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Control mutuality, social media, and organization-public relationships: A study of local animal welfare organizations' donors

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ABSTRACT

Using an online survey and qualitative analysis, this study examined the role of control mutuality in social media engagement to provide insight for social media strategy creation for nonprofit organizations. Guided by OPR and relationship management literature, insights and implications contribute to scholarly discussions of control mutuality and relationship management.

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1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations have different relationships with their publics than corporations (Fussell Sisco, Pressgrove, & Collins, 2013). Nonprofit organizations address societal issues such as animal welfare, poverty, or homelessness (Boris & Steuerle, 2006). Many nonprofit organizations work with small budgets and staffs, which often affects how public relations activities are conducted and enhances the attractiveness of social media.

Online resources such as social media and websites are not used to their full potential in the nonprofit sector (Waters & Lord, 2009). An inability to convey what the nonprofit organization does in a meaningful way online might be the cause (Patel & McKeever, 2014). Often held to a high standard (Doh, 2006), nonprofits can hurt their reputation as well as their relationships with donors online and offline with their social media practices. Damaged relationships with donors severely hinder the operations of nonprofit, local animal welfare organizations that rely heavily on individual donations and are not affiliated with a national organization (Caroline Radom, personal communication, 2014).

Social media can help amplify organization-public relationships through its ability to facilitate immediate feedback from members of key publics (Bowen, 2013). This study explores the role of control mutuality in social media engagement as a means of providing insight for social media strategy creation for nonprofit organizations such as local animal welfare organizations.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Reputations

Reputations are “perceptual representations of a company’s past actions and future prospects” (Fombrun, 1996; p. 72). Reputations provide organizations with competitive advantages (Fombrun, 1996), and as such, should be considered for their financial implications for donations. Reputations represent what an organization stands for, or its values, and establish performance standards for customers, donors, shareholders, vendors, and other relevant publics (Fombrun, 1996). Consistency in communication and action afford members of key publics the ability to accurately assess the organization to determine if the organization has met or exceeded expectations (Fombrun, 1996).

An organization’s ability to engage in dialogue with its key publics and listen to their concerns and feedback is particularly important to managing perceptions about an organization (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). The ability to listen and exceed publics’ expectations is a fundamental component of reputation management (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). Through listening and adjusting business practices accordingly, organizations can maintain a good reputation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000).

2.2. Organization–public relationships

Thirteen years after Ferguson’s (1984) call for further study of organization–public relationships, Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) examined relationships as a concept, highlighting the need for a universal definition for relationships. Broom et al. (1997) contended that organization–public relationships had antecedents and outcomes. Furthermore, Broom et al. (1997) asserted that organization–public relationships consisted of perceptions and expectations, as well as linkages based on needs of both parties. Broom et al. (1997) noted that the process of forming and maintaining organization–public relationships required measurement, which further highlighted the need for a universal definition.

Organization–public relationships have different dimensions. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined organization–public relationships as “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) contended that there were five dimensions of organization–public relationships: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. Acknowledging previous works of J. Grunig, some scholars contended that effective relationships are mutually beneficial for all parties – organizations and their respective publics (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) contended that relationships flourished when there was balance, commitment, openness, and trust in the relationship.

Some scholars focusing on online organization–public relationships argue that the Internet allows organizations to have a more balanced relationship with key publics by fostering understanding (Hallahan, 2006). Hallahan (2006) argued organizations need to be committed to and knowledgeable about the use of online media. Furthermore, Hallahan (2006) argued that there were organizational, system-based, and user-specific antecedents, which included commitment, accessibility, and pre-existing relationships with the organization, to creating organization–public relationships online. Hallahan (2006) noted that the process of creating organization–public relationships online included building awareness and adoption, facilitating cognitive learning, creating opportunities for interaction, as well as impression formation. Consequences of creating online–public relationships include fostering knowledge of the organization, positive attitudes toward the organization, communication activity, as well as repetitive behaviors such as purchases (Hallahan, 2006).

Measurement of organization–public relationships online, especially perceived relational strategies such as conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment, may help heighten perceptions of relational outcomes (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009). Kelleher and Miller (2006) argued that “communicating with a sense of humor, admitting mistakes, treating others as human, and providing links to competitors” formed conversational human voice (p. 399). Kelleher and Miller (2006) found that perceptions of relational strategies on websites and blogs were highly correlated with perceptions of relational outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment. Findings from Kelleher and Miller (2006) lend to further study of organization–public relationships in different online contexts such as social media.

2.2.1. Organization–public relationships in the nonprofit sector

Over the years, the study of organization–public relationships and relationship management in the nonprofit sector has been prolific (Waters & Bortree, 2010; Waters, 2008, 2009, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters and Lord, 2009).

Keeping members of key publics informed on a regular basis is crucial for nonprofit organizations in maintaining relationships. O’Neil (2008) asserted that a nonprofit organization’s communication efforts with its donors affected perceptions of trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Assertions made by O’Neil (2008) highlighted how important public relations tactics are in relationship management.

Accurate assessments of organization–public relationships allow nonprofit organizations the ability to tailor public relations efforts. Waters (2009) examined the role of symmetrical and asymmetrical communication in the nonprofit–public relationships. Waters (2008) asserted that aligned perceptions in organization–public relationships allowed nonprofit organizations to be more effective in their communication efforts and relationship management. Furthermore, Waters (2009)

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