Key roles played by PR/Communication departments: The perspective of senior communication practitioners from Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This study is part of a first time international collaboration surveying senior communication practitioners. This research concerns only the NZ sample (N=107). The work investigated the extent to which these practitioners perceived that six key roles should be played by the PR/Communication department and whether these roles have actually been adopted in their organizations. Results from this research indicate that the key role least supported, on average, by respondents pertained to communicating rather than formulating policy. In contrast, the highest rating was associated with defining the company’s identity and core value. Importantly, for the latter key role, ratings were not significantly different for participants working in organizations that adopted (vs. did not adopt) the practices comprising this key role. With one exception, average ratings of key roles did not differ significantly for respondents working in central marketing communication and central PR/Communication departments.

Keywords: senior communication practitioners, key roles and practices in organizations
Introduction

In the last decades, the exercise of public relations in the social arena has become more visible and diverse. In light of this trend, it has become increasingly important to ensure that a common professional framework for public relations exists (Hallahan, 1993). To this end, important questions need to be answered to frame public relations and its role: “What is it that public relations does? Persuade? Communicate? Change attitudes? Alter behaviour? Avert crisis? Appease clients? Strike harmony?” (Hallahan, 1993, p. 198).

Although many attempts have been made to conceptualize public relations, scholars and practitioners have yet to reach a clear consensus. To further complicate conceptual aspects, some of the functions pertaining to PR departments are often performed by marketing departments and vice-versa. Consistent with this landscape, and taking into account the functions performed by public relations practitioners, some scholars argued that it is important to analyse and set apart the roles that public relations and marketing departments perform at both the organizational and individual levels (J.E. Grunig & L.A. Grunig, 1998; J.E. Grunig et al., 2002; Hutton, 2010; Macnamara, 2012; Spicer, 1991). This argument is valid, as conceptual vagueness in pinpointing the functions of public relations and marketing might result in overlapping work and sometimes conflicting situations between the two departments, which, in time, might affect the organizational management of the company (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Heath & Coombs, 2006; Moye & Langfred, 2004).

Given these considerations, it is important to understand the main functions, that is, the key roles of PR/Communication departments, especially in a country with a small PR sector such as New Zealand. Due to the fact that, in general, PR teams in New Zealand companies are relatively small, it would be of interest to identify whether senior PR/Communication practitioners who are responsible for communication-related components may also have other duties involving marketing product advertising, corporate communication, crisis management, etc. Such an investigation would be able to highlight the main responsibilities these senior PR practitioners have in their organizations as well as to identify how the organizations that employ them make use of the PR function (e.g., to support other departments; J. E. Grunig, 2009).

This study aims to advance understanding the role of the PR/Communication departments in New Zealand companies. To this end, it used data collected from senior communication practitioners. The research was conducted in New Zealand as part of an international collaboration among six countries. Specifically, the Globally Accepted Practices (GAP) project was undertaken by the University of Southern California (USC), Annenberg Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center in the US since 2002. In late 2013 the project extended to other five nations (i.e., Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa) with the support of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. The goals of the project were to analyse the interrelationships between PR/Communication and organisational mission, strategy, character, and management. With such diverse goals, the international collaboration proved important in our understanding of the global trend.

Within the GAP framework, this investigation focused on six key roles/functions that could be played by PR/Communication departments: (a) defining identity and core values of the company; (b) assuring that the company adheres to its identity and core values; (c) defining the overall business strategy of a company; (d) communicating rather than formulating policy; (e) serving as a mediator between the organization and its stakeholders; and (f) serving as an advocate in support of organizational goals. To enhance knowledge of these key roles/functions, this research investigated the extent to which senior communication practitioners in New Zealand regarded each of them as important. In addition, the study examined whether ratings of agreement/disagreement with a statement that a PR/Communication department should play a given key role were
consistent across (i) organizations that adopted (vs. did not adopt) the practices comprising the corresponding key role and (ii) different types of PR/Communication departments.

This research could advance extant knowledge in three potentially important ways. First, it charts which of the core roles played by the PR/Communication departments in today’s organizations are endorsed most strongly by senior PR practitioners. Second, it evaluates whether differences in industry-specific factors (e.g., the type of organization) and company-specific contexts (e.g., whether or not a given role has been adopted in a company) are related to how senior practitioners view these roles (i.e., how strongly they endorse each function of PR). Third, it contributes to a growing corpus of knowledge highlighting the differences in conceptions of public relations in different national contexts.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical approaches to public relations and its roles/functions

Both theorizing regarding PR and examinations of public relations practices benefit from understanding the role that PR plays within the larger society (Taylor, 2010). In line with this argument, and building on the work of Botan and Taylor (2004), Taylor (2010) noted that one approach to defining PR highlights its functional role in society (a role that has been contested heavily). When this conceptual lens is adopted, it places the creation and dissemination of information – that assists an organization in attaining its goals – at the forefront of public relations’ societal role (Taylor, 2010).

A second strand of research and theorizing, grouped under the umbrella term of “cocreational approach” (Taylor, 2010, p. 6) embraced a broader view of the role of public relations in society than that espoused by a functional perspective (Taylor, 2010). More precisely, sharing a cocreational perspective to PR involves conceptualizing public relations’ role in society as a key facilitator for constructing and negotiating shared meanings, goals, and interpretations, as well as building relationships (Taylor, 2010; see also Botan & Taylor, 2004).

A third paradigmatic conceptualization of public relations proposed that PR’s main societal role is to facilitate the conditions necessary for the enactment of civil society and, thus, the production of social capital (Taylor, 2010). Given the central role of rhetoric in the enactment of civil society (Taylor, 2010), important benefits derive from examining PR from a rhetorical tradition perspective (e.g., analysing ethical principles of public policy; investigating issues of social responsibility) (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Bardhan and Weaver (2011) argued that taking into consideration “critical/cultural, interpretive, and postmodern approaches that theorize public relations as playing a significant role in the social construction of reality” (p. 2) helps enhance understandings of public relations practices. In light of this view, it is not surprising that critical approaches to public relations theorizing have received growing attention in the last two decades. An examination of PR theorizing and practice from a critical perspective emphasizes three important aspects: (i) Market deregulation, corporatization, and Western-style capitalism are key drivers of the growth of PR industry (Weaver, 2011); (ii) Organizations help establish and perpetuate the power structures that benefit them (Toth, 2010). Notably, given the multifaceted nature of power, an assessment of PR practices should include both studies of resistance and examinations of how these practices contribute to “the production of ‘new imaginaries’ and material changes” (Weaver, 2011, p. 262; see also Edwards, 2011); and (iii) The global PR industry fosters a tendency to accept privileging of dominant economic interests (Weaver, 2011).

These arguments notwithstanding, Sriramesh (2007) noted that “public relations is fundamentally a communication activity” (p. 509). The role of communication in PR has
also been emphasized by Macnamara (2012) who argued that “communication permeates” (p. 22) multiple facets and roles of PR. Along the same lines with Macnamara (2012), in New Zealand (according to New Zealand Qualifications Authority) public relations is defined by the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. It is about building and managing relationships and communication processes”. This definition is consistent with functional role of public relations in the society. Nevertheless, other scholars stated that the practice of public relations encompasses much more than communication. In this sense, Budd Jr. (1995) claimed that limiting public relations to communication is diminishing the practice. Given these incongruent views of PR and its roles, and the fact that this paper explores the key roles of PR in society that New Zealand practitioners endorse, in the following, I overview some key aspects of the public relations roles.

Public relations roles

According to Dozier and Broom (2006) organizational roles are “conceptual maps that summarize the most salient features of day-to-day behaviors of organizational members” (p. 137). Research in this area started more than three decades ago with Broom and Smith (1979) who examined clients’ perception of the roles or duties performed by public relations professionals. Broom and Smith (1979) identified five major roles in public relations: the expert prescriber, the problem-solving/task facilitator, the communication process facilitator, the technical services provider, and the acceptant legitimizer. Given that empirical findings did not support the conceptualization of the acceptant legitimizer, this role was dropped from consideration. Later on, Broom (1982) redefined and renamed the four roles as: the expert prescriber, the problem-solving process facilitator, the communication facilitator, and the communication technician.

In Broom’s (1982) conceptualization, the expert prescriber role entails full control on all aspects of the PR process, from defining the problem, developing a program, and implementing it. The problem-solving process facilitator role requires being involved and providing leadership in all aspects of the PR work. Thus, this role is similar in scope with the expert prescriber role. The major point of distinction between these two roles is that the former has collaboration with other senior members of the organization as its key feature. In contrast, the latter involves full control on, and responsibility for, all components of the PR program. The communication facilitator role entails maintaining a seamless communication flow among all stakeholders (e.g., organization, public). As a consequence, this role is narrower in scope (as well as more strictly focused) than both the expert prescriber and the problem-solving process facilitator roles. The fourth role, namely that of communication technician, is the most narrow in scope of all roles proposed by Broom (1982). Specifically, it involves a set of specialized communication and journalistic aptitudes and skills needed in the development and production of PR materials.

Dozier (1983) conducted additional research on these four roles and considered that a simplification of their taxonomy was needed. To this end, he further combined the first three roles in what is currently known as the manager role and kept the technician role as a separate one. Importantly, regardless of the type of role-classification used, it is unlikely that the work performed by any public relations practitioner can be subsumed exactly under the umbrella of a single role (Broom, 2009; Dozier & Broom, 1995). Nevertheless, it is possible that one dominant role is enacted more often than others (Broom, 2009).

Notably, Sison (2010) argued that research in the area of PR roles did not advance substantially beyond the manager-technical typology developed earlier by Broom and Dozier. To overcome this limitation, Sison (2010) interviewed Australian communication practitioners and ascertained their involvement in organizational value setting. Following a multiple perspective approach, Sison (2010) developed a new framework for PR roles that
Key roles played by PR/Communication departments: The perspective of senior communication practitioners from Aotearoa New Zealand

encompasses three agency roles: agent of corporate compliance; agent of concertive control and agent of critical conscience.

In Sison’s (2010) conceptualization, the role of the agent of corporate compliance involves supporting the CEO and the executive team and developing a program to disseminate the company values. As a consequence, PR practitioners working in this role have limited opportunities to question corporate rules and play an influential role in their organization(s). The second role, namely that of the agent of concertive control, emphasizes collaboration and consultation within the multifaceted process of organizational values-setting, helps implement a meaning making system that is aligned to the management (rather than employees agenda), and promotes organizational stability. The final role, the one of the agent of critical conscience, entails fully participating in all stages and phases of identifying and defining organizational values. PR practitioners working in this role are committed to dialectical processes, value debate, critique and fresh ideas. Moreover, they play a key role in the company. These efforts of defining and characterizing PR roles notwithstanding, Sison (2010) also made the case that changes in organizational settings and shifts in the types of work PR practitioners undertake require a continuous revisiting of the typology of public relations roles.

Research questions

This phase of the GAP study was exploratory and, hence, did not impose pre-set research questions for the participating countries. Thus, the questions in the paper are formulated by the researcher.

RQ1: To what extent senior communication practitioners in New Zealand think that a PR/Communication department should play certain key roles in an organization?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in practitioners’ ratings of given key roles for respondents working in organizations that adopted (vs. did not adopt) the practices comprising the respective key roles?

RQ3: Are there differences in practitioners’ ratings of key roles for respondents working in different types of PR/Communication departments?

Methods

Given the research’s focus on (i) assessing NZ senior communication practitioners’ evaluation of PR/Communication key roles and (ii) examining similarities and differences of key roles’ ratings across various independent groups, a survey is the most appropriate and efficient method of data collection. The data were analysed by means of quantitative data analytic techniques (i.e., frequencies, measures of central tendency and variability; independent sample t-test). These methods can be appropriately used to explore the data and provide essential information to answer all three research questions.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into five sections: 1) About the organization you work for; 2) About the PR/Communication department; 3) About PR/Communication practices and responsibilities; 4) About use of and relationships with outside agencies; 5) About the respondent. It consisted of a total of 52 items, with some items having multiple sub questions. The online survey required about 30 minutes to complete; participants had the chance to record their answers in one or more sittings. Results are reported in an aggregated form and no reference is made to any specific organization.
Sampling, data collection, procedure, and participants

The sampling frame for the online surveys comprised senior communication practitioners from New Zealand who were not working for an agency. The majority of participants were employed by government agencies/military (48%), private companies (14.7%), non-profit agencies (12.7%), and publicly traded companies (11.8%). This group was selected to be consistent with the frame used by the other five nations participating in the study (Australia, Brazil, Canada, South Africa, and the United States). Most participating senior communication practitioners were recruited by means of the database of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ). The participation in the study was voluntary and involved no incentives.

Prospective participants received an e-mail invitation containing the link to the online survey questionnaire, which was hosted on the Qualtrics platform. The data were collected between November 2013 and March 2014. A total of 107 senior communication practitioners participated in the study. Of the participants who answered the question regarding their current position in the company/organization, 42.3% were the most senior communication professional in their organization. In addition, 19.2% reported directly to the most senior communication professional in their organization and had significant management responsibility. Moreover, 9% were senior communications professionals responsible for managing communications for a unit or division of their organization, and 23.1% were communication professionals reporting to a senior communication executive. Finally, 2.6% were the most senior internal communications professionals in their organizations.

Among the participants who provided data on these demographics, the majority were female (81.30%), were the most senior communication professional in their organisation (42.3%), had postgraduate/graduate school or higher education (50%), and represented the government/public administration industry (48%). The academic areas in which respondents earned their degrees were communication (14%), journalism (12.1%), marketing (7.5%), public relations (10.3%), business administration (2.8%) and other (12.1%; no further elaboration). The remaining of the participants did not answer this question.

Data analysis

The online survey data was analysed using the SPSS software. Details regarding the analyses performed and the results are reported in the next section.

Results

Key roles of the PR/Communication departments

This study investigated six key roles that could be played by the PR/Communication departments: a) defining the identity and core values of company/organization; b) assuring that the company/organization adheres to its identity and core values; c) defining the overall business strategy of a company/organization; d) communicating, rather than formulating policy; e) serving as a mediator between the organization and its stakeholders; and f) serving as an advocate in support of organizational goals. To obtain information on these aspects, respondents were asked (i) to rate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed that a PR/communication department should play a given role; and (ii) to indicate whether each of the six key roles/practices has been adopted in their respective organization. For (i), the answers were recorded on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) Likert scale. Thus, higher values indicate stronger agreement with the stated key role of the PR/Communication department. For (ii), participants selected between Yes and No boxes for each key role.
Among the six key roles investigated, the lowest average rating ($M=3.87, SD=1.67$) corresponded to the primary role of communicating rather than formulating policy. The highest average rating ($M=6.36, SD=0.74$) corresponded to the key role of defining the identity and core values of the company. The average values of the remaining key roles were as follows: assuring that the company/organization adheres to its identity and core values ($M=6.06, SD=0.90$); serving as an advocate in support of organizational goals ($M=5.50, SD=1.00$) defining the overall business strategy of a company/organization ($M=5.25, SD=1.16$); serving as a mediator between the organization and its stakeholders ($M=5.12, SD=1.25$). In the next step of the analysis, I used independent t-tests to examine whether ratings of each key role were different for organizations that adopted vs. did not adopt the practices described in the given key role. The results of these analyses revealed that there were no significant differences between these two groups with regard to the following key roles: 1) defining identity and core values; 2) serving as a mediator between the organization and its stakeholders; and 3) serving as an advocate in support of organizational goals.

Agreement with the statement that PR/Communication department should play a key role in assuring that the company/organization adheres to its identity and core values was higher, on average, for respondents in whose companies this key role was adopted ($M=6.21, SD=0.84$) compared to those in whose companies it was not ($M=5.69, SD=0.95$). Agreement with the stance that PR/Communication department should play a key role in defining the overall business strategy of a company/organization was higher for respondents in whose companies this key role was adopted ($M=5.92, SD=0.90$) compared to those in whose companies it was not ($M=5.05, SD=1.16$). Finally, agreement with the statement that PR/Communication department should play a key role in communicating, rather than formulating policy was higher for respondents in whose companies this key role was adopted ($M=4.33, SD=1.54$) compared to those in whose companies it was not ($M=2.33, SD=1.07$).

Differences in ratings of key roles across types of PR/Communication department

To investigate whether or not ratings of key roles were homogeneous across different types/structures of PR/Communication department or functions, I used independent t-tests to compare these ratings across the two structures of PR/Communication department function with the largest number of respondents. These comparisons could not be conducted on other types/structures because of small/very small number of participants. The first structure analysed was: a central marketing communication department with complete enterprise-wide responsibility for all forms of external communication (i.e., marketing product advertising, corporate communication, crisis management, PR in support of products or services, etc.) ($N=22$). The second structure was: a central PR/Communication department with complete enterprise-wide responsibility for all PR/Communication activities, including support of products or services, support of business units, corporate communication, crisis management, etc.), but excluding product marketing etc. ($N=20$). The only significant difference between these two groups (i.e., central marketing communication and central PR/Communication departments) in terms of ratings of key roles/functions pertained to whether PR/Communication departments should play a key role in defining the overall business strategy of the company/organization. More specifically, respondents representing a central marketing communication department agreed more strongly with this key role ($M=5.59, SD=1.22$) than their counterparts from a central PR/Communication department ($M=4.84, SD=1.17$). In addition, chi-square analyses revealed that, for all six key roles, whether or not a certain key role was adopted in the respondents’ organization was not significantly associated with the structure/nature of their PR/Communication department/function (i.e., central marketing communication department vs. central PR/Communication department).
Discussion

This study examined how senior communication practitioners from New Zealand perceived the roles that should be played by a PR/Communication department. In addition, the research analysed the extent to which these perceptions were different for organizations that adopted (vs. did not adopt) the practices comprising the respective key roles as well as for companies that have distinct types of primary business.

An important point of distinction between the conceptualization of the PR’s key roles in this research and the extant literature (e.g., Broom, 1982; Sison, 2010) needs to be highlighted. Specifically, in this work the key roles studied encompass a more focused set of functions (e.g., communicating policy) than it is the case in prior research (e.g., define a problem, develop and implement a program; Broom, 1982). At the same time, there are important overlaps in how these key roles are conceptualized. In particular, the first PR function we investigated in this study (i.e., defining identity and core values of the company) is a key facet of Sison’s (2010) agent of critical conscience role. In addition, the second role examined in this research (i.e., assuring that the company adheres to its identity and core values) maps well onto the broader role of agent of corporate compliance (Sison, 2010). Finally, the fourth role assessed in this work (i.e., communicating rather than formulating policy) parallels Broom’s (1982) communication technician role.

Findings from this research show that for the key role having the highest overall mean value (i.e., defining the company identity and core values), the magnitude of the ratings did not depend on whether this key role was adopted in a respondent’s company. Given this aspect and noting that the mean rating for this key role was close to the top of the measurement scale, findings suggest that, overall, participants in this research regarded this key role as pivotal for a PR/Communication department. This conclusion is further strengthened by the finding that average ratings of this key role did not differ significantly across the two structures of PR/Communication department compared in this research, namely central marketing communication and central PR/Communication. Interestingly, practices comprising this key role are not among the ones discussed by Hallahan’s (1993) study and overlap only to a small degree to the dimensions he interrogated.

An analysis of this finding from the perspective of the PR roles (Broom, 1982, 2009; Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1983; Dozier & Broom, 1995) suggests that defining the company’s identity and core values was regarded by the senior communication practitioners surveyed as a dominant role for a PR/Communication department. Additionally, the fact that several other key roles received high (very high) ratings is in line with prior findings/arguments (e.g., Broom, 2009; Dozier & Broom, 1995) that PR/Communication practitioners are likely to play, simultaneously, multiple roles in their organizations.

Results in this study suggest that, even in organizations in which the PR/Communication department was tasked to communicate rather than formulate policy, participants’ agreement with this role was lukewarm at best. Importantly, for senior practitioners working in companies that did not adopt this role, average ratings of this item were very low. These findings are in sharp contrast with those associated with the key role of defining the organization’s identity and core values; this latter key role was considered salient regardless of one’s employer adopting it or not.

However, the finding that communication practitioners rated much weaker the key role of simply communicating rather than formulating policy compared to the key role of defining the company’s identity and core value, should not be interpreted as suggesting that these participants did not consider that communicating is a significant part of their role. In fact, taken together, these results point that senior communication practitioners surveyed in this study, did not endorse, strongly a limiting view of their roles as comprising
only/mostly communicating (e.g., a communication technician role in Broom’s 1982 conceptualization).

To frame these findings, it is important to note that respondents in this study were senior PR/Communication practitioners who, due to their seniority, are likely to be part of the conversations concerning organizational policy. This is why, it may not be surprising that they had the lowest level of agreement with the statement that the primary role of the PR/Communication departments should be to communicate rather than formulate policy. Given this finding, at least for this group of respondents, the answer to one of Hallahan’s (1993) question (i.e., whether one of the main roles of PR should only be to communicate) appears to be negative. In addition, although this result is not inconsistent with Sriramesh’s (2007) argument that communication is at the core of PR, it underlines that senior PR/Communication practitioners perceived the roles of their departments in a broader framework that included, but was not limited to, communicating (e.g., the role of agent of critical conscience; Sison, 2010). This finding is in line with the standpoints of Budd Jr (1997) and Macnamara (2012) and is similar to GAP findings from American and Canadian samples.

Limitations of the study and future research

Like any research, this study is not without limitations. First, a rather low participation limited the nature and type of between-group comparisons that could be conducted. Intriguingly, a similarly low rate of participation was recorded for Australia; there, as described by Macnamara (2014), the total number of respondents was 74. A plausible hypothesis for the low participation rate in these two countries is that the online survey was quite lengthy and may have been regarded as too time consuming by senior communication practitioners. Second, the lack of a qualitative component limited the type and nature of information collected. To overcome this drawback, future research could use focus groups, interviews, or field observations. Third, our participants were recruited only from practitioners that did not work for an agency. This restriction was imposed to (i) align with the requirements of the online survey administered in the other five participating nations and (ii) to avoid overlap with the Trends survey administered in New Zealand by PRINZ every two years. The Trends Survey compiles responses from the sector (inhouse and consultancy) and reports on industry demographics, remuneration, work areas and expected growth, education/professional development and social media use (PRINZ, 2015). Given that the perspectives of senior communication practitioners working for agencies might differ considerably from those of their counterparts who are employed outside agencies, future research could examine endorsement of these significant key roles in the former population and contrast findings with those reported here.

Bardhan and Weaver (2011) argued that a multi-paradigmatic approach to examining PR and its functional roles in society would be beneficial (for a similar stance see McKie & Munshi, 2005; Sison, 2010). Hence, it follows that analysing the six key roles targeted in this research (as well as others) from a critical perspective that extends beyond the organization to the society at large would be timely and valuable. Unfortunately, this worthy goal could not be accomplished in this research due to the study’s precise focus on the PR role in organizations. Future research could investigate this aspect. Finally, the GAP 2017 study found that about 50% of PR professionals and over 60% of marketing executives from North America who were surveyed believed that these two fields will become increasingly aligned in the near future. Considering this hypothesis in the light of findings from this study, a productive direction of future research would be to explore the extent to which this trend is also apparent in the New Zealand context (I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion regarding this direction of future inquiry).
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Key roles played by PR/Communication departments: The perspective of senior communication practitioners from Aotearoa New Zealand

References


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