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What we value: A Delphi study to identify key values that guide ethical decision-making in public relations

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Abstract

This study recommends that the Public Relations Society of America expand its professional values list to include respect and trustworthiness. This addition also shows the value this study's public relations participants place on mutually beneficial relationships with their clients/employers, customers, communities, and society as a whole. The findings contribute to the growing attention to and value of relationship management theory for effective public relations.

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When the Public Relations Society of America issued the eighth iteration of its ethics code 6 years ago, it incorporated a statement of professional values to serve as the code's foundation. "These values are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviors and decision-making process," the statement reads. "We believe our professional values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole" (PRSA, 2000). The six core values identified in the code are advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. The essence of these values is woven throughout the code's six provisions that describe specific behavioral expectations.

Much has changed, however, since PRSA unveiled its updated code and accompanying statement of values. For example, public relations practitioners recently were publicly chastised for inadequate sponsor disclosure of video news releases (Brown, 2005; VNR controversy, 2006) and pay-for-play schemes by freelancers and consultants (Creamer, 2005; PRSA statement, 2005; Reeves, 2006). Practitioners went on the offensive to re-establish credibility, and companies such as Merck, Coca-Cola, GE, and McDonald's have sought to enhance their public images through corporate social responsibility efforts (Ferguson, Popescu, & Collins, 2006; Merck's new AIDS drug, 2006; Mishra, 2006).

In light of such occurrences, the purpose of this exploratory study is to revisit whether the six values identified by PRSA still adequately serve the profession, or if others might be considered. Since PRSA represents only a fraction of public relations practitioners in the United States, assessing values identified by practitioners regardless of association membership may provide additional insight about important values for the ever-evolving public relations profession.

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1. Reputation management and mutual values

Ethics means applying core values to interpersonal relationships (Linzer, 1999). Effective relationships also reflect the best practices of public relations as identified through relationship management theory (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000), which emphasizes a reciprocal and balanced approach to public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004) that benefits organizations and their publics (Ledingham, 2006). Rather than focus merely on communication output, this theoretical concept emphasizes the impact of public relations programs “on the quality of the relationship between an organization and the publics with which it interacts” (p. 466). Dimensions – or values – of the relationship management theory are trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment, which reflect what Sullivan (1965) referred to as mutual values; that is, those values that are common to and reciprocal among organizations and their publics.

While current PRSA values (2000) – advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness – encompass some elements of mutuality, the focal point is decidedly on an individual practitioner’s professionalism. Fairness and honesty reflect the mutual needs of both the organization and its publics. Trust, cooperation, understanding, and other reciprocal values are not currently reflected among the PRSA’s statement of professional values.

Using relationship management theory as a foundation, this study addresses two research questions:

RQ1 What values do public relations practitioners believe are most important to practice their craft ethically?

RQ2 Do these values reflect mutuality and reciprocity as advocated by relationship management?

2. Method

A Delphi study was conducted to answer the two research questions. According to Kendall (1996), the Delphi study approach is “a multistep ‘discussion by mail’ procedure” (p. 86) among experts who may help researchers reach a consensus on a particular topic or issue. The advantage of this approach is the ability to gather viewpoints from a variety of practitioners without risking the bias and influence that can occur in group decision making (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1973; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafsohn, 1975; Morgan, Pelissero, & England, 1979).

With today’s technological advancements, this study’s “discussion by mail” (Kendall, 1996, p. 86) was conducted via Internet surveys, which shortened the distribution and response time. The questions were presented via the Survey Monkey Web site (www.surveymonkey.com), allowing the respondents to access the Web site at their convenience, and the researcher to collect their responses efficiently.

The Delphi process involves two or more sets of feedback from a group of participants. Responses to an initial questionnaire are compiled and summarized. In the subsequent questionnaire(s), respondents are provided compiled responses, and are asked to assess their initial positions with those of other study participants, and provide additional feedback (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1976; Kendall, 1996). The assessment can be quantitative and/or qualitative. For this study, the initial questionnaire incorporated one open-ended question: What values do you deem most important for public relations practitioners to employ in their jobs? The list of responses was compiled alphabetically and posted on a second survey that asked the respondents to review the list of values and select those they deemed most important. A second question asked the respondents to select and rank what they believed to be the top 10 values from the list. Because of the sheer quantity of values submitted, the values were grouped according to similar themes (e.g., synonyms of honesty were grouped together). A third survey asked participants to verify that values were grouped appropriately.

A total of 83 public relations practitioners and academics with a minimum of 5 years of experience were sent, via e-mail, the Web address to the initial survey. Of those contacted, two individuals replied and declined to participate, and nine e-mails were returned with inaccurate addresses, resulting 72 practitioners receiving the three surveys. A total of 26 responses were garnered from the first questionnaire, 28 responses from the second questionnaire, and 25 from the third questionnaire. These results fall on the low end of acceptability for Delphi study response rates (Kendall, 1996). The researcher also acquired input from public relations professionals and academics attending a highly regarded public relations conference. Thirty conference attendees provided feedback on the thematic grouping of values. Respondents to all three surveys represented a variety of public relations fields: nonprofit organizations; agencies; for-profit businesses in areas including insurance, pharmaceuticals, and high technology; hospitals, regulated industries, and academia.

3. Results

The first Delphi study questionnaire, which asked respondents what values they deem most important for the public relations practice, produced 70 different values from 26 individuals. Each respondent identified at least one value, and one person identified eight values. A total of 25 respondents identified two values, 23 respondents listed three values, and 16 respondents provided four values.

Although the survey did not ask respondents to prioritize their values, 13 individuals identified honesty as the first item in their lists, and three individuals listed it second. Honesty, by far, was the most-often-cited value. Thirteen of the 70 values were identified by more than one respondent.

Although some of the terms could be considered synonyms (e.g., honesty and truthfulness), the complete list of 70 terms was resubmitted to the respondents in a second survey. At that time, the respondents were asked to review the alphabetized list of values and again identify (by a checkmark) which terms they deem most important. A second question asked the respondents to select and rank their top 10 values from the list.

Overall, 8 of the 70 values were selected as important by more than three-quarters of the respondents: accountability, accuracy, clear writing, critical thinking, being ethical, honesty, integrity, and truthfulness. Ten of the 70 values were selected as important by 50–74% of respondents, and 30 values were deemed important by 25–49% of respondents. Another 22 values were deemed important by less than one-quarter of respondents.

Next, the researcher grouped similar values to determine which ones respondents perceived to be most important. A total of 11 categories of values emerged. Of the 11 categories, seven could be identified as groups of values that cross discipline lines: (1) fairness, (2) honesty, (3) loyalty, (4) open-mindedness, (5) professionalism, (6) reliability, and (7) respect. Additionally, four categories were identified as attributes or strategic skills of importance to the public relations profession: (8) accessibility, (9) advocacy, (10) proactivity, and (11) technical proficiency. Two terms – having fun and being ethical – although reflective of the profession, were not placed within specific categories.

Those values relating to truth and honesty ranked highest. Tying for second were respect and fairness, followed by accountability. Tying for fourth were synonyms of open-mindedness, loyalty, and professionalism. Accessibility and technical proficiency were next. The two smallest categories were proactivity and advocacy. These 11 categories were shared with participants to ascertain the appropriateness of the groupings.

Feedback revealed that some participants considered some of the groups too broad. For example, several participants did not believe that semi-unbiased belonged in a group with fairness and justice. Suggestions were accommodated, but the changes did not detract from the overall concepts of the 11 categories. Additionally, many participants noted that three concepts open-mindedness, technical proficiency, and proactivity—are attributes or traits of public relations professionals, but not values of the profession. Even with these considerations, participants found that the 11 categories adequately address important responsibilities of the public relations profession.

4. Discussion

The study's first research question asked, "What values do public relations practitioners believe are most important for their profession?" The exploratory Delphi study to identify key professional values produced a rather extensive list of 70 items. Grouping similar values as part of the data analysis resulted in 11 categories.

These 11 values generally are consistent with those identified by the Public Relations Society of America (2000) statement of professional values (see Fig. 1). The Delphi study's identification of honesty, loyalty, and fairness corresponds directly to three of PRSA's six values. The professionalism and technical proficiency categories correspond to the PRSA value of expertise, and the open-mindedness category reflects the PRSA value of independence. Four additional groups of values produced by the Delphi study and not part of the PRSA list are respect, trustworthiness, accessibility, and proactivity.

There were no surprises among the list of values, except perhaps for the inclusion of the term "ethical," which one practitioner included for the first, open-ended question despite the survey introduction that explained the study purpose to identify values used in ethical decision-making. The term will not be included in subsequent research.

The second research question asked, "Do these values reflect mutuality and reciprocity as advocated by relationship management?" Results showed that respondents consider mutuality as integral to ethical public relations practices, and these values reflect the dimensions of relationship management espoused by Ledingham (2006) and others—trust, openness, involvement in community welfare, community investment, and community commitment.

Five of the 11 values that emerged from this study show some degree of mutuality—honesty, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, and accessibility (see Fig. 2). Two of these values correspond directly to dimensions of relationship management—trust and openness. Proactivity supports elements of involvement in community welfare, and respect supports both the community investment and community commitment dimensions of relationship management (Dimmick, Bell, Burgiss, & Ragsdale, 2000; Ledingham, 2006).

The identification of respect and trustworthiness by respondents also may be indicative of today’s socio-economic climate, including concerns about unethical business practices and scandals exposed in the 6 years since the PRSA code was formed in 2000 (see, for example, Hays, 2006; Miller, 2006; Nielsen, 2006; Sunseri & Rottman, 2006). The significance these respondents placed on reciprocal values such as respect and trustworthiness also may show the profession’s increased dedication to building and nurturing relationships with publics (Ledingham, 2006). As reported in Edelman’s *Trust Barometer report* (2006), “Trust is more than a bonus; it is a tangible asset that must be created, sustained, and built upon” (p. 7). Additionally, the report noted, “Trust is a ‘price of entry’ attribute – without it, companies will find it difficult or impossible to cultivate positive, productive relationships with key internal and external constituencies” (p. 28).

4.1. Next steps

Certainly, this study is not without its limitations. The data were collected from small groups of public relations practitioners and academics, so no sweeping generalizations may be made about the findings. However, the emergence of values that reflect the expectation of mutually beneficial organizational-public relationships is a key finding. Subsequent research will test the validity of the 11 values discovered in this study among a larger sample of public relations practitioners. The sample will include both PRSA and non-PRSA members.

Additionally, there is some indication from this study that these respondents consider certain values more significant than others. For example, honesty (and its synonyms) consistently received the most “votes,” and respect and fairness followed as close seconds. These results mirror earlier findings by this author (Boynton, 2001), which showed three priority levels of values—(1) avoiding harm, (2) honesty and truthfulness, and (3) compassion and respect. A subsequent study is planned to ask a large sample of practitioners whether they perceive a values priority for the public relations profession, based on the 11 categories discovered in the present study. Although scholars who list universal values typically do not prioritize them because situational ethics precludes prioritizing (e.g., Josephson, 1993; Kidder, 1994), researchers in the field of social work (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996) prioritized a list of seven values as part of their “ethical principles screen” (p. 63) to assist social workers in streamlining their ethical decision-making process.

The two-fold purpose of this study – to independently identify a list of public relations values and determine the level of mutuality of these values – builds on the six professional values identified by the Public Relations Society of America to incorporate the more recent socio-economic concerns of respect and trustworthiness. This addition also shows the value these practitioners place on mutually beneficial relationships with their clients/employers, customers, communities, and society as a whole. The findings contribute to the growing attention to and value of relationship management theory for effective public relations.

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