



OBJECTIVES

Objectives are central to a strategic approach to public relations that is based on research. An objective specifies exactly what is desired from a public relations action. An objective is created from the information collected through formative/background research. Evaluative research is used to determine whether or not the public relations action achieved the objective—whether it was a success or a failure. (Refer to “Formative research” for clarification on the connection between objectives and public relations research.)

Objectives are generally written using the word *to* and then an action verb such as *increase*, *reduce*, *earn*, or *convince*. An objective must be quantifiable; you must be able to measure it in some way. Moreover, the objective should specify the amount of desired change stated as a number or percentage. It is the specificity of an objective that creates the clear standard for judging success. The following objectives are measurable and specific: (a) “to increase attendance at the 2004 charity auction to 120” and (b) “to convince 60 percent of employees to support the restructuring proposal.” A person can count the number of participants to determine if 120 people attended or use a survey to assess employee support for the

restructuring program to see if it reaches 60 percent. Evaluation becomes possible because of the ability to measure an objective and compare it against a specific standard. Some experts recommend that an objective include a target date or deadline. This increases specificity by indicating the date for the desired change to be achieved. You need to decide what time frame is appropriate for your objective. For instance, the second objective could be rewritten as “to convince 60 percent of employees to support the restructuring proposal by the end of June.”

There are many different types of objectives. One distinction is between *process* and *outcome* objectives. A process objective checks to determine if certain steps were taken in the preparation and execution of a public relations action. Sample process objectives include writing a news release, getting approval of Web pages, or securing a permit for a city park. Each of these actions can be converted to a full objective. “To send out a news release to 20 media outlets by July 7.” “To receive management approval of the Web pages by October 13th.” “To secure the permit for the park development fun run by March 11th.” All three of these objectives are measurable; you have either completed the action or not, and each one has a set time for when the action should be completed. Process objectives

address the question “Did we do what we were supposed to do?” A public relations action can fail because a certain action or step was not taken. Process objectives are a checklist for actions or steps that must be taken in your public relations action. This checklist is developed as part of the planning process and used to review the execution of the public relations action.

Outcome objectives are used to determine the success or failure of the public relations action. An outcome objective specifies what the public relations action hoped to achieve. A proper outcome objective often includes the target stakeholder(s) because public relations actions are focused on specific target stakeholder(s)—whom the message is designed to reach and affect. When appropriate, include a specific target stakeholder in the objective. The objective “to convince 60 percent of employees to support the restructuring proposal by the end of June” indicates employees would be the target. You would not include a target stakeholder if you were trying to reach a very general audience as in the objective “to increase attendance at the 2004 charity auction to 120.”

Outcome objectives can be divided into three groups: (a) *knowledge*, (b) *attitude*, and (c) *behavioral*. Knowledge objectives center on learning: The target stakeholders know something after the public relations action that they did not know before the action. There are three types of knowledge objectives: (a) *exposure*, (b) *comprehension*, and (c) *retention*. Exposure means that the target stakeholder(s) has an opportunity to see or hear the public relations action. The public relations action appears in some media or location the target stakeholder uses, such as a newspaper, radio, or Web site. Comprehension is the ability of the target stakeholder(s) to understand the message. A message must be written in a fashion and in a language the target can understand. Retention means that the target stakeholder(s) remembers information about the public relations action. Ideally, the three informational objectives are related to one another. Stakeholders must be exposed to a message in order to comprehend it and must understand a message if they are to remember it properly.

Attitude objectives attempt to change how people think or feel. An attitude can be defined as an evaluation of some object. “I love turkey” or “I dislike traffic” are examples of attitudes. In each case an evaluation (*love* and *dislike*) is made of some object (*turkey* and *traffic*). For an outcome objective, a public relations practitioner is trying to change the attitude of some target stakeholder/audience. The public relations action should alter the target stakeholder’s evaluation of a particular object. “At the end of the three-month campaign, current customers will have a 15 percent increase in the approval of IBM’s customer service department.” The target stakeholders in this objective would be current customers, and the object is IBM’s customer service department. People should hold different attitudes after they encounter the public relations effort than before it. Reputation is a form of attitude and is a common focus of public relations actions.

A behavioral objective seeks to alter the way people act. Behavior change is the most difficult of the three outcome objectives. People are more likely to resist behavior change than to resist new information or even alter an attitude. People are creatures of habits, and we do not like to change those habits—our behaviors. In a behavioral objective, the public relations action is trying to change how a people act. The target stakeholder should act differently after the public relations effort than before it. “To have 15 percent more new donors give blood in 2004 than in 2003.” This objective seeks to get more people (new donors) to give blood—change their behavior.

—W. Timothy Coombs

See also Benchmarking; Formative research; Goals, Qualitative research; Quantitative research; Research objectives; Reputation management

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OECKL, ALBERT

Albert Oeckl (1909–2001) was the most important figure of the post–World War II era of public relations in Germany. The obituaries on his death (April 23, 2001) reflected the mythically idealized position that Oeckl held. He became a living legend primarily through his national as well as international professional activities, but he is also widely known for his writings, public speeches, and teaching activities.

Oeckl was born December 27, 1909, in Nuremberg and studied law and national economy in Munich and Berlin. In 1934 he earned his doctorate with a dissertation, *German Employees and Their Living Conditions*, and worked initially as a junior lawyer. Although written under the national socialist government, his dissertation can, from our contemporary viewpoint, be regarded as a profound scientific work with no recognizable kowtowing to national socialist ideology.

Following his internship as a junior lawyer (1934–1935, in the Reichspropagandaministerium in the Munich state office), he began his vocational career in 1936 at IG Farben in Berlin, where he was later to be employed in the head office and the newly founded press office. As he pointed out himself, this was where and when he gained his first journalistic experience and where he learned about the basics of then-current public relations of an international company.

During the war he worked, among other positions, in the news service for the supreme command of the Wehrmacht (OKW, or German Armed Forces) and in the Reichsamt (the German “empire office”) for economic development under Carl Krauch. A recent dissertation at Leipzig University (by Christian Mattke) has shed light on Oeckl’s career until 1945. Press relations and monitoring as well as support service for visitors were Oeckl’s first duties at IG Farben. He was also responsible for an address card index, which might have triggered the idea for his *Taschenbuch des öffentlichen Lebens* (“Pocket Book of Public Life,” published in 1950).

On May 1, 1933, he joined the NSDAP (Hitler’s ruling national socialist party until 1945); however,

he never held a ranking office in the party, nor did he have any national socialist grade. After the war, in 1947, an allied committee classified Oeckl as a *Mitläufer* (nominal member), a designation given to former members of the Nazi party who were considered not to pose a threat to the emerging democratic, capitalist society. With this classification Oeckl did not have to fear legal consequences stemming from his role during the war. However, he concealed his party membership publicly throughout his life.

Oeckl started his postwar career as the assistant of Dr. Rudolf Vogel, a member of the German Bundestag (German parliament) and of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU). From 1950 to 1959 Oeckl was director of the Public Relations Department of the Deutscher Industrie- und Handelstag (DIHT), the German Association of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. From 1959 on he was head of the public relations department of BASF, also a multinational corporation. From 1961 to 1967, Oeckl held the title of deputy director; from 1967 to 1974 his title was director. In 1974 he retired from his active career.

Oeckl had early ambitions regarding an academic career. He accepted the invitation to teach as a lecturer at the University of Heidelberg, where he gave lectures and seminars from 1960 until 1969. Later on he also taught at Augsburg University. From 1974 until 1978, after his retirement, he taught social psychology and public relations at the International University in Rome in the position of an extraordinary professorship. From this lectureship he earned the title of an honorary professor. This title strengthened his reputation in a discipline in which only few representatives held doctoral degrees. Hence, Oeckl was considered the academically legitimized voice to speak up for the majority of practitioners, to represent the whole professional field of public relations.

From 1950 onward, Oeckl annually published the *Taschenbuch des öffentlichen Lebens* (“Pocket-book of Public Life”) and quickly became well known from it. It contains a systematic collection of addresses and can be found even today on nearly every editorial or public relations desk. In 1964 he

published his first major book, *Das Handbuch der Public relations. Theorie und Praxis der Öffentlichkeitsarbeit in Deutschland und der Welt* (*Handbook of Public Relations: Theory and Practice of Öffentlichkeitsarbeit [Public Relations] in Germany and the World*). A revised version of this handbook was published in 1976, under the title *PR-Praxis. Der Schlüssel zur Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* (*PR Practice: The Key to Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*). At that time, these books—as well as Oeckl's various lectures and articles—played an important role in the professional field. Even today, they are important historical sources for academic public relations research. Oeckl defined *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* (the German equivalent of public relations) as “working with the public, working for the public and working in the public (sphere)” (1976, p. 34). Another definition he gave was “*Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* is the conscious, planned and continuous endeavor . . . to build and maintain mutual understanding in public” (1964, p. 43). This definition, which is very similar to the definition crafted by the British Institute of Public Relations during the 1960s, contains a society-oriented understanding of public relations with symmetrical presuppositions. This understanding also underlies the formula Oeckl coined later: “PR = Information + Adaptation + Integration” (Oeckl, 1976, p. 19).

Although Oeckl—due to demands on his time—never developed a scientific theory that was empirically testable, he created a kind of *normative practitioner theory*. This theory, based on many years of professional experience, is aligned to relevant scientific literature, particularly writings of communication research. It not only provides definitive dividing lines between public relations and other concepts of public communication such as advertising, propaganda, and publicity, but one of the core elements of this practitioner theory is a set of normative guidelines (how-to rules) that express ways to act, to behave as a public relations practitioner. For Oeckl, primary requirements in public relations are “truth, clarity (lucidity), as well as the unity of word and deed” (1964, p. 47). Alongside these demands, sociability, open behavior, integrity, and modesty are characteristics that he considers

important professional values. During the 1960s, Oeckl informed younger professionals about the basic management method, the Four-Phase Model of PR Management: (a) analyses, (b) programming/strategy building, (c) taking action/communicating, and (d) evaluation (1964, pp. 343ff.). Most important for Oeckl's understanding of public relations was his regard for it as a separate and high-level management (staff) function in all kinds of organizations, not as a subdiscipline of marketing, or as pure publicity or propaganda.

Oeckl assumed and informed the profession that he had coined the German equivalent of the term public relations, *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, in 1950 by translating the American term *public relations*. New research has shown, however, that this term had been used much earlier in a discussion of the press organizations of the Protestant Church (*Evangelische Pressverbände*) as early as 1917. Presumably, by 1950 the term had fallen into oblivion. But during the 1950s and 1960s the German term made an excellent resurgence. Today, notably, state institutions (ministries, municipal press departments) and nonprofit organizations use the term *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, whereas private companies and public relations agencies widely prefer the English term *public relations* or *PR*. In recent years, the term *communication management* is used more and more.

Predominantly due to his political organization activities, in which he drew upon his—for that time—profound number of publications and lectures, Oeckl acquired the reputation of Germany's “PR-Nestor.” He was a co-founder of the Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft (DPRG) (German Public Relations Association) in 1958 and officiated as second president between 1961 and 1967, following Carl Hundhausen. In 1986 the DPRG awarded him the honorary president title, and a junior award for academic theses has his name. Also important were Oeckl's international organization activities: Since 1965 he served as Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques (CERP) vice president, and in 1967 the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) voted Oeckl its first German president. Through his activities in these functions, an important early

impetus was given to the academization of the vocational public relations field, from which came ideas for an academically based public relations education at universities and standards for ethical codes.

On the occasion of his 90th birthday, in 1999, CERP president Thomas Achelis presented a *festschrift* ("PR Builds Bridges") to Oeckl, with essays contributed by well-known German, European, and American public relations practitioners, scientists, and organizational representatives that mirror the reputation Albert Oeckl had reached in the international public relations community.

Oeckl played a similar role for Germany to that of Edward L. Bernays for the professional field of American public relations: founding father, influential and symbolic figure for the whole professional field, and representative of a modern concept of the practice. Preconditions for Bernays's and Oeckl's reputations as founding fathers were their outstanding professional achievements and the capability to present themselves and to produce their own images in an outstanding way.

In Germany Oeckl represents the highest standard of the public relations practitioner, carefully considering and reflecting the practice of his profession with a high—and academically based—reputation due to his teaching, his writings, and his positions. In the history of public relations in German-speaking areas, Oeckl can be considered the most important figure next to Carl Hundhausen. Although Hundhausen achieved more solid and greater academic recognition, he was not as outstanding in the practical field as Oeckl. Both of these giants in the profession represent a kind of professional continuity from the 1930s, the national socialist time, on to the Federal Republic of the 1950s and 1960s. Both credibly represent, on the other hand, the restart of postwar public relations in Germany, a profession that had to distinguish itself clearly from the propaganda of Nazi politics. For many years, until the end of the 1980s, Oeckl embodied German *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* worldwide.

—Günter Bentele

See also Bernays, Edward; Promotion; Publicity; Symmetry

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OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION

See Davis, Elmer, and the Office of War Information

ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Online public relations involves the use of Internet technologies to manage communications and to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its key publics.

Organizations have adopted the Internet widely and integrated computer-based delivery into their mix of communications technologies. Particularly valuable is the Internet's ability to allow organizations and people around the world to exchange information on a 24/7 basis.

ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOLS

Web sites

The World Wide Web is probably the most important Internet technology for PR practitioners, permitting organizations to display text, visual, and sound files using computer servers and browser software on personal computers. The Web provides the decentralized delivery of information using human-computer graphical interfaces to facilitate access.

Organizations use Web sites for a variety of marketing, human resource, and other management functions besides public relations. Among the most common applications for public relations are the following.

Online newsrooms allow journalists and others to access news releases and other press materials that can be downloaded quickly and easily and transferred directly to the news production systems of newspapers and magazines as well as radio and television stations. More than 90 percent of all reporters now use the Web as a basic research tool, although Web sites have not surpassed the telephone, personal contacts, and traditional news releases as the preferred source of information for reporters (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003).

Investor relations sites provide a wide range of materials for analysts and investment professionals as well as individual and institutional investors. These materials previously were distributed only as hard copies: annual reports, quarterly reports, earnings information, government filings, analyst presentations and reports, fact books, and so forth.

Product promotion sites engage consumers and others in educational, informational, and entertainment activities. Food and household manufacturers, for example, now provide recipes and consumer tips online. Many production companies sponsor sites to promote movies, TV shows, books, and entertainment fare. Site content includes background information, downloadable photos and audio, streaming video, chat rooms and bulletin boards, and interactive games designed to illustrate key ideas and to promote involvement.

Education and advocacy sites are used by not-for-profit organizations to inform users about issues and engage in the social marketing of ideas. Many of the same techniques used in product promotion sites are adapted to the promotion of ideas (such as an appreciation of the arts) or causes (such as the eradication of social problems). Educational sites often include tutorials and learning materials as well as quizzes and tests that facilitate assessment of a user's learning or knowledge. Advocacy sites encourage public education in the same way, but encourage participation in public discussions and

debates. Unique features on advocacy sites include directories, maps, and other address information regarding where people can write public officials or file public comments. Also included are direct e-mail links and prototype texts that might be used.

Health sites are widely used to provide information on health and risk-related topics and to provide coping mechanisms for people affected by particular maladies. Users can include the sufferers of health problems, as well as family members, friends, and health care practitioners. *Telemedicine* includes the provision of diagnoses and advice by health professionals as well as the self-help activities by support groups and not-for-profit organizations concerned about particular health or safety issues.

Fundraising/development sites are used by not-for-profit organizations to build and maintain their support bases. Online fundraising has become an increasing important application of e-commerce technology. Visitors to sites of nonprofit organizations can become informed, but also involved by joining as members or by sending a financial contribution billed to a credit card.

Intranets and Extranets

Communication within organizations has been facilitated by the advent of *intranets*, or closed-system Web-based communications systems used to facilitate the distribution and sharing of information within an organization. In a similar way, *extranets* have enabled organizations to share data-based information with allied partners, including vendors and customers, using controlled-access (usually password-protected) Web-based information systems accessible to users outside the organization.

Although intranets are used primarily to manage internal operations, many traditional employee relations functions are now conducted online. These include the distribution of announcements, company newsletters, employee policies and procedures, benefits information, and performance recognition. Intranets are also being used to conduct employee suggestion programs, deliver special messages from management, register employees for organizational and social events, and provide access

to various archived materials such as graphics standards and materials and historical records and photographs.

Extranets continue to be used by business organizations primarily to share research and development, production, distribution, and inventory control information. However, as extranets have expanded in use, many organizations have recognized the value of extranets for public relations purposes. News and information about developments and activities at an organization are important to employees of partner organizations. In addition, online relationship building efforts can cement allegiances and improve productivity.

Electronic mail (e-mail) can be used in a variety of ways for public relations purposes. Bulk or broadcast e-mails are used to distribute information about company developments to both internal and external publics, including the distribution of news and feature materials to the press. Individual e-mails can be used to communicate directly with members of key publics, such as managers, employees, customers, donors, or constituents.

Variations of the traditional text-based memoranda are including links that prompt users to go to a Web site for desired information or to access e-mail attachments, which can be in the form of word-processed or portable document format (pdf) documents. More advanced techniques include graphically designed e-mails, video e-mails, electronic newsletters, and e-zines.

People react negatively to unsolicited e-mails (spam). However, an acceptable alternative is to give prospective recipients the option to receive (opt in) or not receive (opt out) bulk e-mails. Such permission (sometimes termed *permission marketing*) enhances message effectiveness by targeting the message to people who have indicated an interest in the topic. Senders must be careful, however, to avoid distributing messages too frequently.

Discussion Groups, Chats, and Online Meetings

Organizations can tap the interactive potential of the Internet by participating in or by sponsoring opportunities for people to share ideas with others.

These include *discussion groups*, also known as newsgroups or bulletin boards, where people can post messages that can be read later (asynchronously) by other discussion group members. Live *chats* use synchronous conferencing software to allow people to come together and interact in real time.

Variations on chats include *Webconferences* and *netmeetings*, where synchronous discussions are augmented by video (made possible by cameras on personal computers) or audio (where people use microphones attached to personal computers). This technology has permitted organizations to make online presentations (*Webcasts*) and to conduct seminars (*Webinars*) to inform and engage participants in remote locations.

Organization representatives can sign on to a wide range of discussion groups or chats online, where they can cull valuable insights about participants' opinions on key issues and can use both fora to articulate organizational viewpoints. An important ethical issue involves whether the organizational representative is clearly identified and all users understand his or her special interest.

Other Online Tools

Lesser-used tools include database file transfers, using file transfer protocol that enables the delivery of large volumes of data by an organization to an inquirer, who can then read, manipulate, and interpret the findings. Remote kiosks allow organizations to use online technology in public buildings and elsewhere so that occasional users can find answers to queries. CD-ROMs provide an alternative delivery mechanism to real-time online connections and enable users to access information in the same ways as the Web. Finally, wireless technology allows people to access Web-based content, e-mail, and other forms of online communication without access to a personal computer. Wireless technologies using cell phones and personal data assistants (PDAs) probably provide less functionality and somewhat limited information—but nonetheless will be important organizational communication tools in the future.

APPLICATIONS OF ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Organizations can use online public relations in a wide range of applications.

Research

The ability to monitor the Web and discussion groups and chat rooms has facilitated the ability of public relations professionals to scan the environment to identify emerging issues and then track particular concerns that might affect the organization. In addition to extant information available online (secondary data), organizations can use online technologies to collect primary data in the form of e-mail and Web surveys.

Information Distribution

E-mail and Web sites facilitate the dissemination of announcements and other information to targeted grounds, eliminating time lags created when organizations depend on the press or postal mail to distribute information. Information is available instantaneously and can be updated regularly as needed. The cost of delivered information can be lower, although many organizations use redundant systems to distribute information (printed and mailed materials, faxes, private wire services, and personal delivery).

Queries

Online technologies provide an ideal, low-cost, automated way for organizations to respond to routine, perfunctory questions, thus reducing the demand on staffs in offices at customer call centers. Although a large majority of queries can be addressed online, effective query management involves incisive anticipation of the most common topics of interest as well as mechanisms for handling the nonroutine, one-of-a-kind problems that might arise. Although many queries can be handled online, organizations must maintain other mechanisms to handle questions, such as telephone help lines and customer/consumer affairs correspondence functions.

Crisis Response

Online communications today play a critical role when organizations are faced with extraordinary events that create uncertainty or disrupt routine operations. People often flood Web sites and e-mail boxes seeking information, and organizations must now include online communications as a critical, first-response component in crisis management plans. Both content and technical Webmasters have become members of crisis response teams in many organizations. Tactics include the creation of a special home page and increasing the system's capacity to process increased volume. Other standard techniques include creation of news and information update pages, activation of online resources to assist victims and others, and use of electronic bulletin boards for employees and others to share intelligence and express concerns.

Discussions and Debate

Organizations can use online technologies to encourage the sharing of ideas among key publics and thus further public debate on issues important to them. A growing number of organizations use their intranets (as well as groupware) to facilitate work on projects among staff organized in *virtual teams*. Intranet discussions groups are being used more widely to seek employee input on problems, including suggestions for improvements in productivity. The effect of this expanded participation is greater involvement and affinity with an organization.

Among external audiences, forward-thinking organizations are creating mechanisms for people to provide feedback on social issues and the organization's issue positions, consistent with notions of about the importance of dialogue and two-way communications. Beyond serving as valuable research findings, public access to comments allows others to crystallize, change, or reinforce their own opinions. Publication of public comments submitted to government agencies is another way online communication can facilitate democratic processes.

Relationship Building

If the ultimate purpose of public relations is to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with key publics, online communications have the potential to help foster positive reputations (as a prerequisite to establishing positive relationships) and to foster interaction between an organization and key publics. Online relationship building is critical where a user's only contact with an organization might be via online communications, but also can contribute to the process where offline relationships exist. The inherent interactive features of Web communications, for example, lend themselves to *two-way symmetrical* or *dialogic* communications, although many organizations so far have failed to fully exploit these features (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001).

MANAGING ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations managers face a variety of managerial concerns as online communications become an integral part of an organization's public relations effort. These include determining who in the organization will control and manage site content, the consistent and proper branding of online communications (such as domain names), the maintenance of content quality, the usability or functionality of the system, and the integration of online and offline activities.

Also important is compliance with the changing laws and regulations that impact online public relations activities. New issues include: (a) the disclosure and enforcement of electronic information privacy policies, (b) the right of employers to eavesdrop or monitor employees' use of private e-mail and other organization-owned systems, (c) the right of government to access electronic records to prevent terrorism, (d) the acceptance of electronic signatures, and (e) regulatory requirements for the retention of electronic messages.

Online communications also raise new concerns related to misuse by others that results in threats or potential losses to an organization. These include (a) defamatory attacks on organizations in discussion

groups or attack/complaint Web sites, (b) intrusions into systems by hackers who aim to disrupt service or destroy content, or (c) misuse of content by lurkers who wish to gain competitive intelligence or who might stalk organizational personnel (*cyberstalkers*). Public relations managers must also deal with rogues who purchase desirable Web site domain names to resell them to organizations for a premium price (*cybersquatters*) or simply to deceive potential visitors for personal gain by diverting traffic. Finally, public relations managers must be concerned with the *theft* of digital assets (copyrighted or trademarked content) that can be diluted in value by excessive or fraudulent use by others.

Public relations managers also face challenges in assessing the effectiveness of online communications vis-à-vis other communications tools. Metrics for measurement of traffic have been developed that allow organizations to count access (such as *hits* on a Web site page), but also unique users (unduplicated *reach*), frequency of use, length of visits, and so on. Registration systems and *cookies* technologies also allow organizations to identify visitors (and to tailor personalized information to them).

Online public relations can be measured based on traditional evaluative standards used in public relations, such as awareness and attitude change. However, valid and reliable measurement techniques need to be developed to assess how mere exposure leads to greater awareness and understanding of online content and how online content leads to persuasion. Fortunately, the interactive nature of online communications makes actions taken online relatively easy to measure. Organizations can count click-throughs to promoted messages, online messages sent, and orders submitted for more information or for products and services. But if actions are taken offline, evaluation becomes more elusive.

More than any other communication activity, online communicators must address the question of return on investment (ROI) or the financial return derived from online communications investments. ROI analysis is a common way for organizations to evaluate investments in technology. Public relations managers will be called upon to demonstrate the

cost-effectiveness of online activities and the consequences if these activities are not undertaken.

—Kirk Hallahan

See also Communication technologies; Crisis communication; Dialogue; Excellence theory, Home page; Qualitative research; Quantitative research; Relationship management theory; Web site

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OP-ED

Op-ed refers to the page in a newspaper that is opposite the page on which editorials are published. (Editorials reflect a newspaper's official position on problems and issues.) Some newspapers devote only one page to editorials, letters to the editor, and commentary; editorials typically are to the left and op-ed contributions typically are to the right, although everything is on a single page.

The best newspapers have balanced editorial and op-ed pages. They publish a blend of editorials;

letters to the editor (typically, not all letters are published); commentary from local and nationally syndicated political columnists; and *public commentary* from individuals who do not work for the newspaper.

The best newspapers also ensure that a broad spectrum of opinion is reflected in their letters, syndicated columns, and public commentaries. (Editorials do not reflect a broad spectrum of opinion because they are the newspaper's official voice, which is likely to lean to the right or the left.) A good balance is sought on political, economic, social, and cultural issues. This does not mean that two conservative and two liberal items will be published each day. It does mean that, on balance, a good newspaper will publish ideas that reflect a wide range of opinions.

The public commentary sections of most newspapers are open to anyone, and public relations practitioners sometimes try to have their organization's views published there. The public affairs officer for a legislator who is sponsoring a controversial and widely discussed bill, for example, might pen a piece explaining the legislation and submit it to all the newspapers in the state (under the legislator's name) in hopes it will be published in some of them.

A corporate public relations practitioner might write a commentary about the steps a corporation is taking to preserve the environment as it attempts to develop land in an environmentally sensitive area. That would be distributed under the CEO's name. Or a practitioner at one of the ubiquitous think tanks might submit a commentary purporting to show that chlorofluorocarbons are not really a threat to the environment after all.

Unfortunately, newspapers do not screen commentaries as carefully as they do other stories. Some commentaries contain factual error, and some reflect partisan views that have little basis in fact. For this reason, public commentary sometimes carries little weight with some readers.

Some newspapers also are extraordinarily difficult to get into. The *Houston Chronicle*, for instance, publishes only 18 of the 400 or so submissions it receives each week. Some organizations follow the lead of Mobil Oil Corporation's Herbert Schmertz, who helped pioneer the use of

the paid commentary (*advertorial*). Mobil wrote commentaries that looked like op-ed pieces and then paid to have them published in newspapers across the country. Such commentaries get published, but they are not op-ed pieces, and they may have less credibility than commentaries that survive the rigorous screening process.

—Michael Ryan

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OPENNESS

The concept of openness, in terms of public relations, may have internal and external interpretations. From an internal perspective, employees may feel positively about open communication feedback cycles and company newsletters advocating the open-door policies of management. From an external perspective, the media may have negative interpretations of openness if the company spokesperson is evasive during a crisis situation.

The concept of openness, in terms of public relations and organizational communication, is derived from systems theory. This theoretical framework is concerned with complex, interdependent organizations that operate within dynamic environments. With the multiple pressures that organizations face (mergers, economic considerations, media coverage, community obligations), openness helps companies see themselves as part of a dynamic web of interdependencies and relationships. Openness involves interaction with the environment, reciprocal exchanges within and outside of organizations. The existence of diverse environments across industries, companies, and governmental entities means that the same organizing principles and solutions cannot be applied in all situations. In short, various contextual and environmental factors need to be considered, and organizations need to have some degree of openness in order to prosper.

Public relations representatives may help organizations achieve openness with various stakeholders (i.e., community, media). Thus, they are critical organizational boundary spanners. Larissa A. Grunig, James E. Grunig, and D. M. Dozier argued in 2002 that the systems perspective emphasizes the coordination of internal and external contingencies. Organizations depend on resources from their environments, such as employees and clients. A company with an open system uses public relations representatives to gather information on how productive its relationships are with the community, customers, and other stakeholders. In contrast, they argued that organizations with closed systems do not actively seek new information but operate on past history or the preferences of managers. The closed organization clings to the status quo (i.e., how we've always done it), and managers tend to exhibit defensive behaviors such as resistance to change.

Openness is synonymous with the concept of organizational boundary spanning (OBS). The boundary spanner straddles the edge of an organization. This person has a viewpoint within and outside of organizations; he/she knows many details about the company as well as its clients. Public relations representatives are the liaisons, explaining the organization's actions to its stakeholders and interpreting the environment for the organization. Public relations people should have open feedback loops with the primary decision makers acting as the members of the dominant coalition—the executive team—in the organization. The boundary spanners can alert managers to problems and opportunities in the environment and help them respond to these changes.

If managers keep their systems open, they allow for the two-way flow of resources and communication between the organization and the environment. The information can be used to adapt to the environment, or managers may use the data to try and control the environment. Control may be accomplished through consolidation of resources or persuasive influence. In some cases this strategy may be appropriate, but eventually some adaptation is required.

According to J. E. Grunig (2000), symmetrical public relations (a balanced approach) values openness and collaboration. Organizations need exchange relationships with the environment. They can be negatively impacted when there is an unwillingness on the part of managers to incur costs that build collaborative relationships. However, they incur greater costs from negative publicity, strict regulation, and other issues that result from closed relationships. Grunig argues that organizations will be more effective if they incorporate values of openness and collaboration into their corporate cultures and decision-making processes.

From an internal culture perspective, openness within the organization may not necessarily lead to successful boundary spanning. However, cherishing this value at all levels of the company will probably lead to communal, collaborative external relationships with stakeholders. According to John J. Rodwell, René Kienzle, and Mark A. Shadur (1998), some organizational professionals argue that employees must be given information about the company, its activities, goals, and vision. Additionally, they must be allowed to have channels through which information can be delivered to management.

Openness is essential for many organizational processes, such as public relations. Through openness in the system, the communication conduit for many aspects of organizational life is strengthened. Rodwell, Kienzle, and Shadur wrote in 1998 that employee attitude surveys often suggest that communication is an area that needs attention. By establishing and maintaining open feedback loops in the organization, positive internal public relations is likely to flourish. Employee morale and organizational commitment may also be positively affected.

Deloris McGee Wanguri argued in 1996 that an environment that encourages discreet and consistent communicative openness is recommended for organizational boundary spanners. From the discretionary viewpoint, this alternative does not advocate the disclosure of privileged information or knowledge that is potentially harmful to any individual or to the company and its clients. In other words, too much openness is problematic for many organizational relationships. In many cases, good judgment

on how much information needs to be revealed is recommended. Additionally, consistency is essential so that trust and respect can develop in these relationships. If the stakeholder learns to trust the consistent communication behaviors of the boundary spanner, respect and continued openness will permeate the relational encounters.

Using sound judgment and prudence in selecting information to share can increase communication openness and enhance perceived equity in these public relationships. If the information is accurate and appropriate for the target stakeholders (e.g., customers probably don't need to know specific quarterly financial results), the benefits outweigh the risks. Communicative openness can lead to positive dynamics, such as increased discussion and understanding, enhanced preparation for change, improved communication, and perceptions of communicative equity. In terms of equity, the receiver perceives that the sender is being straightforward and direct. The receiver also perceives that the sender is using proper discretion and consistent communication patterns. Thus, the organizational relationship is balanced. These perceptions of balance are critical for public relations professionals. Although public relations' stature has improved in society, the associations with propaganda and "spin" have not entirely disappeared.

Open systems, by their nature, react to change. These reactions may involve negotiation and compromise. With these dynamics, the boundary spanners and the stakeholders establish rules and then maintain and adapt the rules as needed. Stakeholders will learn to trust the source credibility of the boundary spanner when openness is valued.

Candor is a means of achieving credibility, and it must be constantly engaged and reengaged. Companies must engage in active listening, a primary part of any open communication process, with their stakeholders and respond to their concerns. Solutions may not be readily available, but mutually acceptable alternatives may be negotiated when such candor is exercised.

Although potential barriers to the effectiveness of communication will always exist, openness is an important and useful public relations strategy. It is a

strategy, however, that requires continuous adjustments to cultural, structural, and behavioral changes. The practitioner's adjustments are relevant for both the organization and its stakeholders. Through open exchange of information, all parties can learn to deal with the changes and their effects on the public relationships.

Ultimately, if the participants in these communication transactions do not trust and respect each other, if the stakeholders do not value the conditions under which the information is shared (i.e., media people recognizing possible spokesperson evasiveness), or if practitioners fail to use discretion in their communication, then the resulting relationships will be negatively affected and the recovery may take many years.

—Brian C. Sowa

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OPPORTUNITY AND THREAT

The idea of opportunity and threat in crisis management is rooted in the oft-recounted observation

that the Chinese character for crisis is made up of two seemingly contradictory symbols: one for opportunity, the other for threat. The implication is that managers should view crises not just as threats—to their bottom line, to their reputations, indeed, to their very survival—but also as opportunities—to redefine problems, to promote self-sacrifice, to reaffirm relationships with key constituents—as well as a vehicle by which to achieve strategic advantage.

OPPORTUNITY AND THREAT DEFINED

The line of reasoning for treating threat and opportunity together is rooted in the term *wei-ji*, the Chinese word for crisis. It is the term *wei* that means threat or danger, and the word *ji* means opportunity. In the pictograph that makes up the word in Chinese, the term for threat is placed at the top, and the word for opportunity is below it. The placement suggests that although the threat in a crisis is real and apparent, the opportunity, though present, is somewhat concealed. The implication, of course, is that wise crisis managers look beyond the threat to see where opportunities lie.

Threat

Threat is central to the concept of a crisis. In their survey of the literature of crisis management, Matthew Seeger, Timothy Sellnow, and Robert Ulmer (1998) wrote that a crisis is composed of three distinct notions: surprise, a short response time, and a threat. Among the threats that an organization faces are a diminished ability to accomplish conventional organizational objectives, as well as the real probability of organizational loss. Indeed, Karl Weick (1988) got at this critical component of threat when he defined crises as “low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of the organization” (p. 305).

Organizations should plan for crises, viewing their likelihood as inevitable, given the variegated threats companies face. Such threats originate from both internal and external sources. Internally,

threats take the form of serious accidents, product safety incidents, or corporate misdeeds by senior executives. Organizations face external threats as well; these threats can emanate from activists who challenge a company's environmental record or consumer terrorists—such as Tylenol tampering incidents—as well as natural disasters.

Opportunity

Whereas the threat in crisis situations is self-evident, the opportunity is not. Weick (1988) acknowledged this problem when he concedes that crisis “events defy interpretations and impose severe demands on sensemaking” (p. 305). Yet if crisis managers are to strategically rescue their organizations from a crisis, they need to develop a sense-making process by which novel opportunities are seen, or, using Weick's term, enacted. That is, they have to cognitively re-create the crisis situation by developing a different way of seeing, one that envisions the situation as one in which opportunities are present.

One such opportunity is definitional; crises provide organizational officials wide latitude in managing meanings. A crisis is powerful in that it breaks frames; old ways of viewing problems are rendered obsolete. This gives a crisis manager an opportunity to redefine a situation in a way that was impossible before, and with new definitions come new solutions for problems. In short, a crisis provides a face-saving way to change paths by providing cover for decision makers—a helpful vehicle by which to disentangle oneself from intractable problems. Crises also proffer *an excuse to act* to bring about desired outcomes—even though the justification may have little to do with the action.

Second, a crisis emboldens people not only to act but to do so in a way that is costly to them—in the expectation that the sacrifice will bring a better day. Crises provide short windows of opportunity by which people are more likely to sacrifice—or accept dramatic change—in order to bring about a long-term good.

Third, a crisis provides opportunities for organizations to demonstrate to key constituencies that their concern is for customers more than for the bottom line. That is, crises give companies an occasion

to reinforce their reputation and their commitment to ethics. Even if they are at fault, by reacting to a crisis in a positive way, an organization can build goodwill.

Finally, crisis managers can use a threat to the industry as an opportunity to position a company for a strategic advantage. The case of Starkist Tuna is instructive. After years of being criticized by environmentalists for the fact that dolphins were caught in its tuna nets, the Heinz Corporation developed a new policy by which it would purchase tuna only from suppliers that could prove that their tuna was caught in a manner that was safe for dolphins. The company then put the label “dolphin-safe” on its tuna cans. The implication of the message was clear: Heinz cared about the environmental consequences of its actions; its competitors did not.

—Keith Michael Hearit

See also Apologia theory; Crisis and crisis management; Crisis communication

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ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND PERSONA

Organizational identity and *persona* are terms that refer to the self or character a company strategically communicates to multiple audiences in order to

achieve organizational goals. They are central concepts in the study and practice of public relations because these corporate personalities shape public acceptance. Just as individuals often play multiple roles and manage multiple identities—for example, people manage their work, home, and relational identities—organizations rely on this public relations function to increase connectedness with audiences. Managing organizational identity and persona involves creating and maintaining a selected public face while resolving contradictions that might arise as audiences interact with this organizational character. If a corporation creates and manages its identity and persona carefully, it can more successfully persuade the public to embrace the organization and its products, services, or policies.

To understand how corporations benefit from this identity management function, it is useful to take a closer look at the concept of organizational persona. Jill J. McMillan suggests that the term *persona* (from the Latin for mask) is beneficial in labeling organizational communication as symbolically constructed while noting that corporations have recognizable social presences with which audiences create relationships. Indeed, as Robert L. Heath (1993) pointed out, “the symbols of the organizations’ personae become real in the minds of persons involved despite the fact that the organizations are only symbolic and artificial” (p. 148). In other words, the only way audiences can often *know* an organization is through its employment of these symbolic personae. As Cheney and McMillan (1990) observed, as members of an organizational society, people must converse with corporate rhetors along with individual speakers. Organizational personae form the basis for this conversation. If people accept an organization’s use of symbols, they will be more likely to have an ongoing dialogue with a company and its services.

Organizations rarely possess only one persona, however, and it is the interaction of various personae that constitutes an organization’s identity. In Western society, the idea that individuals possess qualities that differentiate themselves from each other gradually came to describe differences in organizations as well. Thus, we may think of an organization’s

identity as that which is communicated through its various identifying emblems, logos, insignias, programs, and public actions. As Lars Thøger Christensen and George Cheney noted,

Some corporations, for example, work to personalize their identities in various ways, including the use of visible representatives (such as Hollywood celebrities or CEOs) or characters (such as Xerox’s monk-scribe of some years ago). Other organizations prefer, or even feel compelled, to “center” or “ground” themselves in key values or concerns. (1994, p. 224)

Nike, for example, relies on both of these approaches. Not only does its swoosh logo identify it, but its inner-city teen programs reflect its business personality. An organization’s identity is not static, however. Savvy organizations recognize that audiences interact with these corporate selves and adjust these public faces as needed. A company that in the 1950s communicated the identity of responsible benefactor through its logos and the like might recognize the need to update its identity to one of technological innovator to meet current societal expectations. This ongoing need to assess organizational identity can lead to challenges and even paradoxes for companies.

Examining the ongoing process of a corporation’s effort to maintain its organizational identity and persona with multiple audiences suggests how challenging careful identity management can be. If audiences identify or accept a given organizational persona, the organization will be able to meet its goals more easily. Instead of regulation and close scrutiny, for example, a chemical company that projects the persona of a concerned corporate citizen finds less public resistance. Audiences who feel the chemical company shares their concerns will in turn identify with the company. An important aspect embedded in the concept of organizational identity and persona, then, is the idea of identification. The more a person identifies, or relates, to an offered corporate persona, the less direct or forceful a company’s persuasion needs to be.

An audience member might identify with one organizational persona, however, and not with its other personae. Theresa A. Russell-Loretz (1995) investigated this paradoxical nature of organizational

identity and persona in Dow Chemical recruitment videos. She pointed out that organizations must balance the need to be unique from other organizations with the need to be the same, in order to be part of the cultural mainstream. Dow, like all organizations, must convey its unique corporate values for recruitment purposes while simultaneously informing employees and customers that it shares basic Western business practices and procedures with other corporations.

All corporations, as a cornerstone of a successful public relations foundation, must articulate and monitor their identities and personae. Without these recognizable corporate personalities, a corporation will be unable to stand out from other businesses and attract attention. The challenge facing all corporations, then, is how to create and maintain their images in a way that the public finds both acceptable and appealing.

—Ashli A. Quesinberry

See also Identification; Image; Legitimacy and legitimacy gap

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