TRANSPARENCY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: IMPROVING THE CREDIBILITY
OF PR PROFESSIONALS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Under the Mentorship of Dr. Pete Tormey

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Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By
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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Faculty Mentor

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Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University

MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
Abstract

This correlational study identifies opportunities for PR (public relations) professionals to gain trust by engaging online communities using unprecedented levels of transparency. The thesis begins by reviewing literature and setting the stage for how and when PR gained its PR problem (Thomas et al., 2009). The study observes how PR professionals are currently engaging these audiences, and also demonstrates how the public perceives these actions. The philosophical framework for this study stemmed from Aristotle’s belief in goodwill in communities (Book 1, Chapter 1), and Augustine’s (1909) belief that “All wish to rejoice in truth” (p. 186). Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory (1965) was used to identify favorable social cues, and was used as the lens in evaluating online survey data collected from 84 participants who answered open-ended questions. Results confirmed correlations exist between the use of social media by public relations professionals and public perceptions of transparency and credibility for the represented organizations. Findings will further communication studies by identifying opportunities for PR professionals to gain trust from the publics they serve.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) professionals in general, lack the trust of the American public (Bollinger, 2003), and the implications of this go far beyond the small irony that PR has a PR problem (Thomas et. al, 2009). In the 21st Century as social media has become a pillar of communication for many people, (Kelleher, 2009), PR professionals must evaluate and implement opportunities to regain trust and maintain relevance.

Importance of the Study

An examination of previous research into the trust deficit American PR professionals face, coupled with an evaluation of whether transparency established via social media may improve PR practitioners’ public image and may identify opportunities to increase public trust among PR professionals.

This study will help confirm previous scholarly findings involving the trust of PR professionals by the U.S. public, and will help identify trends that may direct PR professionals to communicate transparently, especially through the strategic and intentional use of social media, to improve their perceived trustworthiness in the U.S. marketplace.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate if correlations exist between the use of social media by public relations professionals and public perceptions of transparency and credibility for the organizations represented.

In other words, the study will attempt to determine relationships between:
• The use of social media by public relations professionals and the perception of transparency within the public relations industry; and

• The use of social media by public relations professionals and the perception of trust within the public.

Definitions of Terms Used

Proximal Cues: Intended audiences make judgments based on cues and established perceptions (Cooksey, 1996).

Public Relations (PR) Professional: The role of the public relations professional is to make management credible to the public, and to make the public credible to management (Lewis, 1977, p. 1)

Trust: Firm belief or confidence in the honesty, integrity, reliability, justice, etc., of another person or thing (Neufeldt, 1997, p. 1436).

Transparency: Transparency has been tied to trust, corporate social responsibility, and ethics (Rawlins, 2009, p.72).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Analysis will be divided into the following chapters: 1) Introduction; 2) Review of the Literature; 3) Scope and methodology of the research; 4) Research results; and 5) Summary and conclusion of the literature and study results.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Lamme and Russell (2010), the public relations (PR) industry started in the 20th Century in an effort to help organizations connect with customers, and vice-versa. Since then, however, many people now think of PR professionals as synonymous as the corrupt, believing that they are hired help spin facts.

Bowen (2009) explains that the PR professionals included in a focus group said they felt pressured by company executives to fix the bad news, even if the bad news was true. This lack of transparency has led many not to trust PR professionals, and now PR has a PR problem (Thomas et al, 2009).

Trust can be improved by increasing the level of transparency among PR professionals, and the Internet can help facilitate that level of transparency (Rawlins, 2009).

Theoretical Basis

The following literature review examines how Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory may be used to identify the process of allowing transparency among PR professionals to improve the trust of the public.

According to Cooksey (1996), intended audiences make judgments based on cues and established perceptions. By using social cues that are already perceived favorably by the public, those perceptions could be used to help deliver a message, and land it with limited criticism. Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall (1965) claimed that one of the primary drivers for attitude change was the credibility of the source. It will be important to discover what sources the public values, and to what degree the public values transparency, and if that would improve the perception of PR professionals.
In the above image, Cooksey (1996) demonstrates how social cues may validate or reject the message being delivered. In this case, by determining that people perceive transparency and social media communities as favorable, it may be possible to improve the credibility of PR professionals who use these social cues.

**Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions**

Aristotle explained that communities are “established for some good purpose; for an apparent good is the spring of all human actions” (*Politics*, Book 1, Chapter 1). By developing communities, PR professionals may be able to show their goodwill toward the members of these online communities. The truth is also extremely important to building these communities. Augustine explains that “All wish to rejoice in truth” (p. 186). By spreading false information may tear the communities apart, and in turn ruining any potential credibility.
Understanding that PR professionals must bridge the gap between organizations and target audiences, Bowen (2009) claims that many perceive PR professionals as having been coddled by their employers, and are no longer fairly representing the public. PR professionals must represent both sides equally; not only represent the company, but also offer public perceptions back to the company to encourage change within the organization, if necessary.

These philosophical and ethical assumptions will be used as the framework as the scholars outlined in the following literature review demonstrate opportunities for PR professionals to gain credibility.

The Literature

Roles & Responsibilities

Lewis (1977) explains that the role of the PR professional is to bridge the gap between the organization and its audience by not just interpreting the company’s actions to customers in a way that is more favorable, but to explain what the company is doing to act on the customers’ feedback. It is the PR professional’s role to ensure organization leaders understand customer feedback and help them interpret the trends; then communicate back to the audience why or why not the company is taking action on that feedback (Lewis, 1977). Lewis goes on to say that the role of the PR professional is thankless, much like the weatherman, however it plays an extremely important part, “to make management credible to the public—and the public credible to management” (Lewis, 1977, p. 1)

It is also the goal of PR professionals to work with journalists to ensure that the organization is represented fairly and accurately in coverage (St. John, 2009). St. John explains that part of the reason for the PR industry’s less than desirable perception rises from “the societal
backlash against the domestic propaganda of World War I and the ongoing momentum toward press professionalism” (St. John, 2009, p. 363). This according to St. John inspires journalists to unearth facts, and grow skeptical of PR professionals. It is this negative outlook that transfers to ink when journalists engage the public.

Based on recent focus groups of PR professionals however, Bowen (2009) suggests that organizational leaders expect PR professionals to “fix” the bad news. Instead of seeking transparency for a long-term solution, leadership oftentimes expects the PR professional to spin the news for the sake of short-term sense of mitigated alarm (Bowen, 2009). This research is helpful in explaining how executives must understand the role that PR plays, and not request the unthinkable, at risk of destroying trustworthy relationships.

**Trustworthy Relationships**

According to Kazoleas & Teven (2009), short-term thinking has contributed to many people not trusting PR professionals. Kazoleas & Teven (2009) state that PR professionals must set their sights on long-term relationships, rather than attempting to spin the news, Kazoleas & Teven suggests building trustworthy relationships over a long period of time will gain credibility.

Pauly (2007) examined the 2006 blog campaign from Wal-Mart and Edelman, which was inherently dishonest as it lied to the public when it said the bloggers were American parents on a family road trip across the country and stopping at Wal-Marts from state to state. The campaign only lasted two weeks before people from the blogosphere caught on and criticized Wal-Mart, forcing Richard Edelman, President and CEO of Edelman, to admit its failure of transparency. While Edelman admitted to being less than transparent, he did not apologize (Pauly, 2007). This
TRANSPARENCY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

evidence shows the importance of full disclosure, and how trying to deceive the public will harm attempts at trying to build relationships with the community.

Geary (2005) cites a 2004 survey by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, sponsored by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Survey results showed that six percent of journalists feel it’s necessary to be moral, and media credibility, in 2004, was at its lowest in 30 years. With the decline in credibility of press, it proves the increased importance of reliable PR. Furthermore, the results speak to how important it is to internalize the importance of ethics and morals, and whether that belief is present or non-existent, the public will pick up on that sense.

One reason why many people don’t inherently trust mass media is because the lines between PR professionals are often encroaching on journalism. According to Potter (2008), readers must increase their media literacy so that they are not limited to one source, but instead can gain truth from multiple sources. To build trust for PR professionals in the 21st Century, Lordan (2005) suggests that PR professionals must not attempt to blur the lines between them and journalists, but in fact distinguish the lines and be extremely clear in the value that a PR professional brings. The public should be able to easily identify PR professionals and the value they offer as they set roles and responsibilities between management and the public, and demonstrate they can be trusted.

Furthermore, Childers (1989) explains that PR professionals must make these lines clear for the organization’s leaders that they represent. Bowen (2009) demonstrates that PR professionals feel under pressure to make bad news, good. Furthermore, Childers (1989) suggests that PR professionals must be clear with organizational leaders about responsibilities, and be realistic about expectations. Heath (1998) explains that the more transparent an
organization can be, the more favorable the perceptions are among the public, as the relationships build over time. Those expectations should be set on long-term goals of trusted relationships rather than short-term wins, and this can be achieved by leveraging social media (Kelleher, 2009).

**Transparency via Social Media**

Kelleher (2009) explains the importance of using the Internet to connect with target audiences. Through a 2006 survey of 128 blog commenters, he showcased results of how customers trusted the organization representatives who chose to use conversational voice and add a human element, rather than those who did not.

Blogs can be used as a way for PR professionals to communicate with people and do it in a way that is transparent, and builds credibility (Smuddle, 2003). “The involvement of organizations and stakeholders together in a blog fosters dialog about the good, the bad, and anything in between” (Smuddle, 2003, p. 37).

Additionally, according to Yang & Lim (2009), blogs have become a popular two-way communications tool for PR professionals. “Blogger credibility ... is often renewed through the process of relational communication” (Ying & Lam, 2009, p. 346). Ying & Lam (2009) studied 314 volunteers who showed that blogger credibility was determined by whether or not the blog had interactivity and fostered dialog.

Len-Rios (2003) had 147 undergraduates fill out questionnaires focused on corporate websites. Results revealed that the organizations that encouraged two-way dialogue built better trust with the user. Two way dialogue could be defined as blog comments, responses to comments, chat rooms, or even as simple as contact information.
Isaksson & Jorgenson (2010) evaluated how European PR firms are positioning themselves online, and determined that the corporate websites were still lacking any human voice and missing an opportunity to connect to potential and existing clients by showcasing trust language. Isaksson & Jorgenson argued that these companies focus too much on “expertise, their dependability, and their inherently benign nature” (2010, pp. 119-120), and should instead use “figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, parallelisms, and personifications … (which) enable a writer to arrange, shape, and present ideas in a way that projects the image of a thoughtful and analytical person whose ideas deserve to be taken seriously” (2010, p. 120).

More than what the person or organization communicates on the profile, the online audience can also learn a lot from the organization by the friends it keeps, and how the organization interacts with its network of people (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). In this article, Walther et al. explain how social media is a form of “give-and-take” (2008, p. 29), and that by offering acknowledgement to individuals, those people will help share the organization’s message in an effort to reciprocate the generosity.

Social Media Limitations

As Lamme and Russel (2010) point out, social media is not going to solve PR’s PR problem alone. In fact, there has always been, and will always be room for improvement with in the PR industry (Lamme & Russell, 2010).

Jin (2003) suggests that integrated communications work best and demonstrates how integrated communications can offer the best strategy to achieving a goal of transparency. Additionally, Jo (2005) showed that organizations that seek credibility should be encouraged to seed objective information with key traditional media first and then use the website to
incorporate material from other trusted sources. The research supports the claim that organizations cannot work in a vacuum because they have a blog, but must continue to work with media to gain trust.

**Time for Change**

The 21st Century reflects a shift in the way journalists currently do their job (Collie, 2008). Collie explains that as people look to the Internet for information and breaking news, print journalists are becoming extinct, and the move to online reporting is essential. Palser (2008) demonstrates that while many newsrooms are cutting jobs, many newsrooms are investing in online news. Furthermore, as reporters are looking for new ways to report the news, PR professionals must also look for new ways to communicate (Lordan, 2003).

A crisis can be detrimental to an organization’s brand (Reynolds, 2008). Reynolds explains one way to mitigate criticism during crisis is to use open and empathetic communication. As researchers have claimed that PR has a PR problem, it’s time that the industry follows its own advice and use open communication with the public.

As the 21st Century presents PR with a PR problem (Callison, 2001), current technology also offers PR an opportunity to become increasingly transparent (Jo, 2005), which will in turn gain trust (Lamme & Russell, 2010).

As people’s media literacy improves, or to “gradually improve … awareness” (Potter, 2009, p. 334), the public is expected to be online and gathering news from several sources, including PR Professionals. PR professionals offer a unique and direct link to organization leaders who are often at the center of news that people care about (Lordan, 2003), and must now meet this need, with transparency, in an effort to build trusted relationships with the public.
According to Smuddle (2005), PR professionals must “walk the talk” to gain trust, and that begins with being intrinsically loyal to both the organization and the public, and using technology to bridge the gap between these audiences.

**Research Question**

It is the aim of this study to answer the following four research questions: 1). “What can public relations professionals do to gain more credibility from the public?” 2). “Why are PR professionals often mistrusted?” 3). “What level of transparency must PR professionals offer?” and 4). “How can social media play a part in improving the credibility of PR professionals?”
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This study was approached from the view of a correlational researcher. A correlational study is a scientific study where the researcher examines relationships between variables.

According to Babbie (2004) social scientists use two models to explain behavior: the idiographic model of explanation and the nomothetic model of explanation. The idiographic model of explanation demonstrates how behavior is caused by several unique experiences. The nomothetic model of explanation, however, explains behavior based on very few experiences that could shift entire perceptions.

This study operates based on nomothetic model of explanation as it is expected to find very few interactions could cause relationships between social media use, transparency, and trust within the PR industry. At best, this correlational (nomothetic) study is expected to find high or low probability between variables, and will not declare causality proving that one factor will cause a determined result.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if correlations exist between the use of social media by public relations professionals and public perceptions of transparency and credibility for the organizations represented.

In other words, the study will attempt to determine relationships between:

The use of social media by public relations professionals and the perception of transparency with in the public relations industry; and

The use of social media by public relations professionals and the perception of trust within the public.
This study will first determine whether correlations exist between a) the use of social media by public relations professionals and the perception of transparency within the public relations industry, and b) the use of social media by PR professionals and the perception of trust within the public. If those relationships are found, the Sherif Social Judgment Theory will be used to identify the process allowing transparency to improve trust of the public.

**Methodology**

As this is a correlational study, qualitative data will be gathered in a non-random sample. The snowball sampling of 185 PR professionals will help target this intended audience, and a large community can be examined through multiple networks of colleagues.

By pushing the survey to PR professionals, it is expected to use people-based research to learn their beliefs of the correlation. According to Rubin et al (2010), people-based research studies peoples’ actions and reactions; and it’s the reactions to survey questions that will be studied to determine correlations.

All subjects were offered informed consent, which Babbie (2004) explains as understanding the risk, and being offered anonymity so that honest answers may result.

The use of online survey, Survey Monkey, was used to request qualitative data for this study. This methodology was expected to be valuable because PR professionals may have best practices for using social media for transparency and gaining trust, and may also have case studies as to why or why not they believe PR professionals can use social media to gain credibility. These anecdotes were extremely important in this study and comments are expected to bring this qualitative data to light.
All data was confidential and anonymous as the names of themselves or the organizations they represent will not be collected, and will instead be identified by age, gender, and whether they are a PR professional or not.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

Surveys returned from 84 participants showed that social media, as expected, could be used as a tool to demonstrate transparency as a means to gain trust. Those surveyed however, also showed that they expected social media be used to gain two-way dialogue as a way to uncover transparency.

These trends appeared upon asking survey respondents a series of open-ended questions into social media use, transparency, and trust, which could be examined to find peoples' perceptions of PR professionals, and what, if anything, could be done to shift these perceptions. Responses revealed that perceptions of trust could be shifted using transparency in social media. One respondent wrote, “If you talk to me regularly, I’ll trust you more than if you only talk to me when you’ve screwed up.” Responses echoed this sentiment, and revealed that social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, was commonly used as a form of communication.

The snowball sampling of 185 PR professionals resulted in a total of 84 participants. Data collection took place on Oct. 21, 2011, one week after sending e-mail messages to 185 PR professionals with a link to a survey instrument developed through the web-based company SurveyMonkey.com. As expected, by targeting PR professionals and requesting them to share the survey with friends, demographics revealed a 38 to 46 split between respondents who are PR professionals, and respondents who are non-PR professionals, respectively. These two demographic groups were first split into two sections to determine similarities and differences in their views of social media, transparency, and their view of PR professionals' credibility. Next, data was categorized by social media, transparency, and trust. Demographics of participants can be found in Tables 1 & 2 below:
Table 1: PR Professional Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 and younger</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and older</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Non-PR Professional Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 and younger</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and older</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Social Media

Participants who filled out the survey were asked about their social media use, and their behavior patterns with regards to blogs. Social media sites offered in the survey included: DIGG; Facebook; Flickr; Foursquare; Friendster; Google+; LinkedIn; MySpace; Quora; Twitter; and Windows Live Spaces. Participants could also choose to select Other or None.

Another question posed to participants asked about news sources. Participants were asked how they used the following information sites: Corporate website/blog; e-mail; Facebook; independent website/blog; online news site; RSS; search engine; Twitter. Participants could also
choose Other or None. Finally, participants were asked an open-ended question to determine, “Is it possible to get to know someone via a social network? Please explain.”

This question is important, as Kazoleas and Teven (2009) state that PR professionals must engage in long-term relationships to establish credibility; therefore, it must first be established that relationships can be formed via social media before it can be determined if social media can be used to build transparency and trust in those relationships.

**Transparency**

Participants were asked for qualitative feedback, and were asked the following questions, “How do you define transparent communication? And, what level of transparency do you expect from PR professionals?” It is important for PR professionals to manage their customers’ expectations because, as Lewis (1977) noted, they must bridge the gap between the organization and its audience by setting roles and responsibilities. Once expectations around transparency can be set, PR professionals now have a goal to reach to start earning trust.

**Trust**

Participants were asked four open-ended questions regarding trust:

- Do you trust official communications? Why or why not?
- How could a company improve its communication to gain more of your trust?
- What must someone do to earn your trust?
- What is your perception of PR Professionals?
These questions were used to identify some of the most critical perceptions of PR professionals and trust. The questions were also posed to determine if the participants held PR professionals to different expectations than others.

Results of the Study

Demographics

Facebook was the ultimate favorite among PR Professionals and non-PR professionals, as data demonstrated that a large majority used it very often. Twitter, Foursquare, and LinkedIn rounded out the top four most-used social media sites. Other sites included in the survey that did not rate as high, included: Google+, Flickr, Quora, MySpace, Digg, Friendster, and Windows Live Spaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR Professionals Social Media Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Answer Options</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MySpace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows Live Spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flickr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data also revealed that both groups categorized the eight most-used news sources into three categories based on frequency of use.

Online News Site and Search Engine were most used for gathering news while Facebook, Twitter and Blog/RSS were grouped together as the third-most used category of online utilities used as sources for news. Furthermore, while non-PR professionals noted they seldom used Twitter, they indicated in the survey a stronger reliance upon Twitter for news than the fourth and final category of online utilities used as sources for news: Independent website/blog; e-mail; and corporate website/blog. In fact, these three resources scored very low for both demographics.
PR Professionals Online News Retrieval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Use very often</th>
<th>Use moderately</th>
<th>Use rarely</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search Engine</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Website/blog</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Website/blog</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online News Site</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question 38
skipped question 0

Non-PR Professionals Online News Retrieval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Use very often</th>
<th>Use moderately</th>
<th>Use rarely</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search Engine</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Website/blog</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Website/blog</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question 46
skipped question 0

With respect to blogs, the majority of participants responded they “Read only.” The difference in blog use between PR Professionals and non-PR Professionals was PR Professionals contribute more to blogs (21.6 percent) by writing posts or commenting to them compared to 15
percent of non-PR Professionals who write and comment. It is also interesting to find that 15 percent of non-PR Professionals responded “Don’t care,” which is double the number of PR Professionals who responded they “don’t care.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR Professional Blog Behavior</th>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read, write, and comment</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read only</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Read and comment</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Read and write</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Write only</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write and comment</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment only</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t care</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s a blog?</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

answered question: 37
skipped question: 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-PR Professional Blog Behavior</th>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>15.2%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read only</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read and comment</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read and write</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write only</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write and comment</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment only</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t care</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s a blog?</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question: 46
skipped question: 0
Social Media

Qualitative data provided insight and reasons why many participants did not utilize blogs as often as other resources. Many of the comments indicated the trust for official communications depended on the credibility of the organization. One participant rhetorically asked, “If you can’t believe the source material then what is the point?” Transparency was a key theme in responses, as demonstrated by the following participant’s response: “It (official communications from organizations) is authoritative, but it’s not transparent. We sort of just have to take their word for it. It would be better if they just operated in the open.”

When asked if participants believed they could get to know someone via social media, the majority of responses indicated a preference for face-to-face engagement; but when that option is not available, social media was seen as an effective way to build pre-established relationships.

Participants responded they generally trust the person they’re communicating with via social media, and many said that the more communications and dialogue with a person, over time helped build relationships and demonstrated transparency. Dialogue was extremely important among participants as they said they could get to know people if they interacted in two-way conversation; rather than simply reading a blog (one-way communication). As noted, a significant number of respondents (15 percent) indicated they “did not care” about blogs.

One person noted, “Many PR folks use FB (Facebook) as a way to communicate that stands out.” Additionally, one person said that social media even offers another, sometimes different side of a person, “In some respects it is possible to get to know a person better via a social network than in person because how a person conducts him/herself, and the type of information shared on social media, tells others a lot about the kind of person that individual is.”
One person responded by saying, "You can get to know the person they show you," demonstrating that transparency via social media was required to build trust.

**Transparency**

Survey respondents were asked: "How do you define transparent communication, and what level of transparency do you expect from PR Professionals?"

Respondents were consistent in their definition of transparency using words such as: truth, honesty, and accessible. One respondent explained that social media defined transparency, "PR professionals need to be using social media to reach audiences 1 on 1, not just via press releases."

Another mentioned social media, but added that execution is key, "Transparent comms are saying what you intend to do, for example if someone tweets to a reply to a customer service issue but then never makes an effort to solve is obnoxious."

When asked what level of transparency they expect from PR professionals, participants responded saying that they hoped PR professionals would be open, honest and truthful, but they did not necessarily believe this was the case.

Nearly all of the PR professionals surveyed said they always expect transparency from themselves. One person said, "I expect it 100% of the time from PR professionals. In today’s world (thanks in part to web and social media), lies are uncovered faster than ever before."

One respondent, however, explained some of the thinking behind adding context, and the timing of information release:

"My job is to work on behalf of my organization and the public interest. At times this may mean that we don't want a particular story to come out a particular way, or at a particular time, because of the misunderstanding
and trouble that might create. This may not be defined as "transparent" by some if I don't go running out the door to tell everyone everything every moment, but realistically that's not my job and I'm not utilizing my organization's resources appropriately if I make more work for everyone. The issues management part of my job can be quite large at times and primarily the goal is not to have something blow up into a three-day (or more) story. At the same time, I need to release all the information we can release when an appropriate request comes in. I work for a public institution and anything in my email is available if an official request is filed. My job at that point is not to erect artificial barriers--those just make people mad and don't change the release of information. I need to provide both information and explanation/context to do my PR job. Frequently, too, if we know something isn't going well we need to get in front of the inquiries and release basic facts. This is important to be able to point back to in order to show that we weren't hiding things. If there is something we really can't say--because of pending negotiations or personnel, for example--we need to be clear about the boundaries. But we shouldn't use those if it isn't true--that's lack of transparency and it's the reason people mistrust those as "excuses" when they are completely valid much of the time. I expect PR professionals to balance the interests of their organization and the public good and be as transparent as they can be, all things considered.”

When asked what they thought of PR Professionals, responses varied. One person summed up the responses however, saying, “Professional liars at their worst. Obfuscators most of the time. Helpful at their best.”
Trust

While several respondents said they found PR professionals helpful, because they worked for an organization, they did not fully trust PR professionals. PR professionals were called: slimy; spin doctors; one step below lawyers; truth benders; and not trustworthy.

When asked what could be done to improve this lack of trust, the majority of participants answered with consistent honesty. Next to consistency, the key theme was speaking openly and direct in the form of two-way conversation.

One participant said, “He or she should also be present at relevant events and be open to two-way dialogue.”

Another echoed this sentiment, “Be willing to have the hard conversation with you, even if they know you won’t like what they have to say.”

A former journalist turned PR professional concurs that PR professionals can do more to become more social:

“In the vein of honesty, I should caveat this answer with that I’m former media and have moved into PR. My perception is that they are smart, but they often have their priorities way out of whack. The biggest issue is an extreme failure to humanize (one of the first things you are taught to do first in journalism). Customers and media which should be the biggest priorities so often get lost in the shuffle of unnecessary process and procedure. Also, PR professionals start seeing these people as "targets or influencers" and fail to remember they are first and foremost human beings. Remembering to work with people as fellow people is a big step. It's in some ways why the larger public is turning to social media and bloggers for news these days. In this world of chaos people still just want to connect.”
One respondent had a solution for PR professionals to connect to people, “I worry that PR professionals are stuck in old-school best practices and aren’t using the web as much as they could.”

Overall, responses to the survey supported the hypothesis that PR professionals must do more to earn people’s trust, and that this can be achieved by demonstrating more transparency. Results also acknowledged that social media could be used to demonstrate transparency and build long-term relationships.

Discussion

Based on the negative responses that were collected from the survey for how people felt about PR professionals, this study confirms that PR does have a PR problem (Thomas et al, 2009). Moreover, that while people who participated in the surveys did not generally trust PR professionals, hope remains for PR professionals to regain trust as survey trends revealed that participants were eager to communicate with PR professionals, and indicated that two-way, transparent, dialogue via social media could improve their trust of PR professionals.

Survey results indicated that the “problem” stems from the perception that PR professionals conduct themselves in a less than transparent manner, offering only one-way conversation that represents only the organizational point of view from which they are hired. Furthermore, it is believed that PR professionals do not reciprocate representation from the public back to the company.

Many perceive PR professionals as having strayed from the genesis of PR, which according to Lamme and Russel (2010), was established to help represent both the company and the public. Survey results indicated that participants believe PR professionals have shifted from
the middle to over-represent company executives to “fix the negative coverage,” (Bowen, p. 432). That said, however, many people believe that transparency is still an option, and the option that will lead to trust.

**Theory & Ethics**

As stated in the theoretical basis of this thesis, using Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory, it is important to determine to what degree the public valued transparency. Once transparency is identified as a favorable social cue, it can then be evaluated as a correlation to improving the perceptions, or attitudes, the public has of PR professionals. Sherif et al. (1965) described attitudes as “stands the individual upholds and cherishes about objects, issues, persons, groups, or institutions” (p. 4).

As the Augustine framework of “truth,” (1909) would have us believe, the qualitative data collected, confirmed that transparency was the first and foremost quality that participants valued, and expected, from PR professionals.

Many survey participants agreed that it was possible to get to know someone via social media, though the majority of respondents said it depended on the amount of two-way dialogue and consistent transparency. When asked if they could get to know someone via social media wrote, “Yes, but it takes time to build a relationship.” Another wrote, “Yes, if there is open and frequent communication.”

Survey participants echoed the sentiment of Kazoleas & Teven (2009) who explained that long-term relationships were important in building trust. Many of those surveyed said that consistent transparency was inherent in developing trust, and as Kelleher (2009) offered, many agreed that the Internet was a convenient way to do this. One participant wrote, “Consistently,
over time tell me the truth, even when it is difficult and they will earn trust – just like in person-to-person relationships."

As survey respondents demonstrated that transparency, social media, and dialog were perceived as favorable, these findings may be used to help determine favorable social cues that could help improve the perception of PR professionals, using Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory.

Furthermore, the survey results confirm that correlations exist between the use of social media by public relations professionals and public perceptions of transparency and credibility for the organizations represented.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

As expected, the primary limitation for this study is that while correlations can be made between the use of social media by public relations professionals and public perceptions of transparency and credibility for the organizations represented, causation cannot be proved. This study determined transparency could be leveraged as a social cue to improve the credibility of PR professionals, and that social media and two-way dialogue could be used to demonstrate this transparency. However it cannot be proven that a lack of social media, two-way dialogue or transparency are the proximate causes for a lack of trust of PR professionals.

Another limitation is the snowball sampling of PR professionals. Because many of the survey respondents were one or two degrees separated from a PR professional, it is possible that bias could have been interjected into the results. Furthermore, the limited sample size was effective in identifying trends, however it proved insufficient for a full and completely thorough analysis.

Additionally, the study focused on transparency via social media, but did not focus on two-way dialogue, which was an emerging trend when respondents described their notions of transparency, and the value of building relationships via social media.

Recommendations for Further Study

The research for this study was intended to be easily replicated. To overcome the aforementioned limitations, it would have been beneficial to determine the causation for the lack of trust among PR professionals beyond a mere lack of transparency.
It may also be beneficial to sample a larger sample size and use random selection to remove unnecessary bias.

Further research shall also study two-way dialogue and research the public’s perceptions of two-way dialogue, and what it means to them.

**Conclusions**

The study revealed that PR professionals, while overall untrusted by the public, have an opportunity to reconnect with the public and build trusted relationships by being transparent, and using two-way dialog via social media.

Survey results confirmed that evidence of transparency through social media constitute favorable social cues. Similar to Aristotle’s philosophical assumption that people want to be part of a community, and Augustine’s belief that people want truth, transparency can be used to build long-term relationships that will, in turn, build trust for represented organizations and their public relations professionals.

There is of course risk to organizations that wish to build long-term relationships. The risk to organizations is that PR professionals must gravitate more toward being perceived as representing the public to much the same extent as they are paid to represent the organizations for which they work. Further, this effort may mean that PR professionals cannot always be expected to “fix the negative coverage,” (Bowen, p. 432). Instead the PR professional must build relationships. As one survey respondent stated, “Consistently (be) forthright with the facts, even when they can portray an organization unfavorably. I expect a high-level of transparency from PR pros . . . their professional reputation depends on it.”
REFERENCES


Letter to Potential Participants

Friends and colleagues:

I’m currently working on my thesis, and as part of this task, I need to collect survey data. I’m using a snowball sampling of PR pros, which means I’m sending the link out to you all and hope that you forward the link on to a mix of friends who are, and are not, in the PR industry. It’s important that I get a handful of each.

I’m collecting qualitative data to gain peoples’ thoughts on trust, social media, transparency, and PR professionals. As is the case with most surveys, the more people that participate, the better.

The survey is completely voluntary. It is anonymous, and your name will never be associated with this survey. You are free to stop the survey at any time or skip any question.

The survey is only 10 questions, shouldn’t take more than 5 minutes, and it would really help me if you could participate. I am hoping to get all data by noon on Monday, Oct. 17.

Thanks,

Pete Voss

petevosspr@hotmail.com

206.898.8378

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RV7KS5G
Interview Questionnaire

1. Please check all that apply
   - PR Professional
   - Male
   - Female
   - 18 and younger
   - 19-24
   - 25-29
   - 30-39
   - 40 and older

2. Please rate the following social media sites you use, with 1 being the site you use the most. Please check N/A for sites you do not use.

   Use very often  Use moderately  Use rarely  NA
   - DIGG
   - Facebook
   - Flickr
   - Foursquare
   - Friendster
   - Google+
   - LinkedIn
   - MySpace
3. Please rate the following as sources you use to retrieve online news. Please check N/A for sources you do not use.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use very often</th>
<th>Use moderately</th>
<th>Use rarely</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate website/blog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. Please check the box that describes your most frequent behavior with blogs:

- Read, write, and comment
- Read only
- Read and comment
• Read and write
• Write only
• Write and comment
• Comment only
• Don’t care
• What’s a blog?
• Other

5. Do you trust official communications? Why or why not?

6. How could a company improve its communication to gain more of your trust?

7. What must someone do to earn your trust?

8. Is it possible to get to know someone via a social network? Please explain.

9. What is your perception of PR professionals?

10. How do you define transparent communication, and what level of transparency do you expect from PR professionals?
Mentor Agreement Form

MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for Pete Voss, who is completing the requirements for his Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a “young colleague.” If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for Pete Voss as he completes his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature:

Title: Associate Director of Public Relations; Adjunct Faculty, Gonzaga University Master’s Program of Communication and Leadership.

Email and telephone number: Tormey@gonzaga.edu; 509 313-6132

Date: Sept. 15, 2011