Perceptions of corporate communication as public relations

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Abstract

Reports on a mailed questionnaire survey of corporate managers and executives from fields other than communication and public relations (accounting, administration, engineering, legal, operations, marketing, etc.) in four major corporations. Analysis included frequency and mean tests plus factor analysis. Results suggest these managers and executives consider the public relations function to be significantly important to their organization. However, most of those surveyed do not know what the public relations function in their organization is or does. Respondents ($n = 423$) ranked external communication activities to be considerably more important than internal communication. Technical public relations skills were also considered more necessary than public relations management abilities. Few thought corporate communication or public relations people needed to be involved in strategic planning or organizational decision making.

Introduction

Public relations is often considered to be a misunderstood occupation. Many who help shape what the general public thinks frequently criticize public relations practitioners and the work they perform. This criticism and misunderstanding has caused confusion about what public relations is and does. Generally, this discord has carried over into the corporate environment where many who work in departments other than public relations and corporate communication question its value and impact. Although some noted business executives have praised the value of corporate communication and public relations (Iacocca, 1984), most appear to take the function pretty much for granted.

Hammond (1994), who founded one of the nation's largest and most successful public relations agencies, has suggested, "The most important issue facing our profession is the public's almost total misunderstanding of what public relations – as we know it – is and does" (p. 27).

What practitioners say

Burson (1992, 1993) and Jackson (1994a) have stressed, on a number of occasions, that corporate public relations practitioners have failed to convince most senior corporate managers that public relations is valuable enough to merit a dominant coalition seat at the decision-making table. Jackson (1994b) also says, "many organizations lack strategic thinkers and old-fashioned counselors, who can truly add a dimension to decision making" (p. 37). This has led in many organizations to a lack of acceptance of the role public relations can play as strategic counsellors to top corporate management.

Public relations people frequently worry about negative opinions concerning the value of their efforts. This topic was addressed thoroughly three years ago when *Public Relations Journal* interviewed a number of senior-level public relations professionals (Bovet, 1994). In this article, Hunter explained that public relations people "… are so often involved in implementation that we fail to make sure our efforts and results are effectively communicated to higher levels of management" (p. 28). And Felton encouraged practitioners to "sell the concepts of public relations as a top management function – then prove that it works" (p. 39).

Academic viewpoints

Ironically, few academic authors have discussed how the value of public relations is perceived within organizations. And most of the scholarly literature concerning the image of public relations centres on the reality that journalists hold a negative view about the field and those who work in it. This concept of negative perception about public relations by journalists holds significance to the way the general public – including top corporate management – views public relations practice. Saunders (1993) reported on the media's distortion of public relations, and showed examples of publications recommending public relations employment for those "who have had secretarial or sales experience", and for those who "like people" (p. 10).

Spicer (1993) suggested journalists are far from objective in their use of negative and antagonistic words to describe public relations. Ryan and Martinson (1988) said this animosity was the result of journalists believing their work is more important to society than the activities performed by public relations practitioners. They also suggested this hostility is "firmly embedded in journalistic culture, and that the antagonism influences the mass communication process" (p. 139). When Kopenhaven (1985) asked journalists to rank order the status of a number of occupations, public relations was next to the bottom, between lawyers and politicians. A number of other studies have suggested these negative attitudes about the public relations function have existed for more than two decades (Aronoff, 1975; Cline, 1982; Pincus et al., 1991).

In spite of these negative perceptions about public relations, the trade press serving print and broadcast media employees frequently offers stories about journalists who have located "better" professional opportunities in public relations (Gross, 1993). While Bivens (1993) suggested some of this criticism centred on ethical issues, Newsom (1979) – one of the nation's most respected public relations educators – claimed public relations sometimes is considered by journalism educators to be "the bastard stepchild of journalism and mass communication education".

Examining the corporate public relations function

Van Leuven (1991) observed the range and scope of communication programmes undertaken by public relations practitioners in corporate settings. His findings explain more about the possibility of function overlap between public relations, marketing, human resources, and other departments, than the function's image. Van Leuven (1991) reported the tasks performed by corporate public relations practitioners differed between organizations and, more than anything else, were determined by how the corporation structures or organizes all of its departments or units.

Wylie (1994) pointed out public relations continues to lag behind most other corporate service functions on the road to professionalism, suggesting public relations has a well-defined body of knowledge but lacks a prescribed course of university study; examination and certification by a government agency; and oversight and disciplinary action by a government agency. And a Conference Board study (Troy, 1993) suggested corporate public relations experts were being asked to function as strategists, not just traditional implementers.

Studies examining the effectiveness of corporate public relations frequently have suggested public relations is an important and necessary strategic management tool (Winokur and Kinkead, 1993). Skolnik's (1994) survey of public relations officers at Fortune magazine's list of "America's most admired corporations" reported public relations played a significant role in building these corporate reputations.

For nearly 14 years, some of public relations' greatest critics have praised corporate communication efforts at Johnson & Johnson during its handling of the Tylenol crisis. This case thrust J&J chairman and chief executive officer James E. Burke into the communications limelight (Leon, 1983).

Fraher (1995-96) suggested CEOs are becoming increasingly involved in their corporation's public relations and communication efforts; and Budd (1993) argued that ineffective public relations contributed to the demise of a number of noted CEOs including Jim Robinson of American Express and John Akers of IBM. Yet, while Campbell (1993) reported that CEOs recognize the importance of corporate public relations, she found many of these executives confused public relations with marketing. Campbell also claimed few corporate leaders included a public relations strategist in their senior management planning and decision making. Pincus (1994) said the CEO's primary key to successful leadership was the ability to use communication strategies effectively.

Burson (1993) has shown concern about the inability of many corporate public relations managers to rise beyond the level of publicity technicians, and said that was a major reason why some major companies have abolished the top corporate public relations job or hired people from other fields – legal, human resources, marketing, etc. – to be the organization's senior communication officer.

Role research and organizational studies

Some of the most thorough research studying the image of public relations and corporate communication as an important organizational function includes the role analysis studies pioneered by Broom and Smith (1979) and later perfected by Broom and Dozier (1986), coupled with research developed as a result of the IABC Research Foundation's Excellence Project (Dozier, 1995; Grunig, 1992).

Role studies have attempted to define the various roles in which public relations practitioners function. They determined that most who practise public relations are communication technicians, responsible for task-oriented activities such as writing, editing and performing other technical skills. A smaller number of practitioners function as communication managers who are involved in organizational decision making and have been positioned high enough in a company's structure so they can contribute to the strategic management of the organization (Broom and Dozier, 1986; Dozier, 1995). Results of the Excellence Project's studies echo the thought that public relations departments do not contribute towards making organizations more effective unless public relations operates within the organization as an integral part of management (Grunig, 1992).

Many of these role and organizational theories are based to some measure on *where* the public relations function reports. Budd (1995) suggested the important question in this discussion might be *how* the function reported instead of *where* it reported. Budd said some corporate public relations officers report directly to CEOs but were not effective because corporate management did not respect the communication function.

Purpose of the study

This study's major purpose was an attempt to determine what corporate executives, from fields other than public relations and corporate communication, think about the public relations function. We were most interested in how important they considered the public relations function to be and in their opinions about the importance of a large number of professional attributes.

The study was designed specifically to discover what these executives thought about corporate public relations in general, and how they saw this function being implemented in the companies they work for. We were interested in learning the relative importance these executives place on a variety of activities public relations professionals frequently perform and qualities professional corporate communication practitioners might possess. In addition to this relative importance, we were interested in testing for correlations or patterns concerning the executives' perceptions to these qualities and attributes.

Method

This was a mail questionnaire study of corporate managers and executives from fields other than public relations and corporate communication. Subjects came from four companies, two headquartered in the USA, one in Canada, and another in Western Europe. In each of these companies, the public relations/corporate communication function was responsible for all external and internal communication, including advertising.

Measuring scales asked these managers and executives to rank the importance – to the "ideal" corporate communication and public relations professional – of a variety of professional activities and attributes. Responses to these questions comprise the major data set that was analysed and reported on in this essay. The questionnaire also asked a variety of general or overview questions.

Subjects included senior and upper-level managers and executives from fields other than public relations and corporate communication in all four companies. In all instances the CEO, CFO, and all senior executive officers were included in the sample. Managers and executives from the following fields were subjects in this study: accounting, administration, division and business unit management, engineering, human resources, legal, operations, production, quality, technical support, sales and marketing.

In the case of two of these companies, responses were mailed directly to the author.

Questionnaires from the other two companies were mailed to the public relations/corporate communication departments, but envelopes were not opened until the author received them. In all four situations anonymity was promised to all participants and to their companies. Usable responses were collected from a total of 423 subjects, representing a successful return rate of almost 70 per cent.

The study's response rate is higher than usual because of a number of steps taken to encourage participation, including letters sent to all subjects by their organization's chief public relations or corporate communication officer. Reminder postcards also were sent to subjects approximately one week after the questionnaire was mailed. A number of additional steps were taken to enhance the response rate. For example, most of the academic literature uses the singular version "communication" to describe corporate public relations activities, but all four companies involved in this study use the term "communications." In the light of this, the plural form was used in the study's questionnaire.

All questionnaires began by asking a variety of five-point, Likert-type scale response questions asking about each organization's overall communication and public relations efforts. These measures were followed by two different question sets concerning 37 separate activities public relations professionals frequently performed for these companies or attributes these practitioners might possess. Subjects first were asked their opinions about the importance of each of these activities (or attributes) to the "ideal" corporate public relations employee. Next, the questionnaire sought an assessment of each company's corporate public relations performance in each of these areas. The study reported on here was concerned with responses to the general, or overall, questions and with answers to those concerning the importance of these 37 attributes for the "ideal" corporate communication and public relations practitioner.

Other sections of the questionnaire sought perceptions about the value and effectiveness of each company's public relations function in communicating with and influencing a variety of important stakeholders.

With the exception of demographic questions, all items were measured on five-point bi-polar scales with most anchors ranging from terms such as "important" to "unimportant," and "effective" to "ineffective". In all cases,

the "better" score received higher numbers (for example "important" would equal "5" while "not important" would equal "1"). Consequently, the higher the mean scores reported in this report the "better" (i.e. more important, more effective, etc.). Cover letters from each organization's chief public relations officer (usually the senior vice-president of corporate communication) accompanied all questionnaires when they were mailed.

Results were analysed in two separate ways. Frequency and mean tests were conducted in an attempt to gauge the perceived relative importance of each of the 37 items.

Given the uniqueness of this research, factor analysis also was employed as a secondary method of data analysis in an attempt to reveal a sense of conformity between the study's variables. Factor analysis was used because of its ability to examine intercorrelations and predict patterns among variations in values and variables. As Thurstone (1947) points out, "Factor analysis is especially useful in those domains where basic and fruitful concepts are essentially lacking, and where experiments have been difficult to achieve."

Principal component factor analysis was performed on responses to the 37 items. An eigenvalue of 1.0 was the established cut-off for rotation. Only those factors containing at least three items with ± 0.50 or stronger primary loadings and no secondary loadings stronger than ± 0.30 were considered for primary discussion. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the lack of similar research in the public relations literature, these criteria were considered as guidelines.

Results

Responses to general questions
As Table I indicates, responses to this set of questions suggest executives from fields other than public relations consider the public relations/communication function to be significantly important to their organizations, but also indicate some frustration with the overall performance of public relations and communication professionals in their companies. Although 84 per cent said the public relations function was important to their organization, only 38 per cent were satisfied with the overall performance of their company's public relations professionals.

Virtually the same level of frustration appears to exist when these executives assess

Table I Responses to general questions

Item	Mean score[a]	Per cent answering important[b]	
How important is the public relations communications function to this company?	4.3	84	n = 418
How satisfied are you with the overall performance of this company's public relations/ communications professionals?	3.2	38	n = 412
How adequate do you consider this company's public relations/communications professionals to be in their knowledge of this business?	3.3	42	n = 408

Notes:

[a] Mean scores are based on responses to the five-point Likert-type scales with "1" indicating "very unimportant … unsatisfied … inadequate" and "5" indicating "very important … satisfied … adequate"

[b] Percentages provided in this column indicate the number answering "5" or "4" to each question. Anchors with possible "5" or "4" answers were "very important (important)", "very satisfied (satisfied)" and "very adequate (adequate)"

how much knowledge their public relations/ communication colleagues have about the business in which each company operates. Only 42 per cent said they thought their organization's public relations people possessed an adequate knowledge of the business.

Mean and frequency analysis

Mean and frequency examinations provide some understanding about the relative importance observers place on each of the statements measured in this study. Table II displays the results of this inquiry. With the exception of having the ability to disseminate messages to external audiences, being good listeners, and possessing strong interpersonal communication skills, executives suggest the attributes most significant to the "ideal" corporate public relations or communication professional are qualities involving ethics, trust, accountability, judgement, and so forth. The following activities/attributes were considered to be "important" or "very important" by at least 90 per cent of the respondents:

- Being moral and ethical.
- People with strong interpersonal communication skills.
- Able to be trusted – totally.
- People with good listening skills.
- Disseminating messages to external audiences.
- Able to be counted on to deliver.
- Able to think creatively and imaginatively.

- Understanding not only what this company does, but how and why we do it.
- Able to help management develop and execute constructive responses to key issues affecting the company.
- Able to build strong relationships with business unit managers.
- People who apply communication knowledge to help this company achieve its business goals.
- Able to identify situations as they are, not just as one imagines them to be.

Table II presents a complete look at the mean and frequency analysis. Of particular interest are some items that fall at the low end of perceived importance, especially "disseminating messages to internal audiences", "knowing how to inspire and motivate others", "dedication to continuous improvement", "being leaders", "strategic thinkers and planners" and "measuring and evaluating programme results". Serving as "communication and public relations counsel to management" scored much lower than expected.

These activities/attributes were considered to be "important" or "very important" by fewer than 80 per cent of the respondents:

- Keeping management informed about reactions to company activities.
- Communication and public relations counsel to management.
- Disseminating messages to internal audiences.
- Seeking feedback from "customers".

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Table II Mean and frequency analysis

Items	Mean scores	Per cent answering important or very important
Being moral or ethical	4.7	95
People with strong interpersonal communication skills	4.6	95
Able to be trusted – totally	4.6	94
People with good listening skills	4.6	92
Disseminating messages to external audiences	4.6	91
Able to be counted on to deliver	4.5	93
Able to think creatively and imaginatively	4.5	93
Understanding not only what this company does, but also how and why we do it	4.5	92
Able to help management develop and execute constructive responses to key issues affecting the company	4.5	91
Able to build strong relationships with business unit managers	4.4	92
People who apply communications knowledge to help this company achieve its business goals	4.4	91
Able to identify situations as they are, not just as one imagines them to be	4.4	90
Being accountable	4.4	89
Possessing good judgement and logic	4.4	88
Being team players	4.4	88
Media relations activities	4.3	90
Good at establishing relationships	4.3	88
Planning communications programmes	4.2	86
Taking the initiative – knowing what to do and how to do it	4.2	86
Commitment to quality	4.2	84
Communicating management decisions	4.2	84
Able to track market, social or political issues that affect the company	4.2	82
Writing, editing, producing messages	4.2	80
Able to think and act effectively in crises	4.1	87
Able to project recommendations successfully in one-on-one conversations	4.1	85
Able to project recommendations successfully before groups	4.1	83
Planning employee communications	4.1	80
Keeping management informed about reactions to company activities	4.1	79
Communications and PR counsel to management	4.0	80
Disseminating messages to internal audiences	4.0	76
Seeking feedback from "customers"	4.0	72
Knowing how to inspire and motivate others	3.9	71
Dedication to continuous improvement	3.8	73
Event planning	3.8	68
Measuring and evaluating programme results	3.7	67
Strategic thinkers and planners	3.7	66
Being leaders	3.7	65

Notes:

Number of subjects = 423

Mean scores reported above are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales with "1" indicating "very unimportant" and "5" indicating "very important". Consequently, the higher the mean score, the more important subjects considered the item. Frequency totals represent the percentage of subjects who considered each item "very important" or "important"

- Knowing how to inspire and motivate others.
- Dedication to continuous improvement.
- Event planning.
- Measuring and evaluating programme results.
- Strategic thinkers and planners.
- Being leaders.

Even some functions that have become the staple activities of many corporate communication and public relations departments – such as writing, editing, producing messages, planning employee communication, disseminating messages to internal audiences – received considerably lower scores than might have been expected. Only 80 per cent considered writing, editing, producing messages or planning employee communications "important" or "very important." Just 76 per cent said disseminating messages to internal audiences was important.

Factor analysis

Normally, when factor analysis is used in a study of this nature, results reveal a certain sense of conformity between variables. As a result, one usually can make considerably more sense out of factor loadings than is the case in this particular study. This fact alone suggests considerable confusion might exist in the minds of corporate executives from fields other than communication over what the public relations function is and does. The principal components procedures produced 11 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. This 11-factor

Table III Eigenvalues and per cent of variance explained from initial factor solution

Factor extracted	Eigenvalue	Per cent of variance	Cumulative per cent of variance
I	10,797	22.9	29.2
II	4,432	12.0	41.2
III	3,710	10.0	51.2
IV	2,815	7.6	58.8
V	2,345	6.3	65.1
VI	2,007	5.4	70.6
VII	1,969	5.3	75.9
VIII	1,772	4.8	80.7
IX	1,328	3.6	84.3
X	1,182	3.2	87.5
XI	1,012	2.7	90.2

Note:
These were the only factors retained for the Varimax rotations

solution, shown in Table III, accounted for 90.2 per cent of the total variance. A Varimax rotated factor matrix was performed on this solution. Only six of the 11 factors in this matrix clearly met the study's primary loading guidelines. Three additional factors closely approximated these criteria. Of the 37 statements submitted to factor analysis, 28 items factor loaded. The coefficient alphas produced from the complete Varimax solution, and the interpreted factors, can be found in Table IV.

Factor I

Seven items clearly define Factor I as shown by the loadings in Table IV. An eighth item comes extremely close to loading on this factor. All items load positively and the statements appear to represent a concept of professional commitment. Statements such as "dedication to continuous improvement", "commitment to quality", "able to be trusted totally", "being team players" and "able to be counted on to deliver", seem to represent qualities and attributes necessary for a total professional commitment. Other items comprising this factor, although not necessarily with loadings as high as those just mentioned, represent talents necessary to function effectively in a corporate public relations position. These include the following: "good at establishing relationships", "people with good listening skills", "being team players", "able to track market, social or political issues that affect the company" and "disseminating messages to internal audiences".

Factor II

Five statements clearly meet the loading criteria on this factor and all indicate a positive attitude towards ethical and constructive communication. These items are "able to think and act effectively in crises", "being moral and ethical", "people with strong interpersonal communication skills", "able to help top management develop and execute constructive responses to key issues affecting the company" and "possessing good judgement and logic".

Factor III

Another five items clearly define this factor. They are "communicating management decisions", "understanding not only what this company does, but also how and why the corporation does it", "able to identify situations as they are, not just as one imagines or wants them to be", "keeping management informed about reactions to company activities" and "planning employee communications". Most of these

Table IV Results of Varimax rotated factor matrix

Item/factor	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI
							Factor loadings				
Factor I											
Dedication to continuous improvement	0.882										
Commitment to quality	0.858										
Disseminating messages to internal audiences	0.817										
Able to be trusted totally	0.810										
Good at establishing relationships	0.549										
People with good listening skills		0.547									
Being team players	0.464										
Able to be counted on to deliver	0.464										
Able to track market, social or political issues that affect the company	0.427										
Factor II											
Able to think and act effectively in crises			0.916								
Being moral and ethical		0.891									
People with strong interpersonal communication skills		0.767									
Able to help top management to develop and execute constructive responses to key issues affecting the company		0.620									
Possessing good judgement and logic		0.571									
Factor III											
Communicating management decisions			0.814								
Understanding not only what this company does, but also how and why the corporation does it			0.801								
Able to identify situations as they are, not just as one imagines them to be			0.577								
Keeping management informed about reactions to company activities			0.563								
Planning employee communications			0.541								
Factor IV											
Measuring and evaluating programme results				0.821							
Event planning				0.812							
Working with the media					0.600						
Factor V											
Seeking feedback from "customers"					0.819						
Being leaders					0.477						
Factor VI											
Good at establishing relationships						0.630					
Disseminating messages to external audiences						0.605					
Able to build strong relationships with business unit managers						0.520					
Factor VII											
Able to project recommendations before groups successfully							0.833				
Taking the initiative – knowing what to do and how to do it							0.655				
Being accountable							0.623				

(Continued)

Table IV

Item/factor	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI
								Factor loadings			
Factor VIII											
Writing, editing, producing messages								0.651			
Planning communications programmes								0.528			
Factor IX											
People who apply public relations and communications knowledge to help the company achieve its business goals									0.890		
Factor X											
Able to think creatively and imaginatively									0.803		
Factor XI											
Able to project recommendations in one-on-one conversations successfully											0.743
Communications counsel to management											0.819

Note:
Number of subjects = 423

employee communications". Most of these items reflect corporate managerial issues.

Factor IV
This factor is defined by three items. The statements are "measuring and evaluating programme results", "event planning" and "cultivating the media". These items appear to be rather technical in nature, especially when one considers items that held secondary loadings on this factor such as "writing, editing, producing messages" and "keeping management informed about reactions to company activities."

Factor VI
Three items load cleanly on this factor. They are: "good at establishing relationships", "disseminating messages to external audiences" and "able to build strong relationships with business unit managers". Secondary loadings come from "planning employee communications" and from "knowing how to inspire and motivate others". This factor seems to reflect a sense of developing relationships with internal and external customers of the public relations function.

Factor VII
Three other statements define this factor. They are "able to project recommendations successfully before groups", "taking the initiative – knowing what to do and how to do it" and "being accountable". Secondary loadings here include the items " possessing good judgement and logic" and "able to

project recommendations in one-on-one conversations successfully." A close look at these items indicates the factor is concerned with a combination of accountability and presentation skills.

Non-significant factors
As mentioned earlier, 11 factors were rotated. In addition to the six factors that clearly met the study's loading criteria, three factors came extremely close to approximating these guidelines but only had two items loading on them. Two additional factors contained only one cleanly loading item. Given the lack of conceptual study in this area, it was felt a brief look at these five other factors might be worthwhile.

Factor VIII
The two statements loading on this factor are "writing, editing, producing messages" and "planning communications programmes". "Cultivating the media", "able to be counted on to deliver" and "able to identify situations as they are, not just as one imagines or wants them to be", all represent items with weak secondary loading here. The factor seems to reflect a sense of planning and skills functions.

Factor XI
The two items that load cleanly on this factor are "able to project recommendations successfully in one-on-one conversations" and being "public relations and communication counsel to management". A weak secondary loading was recorded on the statement,

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"keeping management informed about reactions to company activities".

Factor V

Only one statement, "seeking feedback from 'customers'", loads cleanly on this factor. However, the item, "being leaders." comes extremely close to loading with a 0.477 primary loading. A secondary, but negative, loading of –0.439 was recorded on this factor by the statement, "disseminating messages to external audiences".

Factor IX

The only statement loading on this factor was "people who apply public relations and communication knowledge to help the company achieve its business goals". Secondary loadings came from "taking the initiative – knowing what to do and how to do it", "able to be trusted – totally" and "able to be counted on to deliver".

Factor X

The items "able to think creatively and imaginatively" loaded cleanly on this factor. Secondary loadings were registered on the statements "able to build strong relationships with business unit managers" and "people with good listening skills".

Discussion of results

This study presents considerable evidence to suggest that corporate executives from fields such as accounting, administration, division and business unit management, engineering, human resources, legal, operations, production, quality, technical support, sales and marketing really do not know what the public relations function in their organization is or does. Even though corporate executives from fields other than public relations consider the public relations/communication function to be significantly important to their organizations, results tell us they are not well informed about what their public relations and corporate communication colleagues do.

When results are presented in terms of mean and frequency analysis, one discovers huge discrepancies between some of the measured statements. While executives strongly suggest their company's corporate public relations people should be moral and ethical, be accountable, possess good judgement and logic, be team players, and help management develop and execute constructive responses to key issues affecting the company, they were much less likely to suggest their organization's public relations people be strategic thinkers or planners, be leaders, know how to inspire and motivate others, or be dedicated to continuous improvement.

Careful analysis suggests corporate executives from fields other than public relations or corporate communication do not know much about what their organization's public relations function does. For example, employee communication is the responsibility of the public relations or corporate communication department in all four of the corporations included in this study. And each of these companies recently has made employee communication more important than was the case five years ago. Even with that effort, however, the task of disseminating messages to external audiences was considered to be considerably more important than disseminating messages to internal audiences. Factor analysis results clarify this problem even more as these four items "disseminating messages to internal audiences", "disseminating messages to external audiences", "working with the media" and "planning employee communications" all loaded on separate factors.

It also is interesting to note that executives surveyed consider many technical public relations skills and tasks to be more important than a large number of managerial abilities. For example, managerial functions corporate public relations people frequently perform – such as keeping management informed about reactions to company activities, providing public relations and communication counsel to management, seeking feedback from "customers", knowing how to inspire and motivate others, being strategic thinkers and planners, and being leaders – received lower scores on the mean importance scale than technical skills activities such as media relations, writing, editing, producing messages and communicating decisions already made by others.

Interpersonal communication abilities were considered to be especially important. In fact, with the exception of "being moral and ethical", this study's subjects ranked "strong interpersonal communication skills" and "people with good listening skills" as high as any other items measured. Some other fundamental interpersonal skills – such as relationship building – also scored high in terms of importance.

Ehling and Dozier (1992) suggest corporate public relations departments are compared frequently with other departments in their organization. Results in this study suggest the public relations function would not compare favourably with other functions especially those fields represented by subjects from accounting, administration, division and business unit management, engineering, human resources, legal, operations, production, quality, technical support, sales and marketing.

White and Dozier (1992) claim corporate communication departments must be accepted as an integral part of an organization's management team in order to participate effectively in organizational decision making and be part of a company's dominant coalition. Results here suggest the corporate public relations and communication function has a considerable distance to go before it really is accepted by organizational peers from other functions.

Summary

This study consisted of a survey of corporate executives from fields other than public relations and corporate communication in an attempt to determine what these executives think about the public relations function. The mail questionnaire survey was designed specifically to discover what thoughts these executives had about corporate public relations in general, and how they saw the communication function being implemented in the organizations they work for. Researchers were interested in learning the relative importance these executives place on a variety of activities corporate public relations professionals frequently perform and qualities professional corporate communicators presumably possess.

The research was conducted within four major corporations – two headquartered in the USA, one in Canada, and another in Western Europe. In each of these organizations the public relations/corporate communication function is responsible for all external and internal communication, including advertising. All four companies have a senior vice-president of public relations or corporate communication who reports directly to the organization's chief executive officer.

Subjects included senior and upper-level managers and executives from fields other than public relations in the four companies including accounting, administration,

division and business unit management, engineering, human resources, legal, operations, production, quality, technical support, sales and marketing. Thanks to considerable assistance from the organizations represented in this study, usable responses were received from 423 subjects, representing nearly a 70 per cent return rate.

Results were analysed in two separate ways. Frequency and mean tests were conducted in an attempt to gauge the perceived relative importance of each of the study's 37 items. The major analysis in the study, however, was conducted via factor analysis, given its ability to examine intercorrelations and predict patterns among variations in values and variables.

The study's findings suggest corporate executives from fields other than public relations consider their organization's communication function to be significantly important to their organizations. However, they also indicate confusion exists in their minds over what the public relations function is and does.

Subjects ranked external public relations activities as being considerably more important than internal communication even though all four of the organizations studied place a considerable amount of their public relations function's efforts on employee communication. All in all, respondents tended to consider communication technical skill functions to be more important than public relations managerial attributes. They also placed considerable importance on interpersonal communication abilities.

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