

MEASURING PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

Building stakeholder relationships is a key element of the PR practitioner's role. But Angela Sinickas questions whether relationships should be the ultimate measure of PR's success, or whether they are simply a necessary means to more important ends.

Building strong relationships with an organization's publics is certainly an important part of what communicators do. Dr. James E. Grunig has done a great deal of interesting research on this topic, defining the parameters of a good relationship (control mutuality, trust, commitment and satisfaction), and suggesting research questions to measure relationships' quality.

However, I'm concerned about communicators telling senior leaders that relationship quality should be the key measurement by which to define PR's success, as Dr. Grunig and others recommend.

Relationships and behavior

Dr. Grunig defines relationship measurement in terms of process (number and type of communication activities conducted to strengthen relationships) and outcomes (the type and quality of relationship desired). Yet, I believe these are fairly low-value levels of communication to measure – the activities we pursue and the audience perception changes that result.

I think we need to go further and connect relationships to changed behaviors in our stakeholder groups, and place a financial value on those behavior changes.

Types of relationships

Dr. Grunig identifies "exchange" relationships, where an organization

does things in the expectation of receiving something it wants from its publics, and "communal" relationships. In communal relationships, "parties are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other – even when they believe they might not get anything in return."

He says PR's role is to convince management that it needs communal relationships with its internal and external publics and leave exchange relationships to marketing communicators. He adds, "Public relations serves society, then, by working with publics to resolve the conflicts that tear societies apart." However, I'm afraid this puts PR in the category of "nice to do" rather than "business-critical."

I recommend that communicators pitching relationship measurement to their executives present it in terms of an "exchange" scenario, even if the reciprocation is far down the road. In my experience, neither executives nor members of society regularly make significant decisions based on societal good at great expense to the self.

We examine each decision primarily from the perspective of our personal benefit. Executives can be convinced to do things for societal good only to the extent they perceive it to also be in their own eventual self-interest.

Reducing pollution isn't just for society's good, but to help a company avoid expensive lawsuits. Providing a satisfactory workplace isn't done for the pleasure of employees, but to reduce the costs of finding and training replacements for people who leave, or the costs of fighting class-action lawsuits or union organizing attempts.

Executives, having to answer to

shareholders and their boards, will do only as much, or as little, as they perceive they must do to maintain only as much of a "communal" relationship as they feel they can afford. This becomes, in essence, an "exchange" relationship with a perceived financial value placed on what is given and received.

Publics vs. markets

Dr. Grunig distinguishes between PR's "publics" and MarCom's "markets." He says, "Markets consist of individuals who purchase goods and services. Publics consist of social groups who respond to the consequences that organizations have on them and in turn try to participate in management decisions in ways that serve their interests."

Unfortunately, any individual is part of both groups. Most of us usually make purchasing decisions that are in our own best interest in the marketplace, even if some of those choices conflict with our social and political views, like buying affordable clothing made in China in spite of being passionately opposed to China's annexation of Tibet and unethical labor policies. Most people's "market selves" usually win out over their "public selves."

For all these reasons, I find relationship measurement far short of the breakthrough metric it's purported to be. Unless we can connect relationship measures to their impact on more tangible organizational outcomes, such as calculating a return on investment, our executives will be underwhelmed.

Our organizations' relationships should not be seen as the ultimate outcomes of PR, but as just another communication channel we should leverage to help our organizations reach their goals.



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