational documents to “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2003, p. 87). Documents, which were obtained from interviewees and from personal online research, included both internal and external materials, newsletters and brochures, presentations, websites, intranet sites, and strategy sheets. I also investigated third-party blogs and websites.

Data Analysis

I used a combination of Miles and Huberman's (1994) structured analysis and a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify all possible themes. In my first reading of the data, I used the literature-based coding list, adding themes missing from the literature to the preliminary list of codes. I then reviewed the data a second time, assigning representative codes. On

my third review of the data, I compiled all codes into primary conceptual categories designed to answer each research question, writing vignettes under each, summarizing insights, and noting patterns. Finally, I compared the data of each of the two cases, noting differences, similarities, and writing vignettes about each. I followed Wolcott's (1994) suggestion to stay with the data in interpretation, "keep[ing] a box score along the way" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 86).

Results

Each case is outlined separately to portray the complete picture of integrated communication and public relations. The first case study, Park University¹, represents early phases of integration, the other, Adventure Communications, advanced levels of integration.

Case Organization 1: Park University

Park University is a public university, separated into colleges, schools, and departments—each operating separately, though reporting to the university's governing body. Through the university relations department, the university manages general university communications, including media relations, marketing, and publications. Alumni relations, information technology, campus security, and sports media relations are also considered public relations and marketing functions for the university. Park University's integration efforts are new and are based on coordinating all university messages and images, reflective of Caywood's 2nd level of integration—image integration.

¹ The case organization names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

RQ 1: How do organizations differentiate public relations from marketing under varying levels of integration?

Media matchmakers. Public relations practitioners are often considered as media matchmakers who connect faculty with reporters to promote the university. “I view my role as a broker,” said the public relations director for the business school. “I understand [the media] and their needs. I’m like a matchmaker and I help bring people together.” Respondents commonly reported job responsibilities in positioning faculty as experts for the media to “raise the visibility of the university and tell the university story in the context of it being a major contributor to the state’s economy,” as one communication vice president explained. For example, one public relations associate said she works closely with campus units to produce newsworthy publicity packages, like a recent kit she produced on climate change which comprised a database of faculty information as a “a one-stop place for finding all the information on climate change,” she said.

Public relations professionals in the university relations office are tasked with aggregating all stories on campus based on the university’s news beats, and matching publicity opportunities with research initiatives that match their specialty (i.e. technology or environmental awareness). In this role, practitioners “get a handle of all the things being said and written in the university” and they analyze stories to find “an illustration of [the university’s] larger initiatives,” said one director.

Supporting Roles. In some cases, public relations supports marketing’s efforts in branding and advertising. At the business school, for example, public

relations “falls under the umbrella of marketing” and is considered “one piece of the toolkit,” as the business school’s public relations director explained. As such, public relations efforts are often employed to reinforce the university’s brand and practitioners commonly serve as “logo police” to enforce proper usage of the university or unit brand and messaging.

In university marketing communication efforts, practitioners work to “ensure that the university is served by its alumni and its alumni served by the university,” according to the alumni communications director, as they seek to “keep stakeholders aware of what we’re doing here—opportunities that they might have to invest in our research,” another respondent said.

Public relations’ supporting roles extend to helping the administration as a quick fix, impromptu solution to problems. One respondent said his interaction with the president’s office is limited to “the small things, sharing ideas for a talk for the President or something” and keeps him from having a “seat at the table.” The director of the university’s public relations said, “We get notified about things only when it’s like, ‘We’ve messed up, you need to put a good face on it!’ and we’re sort of scrambling to find things to talk about. Oftentimes, it’s too late to make a difference.”

Public relations practitioners reported taking proactive measures to improve communication at the university, by offering advice to administrators and other communicators. These roles, however, are informal and under-recognized.

RQ 2: Does the level of integration influence public relations’ activities in strategic relationship management?

Influencing Messaging. A town hall meeting illustrated integration's first effects on relationship management. At the meeting, the chief marketing officer asked university relations staff to define the university in five words. As varying answers poured in, the CMO responded, "All great stuff, but you should all be saying the same thing."

Integration's most tangible effect was on messaging, including common talking points at alumni events, branding taglines for fundraising campaigns, and, especially, media relations efforts. One director said she makes sure to "tow the university line" when communicating with reporters, and others reported integration's anticipated influence on media priorities, which would set priorities in their campaigns and require them to work from an established story plan to "increase the number of high impact stories around two strategic messages."

Efforts to synchronize messaging revolve around the university's brand promise, which is still under development. Once complete, practitioners anticipate that it will set relationship management priorities. The chief marketing officer explained in one town hall session, "Every interaction that we have, you'll be able to understand what our brand promise is, who we are and what we stand for."

Integrated messaging may also extend to faculty and into the classroom. The chief marketing officer discussed selecting representative course syllabi, materials, or experiences that represent the brand promise and making them consistent throughout the campus and others discussed mobilizing faculty as brand ambassadors. In these efforts, however, the chief marketing officer said, "Marketing

is not shaping the critical role of academic success...[but it] helps inform what direction you should look at.”

Creating relationships. Professionals do not anticipate integration to hinder relationship management, though one respondent worries about losing his school’s group of alumni to university priorities. Integration may create internal relationships, as the chief marketing officer envisions creating “cross-functional teams of doers” which, one respondent said, provides opportunity to “rethink our relationships...[because] people have been too used to having their own little sphere.” Another respondent said integration will help communicators “find that common goal where you can forge better ongoing relationships.”

Case Organization 2: Adventure Communications

Adventure Communications is a media company that broadcasts top-rated educational programming. Adventure’s networks operate under the umbrella corporate brand of Adventure, but feature their own name, logo, and management structures. Integration at Adventure operates at the highest level of integration—relationship management integration—as all communication functions cooperate to “contribute to the success of the corporate mission” and public relations manages interactions with the full range of organizational stakeholders (Duncan & Caywood, 1996, p. 23).

RQ 1: How do organizations differentiate public relations from marketing under varying levels of integration?

At Adventure Communications, company communication is divided into two functions: 1) marketing, which comprises paid messaging, sales and advertising, and

2) communication, which comprises traditional public relations roles (i.e. viewer relations, promotion, crisis and internal employee communication). From this perspective, communication is differentiated from marketing based on its management roles and its communication approach.

Strategic management. Communicators are actively involved with strategic management of communications, and efforts transcend publicity. One network communication director explained, “My responsibilities are extensive and go beyond what is normally communications. We do everything from brand management...to crisis communications, brand building, program publicity, trade and business, strategic planning—kind of little bit of everything. We also end up picking talent sometimes for shows and bring in story ideas.”

Communicators lead management of integrated communication. This includes taking the lead on coordinating marketing and communication content as well as ensuring the company’s “first line of ambassadorship” (employees) are in line with communication goals. They also work to gain “buy-in” from employees and overcome department silos. “People are doing their jobs and sometimes they think they don’t have time to communicate with one another, so we try to figure out why—help formal and informal communications to occur between departments,” one communication director said. This includes managing conflicts of interest so Adventure’s networks are “not competing against each other.”

From this perspective, communicators take charge of the company’s reputation. In a recent experience recounted by one communication director, the network launched an online simulator that, in lieu of a recent tragedy, caused

unexpected problems and was deemed insensitive. In this situation, communications was alerted to the problem and managed the response, which included issuing a public apology and explanation. Adventure executives commonly look to communications for their advisory expertise: “Oftentimes, we’re a sounding board...because people know that ultimately we’ll have to deal with it,” one public relations specialist said.

Communication style. Marketing and communication “tell the same story in different ways,” one respondent said. Whereas marketing’s approach is unidirectional and emphasizes taglines and promotion in a controlled messaging environment, communications operates from a two-way orientation and with less message control. One network manager said: “Marketing messages are always going to be different because they’re...trying to motivate consumers to buy the product. The message [communications is] trying to sell is different.” That message is one of stakeholder value for dialogue with the organization, as communication professionals mediate the connection between the company and its stakeholders. “We’re the ones who have to be the voice for the network,” one publicity manager said. In this role, participants reported using networking sites like Twitter “to get consumer messages out there that aren’t just press messages.” Messaging in online forums appears to be two-way, as one director said, “We’ literally have a dialogue and [using social media sites] helps us see who is following us.”

One respondent defined the difference between marketing and public relations as “sauce and spice vs. cerebral.” For example, for a show about a real-life adventurer, marketing devised a one-sentence promotional descriptor, while

communication educated publics on outdoor survival. Marketing provides spice through quick taglines, while communication engages audiences with content rich pieces that lead to discussion. This is not to say that public relations is not used in a marketing support role, however, as one vice president explained. “Because we have a lot of new shows, we can’t afford to do marketing for all of them. So, they always say, ‘Don’t worry about it, public relations will just handle it.’ That happens a lot.”

Differentiating public relations from marketing “gets murkier with things like Twitter” and other social media. One communication director explained:

“If there’s something that requires an editorial decision, it’s communications. Blogs are an excellent example, you can provide content to a blog, but that’s still somebody making an editorial decision. Posting something on our Facebook, even though it doesn’t cost money to create the page, it’s something that so far has been handled by marketing.”

RQ 2: Does the level of integration influence public relations’ activities in strategic relationship management?

Messaging. Integration influences the content and tone of communication material, and it extends to internal communication. “We make sure we’re communicating what we have to our employees...and to our partners, providing them the messaging that they then need to message back to their clients,” one director said. This does not mean that the wording is the same. Messaging operates off of essence, not semantics. “The message changes for every campaign, but our underlying message is always to get across the brand—that it’s the number one

non-fiction network, that we produce quality programming,” said one publicity director.

Messaging passes through a brand filter that helps communicators “remember how to frame communications.” The brand “is always part of what we promote, whether it’s obvious or not,” one communicator said. Other influences of the brand filter extend to network talent, who “represent what the brand promise is, or they wouldn’t be on the air,” said one publicity manager. Brand consistency can also be found internally on the employee web portal, which features online programs that recognize employees who are active in the brand and spotlight accomplishments. “We try to make sure we...highlight people or teams that coincide with a theme. It tends to reinforce [the brand].”

Relationships. Communicators do not report a negative influence on relationship efforts. One publicity manager said, “My relationships with reporters are not influenced by [the brand] at all because it’s my personal interaction with them.” Rather, integration’s influence may be in the relationships it creates. “We all love each other and we all work under one umbrella,” said one network vice-president. Integration creates relationships through Adventure’s cross-functional team approach to campaigns, and communicators’ roles as liaisons on marketing teams. Additionally, managers encourage open communication between public relations, marketing, and other functions, inviting communicators to get “marketing’s take” on a problem or issue.

Conclusion

The short answer to the public relations and integrated communication debate is, “Yes, Virginia, integrated communication does influence public relations,” but not in the way scholars anticipate. Though this study is hardly conclusive, it provides tangible evidence that integration facilitates public relations roles in strategic relationship management, rather than limit them.

This may be the case because communication integration is a philosophy that emphasizes a public orientation (Schultz, 2007), which leads to greater roles for the function that may have the most interaction with an organization’s publics—public relations. Caywood has argued as much (1997), and the two cases here demonstrate that public relations’ roles in relationship management are valued in integration. In this way, integrated communications permits public relations to take on a leadership role, as Caywood (1997) has argued, “based upon...its attention to multiple stakeholder groups, and its experience and strength using communications as an important management tool” (p. xiv).

Public relations’ value in integration is its “new sources of strategies, tactics, and general experience that marketing or other organizational functions alone cannot provide” (Caywood, 1997, p. xx). This study shows that these “new sources” of knowledge revolve around stakeholder understanding and engagement, as higher levels of integration at Adventure recognize public relations’ roles in managing relationships with external and internal stakeholders.

Implications for theory and future research

This study provides insight for two theory-based needs in public relations scholarship. First, this study shows that scholar concerns about public relations

limitations in integration may not be confirmed in practice. In fact, these two studies show a progression: case one shows public relations roles focusing on promotion in a system without integration; case two shows public relations as a strategic management function in a fully-integrated program. From this perspective, two related hypotheses need testing: 1) Higher levels of integration lead to higher levels of strategic relationship management for public relations and 2) Higher levels of integration lead to more emphasis on two-way symmetrical relationship strategies.

Second, this study contributes to the development of integrated communication theory. In particular, it answers Grunig's (2006a) call for public relations and marketing scholars to "conceptualize marketing communication principles" (p. 170) and provides a central point to build that conceptualization— stakeholder engagement. The primary change in an integrated program is defined focus on publics, in an outside-in, rather than inside-out, approach to communication (Schultz, 2007). Therefore, marketing communications principles should be defined around the public, rather than the communication tools available (i.e. promotion, advertising, publicity, etc.). In this way, scholarship needs to move away from defining (and redefining) what integration entails and toward the development of "symmetrical principles of cultivating relationships with consumers" (Grunig, 2006, p. 170) based on understanding public responses to integrated programs. Scholarship on this point is limited, though Gronstedt (2000) has offered the idea that because an employee may be a customer and a customer an activist, that communication decisions should not be based on function (public relations vs. marketing) but on the appropriate communication tools used (i.e. press

release vs. advertisement). Further research is needed to understand stakeholder involvement in an integrated program.

Future research should also explore how integrated communication influence relationship management strategies. Marketing scholars seem to focus on exchange and customer loyalty (Zahay, et al., 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and public relations scholars emphasize two-way symmetrical strategies like openness, sharing tasks, and positivity, among others (Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Implications for Practice

This study demonstrates the flexibility of the public relations function within an integrated communication context, that communication tools available to public relations practitioners include marketing tools and strategic relationship management tools. Furthermore, it appears that integrated communication does not limit public relations' use of these tools to merely the marketing-type, but rather, with higher levels of integration, companies recognize and utilize the gamut of public relations tools in strategic relationship management.

Though one cannot make the assumption that this study proves the use of public relations in a strategic management context within an integrated program will yield communication success on every front (this was not this study's intention), it does demonstrate that public relations should be used in a strategic manner, and may be in the best position to lead a successful integrated program, echoing claims by Caywood (1997).

Limitations

The findings of this study could be attributed to any number of factors outside of the level of integration, not the least of which is the type of organizations that participated. It is worth noting, however, that Kotler and Mindak (2000) argue that public relations plays a greater role in academia, but a subservient one in commercial organizations. In this study, the roles are reversed, and I argue that this reversal may be related to the level of integration at each organization.

Notwithstanding, this study is exploratory, and should not be considered conclusive regarding public relations and integration. Limitations included time, resources, and availability of organizations (I began research with more than one organization before the companies decided to withdraw). Another limitation was the conveniently nice and orderly perspectives I received of each organization, as interviewees sought to position their organization positively. My own recruiting efforts may have compounded this limitation—prior to the study and at the request of each organization, I provided an executive summary of the study's intentions. Additionally, this study proved my contention that integration enhances public relations' roles, rather than limit them—and my own bias of intention could have led to this conclusion. However, to compensate for these limitations, I looked for conflict and problems within each organization's integrated program, and I sought to prove my points incorrect in my analysis efforts. I also triangulated my research results against other data sources, including documentation and observation.

Overall, regardless of potential limitations, this study represents some of the first research-based conceptualizations of public relations in an integrated setting. Future research should corroborate these findings quantitatively. The value of this

study is that integrated communication *can* facilitate public relations roles in strategic relationship management. Rather than whither, public relations roles in integration stand to expand around integration's focus on stakeholder engagement.

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