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Corporate public relations dynamics: Internal vs. external stakeholders and the role of the practitioner

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ABSTRACT

Most public relations research advocates for stronger organization–public relationships and the implementation of dialogic theory to advance the practice and elevate the status of the public relations practitioner. However, this study reveals that internal relationship dynamics can prevent corporate public relations practitioners from carrying out this function of the public relations role. Twelve weeks of observation and eleven interviews were conducted at a Fortune 1000 technology company to gain insights on how corporate PR practitioners build relationships with external publics, to gauge practitioners' orientation to dialogue, and to identify challenges to external relationship building. Results show that internal relationship management is a prerequisite to corporate public relations practitioners' success in developing mutually beneficial relationships with key publics. These findings have implications for both the theory and practice of public relations especially when considering the discussion of the technician versus strategic manager role of public relations and the advancement of the field to a professional status.

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1. Introduction

The proliferation of social media, digital content and mobile devices has created a knowledge society of publics who expect constant communication. To meet this demand, corporate PR practitioners are expected to be active on Twitter, LinkedIn and corporate blogs; to respond to media inquiries in time frames that are increasingly becoming shorter; and to create and support corporate narratives that generate news coverage, all while protecting the organization's brand (Waters, Tindal & Morton, 2011; Zerfass, Schwalbach, Bentele, & Sherzada, 2014). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) released a modernized definition of PR in 2012 that states, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA Staff, 2012). In order to build these mutually beneficial relationships with publics, most corporations and larger companies enlist the support of external PR agencies to help the in-house team handle the demands of the job. As Forbes contributor Cheryl Conner (2013) noted:

Some companies do great PR with the help of agencies. Some do great public relations in-house. If an organization does PR well, it hardly matters whether it was accomplished from within or without. But it matters hugely, either way, that they do the job well ([forbes.com](#)).

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The theory of “doing the job well” in PR is largely evaluated by the quality and success of relationships external to the organization (Ferguson, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2003; Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004; Smith, 2012). Much scholarship focuses on building theories to enhance the PR practitioner's ability to build mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its external publics, yet little research has explored the internal communication processes that corporate PR practitioners face on a daily basis and how those internal interactions shape the practitioner's role. External relationship building certainly constitutes a large part of the corporate PR job function. However, practitioners, much like other internal departments such as human relations or purchasing, are also faced with internal stakeholder demands on a daily basis (Jones, 1996; Goebel, Marshal and Locander, 2003). As many corporate communications departments turn to a more integrated communications approach, PR practitioners must establish quality relationships with cross-functional teams in marketing, advertising and product development (Moriarty, 1994; Niemann-Struweg, 2014). Corporate PR practitioners are also tasked with communicating the policies and strategies of the leadership, collaborating with other members of the communications organization, and working with external agency partners to develop cohesive corporate messaging (Gallicano, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2014; Men, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2014). These dynamics constitute an entirely different realm of relationship management in the PR role that has yet to be fully explored in the literature.

To address this research gap, this study analyzes 11 in-depth interviews with corporate and agency PR practitioners to identify and describe the complicated relationship dynamics that practitioners face in their daily roles and how those dynamics affect their performance. As Conner (2013) noted, the bottom line in PR is to do the job well no matter how it is done. However, this study argues that the way the job is done may be affecting the practitioner's ability to do the job well.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The call for dialogic public relations*

Since the late 1990s, public relations scholars have perpetuated the concept of dialogue established by Ron Pearson in 1989 (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Botan, 1997; Kent & Taylor 2014; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, 2008). Pearson (1989) positioned dialogue as an ethical approach to public relations saying, “It is morally right to establish and maintain communication relationships with all publics affected by organizational action and, by implication, morally wrong not to do so” (p. 329). Building on this idea, Botan (1997) pushed for practitioners to transition from a one-way transactional model of communication to a more ethical, two-way, dialogic communication process. Botan (1997) argued, “Traditional approaches to public relations relegate publics to a secondary role, making them an instrument for meeting organizational policy or marketing needs, whereas dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization” (p. 196). This relational framework marked a major shift in PR theory, encouraging the field to argue for the PR role as an ethical backbone to the organization rather than a mere organizational support system transmitting corporate messages with no consideration of stakeholder needs.

Kent and Taylor (1998) developed the first framework for fostering dialogic relationships between organizations and publics on the World Wide Web. In 2002, they followed with a comprehensive theory of dialogic communication in public relations, building on the symmetrical model of public relations theory. Kent and Taylor (2002) defined dialogue as an orientation to communication saying, “Dialogue is not a process or a series of steps. Rather, it is a product of ongoing communication and relationships” (p. 24). Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed five tenets of dialogue: mutuality (an inclusion or collaborative orientation), propinquity (consulting publics on issues that may affect them), empathy (supportiveness and acknowledgment of the other), risk (vulnerability and unanticipated consequences) and commitment (holding conversations for mutual benefit rather than exploitation). According to Kent and Taylor (2002), these five tenets work together to “change the nature of the organization–public relationship by placing emphasis on the relationship” (p. 24). Overall, Kent and Taylor's (2002) concept of dialogue in public relations is characterized by a willingness to accept, understand, consider and involve the “other” (or public) in organizational communication and decision-making.

More recently, Kent and Taylor (2014) have focused on the principle of engagement as a way to clarify and facilitate dialogue in public relations. They argue, “Dialogue is the product of a particular type of relational interaction, not just any communicative interaction. Engagement is a necessary part of dialogue for, without it, there can be no real dialogue” (p. 390). This concept seems particularly relevant with the advances in social media communication and new media technologies as a resource for facilitating engagement in a way never before possible. However, many studies have found that practitioners are not using social media to foster dialogue in the way scholars have hoped (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Waters & Williams, 2011; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Macnamara (2006) expressed frustration over the lack of audience-centric, two-way communication in the field of public relations arguing that practitioners have ignored 10–15 years of professional and academic advice and continue to focus on outputs-oriented, transactional communication. He urged, “New routes to audiences are being constructed; new social networks are being built. We face a necessity and a great opportunity to chart a new course” (Macnamara, 2006, p. 10). A decade later, most corporate public relations departments have come to the realization that utilizing new media and social networks is a necessity—this evidenced by the proliferation of corporate blogs, Twitter accounts and digital content creation.

However, simple adoption of social media and digital tools does not necessarily result in the two-way, audience-centric communication Macnamara (2006) argued for, or what Kent and Taylor (2002) would call dialogic public relations. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that Fortune 500 companies underused Twitter in facilitating dialogic communication, similar to

traditional websites, blogs and other social media sites. A true dialogic use of social media in corporate public relations would require a practitioner to consistently monitor channels and engage with stakeholders when appropriate rather than simply using social media as another way to distribute traditional media (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

The theory of dialogue in public relations certainly presents an ethical framework for building and maintaining organization-public relationships and remains an aspiration of scholars and practitioners alike. However, the literature has shown that dialogue is not occurring at a level sufficient for positioning the organization-public relationship as the key focus of the public relations field. This disconnect between theory and practice requires a better understanding of the challenges public relations practitioners face on a daily basis and why this theory is so hard to implement.

2.2. *Balancing internal communication*

Organizations hire public relations professionals to manage external relationships with stakeholders on the company's behalf, and many scholars argue for the organization-stakeholder relationship as the central focus of public relations (Ferguson, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2003; Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004; Smith, 2012). However, public relations practitioners often must navigate complicated internal communication processes before, during and after developing and executing strategic external communication plans. Research has identified two roles in public relations: that of the technician and that of the strategic manager (Hogg & Doolan, 1999). PR scholars call for the field to move from an industry of technicians to a professional status (Botan, 1997; Grunig, 2000; Macnamara, 2006), but the managerial role requires practitioners to alternate between internal and external audiences (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, & Meckel, 2009), and little research has explored the internal relationship dynamics faced by corporate PR practitioners in a strategic management role.

Strategic communication managers reporting to the executive leadership team are often faced with internal communication obligations that involve time-consuming collaborative meetings, elaborate approval processes and an obligation to internal stakeholders' agendas that may determine job security. Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015) interviewed chief communication officers (top managers reporting directly to their CEOs) and emerging communication leaders (practitioners of the average age of 35 chosen by their CCOs) to gain insights on the conceptualization of corporate communications and value contribution. The study found that CCOs viewed communication as a strategic variable carried out by managing relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. However, emerging leaders believed that reputation management was the primary task of communication departments, and only a few of these interviewees mentioned internal communication and advising top management as a goal of the communication function (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015). These disparate views could be explained by the differing roles and tasks of more experienced communications managers versus younger practitioners focused more on a technician role. Yet, the finding that younger PR practitioners are concerned solely with external communication may present an obstacle to achieving professionalism in the field if the future generation is not trained in the managerial processes of advising executive leaders and balancing internal stakeholder needs.

Organizations today are increasingly adopting an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) approach which has further expanded the importance of the managerial role in corporate communications and public relations. Just as marketing accountability is expected of the marketing department (Stewart, 2009), or just as human resources departments must justify expenditures on performance improvement programs (Phillips, 2012), the PR department, as part of the marketing function, must also demonstrate value and return on investment. Measurement, evaluation and metrics are becoming necessary for PR practitioners to provide CEOs with tangible results (Kim, 2000; Macnamara, 2000; Macnamara, 2006; Likely, Rockland & Weiner, 2006). Corporate communication managers who report into the executive leadership team are usually responsible for managing multi-million dollar budgets along with hundreds of employees nationally or internationally, which requires an even greater need to outline value contribution (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015). Rockland (2013) discussed the need to link communications programs to business objectives and understand the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) valued by the executive staff in order to "speak the C-suite's language." PR managers must be able to communicate value to executives in a way that convinces the leadership to invest in the department—a skill set completely separate from the list of requirements PR practitioners are expected to meet in their job descriptions, yet necessary for success.

Communicating goals, objectives and strategies to executives and securing executive buy-in is another important function of the corporate PR role. Zerfass et al. (2014) found a lack of consistent patterns in the perspectives of top management and communications professionals to be a hindrance to the profession. They argued that "Communication professionals demand a stronger strategic involvement, but as long as their visions do not match those of their superiors, it is quite understandable that CEOs do not see a necessity for an increased strategic influence of communicators" (Zerfass et al., 2014; p. 74). In addition, Zerfass et al. noted a lack of self-confidence in communication professionals with only 45.4% of respondents believing that their profession would gain more power within the next three years. Similarly, Moriarty (1994) discussed an opportunity and a challenge for the PR role within the context of IMC:

High level public relations counsel is needed both to figure out the mission strategy and to create buy-in throughout the organization. It's very similar to the problem of instituting quality programs. If imposed from on top without a total commitment from all employees, managers, directors, and shareholders, quality programs will rarely be successful. Nurturing relationships and involving and motivating people could be considered to be part of the PR mission, but it's a role for which PR people are often not well trained. Involving everyone in the development, as well as the

implementation of a corporate change, calls for a change agent specialist, and that is an opportunity for public relations or corporate communications managers to extend their sphere and make an important contribution to the organization (p. 42).

Moriarty (1994) and Zerfass et al. (2014) touched on the common theme in PR literature of raising the status of the field from an industry of technicians to a profession of strategic managers. However, PR practitioners still lack training on how to manage internal relationships and expand their roles within the organization. While scholars continue to focus on developing theories for external relationship building, PR practitioners are still largely unprepared to assert themselves in the organizational landscape. In order for PR practitioners to move into a more strategic management role, learning to communicate with top management and balance internal stakeholder demands must become a priority.

Aside from gaining strategic involvement, securing executive support is also necessary for the more technical press coverage function of PR. Park and Berger (2004) observed an increase in media coverage on CEOs and business news and described CEOs as the personification of corporations. Similarly, the 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer study recommended CEOs become “chief engagement officers” and advocated for greater CEO involvement in the public discourse (Edelman, 2014). Men (2015) noted that CEO support and participation in communication programs affects the organizational standing and effectiveness of public relations functions. While the need for executive support is clear, less is known about the relationship building techniques and communication processes that PR practitioners use, or should use, to establish and perpetuate executive involvement. Without the ability to secure executive buy-in, the corporate PR department is likely to struggle to secure high-profile media opportunities, which could affect KPIs and present another challenge to demonstrating value contribution.

In addition to the complex relationship dynamics that practitioners face within their own organizations, corporate PR departments often hire external PR agencies to assume some of the workload required to effectively manage media relations, further complicating the internal relationship network. Badgett (2000) explained that the difference between corporate PR and PR agencies as a difference in clientele: while an agency practitioner has multiple clients and must work to achieve objectives that benefit both the client and the agency, the corporate practitioner’s clients are individuals within the company including every department or division head, regional managers, and top management, which requires communicating with every level of the organization (Badgett, 2000). The corporate PR practitioner must address internal stakeholders as clients, which at large corporations can involve time-consuming meetings, leaving little resources for addressing external stakeholder needs. As Waters, Tindall and Morton (2011) note, staying on top of media inquiries and deadlines is a daily task that is necessary for the PR practitioner’s success, especially with the rise of media catching platforms like Help A Reporter Out (HARO) that have reversed the traditional process of media pitching. External agencies support corporate PR departments by handling some of these daily demands.

However, many variables may affect the success of the relationship between the in-house corporate PR department and the external agency. Gallicano (2013) explained that many young practitioners start at an agency before moving on to corporate jobs that require more experience, but found that relationships with these Millennial employees could be better managed. Millennial agency practitioners cited a desire to be set loose on accounts as a source of frustration in their jobs, but Gallicano (2013) observed that these younger practitioners may need a better understanding of the agency’s perspective and the histories of client relationships. As agency practitioners juggle demands from multiple clients as well as internal agency expectations, relationships with any in-house corporate PR team may become strained. While the in-house corporate practitioners often rely on the agency partners, they must also keep in mind that their needs are not the agency practitioners’ sole focus. Managing these relationship dynamics presents another challenge that corporate PR practitioners face in their daily roles.

Public relations scholars advocate for a dialogic, two-way approach to public relations and encourage practitioners to foster quality relationships with journalists, analysts and customers; however, the other side of the practitioner’s job requires securing organizational and executive buy-in before moving forward with any external communication strategies as well as managing relations with external agency partners on a daily basis. While the general theory of PR centers on improving relationships with external publics, it seems that internal relationship dynamics might be equally important to the role and performance of corporate PR practitioners. The PRSA offers accreditation in public relations (APR) through an exam on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) deemed most important in the field. The 2016 APR exam covers an updated list of KSAs that includes “Managing Relationships,” an objective that measures competencies for building relationships with internal stakeholders in addition to managing media relations, whereas the previous exam covered media relations only (PRSA, n.d.). Corporate PR practitioners should institute dialogic communication and focus on building quality relationships with external publics, but the literature suggests that the ability to manage internal stakeholder relationships may be a prerequisite for successful external relations.

3. Research questions

In order to better understand the relationship dynamics that public relations practitioners face in their daily roles and how those dynamics affect their performance, this study sought to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How do corporate public relations practitioners build relationships with external stakeholders?

First, we wanted to explore corporate public relations practitioners' orientation to relationship building and the extent to which dialogue was or was not occurring. Further, if practitioners were engaging in dialogic public relations, we wanted to understand the tactics they used to build these relationships.

RQ2. What challenges to external relationship building do corporate public relations departments face?

Second, much research has shown that dialogue is not occurring at the level public relations practitioners hope for. Forbes contributor [Cheryl Conner \(2013\)](#) noted most corporate communications departments openly admit that they could be doing a better job ([forbes.com](#)). To gain insights on what factors prevent dialogic public relations, we asked practitioners to describe the challenges they faced in their daily roles.

RQ3. How do internal relationship dynamics affect the role of the corporate public relations practitioner?

Finally, after building an understanding of what PR practitioners face on a daily basis by answering the prior research questions, we sought to understand how internal relationship dynamics affect the corporate PR practitioner's performance. We wanted to understand what ties, if any, these internal dynamics might have to the lack of external dialogic communication in corporate PR.

4. Method

This case study uses a qualitative methodology following [Yin's \(2003\)](#) guide for case study research design and methods. The researchers developed a single-case design to gather insights on the relationship dynamics practitioners face in their daily roles. As [Yin \(2003\)](#) explained, a single case can be used under this condition "to determine whether a theory's propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant" (p. 40). Similar to [Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin's \(2011\)](#) study of the American Red Cross's use of social media, this study uses in-depth interviews and observations to examine the public relations department holistically within the social setting of the organization. Focusing on a single case allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges surrounding the context of the corporate PR role.

In order to identify and describe variables involved in implementing dialogic theory in corporate PR, the researchers obtained IRB approval and then spent 12 weeks observing the public relations department of a Fortune 1000 technology company and interviewed 11 participants. Nine of the participants were in-house PR practitioners who spanned a range of experience and rank with job titles including Communications Director, Director of Corporate Public Relations, Senior Public Relations Manager, Senior Analyst Relations Manager, and Public Relations Manager. The nine in-house participants were responsible for PR functions across multiple business units, and they maintained a variety of PR focuses including corporate PR, product PR, education PR, thought leadership PR, analyst relations and social media business enablement. These practitioners were largely measured on KPIs consisting of the quantity, quality, and tone of the top-tier media coverage they were able to generate for the company.

The remaining two participants were PR practitioners employed at an external PR agency but working on the company's corporate account. The agency participants worked with the in-house team daily and advised the team on a variety of matters including developing communications strategies, assisting in crisis communication, pitching media, and following up on inbound media inquiries. The participants' agency titles were Senior Vice President and Senior Account Executive with 26 years and 4 years of PR experience respectively.

All 11 interviews were conducted in person after several weeks of observation. The interviews were recorded and lasted about 30 min. Data collection was concluded after reaching data saturation. The interviews were transcribed, stripped of identifiers, and then coded using [Strauss's \(1987\)](#) method for open and axial coding. Open coding categories were used to account for themes in external relationship building that were evidenced in the literature review of dialogic theory. Axial codes were applied to unexpected themes that emerged directly from the data, such as internal relationship dynamics. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and are used throughout the report to protect anonymity.

5. Findings

The majority of participants in this study recognized the importance of building mutually beneficial relationships, but overwhelmingly cited internal relationship dynamics as a barrier to external relationship building. In 11 interviews, participants mentioned dialogic principles a total of 46 times; barriers to implementing dialogic relationships a total of 25 times; and specifically named internal relationship dynamics as barriers to success a total of 62 times. The results indicate that the participants in this study find internal relationship dynamics to be a challenge that continually affects their ability to effectively carry out the PR function in their organization.

5.1. Dialogue in external relationship building

Since the interview participants held a wide variety of positions ranging from media relations to analyst relations to social media enablement, their external audiences also ranged from journalists to analysts to customers, though journalists were the largest focus with the majority of participants working specifically in media relations. Overall, nine of the 11 participants expressed that building quality relationships with external publics was a very important part of their job. However, two participants felt that creating strong corporate narratives and generating content was most important because newsworthy

stories would always attract journalists. Kay White, a manager, noted, “I really believe that if you have the right content and the right storyline, you can build a relationship with anyone.” Robert Jones, a director, echoed this sentiment saying, “From my point of view, I think it’s been easier for us to get coverage in top-tier media because of what [our company] has done.” While most participants did agree that they had more success in earning media coverage when they had hard news or large announcements, nine of the participants still saw external relationship building as providing vast benefits and contributing to their success.

Participants mentioned some principles of dialogic communication as important processes in external relationship building. Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles of commitment, mutuality and empathy were mentioned often, though the principles of propinquity and risk were seldom part of the conversation. Specifically, in 11 interviews, there were 18 mentions of commitment; 13 mentions of empathy; nine mentions of mutuality; four mentions of non-dialogic principles, such as securing quality story content; one mention of risk; and one mention of propinquity.

Commitment, defined by Kent and Taylor (2002) as holding conversations for mutual benefit rather than exploitation, emerged as a key tactic that participants used to create and foster relationships with journalists, analysts and customers. Many participants discussed the importance of keeping in constant contact with journalists and reaching out proactively to find out what the journalists were looking for. One participant explained:

There’s one reporter that I worked with in New York, and when I was out there I made a point to say. . . even if it wasn’t about news. . . ‘Hey, do you have a chance to grab some coffee? I’d love to pick your brain about stories you’re interested in and how [we] might be able to add value. – Malcolm Smith, manager

Similarly, an agency partner described the importance of holding mutually beneficial conversations with journalists saying:

Getting a better understanding of what they want and what they’re looking for will really help us figure out what we need to ask our client for. Do they need data? Do they need an exclusive? Do they need a certain executive? Those types of things. . . – Claire Wilson, agency practitioner

When asked about tactics for building relationships with journalists, another participant added:

You can think about really looking at the media that you’re interested in getting to know and start sending them story ideas so that you can be seen as a really great source of information and one that’s not always just representing your company. – Karen Lewis, director

These comments were coded as commitment due to the practitioners’ focus on communicating with external publics with the intent of building a mutually beneficial relationship rather than considering journalists as means to an end.

Empathy emerged as the second most common tactic for building external relationships. Kent and Taylor (2002) defined empathy as “supportiveness and acknowledgment of the other.” Participants often explained the importance of getting to know their publics on a more personal level and acknowledging their needs and interests by meeting them in person, following their work, connecting with them on social media to find out more about their hobbies, or incorporating non-work conversations into the professional relationship. Malcolm Smith, a manager, noted the importance of give and take and recognizing that not every point of contact needs to be about a news announcement. “At the end of the day, we’re just people, and you don’t want to come off as a robot,” Smith said. These comments were coded as empathy due to the emphasis of support and acknowledgment on both the professional and personal levels.

Participants mentioned mutuality as a relationship building tactic a total of nine times in 11 interviews. Closely related to commitment, Kent and Taylor (2002) defined mutuality as “an inclusion or collaborative orientation.” Participants oriented themselves toward mutuality describing the need to incorporate journalists’ and analysts’ feedback into organizational decision-making. One participant discussed a long-term relationship with an analyst who originally rated the company poorly in an analyst report, but after continued communication and collaboration, rated the company higher. Susan Richards, a manager, explained, “We continued on a cadence, and so every year he could really see that we’ve really shown momentum, we’ve really made progress, and we’ve listened to his criticisms and either done something about them or addressed them.” Participants also stressed the importance of providing reporters with interesting, quality stories to contribute to the reporters’ job security and earn the reporters’ trust, even if this meant taking months to secure a story. These comments were coded as mutuality to reflect the efforts of both parties—the PR practitioners and their publics—to work together to reach a mutually beneficial outcome.

Risk, which Kent and Taylor (2002) defined as “vulnerability and unexpected consequences,” was mentioned by one participant in reference to giving reporters information off the record. This participant explained the benefit of risk when working with journalists:

What I always fear about “off the record” is that a year from now they forget the terms of that conversation, and it may end up in a story. But, if you can give them some stuff off the record that is helpful to what they’re reporting on, and it gives them context. . . it just shows that you’re on their side, and you always want to show that you’re on their side and you’re helping them out because there are going to be a lot of times where you just can’t. –Rachel Watson, manager

Watson also noted the importance of knowing when to take a risk and when to be more conservative due to ramifications that could threaten job security. The participant based her openness to risk on the level of trust in the relationship with the journalist.

Last, propinquity, defined by Kent and Taylor (2002) as “consulting publics on issues that may affect them,” only surfaced once in a general reference to discussing a business model shift with industry analysts prior to making a formal announcement. The slim representation of the principles of risk and propinquity is not surprising given past research on the appearance of dialogue in corporate PR and the consideration that risk and propinquity are the two principles that require practitioners to put the publics’ interests ahead of the organization’s.

5.2. Challenges to external relationship building

Overall, the participants who identified external relationship building as an important part of the job admitted that they did not spend as much time as they should cultivating relationships. Participants named the lack of newsworthy content, the lack of trust in journalists, and general competition in the industry as common barriers to external relationship building. Because corporate PR practitioners are measured on their ability to secure media coverage, many of the participants equated challenges to relationship building with challenges to securing coverage. While simply securing coverage does not constitute a relationship, participants considered the first step to building a relationship as making initial contact. Participants described this first step as catching the reporters’ attention with the content they pitch, a process they characterized as the largest challenge in building external relationships. As noted before, two participants expressed that generating quality content and newsworthy stories was the most important function of the PR role because relationships with reporters would naturally follow. In contrast, the other nine participants believed in the opposite approach that building relationships with journalists and analysts would facilitate quality coverage. However, even the participants who named external relationship building as one of their primary goals felt that the lack of content was the number one challenge to building these relationships.

Participants defined lack of content as either not having newsworthy content, what reporters would call “hard news”; not having the content the reporter needed, such as an executive interview or proprietary information; or over-pitching the reporter in terms of quantity or quality. One participant explained that reporters are usually only interested in hard news. Anna Tucker, a manager, said, “I can tell you right now, if you have legitimate news, like product news, we will get coverage. We will get a response. It’s the proactive stuff that’s really, really tough.” Another participant discussed instances where a reporter may want an interview with the CEO, which the PR manager cannot always provide:

We decline giving the CEO. But depending on who it is, what the subject matter is, what the story is going to be about, we will likely offer a different executive. A lot of times it’s just really not a fit—it’s not the right leveling. But it could definitely come back and bite you in the end. – Rachel Watson, manager

In terms of over-pitching reporters, another participant described a common occurrence:

If you spend a ton of time hounding them with a bunch of emails, and then you finally convince them to come in for an interview, and they’re not getting anything meaty, you could just potentially blow it in one shot, for sure. – Malcolm Smith, manager

These comments, while geared toward securing coverage, do illustrate the practitioners’ understanding of mutual benefit in a dialogic relationship. The participants expressed that in order to build relationships with their external publics, they must offer their stakeholders beneficial content.

However, participants named a lack of trust in journalists as the second most common barrier to external relationship building, and participants often expressed concern over getting “burned” on stories. One participant shared an anecdote of noticing a change in the tone of coverage of one long-time reporter:

I remember making the recommendation that we not pre-brief her on our news because we had already seen the tone and tenor of her coverage, and I didn’t think it was worth the risk. Well, we got the directive that, no, we had to pre-brief her because we couldn’t hamper the relationship. So I said, ‘Ok. I disagree with it, but we’ll do it.’ And sure enough, the coverage was negative. It was very opinionated. And it was good that it played out that way because we were able to take that back to upper management and say, ‘Here’s the results. This is what we were trying to tell you.’ – Lisa Brown, manager

Another PR Manager explained her approach to these types of interactions:

It works both ways. Yeah, reporters get pinged all the time, but if I have something really good, and a reporter is always trying to get controversial or trying to fish for a story, then I’m not going to work with him again because we always get negative coverage. – Anna Tucker, manager

These comments represent a barrier to dialogue in PR that most literature in the field does not discuss: an obligation to upper management expectations that sometimes interferes with the practitioners’ ability to do their job. Practitioners guard against negative media coverage because it makes the company look bad and upsets top management. This act orients practitioners toward the interests of the organization rather than the public. In addition, practitioners are sometimes forced

to follow the directives of top management, even when these directives conflict with the practitioners' judgment, again shifting the focus from the public to the organization.

5.3. Internal relationship dynamics

While findings from the first two research questions are consistent with other findings in the literature, the third research question explored a phenomenon not often discussed in public relations theory but that nonetheless casts a shadow over the data from the prior two questions. Over the course of 11 interviews, participants made 46 mentions of external relationship building tactics, 25 mentions of barriers to external relationship building, and 62 mentions of internal processes that somehow affected their ability to perform functions of the PR role. In other words, the single most common comment type concerned internal relationships. References to internal relationship dynamics included working relationships with the external PR agency, a lack of time and resources, executive involvement in PR opportunities, and relationships with internal stakeholders. Participants largely described these dynamics as challenges or barriers to external relationship building.

The most common topic involved relationship dynamics between the in-house PR team and the external PR agency in regards to who should own relationships with media. The status quo of the department seemed to be delegating media relations to the agency and leveraging agency relationships when needed, although many participants expressed dissatisfaction with this approach. Malcolm Smith, a manager, noted, "I think it's a real danger to just give away all the press relationships to the agency. Although we need the agency, agency people leave, and when they leave, they take those relationships with them, and that's a big risk." Another participant expressed similar feelings:

Companies do it differently depending on where you are and what the structure is, but here, I feel as if the majority of those media relationships have been outsourced. So it's a really lean internal team and then the agency is the one kind of building those relationships. There's probably no right or wrong answer. . . . But I do feel like, especially if you're with an agency for an extended amount of time like [we have] been with our PR agency. . . . I think it's like 20-something years. . . . you have given up some of that equity to another entity. – Karen Lewis, director

While several participants felt the need to own at least some media relationships themselves, there were almost equal mentions of reasons to rely on the agency. Participants attributed this reliance to an inability to handle media demand. One manager described it specifically as "a resource thing." Another explained:

We have hundreds of contacts, and I personally could not own a hundred targets, so I might pick out my top 15 or 20 contacts who I've worked with more regularly in the past, who know me, who I have some rapport with. – Malcolm Smith, manager

Claire Wilson, an agency practitioner, noted seeing a shift in the industry towards in-house practitioners owning more media relations, but still argued for the value of the agency describing agency practitioners as "more responsive" because "that's their end goal, and their job is to work with [reporters]." This comment is particularly interesting in that it begs the question: if it is the agency practitioner's job to work with media, then what is the in-house practitioner's job? The in-house participants' juxtaposition of the need to rely on the agency with the dissatisfaction in having to do so indicates a source of frustration for corporate PR practitioners that stems from an obligation to internal stakeholders. The participants expressed a desire to spend more time managing media relations, but described internal communication processes as consuming the majority of their time.

The in-house practitioners spoke often about these obligations to internal stakeholders as well as the need for executive support. The discussions of relationship dynamics with internal stakeholders took a variety of approaches. One participant described the difficulty in balancing the needs of internal and external stakeholders:

We have two constituents we've got to make happy—our press, because as a PR person, my customer is the reporter. . . .but, at the same time, I've got to make my executives and my internal stakeholders happy by getting coverage that's going to drive the business and customer sales. So it's a really tough balance. – Lisa Brown, manager

Another participant described the corporate culture and how it affected the public relations role:

It's a double-edged sword. I love that it's a very collaborative culture. However, when it comes time to making a decision, with PR, we usually have quicker deadlines. If a reporter is reaching out to me today saying, 'I need to talk to someone about this,' it's not like, 'I'll get back to you in three days.' You need to get back to them in maybe three hours or by the end of the day at the latest. We have a very bureaucratic culture where we have to get through a lot of red tape sometimes. . . .like, 'oh, you know, we have to get so-and-so to buy off on this, and then they need to get it approved by someone else'. . . . And then, things get distilled down so much that sometimes you lose the essence of the message you were trying to convey in the first place, or you just completely miss the opportunity. – Malcolm Smith, manager

Participants also deliberated the balance between needing to be in tune with media coverage and media relations but not having adequate time to perform these duties due to internal demands. Karen Lewis, a director, explained, "A lot of times internally you're in meetings, and you're not able to give that quick turn." However, Lewis also deemed maintaining media

relationships important saying, “It strengthens our ability to counsel people internally about what the media are looking for and how we can tell the story for those audiences.” These comments reflect the view that the strategic management role of PR requires practitioners to fluctuate between internal and external stakeholder audiences, yet further demonstrates that PR practitioners experience difficulty in managing both audiences at the same time.

Finally, in-house practitioners described executive involvement in public relations as necessary for success. One participant expressed frustration with the current level of executive involvement:

If getting coverage and improving our brand recognition and innovation standing is a priority for our executives, they need to make it a priority. Doing one interview a quarter per executive is not going to cut it. They need to make time and make it a priority in their day and in their week to be part of the relationship building with press. There’s only so much that PR can do. – Kay White, manager

Another participant explained that much of her job involves pitching stories internally to executives and upper management just like she would pitch stories externally to journalists. She described one scenario of trying to secure coverage in a top-tier publication saying:

It was a goal of ours—we wanted to get in there. But we had to sell it in internally. We had to sell it in that [this publication] was the global leader. . . and then we had to sell it in that [the CEO] should give his time. . . So it was selling it to the reporter and the publication, selling it internally, and then having everything marry together. – Rachel Watson, manager

In addition, Watson noted that upper management turned down 90 percent of the PR opportunities internally before external negotiations could even be developed. Another participant noted:

I think one thing that holds us back is that we don’t have the kind of executives who are out there with the media, who invest time in doing that, who are controversial. . . [Our CEO] is a great CEO, believe you me. He has done an incredible job in transitioning the company, but I think he would be the first to say that he is not an outward-bound CEO selling the company. – Robert Jones, director

Overall, practitioners described executive involvement in PR opportunities as providing conversational currency for media—a valuable requirement in establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with external stakeholders and one that the PR department alone cannot satisfy.

6. Discussion and conclusions

While scholars continue to advocate for a dialogic approach to public relations, research has shown that little progress has been made in incorporating this theory into public relations practice. The majority of participants in this study recognized the importance of building mutually beneficial relationships with external publics but cited relationship dynamics within the organization as barriers to accomplishing this goal. Participants particularly expressed a willingness to incorporate Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles of commitment, mutuality, and empathy into their public relations approach, yet the principles of risk and propinquity—principles that truly require practitioners to put the publics’ interests ahead of the organization’s—were missing from participants’ discussions of external relationship building. Overall, principles of dialogue emerged, but dialogue as an orientation to public relations was not fully embraced.

These findings are not surprising given previous research in the field; however, this study does reveal interesting insights into why dialogic theory seems so difficult to achieve in corporate PR. When questioned about external relationship building tactics and challenges to relationship building, participants made a total of 62 references to internal relationship dynamics and communication processes that somehow affected their ability to perform functions of the PR role.

Based on these findings, some interesting conclusions seem to emerge. Specifically, in-house corporate PR participants referenced complicated relationships with their external PR agency; difficulty balancing internal and external stakeholder needs; and a lack of executive support for the PR function as barriers to external relationship building. Participants also described a lack of newsworthy content as one of the biggest challenges in external relationship building, yet this topic can also be linked to internal relationship dynamics. When discussing the struggle to create newsworthy content to secure top-tier media coverage, one participant explained, “This PR team really needs to continue educating executive management on the difference between marketing messaging and news because that’s where the big disconnect is here, and it always has been.” This statement directly correlates with the theoretical discussion of the PR practitioner as a technician versus a strategic manager and the need for managers to be able to alternate between internal and external stakeholder audiences to gain the right to counsel executive management and expand the PR role within the organization (Beurer-Zullig et al., 2009; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Hogg & Doolan, 1999; Moriarty, 1994; Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Zeffass et al., 2014). Yet even though PR scholarship recognizes the separate roles and responsibilities of PR technicians and managers, PR practitioners still struggle to elevate their status in the organization, and little research has provided guidance on how to do so.

Dialogic theory has been proposed as a strategy for elevating the status of the organization-public relationship and therefore the role of the corporate PR practitioner (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Botan, 1997; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Macnamara, 2006), yet research has shown that dialogue as an orientation is not being implemented in the field of PR. This study

suggests that while corporate PR practitioners are open to principles of dialogue, internal relationship dynamics and internal stakeholder demands act as a barrier to external relationship building. While the field continues to focus on building theory to support external relationship management as a channel for advancing the practice (Ledingham, 2003; Smith, 2012), internal relationship dynamics within the organization prevent PR practitioners from being able to focus on external relations and perform their job functions. In-house corporate PR practitioners outsource many external relationships to PR agencies in order to focus on internal stakeholder needs and the expectations of executive management, yet still struggle to succeed in the strategic management capacity (Zerfass et al., 2014).

This study examined Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic theory of public relations and has provided an alternative set of explanations as to why dialogic theory is not being implemented in practice. We argue that the corporate PR practitioner's ability to manage internal stakeholder relationships is a prerequisite to successful external relations. To advance the profession, corporate PR practitioners must be able to enact a strategic management role, communicate value to top management, counsel executive leadership, and attain internal stakeholder buy-in for communications campaigns.

7. Limitations and future research

While we consider these findings to be beneficial in advancing both theoretical and practical considerations for the field of public relations, limitations exist. As a single-case study of a PR department at only one Fortune 1000 Company, findings are specific to this organization and may not represent corporate PR on a broad spectrum. With a small sample size, our findings cannot be generalized; however, we hope that this study may be used as a model for identifying commonalities in other corporate PR departments and conceptualizing new approaches in the field.

An additional limitation is the scope of the study. While the case study approach employed provided valuable insights and great depth of understanding in particular areas, it left gaps in understanding how the organization functions in other areas. For example, future research should explore how crisis communication and corporate social responsibility are managed internally and externally, and how those dynamics influence relationships within the organization. Future studies should also look for the connections across departmental boundaries, for example the type of relationship that the PR team has with the marketing department – assuming the two are not integrated entities. Also, questions related to the size of budget, level of experience and training, and time on the job should all be assessed to understand the nature of dialogue and relationships within this type of context. Lastly, more research is needed to provide theoretical guidance to educate practitioners on strategies for internal relationship management.

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