Asia Pacific Media Educator

12-2002

Emails, educators, practitioners and changing professional paradigms

J. Chia
University of South Australia

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme

Emails, Educators, Practitioners And Changing Professional Paradigms

The management of relationships with stakeholders, key publics and clients is central to the practice of public relations. Maintaining relationships and valuing those that have been established between practitioners and their clients and between practitioners and other organisations, has become increasingly important to the practitioner. However within the changing communication environment of email and Websites can these relationships be managed effectively? Both the practitioner and the educator of public relations are communicating with virtual clients and virtual students through online discussion, email messages, chat rooms and organisational websites. This paper points to the way in which practitioners are adjusting to the changes in online relationship management both online and through traditional communication, and how this can be reflected in educators' response to online teaching of public relations

Joy Chia
University of South Australia

In the 2001 Summer School of an external undergraduate public relations course at the University of South Australia, one of the students encountered a personal crisis that he detailed in a long and emotive email message to the course director. On the following day the student sent a further brief email message apologising for his blunt language and indicated that he had been very stressed when initially sending an email. The online communication continued throughout the two-month course resulting in open discussion that began with a personal issue and ended in intense online analysis of the public relations profession.

Undoubtedly, educator and student developed an understanding about each other online. The student coped well personally and educationally and the educator found the exchange rewarding. However, this was incidental in that the course was planned with specific objectives to develop understanding and knowledge about public relations and enhance communication skills for a large number of offshore and onshore students. This

student was one of many studying in a virtual classroom where online needs and expectations demand more than information and one-way education. As an increasing number of online tertiary courses and programmes are introduced, educators are faced with the difficult task of personalising and tailoring educational programmes so that the excellent online relationship in the case I have cited, can become the norm.

The Internet may be "people connecting with people" (Holtz, 1999: 73) but the individual customer or student online communicates through a virtual medium that at times seems very impersonal. In my current research on relationship management between public relations consultants and their clients, one of the aims is to ascertain how consultants manage, personalise and develop online relationships with their clients. It arises out of a preliminary qualitative study of 11 senior public relations practitioners from 11 different organisations (Chia, 2001).

Practitioners were selected from the South Australian Public Relations Institute of Australia database through the stratified sampling method and semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of three months at their respective offices. Preliminary study findings point to current changes for practitioners especially in relation to website management. Some practitioners had established websites as it seemed to be the trend or thing to do, but they are now revamping and reviewing both site content and the value of the site for customers. There was also evidence of increasing management of email messages through the development of policy guidelines pertinent to the sending and receiving of messages. The need for this had arisen out of endless emails clogging practitioners' communication and adversely affecting the online flow of messages.

Practitioners described email as an online siege and often encountered conflict online when there was misunderstanding about what was being communicated. Practitioners therefore continued to place primary value on face-to-face communication especially when there was tension and dissatisfaction in their relationships with clients and other organisations.

Preliminary and current research on relationship management indicates that the new focus on the relational component of professional practice is slowly changing public relations practice. This paper, within traditional and new forms of communication, explores some of the implications of the new relational focus for practitioners and public relations educators.

Relationship Management

Scholars such as Hunt and Grunig (1994), Hutton (1999), Lindenmann (1998) and Gronstedt (1997) assert that the core function of public relations has changed. They contend that public relations

is no longer a profession primarily focusing on publicity and promotion but emphasis is on valuing and building relationships with employees, other organisations, stakeholders and customers. In addition the concept of relationship management within public relations practice is central to the theory that moulds the profession (Dozier, et al, 1995) and is therefore critical to sound public relations practice.

The relationship-marketing paradigm which emerged during the 1990's has had an important influence on related professions such as public relations, with an emphasis on the maintenance and respect of established relationships between practitioners, organisations and customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Lindenmann, 1998; Kitchen, 1999). However, those pioneering relationship management in both marketing and public relations although acknowledging the need to foster relationships, have failed to develop synonymously understanding of the processes critical to sustain these relationships.

Initial research by Grunig and Huang (2000) and Ledingham and Bruning (2000) in this area (for public relations practice) was influenced by Ferguson's (1984) focus on the importance of a relational approach to public relations practice. Ferguson identified attributes of relationships: "dynamic versus static, open versus closed; the degree to which both the organisation and the public are satisfied with relationship; and the mutuality of understanding, agreement, and consensus" (Grunig & Huang, 2000: 28). These attributes signify recognition of the changing parameters for relationship management.

Even so, the understanding of the concept of relationship and relationship management within public relations practice is one that is still quite confusing for practitioners. Scholars including Seitel (1997), Esrock and Leichty (1998), Thomsen (1997), Ledingham and Bruning (1998), Hunt and Grunig (1994), Toth (2000), contend that there is often an implied understanding of what a public relations professional relationship is and includes. The lack of definition of a relationship and the varied emphases on different components, processes and outcomes of relationships are impeding theory development of relationship management in public relations practice (Broom, et al. 2000).

Contemporary practitioners and public relations educators need to be aware that, "liking people and valuing personal and human relationships and communication is a critical prerequisite to the real function and value of public relations in the realm of business" (Wilson, 1994: 341). Moreover the needs of customers, stakeholders and employees have changed, as "the purpose of communication is not necessarily to influence stakeholders, but to add value to them" (Gronstedt, 1997: 39). The new relational

focus in public relations practice to a great extent recognises that persuasion, manipulation and one-way communication have been practised in a pro-business environment at the expense of a more personalised approach.

Additionally, mass communication on the Internet is often one-way with greater emphasis on giving rather than sharing information. For the public relations educator therefore, adding value to a programme website where dialogue and discussion is encouraged, might mean that greater attention needs to be given to students to participate in the learning process. One way to achieve this is for students to be involved in course website initiatives, other practical ways to create online communication exchange such as online coffee corners will be discussed later in this paper.

However, establishing and maintaining a relational focus "between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, et al, 2000: 6) is difficult because of the increasing number and forms of communication used. This is especially evident when practitioners and educators develop online communication tools that tend to fit in and around traditional tools of communication. A public relations educator may develop in-class tutorials, post lectures on a website and communicate with students by email without clearly understanding the overall aims and expected outcomes of each medium of communication. Furthermore, the demands of new technology and the demands of a computer savvy generation place pressure on educators to upgrade skills and manage online education proficiently. In addition, the demands on the educator in terms of monitoring, responding and interacting one-on-one with students are considerable and resource intensive.

Managing Relationships Online

Thomlison (2000) rightly identifies the one thing that is certain is that the traditional mass media models of public relations lack the sophistication that is essential to understand how to nurture and maintain relationships. This is especially important in online communication and has presented a real challenge to me in managing online classes of 150 to 200 students. How do you personalise a website for so many students and build online relationships? Certainly a key goal for the educator is to retain students that are also satisfied students but doing so in the virtual classroom seems to call for new ways of thinking and planning education online. One-to-one tailored online communication may be critical to the nurturing of relationships (Swift, 2000; Marken, 2000; Sterne, et al, 2000) but educators are also confronted with the increased volume of work with students that takes place in the

online environment. A balanced approach that caters to individual needs while building relationships with student groups seems a more plausible way to manage online education.

My postgraduate and undergraduate students have components of online assessment where students post their plans for managing a campaign such as a recycling campaign, as many times as they like within the assessment period. Active discussion takes place online as each student works hard to argue for their approach. During this process the sharing of ideas contributes to students getting to know each other and to appreciate the views of other students. My experience in teaching public relations online is that students appreciate that they are listened to but they are also empowered and begin to take control of their online education and build a relationship with the educator and with other students. This emulates the empowerment or the changing of power (by giving control in part to the receiver of message or information) in marketing relationship management that Kitchen (1999: 391) asserts is essential for a collaborative and satisfying partnership. Phillips (2001) describes this as e-enabling i.e. the practitioner and client enable each other to benefit from the online communication exchange.

If public relations educators adopt Kitchen's stance to free consumers "from the traditional passive role of receivers of communication" (1999: 396) to one where they are active participants, then educators can profit from the input of students who are IT-savvy and enjoy taking on a key role in making the online learning environment more rewarding. Conversely, over the last three years it has been evident in both my offshore and onshore public relations programmes that mass-producing material for large online audiences gives little idea of how the students are progressing or not progressing. This also encourages students to download information without engaging in the learning process and impedes the building of online relationships. Besides, mass production, especially in the growing offshore market, encourages market driven business ventures (Mickey, 1998: 336) where short-term for-profit strategies continue to be more prominent, overriding more important long-term relationship development.

Practitioners And Educators In Limbo

If educators intend to adopt relationship strategies for online learning from the lessons learned by public relations practitioners, they will find that the understanding of how to achieve both online dialogues while building relationships on the web and through email is still embryonic. Scholars such as Bobbitt (1995), Hill and White (2000), Marken (1998), Esrock and Leichty

(1998), Coombs (1998), Heath (1998), and Swift (2001), have explored the opportunities of new technology and the characteristics of dynamic online dialogue. Kent and Taylor (1998: 321) in particular have pointed to the huge potential of building strategically managed online relationships between organisations and publics, but found that they are under-utilised by practitioners and have not been addressed by scholars as being important. Dougall and Fox also found that Australian practitioners had difficulties with managing online communication and that "the actual usage of new communication tools is quite low" (2001: 34). Educators face similar challenges.

In Australian universities a "recent study by the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, found that no university is offering virtual degrees" (Gibbons, 2001: 104), and that universities are using the Internet as a supplementary teaching tool. Further, the study indicated that there was a pattern of utilising the online learning facilities as additional tools for education rather than tailoring course and programme websites to the needs of the students. In the same way that practitioners have improvised and sort to manage their practice around new technologies, educators have been absorbed in seeking solutions to manage big classes, manage new technology and manage education online, at times lacking a strategic focus in this process. There is also certain fragility about managing online education as the potential for misinterpretation of communication can detract from the key objectives of online learning. Certainly other forms of communication such as video conferencing could assist in overcoming some of these problems, but a more strategic and creative approach is required if online education is to realise its full potential.

One of the ways in which I have personalised course websites, and ensured that they are more than a one-way communication exercise is to include a social meeting point or coffee corner on the website (informal communication discussion site for students in addition to the course discussion and chat room). Students can get to know each other and the educator can participate with students informally. This has been integral to a more satisfying online educator-student relationship, but also student-to-student relationship. It also exemplifies the two-way symmetric model of communication, as ideas, comments and discussion allow for constant development of understanding of all parties communicating online.

Moreover, it is important that online courses are flexible, speedy and encourage information-rich interactions that enhance relationships (Swift, 2001: 83). In two of my course websites I posted the launch of the Anti-Smoking campaign in Singapore and

Australia and students were asked to identify issues in launching and managing the campaign in each other's countries. This generated information-rich interactions about cultural differences and expectations, why shock tactics in advertising had limitations and how the campaign could be run more effectively. It also developed a close-knit online group between students of the two countries as they worked together while engaging in learning and information exchange.

Limitations and opportunities managing relationships online and offline

Student feedback in my public relations programmes at the University of South Australia both offshore and onshore also points to the value of flexible programme delivery that balances offline and online education. This is imperative to valuing the student and personalising education and is a primary motivation to include, where possible, a component of face-to-face learning in public relations courses and programmes. Offshore courses are introduced online a month before my arrival and before the face-to-face seminars are conducted. Although my online programmes are tailored to cultural needs, e.g. by including case studies specific to the students' cultures, it is often in the face-to-face seminars that students develop understanding and test out their ideas in a more rigorous way.

If educators rely on online, virtual delivery of courses there can be some difficulties. Kruckerberg, for example, cautions that the there will be a diversity of people "who will readily exploit technology to communicate with one another through time and space" (1995: 37) and who will use the Internet in ways that may be inappropriate. This is evident in some of the abrupt communication that takes place in my online courses where students send offensive emails and post offensive remarks on the discussion board. Some have apologised for communicating in a way that may offend but by this stage the message has been read by many other students. In part this is to be expected as the "Internet is very new, untested, misunderstood and developing rapidly. Its use for the media and the public is still ill defined, although this is gradually improving with time and better information" (Sherwin, et al, 1999: 46).

I would argue that educators have been too eager to embrace online education at a time when the medium of communication on the Internet has not been well understood. Further, in the same way that practitioners have only just begun to factor in, and plan for, value-added online communication, online education is in the

early stages of personalising online courses and valuing the 'virtual' student. More needs to be researched and understood about online relationship management.

Educators need to balance the continuing growth of online offshore and onshore programmes with a component of face-to-face delivery to cater to the needs of students and balance the strengths of offline delivery with online potential. This can only be achieved if, as part of the strategy for online and offline programme delivery, there are both short and long-term objectives to develop relationships along with the business of education.

Managing online relationships and value adding online education

Practical Approaches

In one of the public relations courses, students found the topic of crisis management very challenging. A practitioner who managed a very complex crisis prepared a 'Walk Through' case study, which was posted online. It was written in a personal style with details about how the practitioner was challenged when the crisis escalated and how he and the Chief Executive Officer had been exhausted in the three days of intense crisis management. He even detailed what they ate and how they felt. In a sense the practitioner took the students on a journey through the highs and lows of crisis management. The entire case study ran for 32 pages and both the educator and the practitioner were available to students for discussion online and by telephone. Students' feedback indicated that they felt that they entered into the realities of the crisis and grasped what it really meant to manage a crisis. In addition the online case was better received than other cases presented in class in the previous year as students had time to evaluate the process while accessing recommended websites that added to the online case study and discussion. They could also discuss emerging issues with other groups of students online. This was a valuable experience for the students, educator and practitioner and added value to the education of this area of public relations.

Although websites and discussion facilities can be accessed at the students' convenience, specific online timeslots have been allocated prior to student assessments. The aim of this special time is that students know that the educator is available for a specific purpose. This more strategic approach has been invaluable as it is similar to the offline appointment system. It is also superior to the one-on-one email or to the general discussion and chat room communication where 24-hour access may be convenient but lacks the focus necessary for specific stages of educational development.

A special discussion site was set up for informal discussion,

as cited earlier through the example of the online *Coffee Corner.* The site created an online social meeting point where the potential of the Internet as an interactive personalised tool could be realised.

An online debate about ethics and integrity in a public relations course led to the students setting up an ethics forum about ethics online. Students began to work through real issues, to challenge each other, and they also became very open about their views on ethics, truth and morality. For a short period the online discussion moved away from the specifics of public relations ethics but was essential to the students dealing with their mixed emotions on the topic as well as addressing professional issues. Certainly much of the discussion may have been similar to the offline tutorial discussion but the online forum moved to online sites on hacker ethics, ethics in cyberspace, online security and who might be invading their website. It was a valued added learning experience that enriched the discussion and learning about a very difficult topic. Again students used the *Coffee Corner* as 'time out' online when the debate became too intense.

These are just a few examples that are representative of online education being more than a one-way information tool; rather emphasis is on value adding education, knowing and understanding the student in the virtual classroom and developing a relationship between educator and student. The value of mixed-mode delivery however cannot be underestimated as online and face-to-face education especially in offshore public relations programmes makes possible the best of both forms of communication. Mixed mode delivery does not provide all the answers for educators who are pressured to move their courses and programmes online, but it provides some of the answers to the strengths of education in both online and offline forums.

The Future | The reality of relationship management

The reality for the public relations educator is that online courses and programmes necessitate considerable knowledge and understanding of students' needs, and knowledge and skills to manage new technology strategically. However, according to Coombs and Rybacki (1999), many educators are not sufficiently trained in new technologies. Furthermore, Sherwin and Avila assert that "the Internet represents only one facet of a public relations strategy" (1999: 46) so that being skilled online and utilising online resources represents but one component of public relations practice and public relations education. In addition, as the understanding of online and offline relationship management is still embryonic, it is essential that future research in this area identifies the parameters for successful long term relationships

between practitioners and stakeholders, clients and key publics and between educators and students.

My current qualitative research or work in progress is focusing on online and offline relationship management of consultants and their clients, in terms of the identified benchmarks of quality relationships (trust, openness, commitment, satisfaction) (Huang, 2000) that will be explored along with the changing context of this communication. It is anticipated that the benchmarks of quality relationships may not have been properly considered or planned for in either email or website communication. The challenge in my research will be to advance the concepts raised by Kent and Taylor (1998) and other scholars around web relationship management and progress relational theory to a point where it is applicable to both online and offline relationship management.

The greatest challenge for practitioners and educators will be to keep pace with the rapid change and demands of new technology. Certainly, avoidance of online communication and education is scarcely an option. Rather online communication has the potential to augment offline or traditional communication and enhance collaborative learning and exchange. ∎

REFERENCES

Bobbitt, R. (1995) An internet primer for public relations, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Vol. 40(3), 27-33.

Broom, G.; Casey, S & Ritchey, J. (2000). Concept and theory of organisation-public relationships, in Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Bruning, S. & Ledingham, J. eds. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Chia, J. (2002). Online relationship management. Is it a reality for public relations practitioners? *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal,* Vol.3(1), 97-115.

Coombs, W .(1998), The Internet as a potential equalizer: new leverage for confronting social irresponsibility, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.24(3), 289-304.

Coombs, T & Rybacki, K.(1999). Public relations education: Where is pedagogy? *Public Relations Review,* Vol.25(1), 55-64.

Cutlip, S. & Center, A. & Broom, G. (2000). *Effective public relations,* 8th ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Dozier, M.; Grunig, L. & Grunig, J. (1995). *Managers guide to excellence in public relations and communication management,* Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Esrock, S. & Leichty, G. (1998). Social responsibility and corporate Web pages: self presentations or agenda setting? *Public Relations Review,*

Special issue: T*echnology and the Corporate Citizen,* Vol. 24(3),305-320.

Esrock, S. & Leichty, G. (2000). Organization of corporate web pages: publics and functions, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.26(3), 327-343.

Ferguson, M. (1984). *Building Theory in Public Relations: Interorganisational relationships as public relations paradigm,* paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville,FL, August. In Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. 2000. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Gibbons, P. (2001). The virtual professor, *Business Review Weekly,* October 20, 100-104.

Gronstedt, A. (1997). The role of research in public relations in Public relations strategy and planning in Caywood, L. *The handbook of strategic public relations & integrated communications,* New York. McGraw-Hill.

Grunig, J. & Huang, Yi-Hui (2000). From organisational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes, in Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,*

Gundling, E. (1999). How to communicate globally, *Training and Development,* Vol.53(6), 28-31.

Heath, R. (1998). New communication technologies: an issues management point of view, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.24(3), 273-289.

Hill, L. & White, C. (2000). Public relations practitioners' perception of the world wide web as a communication tool, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.26, 31-51.

Holtz, S. (1999). *Public relations on the Net,* New York. AMOCOM.

Hunt, T. & Grunig, J. (1994). *Public relations techniques,* Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Hutton, J. (1999). The definitions, dimensions, and domain of public relations, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.25(2), 199-214.

Kent, L. & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through World Wide Web, *Public Relations Review, Special Issue: Technology and the corporate citizen,* Vol.24(3), 321-335.

Kitchen, P. (1999). *Marketing communications: Principles and practice,* London: Thomson Business Press.

Kruckerberg, D. (1995). The challenge for public relations in the era of globalization, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Vol.40(4), 36-40.

Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. (1998). Relationship management in public relations: dimensions of an organization-public relationship, *Public Relations Review,* Spring, Vol.24(1), 55-66.

Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. (2000). *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Lindenmann, W. (1999). Measuring relationships is key to successful public relations, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Vol.43(4), 18-31.

Marken, A. (1996). The Internet and the Web: The two-way public relations highway, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Spring, Vol. 43(1), 31-35.

Marken, A. (2000). CRM…Take a hint from the Internet, redefine customers, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Vol.45(3), 40-41.

Mickey, T. (1998). Selling the Internet. A cultural studies approach to public relations, *Public Relations Review,* Vol.24(3), 335-350.

Morgan, R. & Hunt, S. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, *Journal of Marketing,* Vol.58(3), 20-39.

Peppard, J. (2000). Customer relationship management (CRM) in financial services, *European Management Journal,* Vol.18(3), 312-327.

Phillips, D. (2001). *Online public relations,* Kogan Page.

Seitel, F. (1998). *The practice of public relations,* 7th edition, Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Springston, J. & Keyton, J. (2001). Public relations field dynamics, in Heath, R. *Handbook of public relations,* Thousand Oaks, USA.

Sherwin, G & Avila, E. (1999). *Connecting online. Creating a successful image on the Internet,* Central Point, Oregon: The Oasis Press.

Sterne, J & Priore, A. (2000). *Email marketing. Using email to reach your target audience and build customer relationships,* New York: Wiley Computer Publishing.

Swift, R. (2001). *Accelerating customer relationships. Using CRM and relationship technologies,* Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall.

Toth (2000). From personal influence to interpersonal influence. A model for relationship management, public relations as relationship management, in Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Thomlison, D. (2000). An interpersonal primer with implications for public relations, in Ledingham, J. & Bruning, S. *Public relations as relationship management. A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Thomsen, S. (1997). Public relations in the new millennium: understanding the forces that are reshaping the profession, *Public Relations Quarterly,* Vol.42(1), 11-20.

Wilson, L. (1994). Excellent companies and coalition building among the Fortune 500: a value-and relationship-based theory, *Public Relations Review.* Vol.20(4), 333-344.

JOY CHIA is Public Relations Program Director of the Masters of Communication Management and Graduate Diploma in Communication (PR) at the University of South Australia. She also teaches public relations in Hong Kong and Singapore as part of the offshore masters programs. She is member of the National Education Committee of the Public Relations Institute of Australia.
Email: Joy.Chia@unisa.edu.au