

The Ends Justify the Means:  
A Global Research Agenda for  
Political Marketing and Public Affairs

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## ABSTRACT

Political marketing has developed into an increasingly mainstream discipline in universities globally over the last decade. There are many schools of political marketing with different approaches, such as the North American approach, the Western and Eastern European perspectives, and the Asian position. The study and application of political marketing has been categorized with different perspectives, such as electoral, governmental and international aspects. It is becoming increasingly evident that political marketing needs further classification like any matured and established discipline. A close analysis of political marketing practices and academic research leads one to perceive two distinct areas of political exchanges in two different markets: the intra-national market and the international market. The first deals with political marketing at a local, district, municipal, state/provincial and national levels. The second deals with political marketing across national borders. As in the case of commercial marketing, international marketing became a major study field when marketing grew into a matured mainstream discipline in the 1980's.

The practices of international political marketing can be seen everyday in the foreign relations of independent states for the fact that most countries have a government department in charge, such as the State Department in USA, Ministry of External Affairs, Foreign And Commonwealth Office or Ministry of Foreign Affairs as is evident in such countries as the UK, France, China and Russia etc. Similarly international political marketing has been carried out daily in international organizations, such as the Association of Pacific Economic United Nations, European Union, and International Olympic Committees, and etc. In the academic fields, a quick search on-line would lead to the publications with titles such as The Marketing of Nations (Kotler), Global Political Marketing, International Political Communication, International Public Affairs, Soft Power and Smart Power, Public Diplomacy, Cross Culture Propaganda, International Crisis Management, and NPO International Marketing. Numerous journal articles have been published on the above mentioned subjects in relation to political exchange in the international arena.

This paper focuses on public affairs as one of the critical management functions that has emerged in the area and highlights the key issues.

To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers,  
may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers.  
It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely  
fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers.

–Adam Smith,

The Wealth of Nations

Adam Smith's comments apply as much to the world and Europe as they did in the eighteenth century to the UK as we have seen the development of the world trading market, the internet and global regulatory influence and power. The world is increasingly run by shopkeepers and very full of customers.

Public Affairs is at the heart of Europe reflecting that it is the largest developed consumer market in the world comprising of over 40 national states and most of the key international businesses. Financial systems, organisations and regulatory bodies are based there. The Headquarters of the European Union, in Brussels which represents the 28 member states of the EU has probably the largest concentration of the public affairs industry in the world around it reflecting the fact that its economy is approximately 25% of the world's GDP and it has a geographically concentrated population of 500 million at the centre of the modern world trade routes. In addition to this the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which represents the key former USSR states and is headquartered in Moscow and members include Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan totaling approximately 146 million citizens in what we call Europe. Other states not in these economic zones include Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, a number of smaller states and of course Switzerland. Switzerland partially a result of its historic neutrality and centrality in Europe has become the home of the United Nations HQ, and consequently is the base of the World Health Organisation, International Labour Organisation, International Telecommunications Union and about 200 other international bodies such as the World Trade Organisation, (WTO) and World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO). The annual meeting of the World Economic Forum is held in Davos, Switzerland and brings together the top business and political figures together to discuss critical environmental, health and societal issues that are impacting on the globe.

Thus it can be seen that, Europe, is very much the key continent for regulation, finance and the development of standards across the world, thus centres such as Brussels, Geneva,

London, Moscow, Paris and Vienna all play pivotal roles for sharing knowledge, policy positions and finance across a number of worldwide markets. In fact the area close to the EU buildings and parliament in Belgium has come to be known as Brusslington reflecting the pivotal role it plays in allowing businesses and organisations to influence and shape legislation and regulation of trade and the environment worldwide.

The population of the EU in 2015 was not homogenous and shows widely varying trends and different demographics and had a population of over 508 million, with a declining population in the East and some signs of growth in the West. The UK had the fastest population growth rate, followed by France and Germany amongst major countries, thus explaining some aspects of migration across the continent. Europe is vast and its total population is close to 800 million people and its broad GDP is close to 40% of the world's outputs which shows its influence and why public affairs has grown to be the substantive industry it is in that continent. It is the home in currency terms and finances to the Euro, UK Pound, Swiss Frank and the Russian Rouble amongst others and plays a leadership role in setting and regulating environmental legislation, financial regulation and market trading rules for world business.

A review of relevant political marketing and international relations publications reveals a close linkage between the two. Based on the review, this paper categorizes political marketing into three aspects: the electoral, governmental and international aspect of political marketing. The focus of this article is on international political marketing, which has been defined in two case studies published by Journal of Public Affairs (Sun, 2007 and Sun, 2008). This paper advances the argument that practically all nation states and international organizations apply international political marketing to both their strategic planning as well as their conduct of day-to-day affairs. The contents of international political marketing have been selected and discussed one by one.

Public Affairs Management is increasingly seen as the critical boardroom skill that resides with the Chief Executive and those engaged in multi-complex strategic political management work, particularly those working in the business, government and politics interface. This has become of paramount importance to modern business in a very competitive and rapidly globalizing world where corporate communications, issues management and governmental and regulatory issues and soft power can often be pivotal to whether you succeed or fail as an organization. As one senior executive commented, there are those who are good at public

affairs and politics and their businesses succeed and those who do not understand the subject and they are no more or in decline.

A good example of regulatory impact on the shape of international business is the attempts to shore-up global financial practice and procedure by intervention in the world money markets and regulation of the banking and finance business post the 2006 financial crash. The impact of over regulation after an event was summed-up in 2011 to the authors by one colleague in the City of London, who commented, that they, were “being regulated into the stone-age.” Obviously the financial industry and its associated businesses have had to respond by being much more active to address what has at times been a crisis in confidence worldwide. This has led to greater scrutiny of banking practices and financial operations worldwide resulting in increased regulation and intervention by state governments, the recent revelations around HSBC and its operations in Switzerland are a good case in point (Swiss Info, 2015) The Greek Economy and its position in the Euro (aka what has been termed GREXIT has dominated much of European political thought and policy making over the last twelve months. The Euro Zone instability crisis is a growing area of research looking at the study of political power and political risk. The marketing of policy making has had to be conducted via public affairs experts and government leaders to respective constituents, whilst the results of citizen concern and referendums have had to be managed by European State Governments, the European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund. Not to dissimilar situations have occurred in many business sectors before such as in the oil, chemical and nuclear industries to name just a few and the public affairs practitioner has been to the fore in each of these situations in trying to ensure stability and a long term strategic view is taken.

Public Affairs is often seen by many as the senior service of modern global strategic management, combining transnational negotiation skills, networks and an understanding of governmental policy processes to operate in a regulated and complex world internationally. One plea that is worth emphasizing is that Public Affairs is still very much an advanced and sometimes ultra- discrete industry and profession, thus it rarely gets taught at Business and Management Schools, this needs to change or otherwise we are not teaching the future executive, official or politician reality.

The core activities conducted by the public affairs function are most frequently seen as:

External Communications

Issues Management

Media relations  
Crisis management  
Public relations  
Interest group/stakeholder relations  
Stakeholder Management  
Employee communications  
Government relations  
Industry association liaison  
Brand management/brand image  
Intranet management  
Corporate citizenship  
Corporate sponsorships  
Web Site Management  
Corporate giving  
Corporate social responsibility  
Social enterprise activities  
International public affairs  
Corporate marketing  
Change management/cultural change/organizational change  
Environmental affairs  
Regulatory affairs  
Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc)  
Blog management  
Consumer Affairs  
Investor and financial relations  
Legal/General Counsel

The mix and importance of these functions covered will depend on which business sector and which area of government the public affairs practitioner is operating in. Also whether they are based in a consultancy looking after a range of clients or a corporate or not for profit organization focused on a particular issue or business.

The rapidly increasing strategic role of public affairs has been spurred on by the trend towards increased privatization and regulation. This together with the globalization of

business operations and a surge in transnational government legislation and policy making, Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC], European Union [EU], North American Free Trade Area [NAFTA], World Trade Organization [WTO] etc) has forced organizations of all types to pay greater attention to their relationships with government - at all levels. The formal approval of acquisitions, alliances, mergers and takeovers is increasingly under government scrutiny as it attempts to regulate markets and trade. The regulation of auditing and the large accountancy groups like banking and financial services groups is now much on the world public affairs agenda and exercising leading corporate, political and research minds as they attempt to produce good corporate governance.

The increasing role of government as regulator as old corporatist linkages break down under globalization is a phenomenon that public affairs practitioners and corporations have to deal with on a daily and yet strategic basis. The transfer of publicly owned businesses to the private sector such as energy, telecommunications, water utilities and increasingly government services and the potential entrance of the Chinese RMB currency as a formal world trading currency has directly stimulated the increasing importance of the public affairs area.

In addition the growth of increasingly powerful and well-organized pressure groups, which are capable of mobilizing strong opposition to organizations whose policies they disagree with, has further stimulated public affairs work, stakeholder programs, political campaigning and lobbying activity. Technological advances within the media now allow events in virtually any part of the world to be screened almost instantaneously, subjecting the behavior of organizations even in the most remote parts of the globe to worldwide media and public scrutiny. The growth of social media and cause and campaign activities using this medium has necessitated regular tracking and management of corporate and societal communication in this medium. The global dialogue on trade, commerce, and investment involves business executives, government officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Not surprisingly, this dialogue often includes environmental (ecological), social and community issues. Thus the entire business government society relationship is open to discussion, debate, and redefinition throughout the world.

Businesses, government agencies, state and private media, and NGOs have a stake in cultivating a dialogue that is informed, fact driven, and progressive. Population growth, environmentalism and sustainability, the need for improved quality of life, military security, human rights, and sustainable economic and ecological practices are among the broad issues shaping the public agenda for nations across the globe. Constructive dialogue depends on accurate information, commitment to human interaction, and the willingness to think long- as well as short-term.

Public affairs is the term used usually to describe corporate communication activities in relation to government, pressure groups and sometimes financial affairs at a corporate level, i.e. excluding customers and prospects and probably employees. Many people have the impression that “Public Affairs” is another way of describing lobbying. Others perceive it as classic Public Relations or the second leg of Political marketing after electoral campaigning.. Lobbying still tends to have a negative image, and although almost everyone is attempting to do it, few organizations claim that they are professional lobbyists.

Lobbying is an international industry of major significance with key focal points of activity being centered on Brussels, Geneva, London and Washington and more recently Beijing, Berlin, Brasilia and Hong Kong. Lobbying is seen as being an integral part of Public Affairs Management, which is strategic international business communication focused on informing legislatures, officials, policy makers and those that influence regulatory frameworks whether they are at a local, national or at an international level.

There are increasing amounts of published research in this field and it is an area of professional practice that has seen substantial growth over the past decade. Public Affairs and particularly government relations/lobbying, have evolved from a tactic adopted by organizations to amend occasional legislation to become a managerial strategy to achieve competitive advantage. A well cited example of lobbying is that of particular European vehicle manufacturers to ensure catalytic convertors were installed as standard emissions systems in Europe, ensuring they gained competitive edge.



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The lack of consensus around the term Public Affairs does make it problematic to conceptualise research in the field, and thus to utilise existing work to suggest what 'best practice' might look like. One attempt to summarise what appear to be two main themes running through the area, which seeks to define the scope of public affairs, is outlined in the following extract:

The lingua franca of what appears to be the principal two arms of public affairs – government relations/lobbying and community relations/corporate responsibility – can be seen as ‘dialogue at both a societal and government level’. By implication, those working in the public affairs field increasingly are required not only to be proficient communicators, but to have a sound appreciation of how the political parties work, develop policy, are influenced, run campaigns and are funded. Moreover, the type of issues and challenges that normally fall within the public affairs domain generally require far more complex and sophisticated solutions than those required when tackling market-related promotional campaigns (Harris and Moss, 2001, p.108).

Other boundaries might encompass public policy, issues management, crisis management, public relations and stakeholder relations. While there may be some variation in the way functional boundaries are understood within different organisations and equally, within businesses around the world, what does emerge clearly, is that issues management is a particularly significant component of the work of the public affairs function. The way in which public affairs is structured within an organisation is clearly one critically important factor in its capacity to be effective. Although the literature on the structuring of public affairs is limited, the function’s location within the organisational hierarchy and particularly in terms of access to top management is widely recognized as a key to public affairs achieving its full potential. While there is very limited empirical evidence, there is at least an anecdotal sense that all too often public affairs fails to adequately communicate its role and value to the rest of the organisation. Here a range of factors could be at play. First, public affairs is a relatively specialised function, and as such tends to be quite small numerically and thus limited in what it can do. Second, public affairs may suffer in practical ways from the ambiguity surrounding its scope and from its general inability to date to establish itself as a recognised profession. Third, practitioners are perhaps more inclined to devote time and energy to promoting the organisation externally and influencing its environment, rather than to feeding back the views of outside stakeholders to senior management and engaging in corporate discussions about external policies.

There is a lack of consensus about what public affairs is said by academics and professional practitioners is said to include. This is exacerbated by the discipline calling upon a range of skills such as diplomacy, law, international relations, government affairs, politics, marketing,

communications, public relations, organisational behaviour, environmental science, trade relations and an awareness of stakeholders and policy issues. Windsor (2005, p.401) notes that, “There is no ‘grand’ theory of public affairs – no integrative or overarching framework”, but he does also go on to draw attention to the various theoretical debates which surround this area and which can inform academic thinking on public affairs, as do Getz (2002) and Griffin (2005). In Schuler’s (2002) view, this lack of a single – central – theory makes it problematic for researchers to extend knowledge, while others suggest that a grand theory is unachievable, and even if it could be achieved, might be not desirable (Hillman, 2002).

Other boundaries might encompass public policy, issues management, crisis management, public relations and stakeholder relations. While there may be some variation in the way functional boundaries are understood within different organisations and equally, within Unilever companies around the world, what does emerge clearly, is that issues management is a particularly significant component of the work of the public affairs function. Moreover, it is in the context of issue management work, that senior management and other functional units (e.g. products, legal, financial, etc.) are most likely to see at first hand the value of public affairs. Indeed, it is worth noting that one recent article cited Unilever Plc as one of the “leading adopters of issues management” (Wartick and Heugens, 2003), but highlighted the potential for even greater synergies between issues management and public affairs.

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Fleisher (1998, p.9) notes the irony that while public affairs “relies upon effective communication to position the organisation in its external marketplace”, this expertise can be “less evident in trying to position the function within the organisation.” This view is supported by some empirical evidence. For example, respondents to a Dutch survey were asked to define what was meant by public affairs and to account for how much time they spent on particular activities, and in both cases respondents overwhelmingly noted external rather than internal priorities (de Lange, 2000). Fully 60% of the definitions of public affairs identified were clearly about communicating to and influencing the outside world, while the remainder were generic descriptors such as building networks and dealing with socio-political change; none explicitly suggested that public affairs was about influencing the organisation on behalf of stakeholders. If public affairs is to significantly deepen internal understanding of its importance, staff must devote more time to internal communication and must become better equipped in what one scholar has termed “functional multilingualism ... the operational languages of finance, marketing, human resources, and so on” (Gollner, 1984, p.9) so that they are able to communicate with colleagues in other departments in ways which are meaningful to those colleagues.

Any company – Unilever included – which wishes to review the effectiveness of its existing public affairs function arguably needs to focus on three interrelated areas:

- Corporate level: how is public affairs structured and managed within the organisation as a whole?
- Department level: what policies and processes are employed within the public affairs function itself?
- Individual level: what professional backgrounds/skills and key personal competencies do public affairs staff need to bring to their role?

Clearly there is very little in the way of clear prescription within the literature about what processes might be put in place to ensure regular interaction between public affairs and senior management. One area in which current corporate public affairs appears on the face of it to fall very short of what might be regarded as ‘best practice’ – but which nonetheless attracts more comment from activist groups than from academics – is that of internal processes intended to ensure senior oversight. Marx (1990) makes the point that a board-level public

affairs committee should only focus on the relatively few issues which are most critical to the organisation and on which the organisation can have a positive influence. Examining examples of companies where such committees operate, Marx found that they dealt exclusively with no more than a handful of issues, which tended to be those issues that were identified as being of direct importance to the organisation's business strategy, relatively short-term (so that their impact would be felt over the next 1-3 years), and on which the firm could potentially have a significant affect. A recent survey of 100 leading companies suggests that relatively few had a board-level committee which had responsibility for lobbying activities; among those which do are Chevron, ExxonMobil, Ford, Johnson & Johnson, Texas Instruments and BP (SustainAbility and WWF, 2005). Using Dow Chemical as an example, Lerbinger (2006, p.420) asserts that establishment of what he terms a "public interest committee" that would act as the board-level focal point for oversight of public affairs would be a "useful structural addition to corporate governance."

A similar point was made by Langton (1982, p.112) who described a public policy committee as "a powerful asset" for a firm in signalling to middle management that senior executives were focused on the "socio-political aspect of corporate performance." Mack (1997, p.61) emphasises managerial commitment over all else – "The essential elements in any organisation's government relations program are top management support, top management support, and top management support." It should not be assumed that such high-level support is automatic – a recent survey conducted by McKinsey found that only one-third of CEOs mentioned engaging with host governments in their primary overseas markets as one of their personal top three priorities (Dua et al. 2010).

As Griffin and Dunn (2004, p.215) acknowledge, "there is no indication of a universal or 'right' way to structure corporate PA departments." What works for one company may be entirely contrary to another company's philosophy and organisation. Mack (1997) identifies three primary models by which a public affairs function may be organised:

- Centralised – here, one executive has responsibility for the entire public affairs programme and staff, and public affairs undertakes activities on behalf of the whole organisation.
- Decentralised – a central public affairs team will co-ordinate activity, but most public affairs staff are based within the organisation's business units which set their own priorities and programmes.

- Dispersed – an issues manager within each operating unit will handle that section’s public affairs with little or no central co-ordination, but it is regarded very much as an issue-driven process rather than as a wider functional role.

None of these models is likely to be appropriate in all places, at all times, for all companies (Dunn et al. 1979). If best practice in public affairs is taken to mean the search for a single answer from which absolute effectiveness will then flow, then it is likely to prove a futile and fruitless quest. What research can uncover, however, is what factors are important contributors to the performance of a public affairs department. For example, whether there is any correlation between the size of a public affairs unit and success, or between the seniority of a public affairs head and the function’s involvement in the corporate planning process. One survey of Canadian practitioners concluded that the key elements in an effective government relations unit were:

- The head of the unit must have credibility and authority within the organisation;
- Good contacts and relationships with government and policymakers;
- The unit plays a significant role in the business strategic planning process;
- Commitment and support for public affairs from the CEO; and
- The unit achieves visible successes so that it is seen to add value to the organisation (Baetz, 1992).

However, to what extent such elements can be considered to constitute some of the key criteria for ‘best practice’ in public affairs remains open to debate – a debate which we will address later in this report.

What does appear to come through clearly is that as with all corporate units, success is dependent upon personnel – recruitment of the ‘right’ people and providing them with the appropriate in-career training is a fundamental precondition of effectiveness. Public affairs positions are arguably particularly difficult to fill, given the cross-boundary nature of their work (cutting across communication, management and politics, in addition to the product-specific knowledge required) and consequently the need for them to bring cross-disciplinary skills to the role. Paradoxically, however, little scholarly or professional research has focused on the question of the core personal qualities and professional competencies required by public affairs staff (van Schendelen, 2002; Titley, 2003; Shaw, 2005). According to one

observer, “The task of identifying, defining, describing the characteristics, and measuring competencies in nearly all PA [public affairs] activity areas ... is one ripe for academic research” (Fleisher, 2003b, p.80). As part of a survey of in-house lobbyists in the US higher education sector, Ferrin (2003) found a diverse spread of educational backgrounds and career profiles, which he attributed to the prevalence of three dominant views when an institution is hiring a lobbyist:

- First, that there is no particular background required to produce the generic practitioner, rather personal qualities are a more significant predictor of effectiveness;
- Second that it is essential to bring some particular political knowledge or experience to the role, perhaps through a primary degree or through having worked as an aide to a politician. The rationale here appears to be that a professional who comes equipped with an understanding of how the political process works can relatively easily acquire the sector or product specific knowledge which a given organisation needs; and
- Third, that by contrast it is most important for the practitioner to have been fully immersed in the organisation and its issues in order to be viewed by policymakers as credible, with political expertise picked up on the job. Clearly this view would imply that public affairs staff are recruited internally from other units of the organisation, rather than externally from the political class.

Charles Mack (1997, p.98) suggests that the ideal lobbyist should possess similar skills to the ideal salesperson, “Government relations is, in a sense, a specialized form of marketing. In that same sense, direct lobbying is often face-to-face selling. The same qualities required to be successful in sales are needed in a successful lobbyist: cordiality and charm, persistence, understanding of the product (i.e. the position the ‘issue sales person’ is advocating), and the persuasiveness needed to make the ‘purchaser’ (the public policy-maker) want to buy the ‘product’”. One key factor mentioned by Mack is charm, or personality. And, certainly personality is important – but there is evidence that, over time, expertise becomes more significant. An article by one of the authors (McGrath, 2006) presents the most systematic available survey of the personal characteristics, which appear to be most important to public affairs personnel: listening skills, courtesy, relationship skills, honesty, integrity and credibility.

If the public affairs function is not sufficiently well understood by senior executives, it runs the risk of being regarded rather like an insurance policy, as a cost rather than a benefit. In other words, its purpose may be clearer at times of crisis than in periods of routine. The analogy, however, breaks down quickly in one crucial respect – if one has an insurance policy it will come into effect following a crisis and delivers what it is supposed to, while public affairs cannot effectively be turned off for long periods and then immediately triggered to solve a grave difficulty. It is important, therefore, that public affairs should find ways of demonstrating to the organisation its proper role and value, to better explain what it does and why that is important. Providing that can be achieved, public affairs will then enjoy elevated credibility within the organisation on an ongoing basis. One report, by an NGO working on sustainable development issues, advocates that organisations should consider six key factors as a means of gauging whether their lobbying efforts are appropriate; the areas are applicable to public affairs more generally. According to AccountAbility (2005), these six measures are: Alignment – are the organisation’s activities consistent with its stated core values and business principles?

- Materiality – are activities focused on those public policy issues of greatest potential significance to the organisation?
- Stakeholder Engagement – is the organisation open to constructive dialogue with outside groups?
- Reporting – is information about the organisation’s activities and positions transparent and accessible?
- People – is the company clear about who represents it on public policy issues?
- Processes – are suitable internal mechanisms in place to ensure that activities are both appropriate and effective?

We are reminded by Fleisher (1993) that assessment of public affairs should not focus entirely on what it delivered but on how it is delivered. He suggests that public affairs units can and should undertake internal quality management programmes, in order to demonstrate their value to the organisation. This would entail:

- Crafting a public affairs mission statement as an explicit statement of the internal and external ‘customers’ the unit seeks to serve, its relationship with other functional units, and the customer-driven needs it aims to meet;



- Setting key, prioritised, objectives for the unit which define how it needs to operate in order to achieve its mission;
- Identifying the ‘products’ which the unit provides to each of its customers, so that the purpose of each activity can be made clear, and ultimately evaluated by surveying the customer groups. In addition, the production costs of each activity can be quantified;
- Assessing the efficiency of the internal processes through which products are delivered – for instance, the cost-effectiveness of the resources needed to implement an activity and the physical form of the product; and
- Measuring the effectiveness of each product, again by receiving feedback on its quality from customers.

One of the key attributes of an effective public affairs department for Andrews (1985) is that it should make a positive contribution to the organisation’s financial performance. This, however, presents immediate difficulties as regards metrics and evaluation, highlighting the challenge of how one measure with any degree of accuracy the impact of public affairs. As a senior European practitioner puts it, “Often, public affairs is seen as a function driven by activities which are triggered by external forces instead of being driven by what the company needs for which its public affairs managers are working” (Jonnaert, 2005, p.24). The very process of making explicit what strategic objectives are derived from business requirements and how those objectives are to be translated into activities, and then going on to connect the two by measuring progress achieved, can in itself demonstrate to other managers the role and value of public affairs for the organisation as a whole.

Laird (1996) takes this idea one step further, when he proposes that public affairs can and should partly refocus its attention away from externally generated public policy issues and towards internally generated business issues. What he suggests is that if a public affairs unit was to proactively identify issues which have a direct impact on how the organisation’s business units are able to perform, that would in itself improve the perception by colleagues that public affairs adds value to the organisation. The methodology here is termed ‘Quantifying Impacts’, and begins with public affairs asking operating staff what changes in their external environment would have the greatest impact on profitability (either by reducing costs or increasing profits). According to Laird (1996, p.254), business units operate on the basis of the restrictions and limitations they already face, as those personnel “cannot fully

appreciate or assess the potential for changing the external limitations.” Once those potential changes are identified, analysed and quantified, public affairs can then begin to work towards achieving the most significant, for instance, by seeking to amend legislative or regulatory requirements.

#### ‘Best Practice’ and Its Limitations

An interesting paper produced by researchers at the University of Central Florida examines the central issue of what is best practice in any disciplinary field and how best practice can be researched (Myers, Smith and Martin, 2004). The paper reviewed a number of studies of best practice in a variety of contexts, including healthcare, public administration and public affairs, highlighting the lack of robustness in the way the term ‘best practice’ has been used in corporate and public sector body reports and emphasizing the lack of consensus in defining the term ‘best practice’. The authors point to one of the more useful definitions of best practice in the public affairs context advanced by Overman and Boyd (1994, p.69) as, “the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories.” This definition contains several key observations:

- Its emphasis on the use of exemplars – the ‘best of the best’ – highlights the need for careful judgement in determining which cases should be included in best practice research;
- It is important to draw evidence from multiple sources and contexts to increase the generalizability and utility of the findings; and
- Research into best practice should be done less for its own sake than as a means of deriving useful principles and theories.

Myers et al. go on to suggest a useful three-fold taxonomy of best practice based on what they see as a hierarchy of evidence – evidenced based practices, best practices, and emerging/promising practices:

- Evidenced Based Practices (EBPs) are those practices which are supported by a substantial body of outcome-based research;
- Best Practices (BPs) are practices which are supported by a substantial body of research findings generally acknowledged as superior or state of the art; and
- Emerging Practices (EPs) are believed by at least some knowledgeable professionals or professional groups to represent superior approaches.

The authors suggest that most of the best practice schemas they observed failed to meet the highest classification of EBPs, and hence they conclude that there is a need for greater rigour and objectivity in setting criteria and conducting research to determine best practice guidelines in fields such as public affairs.

Much generic advice on 'best practice' is available in the academic literature. One review asserts that identifying 'best practice' requires a comprehensive analysis of all comparable cases, which would suggest that establishing 'best practice' in absolute terms is inevitably a difficult and elusive goal, "Any empirical attempt will fall short" (Bretschneider et al. 2005, p. 320). It does, however, go on to note that what organisations can seek to do is identify what constitutes 'good' practice and in so doing discover ways of improving organisational performance. It may be that the quest for 'best practice' is better directed toward developing consistently 'better' practice in all areas over time, benchmarked against peer companies. As one author puts it, "Benchmarking encourages quantum rather than incremental learning.... Its principal utility is as a check against complacency built on past success" (John, 2002, p.32). Fleisher and Burton (1995) suggest a number of reasons why benchmarking can be useful in the public affairs field. These reasons are summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Benefits of Benchmarking in Public Affairs

- To enhance internal communication and coordination between public affairs and both senior management and other functional units, as the audit process can in itself raise the unit's visibility within the organisation;
- To demonstrate public affairs' willingness to adopt more scientific or empirical methodologies for measuring performance, similar to those which are commonly used in other functional units such as marketing, production and manufacturing;
- To identify technologies used by other organisations which can then be adopted;
- To produce systematic information on the basis of which management and resourcing decisions can be made;
- To highlight areas of relative efficiency and effectiveness;
- To evaluate the performance of the public affairs unit – in its own right, compared against other organisations, and indeed individual staff performance within the unit;
- To serve as an 'early warning system' by flagging up areas in which change and challenges will emerge in the future.
- To assist in setting priorities for future work, and in documenting how effective particular activities have been to date; and
- To help the organisation improve its internal decision-making processes by enhancing the objective information available.

While several of these rationales may seem to be overlapping, nonetheless this listing does help make clear the range of benefits which can accrue from a serious and sustained effort to move towards determining best practice in public affairs.

What any 'best practice' audit should result in is a deeper awareness among practitioners that even in the highest-performing organisation, there will always be scope for further development and improvement. No company, or functional unit, is the 'best in class' across the whole range of its activities – to say nothing of the fact that it will not be undertaking all

the possible activities which could be done. Ideally, it will serve to highlight not only areas where existing standards can be raised, but also areas in which new activity would be beneficial. Some form of benchmarking can therefore always be useful, particularly if it is systematic, designed as a learning process rather than as self-justification, based upon valid comparisons with peer organisations, acted upon, and repeated regularly. Benchmarking oneself against well-regarded peers allows the big picture of public affairs and the individual fields of activity within it to be subjected to detailed scrutiny annually or on a rolling basis, whereby components are looked at on a set schedule which allows a whole programme of evaluation every 3-4 years.

Both the academic and professional literatures concentrate overwhelmingly on public affairs as it is practiced in advanced Western democracies. In order to arrive at any unified model of what best practice in public affairs might look like, it is essential that some element of cross-cultural awareness be built in (Fleisher, 2005a). Public affairs executives and staff increasingly need to be able to manage and implement campaigns across a number of nations (Dunn et al. 1979; Lodge, 1990; Mack, 1997; Zetter, 2008). Indeed, they may need to ensure both that a global campaign is sensitive to individual and diverse national cultures, and that activities in one country are integrated into and are harmonious with a global strategy. Organisations thus face a tremendous challenge in ensuring that their public affairs staffs have the necessary skills and knowledge to operate internationally. Fleisher (2003b; 2007) lists seven subjects which effective international public affairs practitioners are required to have knowledge of and skills in:

- Intercultural competence
- The ways in which society impacts upon public affairs;
- Local policy making processes;
- National understandings of what public affairs involves;
- Multi-lingual to working standards;
- International ethical standards; and
- The management of external consultants and partners.

On-going research which the authors have embarked upon with Moss, McGrath and Tonge suggests public affairs has several defining characteristics:

- It is necessarily concerned with socio-political issues which affect the organisation's business performance;
- It must involve the organisation's relationships with external stakeholders, and do so in a genuinely dialogical manner;
- It is a boundary-spanning activity which crosses a number of functional units and professional disciplines;
- Protecting and enhancing the organisation's reputation is a central purpose;
- It is proactive rather than reactive;
- Public affairs is based around the management of public policy issues and their life cycle;
- Public affairs is closely bound up with organisational strategic planning processes; and
- The systems, activities and performance of public affairs are all capable of demonstrating through meaningful measures what their contribution is to the organisation and its bottom line.

So to sum-up what do we see Strategic Political Public Affairs as and the core areas for future research:

#### Public Affairs

- Concerned with socio-political issues which affect the organisation's business performance, image and activities ;
- Involves the organisation's relationships with external stakeholders, and is most effective when adopted in a genuinely regular and on-going dialogical manner. It is always best to start early and regularly provide information rather than respond last minute when the decision has almost already been taken on previous dialogue and thinking. This also shows that the organisation has not been watching policy formation and influencing it long term and strategically
- It is a boundary-spanning activity which crosses a number of functional units and professional disciplines and involves the management of the business/political interface.
- Protecting and enhancing the organisation's reputation is a central purpose;
- Public affairs is based around the management of public policy issues and their life cycle; The electoral or change cycle in an organisation, such as the appointment in

November 2012 and 2017 of the new Chinese Central Committee, the formation of a majority Conservative Government in the UK in May 2015 or of direct relevance the election of SYRIZA as the governing party in Greece in 2015 the, outlines to the knowledgeable pa practitioner when is best to exert influence and get things done or not.

- Public affairs is closely bound up with organisational strategic planning processes; and The systems, activities and performance of public affairs are all capable of demonstrating through meaningful measures what their contribution is to the organisation and its bottom line.

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