Defining the Future of Public Relations

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Abstract

Public relations remains a field plagued by lack of definition. To fulfill its promise, the field must not only adopt a much clearer definition, it must make that paradigm real and credible by (a) developing relevant theory, (b) applying it in a much more sophisticated manner, (c) communicating it clearly and consistently, and (d) taking aggressive steps to arm practitioners, students, scholars and educators with relevant education and training.

The field of public relations would be wise to reject the emerging paradigm of "reputation management", in favor of a deeper and longer-lasting definition along the lines of "managing strategic relationships".

Key words

Public relations, reputation management, relationship management, corporate communications, marketing.

Introduction

Defining public relations has been a perilous proposition for a very long time. More than forty years ago, Marston (1963) observed that public relations was "a brotherhood of some 100,000 whose common bond is its profession and whose common woe is that no two of them can ever quite agree on what that profession is".

Over the past century, as the field has become a formalized area of

practice and inquiry, an extraordinary number of definitions have been proposed. Public relations pioneer Ivy Lee did not espouse a formal definition, but focused on honesty, understanding and compromise, to create a "proper adjustment of the interrelations" of public and business. He described himself as an information provider, but also as a sort of lawyer, representing his clients in the court of public opinion (Hiebert, 1966). Interestingly, the other major pioneer in the history of public relations, Edward Bernays, also included the notion of adjustment: "Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution" (Bernays, 1955).

During the first two or three decades of the 20th century, according to Harlow (1977), "using communication to build and hold goodwill" was the dominant theme in public relations. By the 1940s, a litany of other definitions had been proposed: "a guide to social conduct"; "social and political engineering"; "developer of goodwill"; "builder of public opinion"; "motivator"; "persuader"; "clarifier". In the 1950s and '60s, other metaphors were added to the list: "lubricant", "pilot", "catalyst", "spotlight", "interpreter" and "devil's advocate".

Stuart Ewen's (1996) review of public relations history noted still other definitions and metaphors that appeared over the ensuing decades: public relations as educator, creator and/or manipulator of symbols, news engineer, publicity doctor, perception manager, and middleperson.

Further complication and confusion have arisen when scholars have tried to force-fit theory from other fields. For example, Gordon's (1997) suggestion that "public relations is the active participation in the social construction of meaning", based on Blumer's theories of "symbolic interactionism", provided an extremely theoretical definition for a very applied field. Besides not describing the practice of public relations well, such definitions lack the discriminant validity necessary to distinguish public relations from other communication fields, sociology, psychology and cultural studies, to name a few.

A review of recent public relations definitions in textbooks and academic literature suggests a number of common themes, but no true convergence. In fact, at least two of the major introductory textbooks offer no definition, per se, but outline characteristics of public relations prac-

tice. The most common definitional components appear to be "management", "organization" and "publics". Practitioner definitions tend to focus on "management", "organization" and "publics", as well. For example, a widely quoted definition from Denny Griswold, which first appeared in the *Public Relations News*: "Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance".

The definition du jour: "Reputation Management"

In the past 10 years or so, a new definition for public relations that began in the United States has taken hold in much of the world: "reputation management". Unfortunately, there are serious questions about whether that trend or fad may be sending the field in the wrong direction.

The popularity of reputation management as a concept can be traced directly to American investor Warren Buffet, whose financial wizardry has made him one of the richest men in the world. Buffet said, "If you lose dollars for the firm by bad decisions, I will be understanding. If you lose reputation, I will be ruthless" (Gaines-Ross, 2004).

The interest in reputation management stems from the almost universal belief that a good reputation creates an aura of respect and credibility that leads to a variety of benefits: higher sales and earnings, price premiums, higher stock price, better applicants for job openings, better community relations and so forth (Therkelsen, et al., 2006). Unfortunately, there are a variety of problems with the notion that reputation management should be the dominant paradigm for public relations, including lack of definition, improper constructs, unreliable measures and potentially fatal questions about whether public relations – or anyone else – can manage reputation.

Reputation is often undefined or ill-defined

Numerous problems exist with the way in which reputation is defined. While most of the reputation measures are combinatory measures (i.e., rating an organization on various measures and then summing tho-

se measures into an overall measure of "reputation"), there is little evidence that individuals determine reputations in that manner. Rather, it appears that reputation is an overall, holistic, affective measure that cannot simply be determined by scoring and summing individual variables. Much more problematic is the circular logic that is often used in determining the causes and effects of reputation. For example, the "most admired companies" from *Fortune* magazine's survey have been perhaps the most widely cited and researched measures of reputation, yet the conclusions drawn from those ratings are sometimes illogical. For example, some people point to studies that claim the "most admired" companies are more profitable, but they fail to point out that profitability is one of the key variables in the formula that *determines* what companies are most admired. So, of course, reputation and profitability are correlated, and profitability causes reputation, simply by virtue of the way reputation is defined, but it is not at all clear that reputation causes profitability.

Measures are unreliable

Despite repeated claims by popular business publications and even academic studies that reputation measures are stable, that is not the case. A study of the *Fortune* "most admired" list (Hutton, et al., 2001) demonstrated very clearly that reputations are fragile and unstable, with companies bouncing around quite noticeably in the reputation rankings from year to year. One need only look at a company such as Apple, over the past 20 years, to see how fickle reputations can be. Similarly, it is worth noting that Enron was voted the "most innovative" big company in America – the year before it collapsed in one of the biggest corporate meltdowns in business history. In scholarly terms, measures of reputation appear to lack construct validity, discriminant validity and even face validity.

The wrong people and the wrong disciplines are speaking

One of the major concerns about reputation management is that many of the people and the disciplines who have been the driving forces behind the concept are not necessarily qualified to speak to the issue. For example, Charles Fombrun, whose books, articles, speeches, journal and institute have been perhaps the single greatest force behind

the rise of reputation management, comes from a human resources background, not a public relations background, and has made numerous claims that are highly questionable and sometimes demonstrably false. For example:

- In his book on reputation, Fombrun (1996) stated that a company's reputational capital is "the amount by which the company's market value exceeds the liquidation value of its assets". Obviously, that is not correct. There are a myriad of other factors that help determine market capitalization, such as consistency and predictability of earnings, perceptions about the quality of management, industry outlook, technological change, legislative outlook, research-and-development expectations, future earnings prospects, risk factors, and so forth.
- In the same book, Fombrun stated that "the lower a company's visibility in the media, the better its reputation". That statement is contradicted by empirical research, as well as an enormous amount of anecdotal evidence.
- Also, Fombrun asserted that human resources should be the role model for public relations. It would be foolhardy for public relations to follow the lead of human resources, which is the only major department in most American corporations that is *less* respected than the public relations department.
- Fombrun and Van Riel (1997) stated that academic literature from six different fields – economic, strategic, marketing, organizational, sociological and accounting – was "converging in their emphasis on corporate reputations". First, it is highly questionable whether all of those literatures (perhaps *any* of them) contain enough knowledge of public opinion and attitude formation to weigh in on the issue of reputation management. Second, why was public relations – the only field with a history of dealing with reputations in various forms – omitted from that discussion?

Reputation cannot be managed directly, in any real sense

A number of scholars and practitioners have suggested that reputation is not something that can be managed directly, but something that is the result of the entire organization's performance (Ewen, 1996, p. 403; "Up-

front…", 1997) That idea is reinforced by recent research (Therkelsen, et al., 2006), which found that top executives perceive product/service quality, customer service and business ethics to be the factors most important to building and maintaining a good reputation, followed by company leadership and vision/strategy. The same study found that, while there was very strong agreement with the idea that reputation is critically important to companies' success, there was little support for increasing spending on activities directly targeted at reputation-building.

Public relations is not seen as the reputation manager

Perhaps even more important for the public relations field, the Therkelsen (2006) study found that there was an enormous gap in the perceptions of top executives versus public relations practitioners, in terms of who "owns" reputation management. Forty-six percent of public relations practitioners in the study said that public relations (or "communications") was in charge of reputation management, while only 4% of business executives agreed. Instead, the top executives saw the person in charge of reputations as themselves (61%), followed by customer service (17%) and marketing/sales (13%). These findings were alarming, considering that an earlier survey of major companies (Hutton, et al., 2001) found that public relations executives described "managing reputations" as their most important role.

Dangerous contradictions

Considering the huge contradictions that exist in both the theory and practical application of "reputation management", it is time for the entire public relations field to call time-out and reconsider current trends. The situation is simply untenable: On one hand, public relations people are claiming that reputation management is their primary goal and role within the organization, while top executives see public relations people as involved only on the periphery, if at all. Potentially even worse, public relations practitioners are claiming to be managing something that most top business people seem to feel in inherently unmanageable, in any direct sense.

An essential question is *why* reputation management has made such rapid strides in being adopted by practitioners as a newfound definition of public relations, especially without serious debate or a significant body of research to support the concept. In fact, public relations scholars have provided very little support for the idea, which is being championed especially by some of the major public relations agencies and some industry publications. No major public relations textbook defines the field as reputation management, and several scholars have raised specific objections about the idea (e.g., Grunig and Hung, 2002).

Perhaps the answer lies in the historical analysis of Olasky (1984), who lamented what he called "the aborted debate within public relations". During the 1950s and 1960s, according to Olasky, the public relations profession chose not to seriously challenge Edward Bernays' paradigm, developed during the 1920s, that focused on advocacy of the client's position and a general lack of concern for objectivity: "The public relations occupation was too profitable for its beneficiaries to accept the reformation and reconstruction that paradigm changes require…. The trade was made: acceptance of a low status for public relations in return for acceptance of fat paychecks".

One might argue that something similar is happening now. In an era in which businesses are often notoriously short-sighted and under pressure to meet quarterly earnings targets rather than building organizations of lasting value to both shareholders and society, "reputation management" – with its focus on immediacy and image – has a special allure.

Vercic (2000), among others, has lamented the trend: "For nearly a century, the public relations profession has been trying to disassociate itself from the image of being a profession about image-making. It is therefore a pity that it tries to redefine itself as reputation management–which is basically the same as image-making".

To some extent, the number and variety of definitions put forth by public relations scholars and practitioners is natural, given the field's relatively short history as a modern practice and subject of scholarship, and its natural tendency to adapt to a changing business environment. Of special concern, however, is that the public relations field seems to be embracing reputation management (as well as certain other definitions) for mostly the wrong reasons. For instance, top executives who

lack training in public relations tend to think of PR in superficial terms like "image" and "perception", while practitioners themselves are anxious to bury the negative connotations of "public relations" once and for all (Hutton, 1996a). As of 1997, in fact, only two of the top 10 public relations agencies in the U.S. (most of which were global firms) were still using "public relations" in their titles (Edelman, 1997).

A better definition: managing strategic relationships

A tragic irony is that public relations voluntarily and inexplicably abandoned its natural and most logical paradigm – relationships – at precisely the time when relationships were becoming the focus of much business thought and practice. In the mid-1990s, just as reputation management was beginning to find an audience within the public relations field, there was a flurry of activity within the field of marketing to largely redefine itself as relationship-building.

Duncan (1993), for example, defined "integrated marketing communications" as "the process of strategically developing and controlling or influencing all messages used to build and nourish relationships with customers and other stakeholders". Meanwhile, Plummer (1993) defined "relationship marketing" as "interacting with publics". Those definitions were perfectly in keeping with the work of Philip Kotler, the best-known marketing scholar in the world, who, much earlier, had defined marketing in terms of relationships and an organization's "attempts to relate to all of its publics" (Kotler, 1972).

Hutton (1999) analyzed potential definitions of public relations, based on a conceptual framework of three dimensions: "initiative" (i.e., whether public relations was pro-active or reactive), "interest" (i.e., how much public relations was acting in the interest of the client versus the interest of the public) and "image" (the degree to which public relations was addressing substance versus image).

Based on that analysis, he concluded that "persuasion" was a fairly strong candidate to be the preferred definition of public relations because it accurately describes what many public relations people attempt to do, and is in keeping with Bernay's concept of "engineering consent". But Hutton ultimately concluded that only one definition – "managing

strategic relationships" – adequately described the listening, communicating, influencing and other roles performed by a sophisticated public relations function.

That definition of public relations as relationship management is actually quite traditional, and very similar to the definition provided by Cutlip, Center and Broom, one of the top-selling introductory public relations textbook. The challenge for the public relations profession is to make it credible and "real".

Making it real

Better theory of relationships is needed

A major first step in making relationship management a credible paradigm for public relations is to build a much stronger theoretical foundation. A few public relations scholars have done excellent work to that end, perhaps most notably Ledingham and Bruning (e.g., 1998). The best work on organizational-stakeholder relationships, however, has come not from public relations but from marketing – specifically, the Morgan and Hunt (1994) commitment-trust theory.

In their model, Morgan and Hunt proposed a theory (which they tested using structural equations modeling) that identified trust and commitment as the heart of a relationship. The antecedents or drivers of a good relationship include such things as good communication, the absence of opportunistic behavior, and shared values (known in the organizational world as "corporate culture"). The outputs or consequences of a good relationship include such things as cooperation, longevity of the relationship, and functional (as opposed to dysfunctional) conflict.

Grunig and Hung (2002) and others have dabbled with variations of the Morgan and Hunt model, but the original remains remarkably robust after more than a decade. Public relations scholars would do well just to test and elaborate the model, asking relevant questions such as:

1. Antecedents
   A. Relationship termination costs

- In relationships that are maintained partly or largely because they are too expensive to exit, how are the parties able to maintain a sense of trust and commitment?
- In what way are such relationships different from relationships held together primarily by mutual benefit, shared values and good communication?

B. Relationship benefits
- How are business and organizational relationships affected when there is an imbalance in relationship benefits?
- Are some types of benefits (e.g., psychic or emotional rewards, versus financial rewards) better than others, when it comes to maintaining productive stakeholder relationships?

C. Shared values
(the only antecedent that drives both commitment and trust)
- What role should public relations play in creating and maintaining organizational culture?
- Which cultures or value systems are most conducive to building long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships?

D. Communication
- What types and styles of communication (e.g., interpersonal versus electronic) are most effective in building good stakeholders relationships?
- How might public relations keep open the lines of communication with various publics while still maintaining control of organizational messages?

E. Opportunistic behavior
- How and when do stakeholders forgive an organization that damages a relationship through inappropriate actions?
- What types of opportunistic behavior are most and least forgivable?

2. The relationship core
A. Trust
- Presumably "keeping your promises" is key to building trust, but are there other ways (e.g., invoking various types of authority)?
- Can trust be stored up, in the form of corporate equity that can be spent when needed? If so, what are the "rules" for doing so?

B. Commitment
- Do certain individuals and certain types of publics have inherently deeper or shallower levels of commitment?
- What is the best way to measure commitment?

3. Consequences
    A. Acquiescence
    - If individuals or stakeholder groups acquiesce to an organization's desires, do they feel that the organization must reciprocate in order to maintain balance in the relationship?
    - What types of persuasion are most effective, in terms of building rather than undermining relationships?

    B. Propensity to leave
    - What does the threat of leaving do to a relationship?
    - If one leaves, how difficult is it to come back?

    C. Cooperation. (The only consequence that is driven by both commitment and trust)
    - How should an organization reward a stakeholder group that cooperates?
    - How should an organization deal with a stakeholder group that refuses to cooperate?

    D. Functional conflict
    - What are the best methods for conflict resolution, in terms of maintaining solid stakeholder relationships?
    - What are the best methods for healing and bonding, following conflict?

    E. Uncertainty
    - What are the best ways to relieve uncertainty, in the context of organizational relationships?
    - In cases where uncertainty is unavoidable, how should organizations work with various publics to maintain working relationships until that uncertainty is resolved?

The answers to some of these questions, of course, have been answered to varying degrees by a variety of fields – social psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc. – but others remain largely virgin territory, at least in the context of stakeholder relationships.

PR must make substantive and unique contributions
vis-à-vis relationships

While public relations scholars need to develop much better theoretical frameworks and provide answers to a variety of questions relating to relationships, public relations practitioners need to demonstrate that they know how to *apply* relationship concepts to organizational situations. It is more than a little ironic that "trust", one of the two core elements of Morgan and Hunt's eloquent relationship model, is conspicuously absent in the relationships that many public relations people maintain with their publics.

Opportunities abound for public relations people to demonstrate their knowledge and skill in relationships – with employee communications, for example, where respect, transparency, honesty, open lines of communication, nurturing of shared values and other basic principles are key to communication that builds strong employee-employer relationships. Most of the same principles apply equally well in building productive community relationships.

Perhaps marketing, though, is the area where public relations can best demonstrate and contribute its understanding of relationships. Ironically, some public relations people perceive themselves as part of marketing or their primary purpose as supporting marketing, while other public relations people try to distance themselves from marketing as much as possible because they fear what some have described as "marketing imperialism" (Lauzen, 1991).

Probably neither of those perspectives is the wisest approach, given that (a) the two fields are, indeed, separate fields of study and practice, but (b) they overlap to some extent, in terms of their common tools and tasks (research, segmentation, communication, etc.) and are inexorably linked in the minds of most business people and the general public.

There are at least two critical ways in which public relations can significantly improve an organization's marketing effort: by helping to manage elements of the organizational culture that relate not just to internal audiences, but to customers as well; and by helping to develop a much more humanistic approach to the organization's relationships with – and attitude toward – customers.

In the first case, public relations can contribute to marketing by helping to make the organization's culture clear and meaningful to customers. Growing evidence suggests that customers – especially in the context of business-to-business markets, but also in consumer markets – prefer to do business with people and organizations who share similar values. Studies have suggested not only that great organizations tend to have well defined and well communicated cultures that are appropriate to their business environments (Deal and Kennedy, 1992), but also that, more specifically, great marketing organizations tend to have what has been termed a "culture-to-customer" approach to their marketing efforts (Hutton, 1996b). Companies that are able to convey a value system (the heart of an organization's culture) that is meaningful, valued and shared with its customers generally have a competitive edge. Examples:

- Service: IBM, Nordstrom.
- Quality: Toyota, Johnson & Johnson.
- Innovation: 3M, General Electric, Sony.
- Style: Braun, Bang & Olufsen.
- Nonconformity: Apple, Benetton.
- Social consciousness: Ben & Jerry's, Body Shop.
- No-frills value: Wal-Mart.

The public relations function often plays the central role in not just communicating but also creating and nurturing organizational culture. In terms described by Deal and Kennedy (1992), public relations can perform such critical functions as:

- Developing and refining the organization's value system by counseling the CEO.
- Managing the communication network that is critical to disseminating and nurturing the culture.
- Reinforcing the culture by creating and/or publicizing the appropriate "heroes" and other cultural role models – who model the organization's value system – in various organizational media such as publications, videos, press conferences and meetings with both internal and external audiences.
- Creating and/or publicizing corporate myths, allegories, metaphors, stories and other mechanisms that serve to affirm, perpetuate or redirect the corporate culture.

A second major way in which public relations can enlighten marketing is by enriching the notion of customer relationships. Oddly, the field that has had the most impact on marketing's concept of relationships is information technology, with assistance from accounting and finance, in the form of "Customer Relationship Management" (CRM) systems. Corporations around the world have invested enormous amounts of money and other resources in such systems, with generally poor results. Various studies have suggested that as many as 80% of CRM systems fail.

CRM systems might be described as next-generation "marketing information systems". Marketing information systems have traditionally focused on databases containing customer (and perhaps competitor and other business information), analytical/statistical tools to analyze the data, and output mechanisms to report on the data in a way that could assist the identification, development and targeting of markets. Most CRM systems augment the traditional marketing information system through such means as developing a higher level of information about individual customer behavior and identifying the "net present value" or "lifetime customer value" of individual customers.

Unfortunately, the notion that simply having more data and then using that data to determine a customer's financial value to the organization does *not* constitute a relationship. CRM systems *might* be used to help better define and deliver customer wants and needs, if used properly. But often they are antithetical to the very idea of a relationship, to the extent that they represent invasions of privacy, an imbalance of power, and one-way versus two-way communication. In short, CRM systems rarely enhance the trust and commitment that a relationship entails.

More generally, CRM systems represent a rather extreme example of what might be termed the "competitive/exchange" mindset toward relationships that marketers often employ, rather than the "humanistic" view that would be far more appropriate and successful in building good relationships. Because they are typically trained in business schools, marketers tend to be well schooled in business, economics, finance, strategy (much of it military-based) and competition. Conversely, they are typically not well trained in humanities and humanistic theory, which is far more appropriate to relationships defined by trust and positive commitment.

Hence, marketers are much more prone to ask questions that are based on a competitive/exchange mindset rather than the more humanistic perspective that public relations could and should provide. For example (see Hutton, 1996c):

- Rather than asking "What is the customer's value to us?" (the competitive/exchange approach) perhaps we should ask "What are the customers values?" (a humanistic approach).
- Instead of asking "Will the customer buy from us?" perhaps we should ask questions such as "Does the customer like to be seen with us?" and "Is the customer proud of his/her association with us?".
- Instead of asking "What does the customer want, in the way of features and benefits?" perhaps we should ask "What are we *promising* the customer?".
- Instead of asking "Are our customers loyal to us?" perhaps we should ask "Are we loyal to our customers?".
- Instead of asking "Will our customers leave us for a competitor?" perhaps we should ask "Will our customers *forgive* us?".

Public relations people generally receive more training in fields that are more closely allied with humanities (e.g., English, literature, journalism, social sciences), and should be far better qualified than someone trained in finance, accounting, economics or information technology to provide insights into successful relationships. Conceptually, it makes far more sense for marketers to seek the advice of public relations people rather than information technologists and accountants, when it comes to relationships.

Substantive changes needed in education and philosophy

Whether public relations is up to the challenge remains to be seen, however. On both the academic and practitioner sides, public relations needs to take some very specific steps if it is to be a credible as the organizational function in charge of relationship management with key stakeholders. Among the necessary changes:

1. *Public relations must significantly improve its knowledge of both key elements –relationships and management– if is to have any real claim*

of being in charge of relationship management. Improved knowledge of relationships can be obtained through greater focus on social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Improved knowledge of management can be obtained through a greater focus on the relationship between public relations programs and business schools, permitting and requiring public relations students to take more courses in basic accounting, finance, economics and management. No matter how knowledgeable public relations people may be about relationships, their effectiveness will be seriously diminished as long as they can't speak the language of business people. Unfortunately, public relations as a field has generally not shown itself to be very knowledgeable about even the business field that it is most closely allied with – marketing. For example, the so-called "Excellence" study (Grunig, 1992) – the largest and best-funded scholarly research project ever in the public relations field – contains a number of assertions that would be considered nonsense by sophisticated marketing practitioners, such as:

- "In contrast to public relations, marketing is characterized by unilateral design, unidirectional message flow, and one-stage operation" (p. 389).
- "Marketing rationale and techniques are not … even useful to non-business organizations such as educational institutions, not-for-profit hospitals, and public welfare agencies" (p. 359).
- "The resolution of conflict and the mediation of disputes is essentially a public relations function and not a concern of marketing" (p. 369).

2. *Public relations must abandon the idea that communication is the whole of public relations.* As Daniel J. Edelman (1997) and others have pointed out, communications is just a part of public relations, and not the most important part, at the highest levels of the field. Rather, Edelman points to counseling and advising, especially in times of difficulty and crisis, as the core of public relations at the highest level. Communication skills – particularly writing – are necessary but not sufficient to practice public relations effectively.

Conclusion

Public relations' failure to define itself properly has resulted in confusion, loss of credibility, loss of influence and loss of key responsibilities (e.g., investor relations and government relations) to other functional areas such as the finance department and the legal department. To resolve such problems, public relations must, once and for all, have the courage to adopt a long-term, substantive, generally accepted definition and organizing paradigm for itself.

It will not be easy. The effort will likely require unprecedented cooperation among professional associations, academics, major public relations agencies, leading corporate practitioners and major trade-journal editors. It will also require that public relations people abandon short-sighted, noncredible or limiting notions about public relations as merely "reputation management" or "communication". If successful in that effort, however, public relations will regain control of its own destiny and take a giant step toward fulfilling its promise as a business and social function.

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