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Perceptions of Relationships and Evaluations of Satisfaction: An Exploration of Interaction

ABSTRACT: Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are defining public relations as the management of relationships between organizations and publics. Because relationships can be difficult to measure, public relations practitioners often have struggled to demonstrate the influence that public relations activities have on consumer perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors. The current investigation sought to examine key public members' perceptions of the personal, professional, and community relationships they have with a bank and to relate those perceptions to evaluations of satisfaction. The results show that key public members' perceptions of their personal and professional relationships significantly influence evaluations of overall satisfaction with the organization, accounting for 75% of satisfaction variation. A discussion of the implications these findings hold for the study and practice of public relations are provided, a management framework, SMART Public Relations, is suggested, and areas of examination for future research are presented.

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Cutlip, Center, and Broom defined public relations as the management of the relationship between an organization and key publics.¹ Historically, many public relations scholars and practitioners have assumed that using effective press relations to manage issues enhanced organizational image and created a sense of goodwill among key publics.² Moreover, many practitioners and managers believed that effective press relations, and the purported goodwill that resulted, positively influenced key public members to be favorably predisposed toward the organization, inferring that enhanced organizational image is linked to key public members' behavior.³ As a result of its journalistic heritage, public relations has generally been practiced using a mass communication perspective in which message creation, dissemination, and measurement was the primary focus of public relations research.

Although the focus on press relations has been practiced widely in the field, Grunig argued that practitioners must be concerned not only with symbolic relationships between organizations and key publics (often managed through the use of press relations), but more important, with the behavioral relationships that result.⁴ More recently, Gronstedt argued that most public relations programs do not evaluate the influence that programmatic initiatives have on key public members' behavior, but rather tend to focus on clip counting and broadcast placements.⁵ Moreover, Gronstedt stated that

In today's world, people are actively seeking information they believe to be relevant. They are active, interactive, and equal participants of an ongoing communication process, rather than passive sponges. The role of the communicator is increasingly to make information available to stakeholders in a user-friendly way, rather than shoving it down their throats, and to support an ongoing relationship rather than transferring information.⁶

Recently, public relations scholars have argued that the relationship management approach may be more appropriate for studying and managing organization-public relationships.⁷ Recent research has shown that organizations and key public members have at least three types of relationships: personal, professional, and community.⁸ The following section provides an overview of public relations research that has been conducted by examining the influence of organization-public relationships on key public members' perceptions and behavior.

Managing Organization–Public Relationships

Cardwell noted that, historically, journalism was “the feeder profession of choice for public relations”⁹ because it was assumed that former newsmen would be able not only to bring new perspectives to the organization, but more important, would be able to effect cordial alliances with members of the media. Although public relations practitioners have been very effective in this role of “journalist in residence,” the outcomes of public relations initiatives and programs have been difficult for public relations practitioners to

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