
Towards a Typology of the Public Relations Behaviour of Organisations

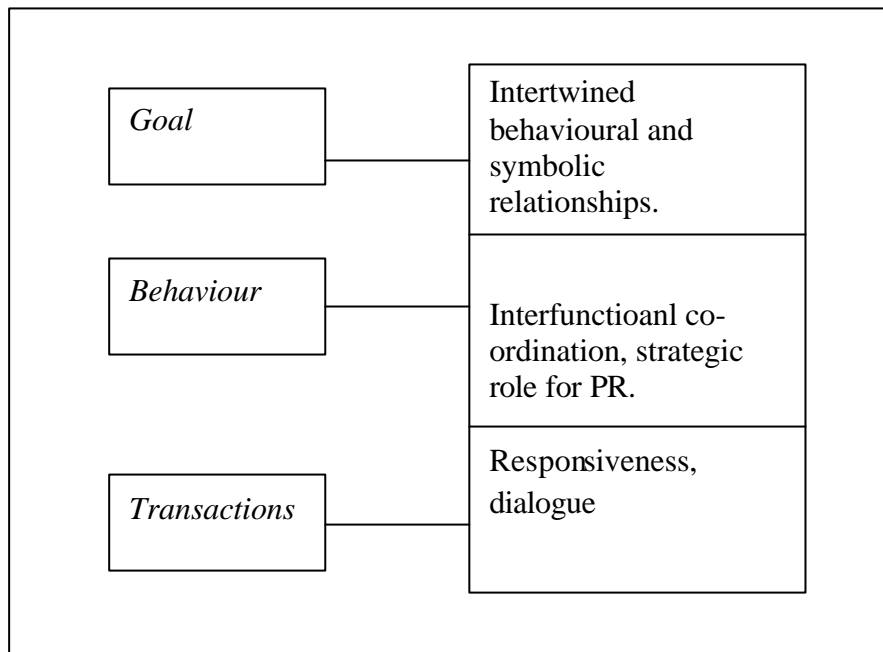
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This paper contributes to a general theory of the public relations behaviour of organisations by developing a typology of organisational public relations behaviour based on a new construct called public relations orientation. Four constructed types describe the way organisations practise public relations, and the organisation-level outcomes that may be expected from pursuing public relations strategy through a given type. It also contributes to a general theory of public relations by specifying how the types fit into a broader framework that explains the relationship of public relations to the strategy-performance link.

A general theory of the public relations (PR) behaviour of organisations remains an elusive goal of scholars. Attempts such as the four models developed by Grunig (Grunig & Grunig, 1991) fall short of a PR theory of organisational behaviour, since most organisations practice each of the models at different times. For this reason, it is not yet possible to classify organisations by their practice of PR, to predict the type of PR an organisation will use, or to explain the effect of different types of public relations on organisational performance.

Organisational scientists such as McKelvey (1982) believe theories of organisational behaviour must begin with a “classification of the species” in order to identify homogenous populations within the species about which falsifiable hypotheses can be formed and tested. This paper attempts to develop a preliminary classification system, or typology, of public relations behaviour based on a new construct called public relations orientation (See Figure 1). The constructed types presented in this paper describe what type of organisation practises what type of public relations, and what organisation-level outcomes may be expected from pursuing public relations strategy through a given type. The paper begins by outlining the criteria for a good typology. It then describes the variables that underlie the new construct “public relations orientation” and suggests how combinations of these variables form different organisational types. We relate the public relations types to the Miles and Snow (1978) typology of strategic orientations to show how the public relations behaviour of organisations may be related to the strategy-performance link. Finally, we suggest how the types contribute to a general theory of the public relations behaviour of organisations.

Figure 1: The Dimensions of Public Relations Orientation



Methods

Classification is an essential prerequisite to good science because it identifies homogeneous populations within the larger species (in this case, organisations) about which falsifiable hypotheses can be formed (McKelvey, 1982). By specifying the diversity inherent in the species called “organisations” organisational behaviour can be explained and predicted (Miles & Snow, 1978).

Types are “constructed” by ordering or synthesising a complex set of variables for comparing and measuring objectively probable phenomena (McKinney, 1966). Typologies meet the criteria for theory-building because they contain constructs or variables on which a theoretical system can be built, they specify relationships between the constructs, that is, they generate hypotheses, and they are empirically testable (McKinney, 1966; Doty & Glick, 1994).

Good typologies should specify the dimensions of the type and how they are measured (i.e., high-low) and describe the logic underlying the configuration of dimensions (Mitnick, 1994). Additional criteria include terminological clarity (provides good definitions), essentiality (captures important features), extensiveness (spans the space of the

phenomena), inclusivity (all relevant entities are included), systematisation (all cells determined in principle are included), power (subsumes other typologies), theoretical productivity (contributes to theory development), logic, and prescriptive utility (helps us design, manage and intervene) Mitnick, 1996.

With these guidelines in mind, we begin the task of constructing a typology of the public relations behaviour of organisations, based on our construct, “public relations orientation”.

Public relations orientation (PRO)

The term “orientation” is used to describe the possible philosophical stances of an organisation towards public relations (See Figure 1). Orientation involves a) a specific goal (direction), b) a description of the way one acts as a consequence of the goal, and c) the response one adopts when dealing with things external to one’s self. Thus, an orientation can be described in terms of the characteristics of the goal, the goal-directed behaviour, and the transactions with the environment and parties threatening or enabling the achievement of the goal (stakeholders).

Our explication of public relations orientation is based on five dimensions grouped under the

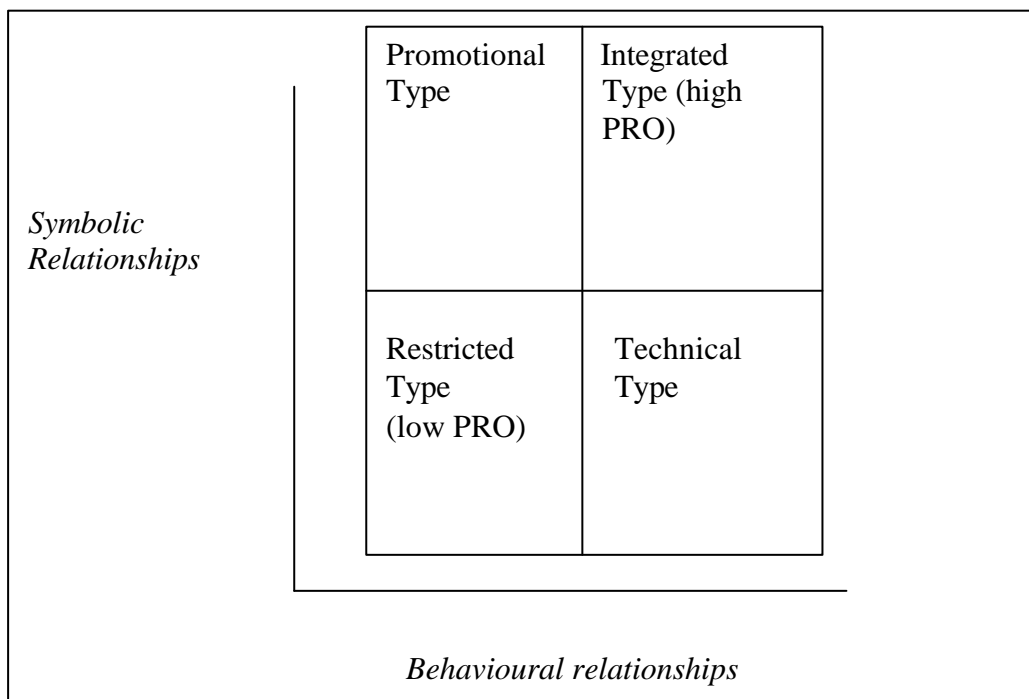
three categories of goal, behaviour and transactions. Each of these dimensions will now be described and its underlying variables deconstructed. Each is also generally measured as “high-low”.

Public relations goal

The goal dimension of public relations has two axes: the quest for positive images (symbolic relationships) and the quest for substantive behavioural relationships between organisations and publics. PR people can set short-term objectives to improve symbolic relationships with publics, but over the long term public relations should "examine behavioral relationships with publics—relationships that directly affect the ... ability to accomplish organizational goals"(Grunig, 1993, p. 124). High PRO occurs when behavioural and symbolic aspects of relationships are “intertwined”. When they are

separated, public relations practitioners offer little value because “they suggest that the problems in relationships with publics can be solved using the proper message—disseminated through publicity or media relations—to change an image of an organization” (Grunig, 1993, p. 136). The disconnection of symbolic relationships from behavioural relationships represents low PRO. The two sub-dimensions, each specified as high or low, lead to four possible cells, which form the foundation of the proposed PRO typology (see Figure 2). The four cells are high behavioural relationships/high symbolic relationships (HBR-HSR), named “integrated”; low behavioural relationship/high symbolic relationship (LBR-HSR), named “promotional”; high behavioural relationship/low symbolic relationship (HBR-LSR), named “technical”; and low behavioural relationship/low symbolic relationship (LBR-LSR), named “restricted”.

Figure 2: A Typology of the Public Relations Behaviour of Organisations



Public relations behaviour

The PR behaviour category is based on two dimensions: interfunctional co-ordination, and a

strategic role for public relations. These dimensions are considered the foundation of effective public relations behaviour of organisations.

Interfunctional co-ordination

Constraints on information collection and dissemination (Ryan, 1987; Sweep, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1994), which we call interfunctional co-ordination, limit public relations effectiveness. Interfunctional-coordination is a term borrowed from the marketing literature (Wrenn, 1997), to indicate the integration of efforts by all parts of the organisation to achieve the PR goal (integrated symbolic and behavioural relationships). It includes the systematic generation, analysis and dissemination of intelligence across functional boundaries about relationships with publics or stakeholders.

PR has a strategic role

Scholars have identified the presence of a strategic role for public relations as a requirement of public relations “excellence” (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) and its lack as a constraint on public relations effectiveness (Sweep et al., 1994).

Characteristics of transactions with environment

The third category of PRO dimensions is the transactions of the organisation with actors in its environment (publics) who threaten or enable achievement of the public relations goal (high, intertwined symbolic and behavioural relationships). This category has two dimensions, responsiveness to stakeholders and a dialogic approach to stakeholder relationships.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is implicit in much of the public relations literature. However, the concept of responsiveness adopted here is based on the results of the grounded theory study reported by Black and Härtel (2001). The responsiveness atom has two axes, one being the intensity of activity ranging from “do little” to “do much”, the other being the nature of activity, ranging from “adversarial” to “collaborative”. The two-

by-two structure of this dimension leads to four possible cells, which conform closely to the responsiveness modes defined by Clarkson (1995). The do-much/collaborative cell is named “proactive” (lead the industry); the do-little/collaborative cell is named “accommodative” (be progressive); the do-much/adversarial cell is named “reactive” (fight all the way); and the do-little/reactive cell is named “defensive” (do only what is required).

Dialogic approach

A dialogue process is necessary to fully and accurately identify stakeholder needs and to negotiate effective responses. Pearson (1991) suggests that dialogue is a precondition for ethical public relations. Following Pearson, dialogue in our model is composed of respectful attitudes towards the dialogic partner, mutual agreement about the structural attributes of communication, and mutual satisfaction with the rules of communication. Effective, ethical dialogue also requires openness and a willingness to disclose information that is critical to the relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000).

A typology of the public relations behaviour of organisations

Thus far we have prepared the groundwork for developing a typology of the public relations behaviour of organisations by specifying five first-order constructs and how they are to be measured or dimensionalised. We now move to describing the public relations types of organisations by ordering logically possible combinations of the constructs. The goal of public relations is the starting point for defining each of the types. As noted earlier, the two axes of the goal (symbolic and behavioural relationships) lead to four cells, or types, as the span of possibilities.

The integrated public relations organisation

In the integrated public relations organisation, the public relations goal synthesises high symbolic and high behavioural relationships with publics. The public relations



function has a strategic, managerial role and its manager is most likely to generate valuable outcomes for the organisation. The organisation effectively utilises public relations intelligence to adapt itself to its changing stakeholder environment, which may be both complex and dynamic (Acharya, 1985). The integrated PR organisation is proactive in that it actively seeks collaborative solutions to conflict with publics or stakeholders. Dialogue and openness are key relationship maintenance strategies, providing an ethical framework for decision-making. This organisation is likely to hold a symmetrical worldview for public relations and is more likely than the other types to use symmetrical public relations strategies, although mixed mode strategies will be used. Among the four types, this organisation is most likely to practice “excellent” public relations.

The integrated public relations type is expected to be most frequently associated with the “analyzer” strategic type (Miles & Snow, 1978). The analyzer organisation tries to exploit new product and market opportunities (requiring attention to symbolic relationships that can signal quality or other attributes to prospective customers) while maintaining a firm base of traditional products and customers (requiring attention to behavioural relationships aimed at improving customer loyalty, repeat purchase and so on). The ability of public relations managers to develop measurable, strategic public relations goals and strategies that support the overall business goals will lead to influence within the dominant coalition. The major problem faced by public relations managers in integrated organisations is the tension between the need for innovation in relating to new or changing publics and the need for efficiency without staleness in relating to traditional publics. When executed well, the organisation-level public relations outcomes for this organisation are likely to include a good reputation, legitimacy (license to operate), and reduced conflict with stakeholders.

The promotional public relations organisation

The promotional PR organisation pursues high symbolic relationships with publics, but does not place the same emphasis on behavioural relationships. Therefore, the organisation’s actions do not always match its rhetoric. While intensely active, the organisation’s asymmetrical worldview for public relations leads to behaviour aimed at persuading publics that it is right, which is an adversarial, rather than a collaborative, type of responsiveness. Interfunctional co-ordination is moderate as the type of PR information exchanged within the organisation relates only to the organisation’s ability to promote itself and not the full stakeholder environment. In the promotional public relations organisation, public relations may contribute to image-making strategy, but not to overall organisation strategy. The organisation selectively attends to stakeholder groups important to its image, such as customers. It does not seek dialogue, although it may seek feedback in order to more scientifically persuade its publics that it is right. It is moderately open, insofar as is required to promote itself to various publics. The correlates of the promotional type are, therefore, an asymmetrical worldview for public relations and a managerial role for public relations. The managerial role is posited because the manager is likely to have control of an adequate budget for promotions and use research to ascertain the effectiveness of promotional programs.

The promotional type of organisation may be most closely associated with the Miles and Snow (1978) “prospector” strategic type. The prospector is continually modifying its product-market domain to take advantage of perceived opportunities and therefore has a high requirement for both marketing and promotions. Its requirement for speed to market means that attention to long-term collaborative relationships with stakeholders takes a back seat to the requirements for symbolic, image-making activity. Creative approaches to public relations will flourish in this organisation when the top communicator is able to enact a managerial role. However, the inherent inefficiencies of the prospector’s rapidly changing, diverse operations may be a trap for the public relations

function, which typically requires a long-term focus for maximum impact.

The organisation may have an active PR department and be well recognised because of its intense image making activity, but its failure to attend to substantive behavioural relationships puts it at risk of stakeholder cynicism, and ultimately, loss of reputation.

The technical public relations organisation

The technical PR organisation pays a lot of attention to maintaining good stakeholder relationships but places little emphasis on image, believing that actions speak louder than words. The organisation is not well known except among those it has a direct relationship with. Long-term relationships with key publics are likely to be collaborative rather than adversarial; for example, the organisation may be a supplier of customised components to long term customers in a stable industry. While responsive, the organisation takes little initiative and routine communications predominate. PR interfunctional co-ordination is low because public relations generates little valuable intelligence for the organisation. In this organisation, the worldview for public relations is technical, and public relations plays a technical role rather than a strategic role. Public relations will use little or no research, set output rather than outcome goals, and make little contribution to the achievement of business goals. The transactional dimensions of public relations orientation, namely responsiveness and dialogue, are moderate because even though public relations has little input, the organisation as a whole has an accommodative approach towards its long-standing stakeholders.

This organisation is most like the Miles and Snow (1978) “defender” type, which has a relatively stable environment, with few changes to its product-market domain. This organisation is focused on efficiency to defend its narrow market domain. Because the product-market domain is stable, and public relations enacts a technical role, life for the public relations staff is predictable and routine. Changes in its business environment or business strategy put this type at risk unless it develops a proactive

communication plan to keep emerging and existing stakeholders well informed.

The restricted public relations organisation

The restricted PR organisation places little value on either symbolic or behavioural relationships with stakeholders. It is least likely to have a discrete public relations function, thus it is the most restricted organisational environment for public relations. When publics intrude into the operations of the organisation, the response is to do as little as possible (defensive). Because publics are not valued, neither is the public relations function, and all of the dimensions of public relations orientation will be low. If the organisation has a public relations person, the person’s tasks are likely to be technical, or even clerical, in nature, such as distribution of statutory reports or product samples. Such an organisation may be successful with a low public relations orientation if it has few and undemanding stakeholders. However, low attention to stakeholder relationships is an unsustainable strategy for most organisations.

The strategic impotence of the restricted PR type makes it like the “reactor” type defined by Miles and Snow (1978). This type represents a failure of an organisation to use any of the other strategies to adapt to its product-market environment. Miles and Snow suggest that reactors, which are inherently unstable, fail to adapt to their environment. A public relations manager is unlikely to be able to perform well in this organisation.

Discussion and further research

Thus far, we have described a new construct called public relations orientation and developed a typology of the public relations behaviour of organisations based on its dimensions. The typology meets Mitnick’s (1994) essential criteria for a good typology because it includes all relevant entities (all organisations whether they have a public relations function, or not), captures important features of public relations behaviour in a systematic way and has a clear logic. We now turn to a discussion of how the

typology might meet some of Mitnick's higher-level criteria, which are power, theoretical productivity, and prescriptive utility.

Power

A powerful typology is one that subsumes other typologies. Several typologies have been developed in public relations theory. For example, worldviews for public relations (Grunig & White, 1992; Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998) have been identified as symmetrical and asymmetrical. Our integrated type is symmetrical, while the other three types are asymmetrical. The technical type, however, may well emulate the technical worldview described by Grunig and White (1992).

Public relations roles have been typified in the literature as managerial and technical (Dozier 1992, 1995). Managerial roles are more likely to predominate in our integrated and promotional types, and technical roles are expected to prevail in our technical type. Our restricted type may not have a discrete public relations function.

Another PR typology is the four models of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1991). Each of the models may be practised in all of our types except the restricted type, although symmetrical public relations will be practised more in the integrated type than in any of the others. Use of the models in each type is more likely to vary by intensity. In other words, the integrated type uses all the models more than the promotional type, and the promotional type uses all the models more than the technical type.

Public relations environments have also been classified as complex/simple and turbulent/static (Acharya, 1985). Relating the public relations types to the Miles and Snow typology addresses aspects of the product-market environment. However, public relations is also concerned with publics in the non-market, or social and political environment. The addition of non-market environmental variables to the types suggests a further research direction.

Finally, structure of the public relations department has been classified in relation to the Hage-Hull typology (Grunig, 1991) with limited success. Our typology addresses structure via

linkage to the Miles & Snow typology, which is based on the variables of structure, strategy and process. However, more remains to be explained about the contribution of the structure of public relations to organisational performance. Nevertheless, we suggest that even at this preliminary stage of development, a typology based on public relations orientation has considerable power.

Theoretical productivity

Each of the types can be considered a mid-range theory that explains how public relations works within a particular type of organisation. However, types are most useful in theory development when they are treated as independent variables in a grand theoretical assertion, that is, that variation in the types predicts something. By linking our typology with the Miles and Snow typology, we are suggesting that variation in the public relations types explains some variance in organisational performance. The pathway by which public relations contributes to performance is by managing behavioural and symbolic relationships with publics. Symbolic relationships may influence reputation, which in turn impacts performance (Kim, 2000). Behavioural relationships may reduce the level of conflict, which contributes to performance by lowering costs. Behavioural relationships may also engender co-operative behaviour from publics, which leads to outcomes such as legitimacy (license to operate) and loyalty. Thus, the types contribute to a general theory of the public relations behaviour of organisations, by hypothesizing how each type contributes to performance (or not).

Prescriptive utility

The multi-dimensional construct, public relations orientation, clearly has prescriptive utility as managers can use it as an organisational diagnostic, to make changes to the public relations mission, behaviour or stakeholder transactions. Prescriptive utility also arises because each type relies on a public relations strategy that is more or less likely to

produce particular outcomes, such as reputation or reduced conflict with stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a monothetic typology of the public relations behaviour of organisations based on a new construct called public relations orientation. It also contributes to a general theory of public relations by specifying how the types fit into a broader framework that explains the relationship of public relations to the strategy-performance link. An empirical test of the theoretical system may help resolve one of the biggest questions arising from the preliminary typology, which is whether organisations can be successful with a low public relations orientation.

The types indicate a hierarchy of public relations “excellence”. This is problematic when considering the relationship of the public relations types to the Miles and Snow typology. Both the defender and prospector types are considered viable strategies when executed well, yet their public relations strategies fall short of excellence according to this framework. Clearly, some organisations can get away with less than excellent PR, although in organisations practising excellent PR one would expect to see a higher amount of variance in organisational performance attributed to PR. An alternate explanation is that the theory of PR excellence applies to only some organisations.

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