

**SPEAKING OUT**—by Angela Sinickas**It's new, it's hot—it's relationship measurement . . . not!**

I've been reading a lot lately in PR and communication journals and listservs about the importance of measuring organizations' relationships. This flurry of discussion was triggered by recent heavy publicity of studies conducted by communication researcher Dr. James E. Grunig, primary author of the 1985 IABC Research Foundation study on Communication Excellence.

He defines the parameters that should be measured in assessing organizational relationships (control mutuality, trust, commitment and satisfaction) and provides a list of questions to ask through interviews, focus groups and surveys to evaluate the strengths of these relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

However, I have serious concerns about communicators hitchhiking onto this bandwagon and presenting these ideas wholesale to their leadership without thinking it through in the context of their executives' business realities versus academic theories.

### **Relationships are not the ultimate measure**

My biggest concern with the focus on relationship measurement is the importance many communication organizations and individual experts are placing on this as the ultimate measurement organizational communicators should be focusing on. Dr. Grunig defines relationship measurement in terms of process (number and type of communication activities conducted as a way of implementing your strategies to build and cultivate relationships) and outcomes (the type and quality of the relationship that you hope to achieve). Yet, as I see it, this measures the two lowest-value levels of communication—the *activities* we pursue and the first level of outcome, a

change in audience *perception*.

Before I would recommend a heavy focus on relationship measurement, I would need to see these two measures connect the relationship to changed *behaviors* in our stakeholder groups and placing a *financial value* on those behavior changes. However, Grunig seems to say that communicators shouldn't be focusing on those measures, which should be left to the marketing department.

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### **Communal vs. exchange relationships**

Dr. Grunig defines relationships as either “exchange” relationships where an organization does things in the expectation of receiving something it wants from one or more of its publics, usually customers, or “communal” relationships. He defines communal relationships as ones in which “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. The role of public relations is to convince management that it also needs communal relationships with publics such as employees, the commu-

nity and the media.”

Dr. Grunig believes PR should focus on communal relationships 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, this leaves PR as something that's nice to do rather than something that brings value to the bottom line—which marginalizes PR in management's eyes.

I believe that if communicators want to pitch relationship measurement to their executives, they'll need to couch 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 good 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.

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## Stakeholder publics vs. markets

From the stakeholders' perspective, 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." This is a nice academic distinction that will get you points on a PR exam, but real people have one foot in each group. The vast majority of us usually make purchasing decisions about cars, gas and other products and services that are in our own best (or most convenient) interest in the marketplace, even when those choices conflict with our social and political views.

For example, a few years ago I refused to buy clothing made in China because of their annexation of Tibet and their labor policies. However, it became increasingly difficult to eliminate more and more of the clothing in stores from my potential shopping list. I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but my wallet and my convenience (my market self) win out over my "public" self nearly every time in decisions I make relative to companies and large organizations. I'm sure most readers can think of similar situations in their own lives.

While I applaud Dr. Grunig's focus on measuring a very important aspect of public relations—the relations we try to foster—I find it falls far short of the breakthrough measure it's being touted as by some of our colleagues. I anticipate that communicators will be

spinning their wheels on an academic exercise unless they can connect relationship measures to their impact on more tangible organizational outcomes, such as calculating a return on investment. The relationships are not the ultimate outcomes of PR, but just another communication channel we should leverage to help our organizations achieve their goals.

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