Editorial 29.5: Relationship building and behaviour in public relations and corporate communications

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Authors generally argue that organisations should take an active role in building relationships with their stakeholders, who sometimes expect organisations to take a proactive role in pressing problems. These relationships should be proactively built in collaboration with strategic stakeholders so that value can be created for both stakeholders and organisations (Goodwin, 2003; Maak, 2007; Slabbert and Barker, 2014), and these relationships can enhance organisational performance (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007).

Relationship building is one of the cornerstones of public relations practice because this practice is based on trust and respect. The relationship-building element started in the mid-1980s following a long period of focusing on publicity, media relations and employee communications (Cardwell, 1997; Bruning, 2002). Relationship-building entails two-way communication, and adopting this approach requires changing how practitioners think about their *publics* because they are "active, interactive, and equal participants of an ongoing communication process" (Gronstedt, 1997, p. 39). Grunig (1993) argued that "for public relations to be valued by the organizations it serves, practitioners must be able to demonstrate that their efforts contribute to the goals of these organizations by building long-term behavioral relationships with strategic publics" (p. 136). Some authors recommended that to foster effective relationship-building, organisations should adapt relationships with their *publics*, and interpersonal relationship-building should be used to build relationships (Botan, 1993; Toth, 2000). Some research studies have also shown that members of the public who develop a relationship with the organisation will likely also remain customers and for the relationship to be effective, it must be linked to the behaviour of key members of the public that the organisation aims to build a relationship with (Bruning, 2000, 2002).

Relationship marketing focuses on building business relationships with customers; thus, like public relations, marketing also moved away from transactional relationships (Zhu *et al.*, 2006) and followed the public relations path. Relationship marketing "sees marketing as a pervasive approach for doing business and has the potential to form a synthesis between quality management, customer service management and marketing" (Zhu *et al.*, 2006, p. 321). Some marketing authors also suggested focusing on social capital to achieve a return in the marketplace because social capital is seen as a social asset of people's connections and memberships of various social groups (Lin, 2001). Putnam (1995) argued that social capital represents a social organisation's "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). Bourdieu (1986) also spoke of social capital in the context of connections and networks some individuals have, whilst some other authors talked about relational capital as relevant to the network concept and serves as a subset of social capital (Bontis, 1998, 1999; Zhu *et al.*, 2006). Relationship capital encompasses two types of values: "the value of customer relationships and the value of relationships with shareholders, governments, and partners of strategic alliances" (Zhu *et al.*, 2006, p. 322). This also means that because we are part of networks, organisational communication has a far-reaching impact because people speak with their networks about issues of the day and thus views of organisations are also regularly exchanged.

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Building relationships is linked to relationship-oriented behaviour, which has been present in leadership literature for decades (Stogdill and Coons, 1957), and initial studies focused on exploring behavioural styles focused on relationships and developing trusting work relationships (Likert, 1961; Stogdgill *et al.*, 1962; Brower *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2005, 2006), as well as looking at how leaders engage in tasks and relationship behaviour, meaning to get the job done (task) and help people feel integrated into a group (relationship) (Topić, 2024, pp. 473–474). However, the challenge for leaders is often finding enough time to build relationships with followers and get to know them personally to get the task done. This is a pressing issue in the digital age where organisations no longer just build relationships using the interpersonal communication skills of public relations professionals in various face-to-face events but also in the digital sphere.

Lately, a new area of research has emerged focusing on corporate social advocacy (CSA) which is "an organization taking a public stance on social-political issues" (Dodd and Supa, 2014, p. 5). The CSA has emerged as a strategy in corporate communications with many organisations being outspoken about social issues, which are culturally conditioned but can include immigration, diversity, racism, LGBT + rights, etc. Browning *et al.* (2020) have argued that organisational advocacy includes "the taking of a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue that risks alienating some stakeholders while signaling to others a shared commitment to values or ideals important to both parties" (p. 97). These authors then argued that CSA presents a narrower typology than if we used the term organisational advocacy because CSA is more defined by functional motifs and tangible outcomes rather than organisational prosocial actions. CSA is linked to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and is expected to yield financial results for the organisation (Dodd and Supa, 2014). However, some authors argued that whilst CSR tries to engage with all stakeholders generally, CSA is different because organisations using CSA are taking a stand supporting only one side of the argument, thus not engaging with all stakeholders but only with one group of them (Rim *et al.*, 2020; Dodd and Supa, 2014). Previous studies have indeed shown that *publics* engage in positive word-of-mouth communication about CSA-active organisations, purchase intentions increase and brand preference changes (Overton *et al.*, 2021; Hong and Li, 2020; Alharbi *et al.*, 2022); however, CSA activities can also alienate certain stakeholders who do not agree with the position of the organisation, and thus, outcomes of CSA are not even (Rim *et al.*, 2020). It can be, therefore, argued that CSA opens a question of relationship-building and whether organisations are communicating CSA in a way that their stakeholders can get on board with and whether they are building relationships with the right stakeholders when engaging in CSA. CSA is not a straightforward issue and requires planning, analysing and understanding stakeholder behaviour.

In this issue, Minhee Choi and Baobao Song write about four factors (source, content, medium and receiver) and how these factors affect the relational, financial and social outcomes of CSA communication, using also Lasswell's communication model. The authors argue that "with content and medium, individuals' connectedness (receiver) to a CSA issue is a core factor leading to a high level of purchase intention and issue advocacy". In addition to that, the authors found that "message strategies (i.e. informativeness, factual tone, no promotional tone) are core factors leading to a high level of trust and issue advocacy". Joon Kyoung Kim, Won-Ki Moon and Jegoo Lee write in this issue about the role of different forms of CSA in shaping individuals' attitudinal and behavioural intentions towards organisations that take a social stance on controversial social and political issues. The study tested "whether depicting nonpolitical or political behaviors in CSA messages increases individuals' positive behavioral intentions". Using an online experiment on US young adults, the authors argue that people show "higher levels of brand preference when they viewed CSA messages depicting the company's political action intended to repel anti-LGBTQ + legislation. Participants showed more positive WOM intentions towards the company when they perceived its political actions as more values-driven". In other words, individuals show higher brand preference when organisations depict a political action rather than a nonpolitical action. In addition to that, "displaying a political action in CSA messages did not directly increase individuals' WOM intentions. However, the results of mediation tests showed that individuals would talk more positively about companies when they perceive more altruistic motives behind CSA". What these two studies show is that to build effective and meaningful relationships with stakeholders, organisations need to engage in genuine relationship-building and decide which stakeholder values they want to promote and then embrace those values as organisational values to positively affect stakeholder behaviour. Equally, organisations need to clearly communicate what they do and disclose relevant information, which can also contribute towards relationship-building. Hend Guermazi, Salma Damak and Adel Beldi write in this issue about factors that contribute to the disclosure of relational liabilities of US companies. The authors argue that there is a positive correlation between the disclosure of relational outcomes and gender diversity of the board of directors, as well as the educational levels of CEOs. In addition to that, companies working in knowledge-intensive industries tend to disclose more about their relational outcomes than companies operating in other industries. The authors focus on intellectual liabilities (IL) due to IL's importance in determining a company's value, whereas the previous studies mainly focused on intellectual capital (IC). Most IC disclosure studies have shown that relational capital (RC) is the most disclosed category, and this study uncovers the main determinants of relational liabilities (RL) disclosure. Abdulkader Zairbani and J.P. Senthil Kumar write for this issue about the organisational mission statements of Indian and Singaporean organisations in the healthcare sector. The authors studied 200 organisations using a network analytic approach and looked at their mission statements. The findings "indicate a similarity and variation between Indian and Singaporean mission statements. Both countries are more concerned about patients, service, community, quality, and healthcare in their mission statements, but Indian mission statements emphasize quality, affordable price and technology more than Singaporean firms. In contrast, Singaporean mission statements tend to highlight innovation and company value".

However, issues with CSA and the behaviour of stakeholders lead to a question of measurement and evaluation of corporate communication and asking whether existing communication models are still suitable or perhaps they need re-developing. Dmytro Oltarzhevskyi in this issue analyses methods used for measurement and evaluation (M&E) of corporate communications, using 462 key English language books and papers devoted to these topics and published between 1970 and 2023. The findings show that "despite the significant contribution to developing a wide range of M&E models, they are still not perfect and universal. In addition, this system of approaches is continuously self-evolving and changing under the influence of digital innovations, so it requires steady rethinking and updating. On the other hand, most previous studies focused on communication management processes, losing focus on communication aspects". The author proposes a model that "combines quantitative and qualitative M&E methods for the five main components of corporate communication (communicator, audience, content, channels and result), covering a wide range of tools, from statistical and sociological research to big data analysis and neuro research." In addition to that, the author argues that "corporate communication represents a social communication process that is more complex and more significant than just a combination of exchanging information between the company and its stakeholders and the management function aimed at achieving business results. It is about harmonizing relations and influencing broad social groups' attitudes, habits and behavioral patterns. The dualism of corporate communication requires special complex research approaches that take their sources from classical theories of mass communication, including Lasswell's model, which reveals the essence, structure and elements of a standard communication chain".

During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication did not stop. If anything, we started to communicate more albeit via online platforms and organisations also had to communicate via social media more than ever. Relationship-building moved to the digital sphere where organisations had to engage in building relationships with both employees and the public online. Karina Villumsen, Hanne Elmer and Line Schmeltz write for this issue about new social media communication strategies of tourist and cultural businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors analysed data from 24 midsize cultural institutions and tourist attractions in Denmark during the first two lockdown months in 2020, and 900 Facebook posts were collected and analysed using a netnographic method. The findings showed a new communication strategy emerging including a short-term horizon strategy and that in the choice of content themes, an inside-out strategy dominated communication. However, communication was still focused on creating two-way engagement, dialogue and interaction, but there was also a mixed approach. The two main communication strategies emerging from data were hope and host strategies, meaning that hope is characterised by "dialogic intentions manifested in a conversational human voice working actively to reassure followers that better times will come – there is hope", whilst the host strategy "is a consequence of the organizations' experiments with TV-formats on social media and (. . .) personal characteristics of the host is a prerequisite for the engagement potential and the transformation of traditional broadcast genres into social TV". However, the fact during lockdowns employees and organisations communicated mainly online opened up an interest in face-to-face conversations with many organisations trying to get employees to return to offices so that they can engage in unplanned conversations which always fostered creativity. Whilst the call to abandon remote work has been controversial, organisations have been trying to bring employees back to offices and they started to return slowly (Lavelle Gartner, 2020). Unplanned conversations often occur when people randomly see each other in the workplace (Kraut *et al.*, 1990), and this can happen anywhere in the organisational space, with the activity including developing relationships, forming collectives and developing collaborations, and these actions are critical for sharing information, monitoring projects and obtaining and providing feedback, as well as increase and improve wellbeing, job satisfaction, engagement and productivity (Sobering, 2019; Pentland, 2012; Blanchard, 2021; Mandhana, 2023). Dron M. Mandhana and Dawna I. Ballard write for this issue about unplanned conversations, looking also at the spatial and temporal factors influencing this form of interaction. The authors conceptualise unplanned organisational conversations and argue that "unplanned conversations were precisely defined as opportunistic or spontaneous conversations, characterized by the absence of pre-planning, that can be work or non-work related. Then, the characteristics of unplanned conversations (emergent, episodic and brief, interrelated, convenient, and improvisational) were outlined, indicating their distinct organizing and structuring capabilities. The spatial (i.e. spatial proximity, visibility, legitimacy, and psychological safety) and temporal (i.e. work time pressure, work history, work expertise, and work routineness) factors identified in the study both afford and constrain individuals' unplanned conversations". These two papers show the importance of communication and relationship building both in the online sphere (as with Danish cultural and tourist institutions) and in person. In both cases, organisations are trying to build relationships, and whilst the world changed, more remote working became the norm and the everyday, in-person communication and relationship-building remain relevant.

Finally, the question of the mainstream media and their role in corporate communications remains open as media are still influential in setting the agenda and influencing public opinion, the latter also including an influence over organisational reputation. Sining Kong, Weiting Tao and Zifei Fay Chen for this issue write about an interplay between "media-induced emotional crisis framing (anger vs sadness) and message sidedness of crisis response on publics' attribution of crisis responsibility, as well as subsequent company evaluation and supportive behavioural intention", using SCCT theory. The findings showed that "anger-inducing media framing of the crisis elicited higher levels of crisis responsibility attribution and more negative company evaluation, compared with sadness-inducing media framing. One-sided message response was more effective than two-sided message response in lowering attribution of crisis responsibility when sadness was induced, but no difference was found under the anger-induced condition. Attribution of crisis responsibility fully mediated the effects of emotional crisis framing on company evaluation and supportive behavioral intention toward the company". This paper shows that corporate communications and public relations still need to work towards building relationships with the media because even though public relations moved away from only focusing on publicity, media and employee relations (Cardwell, 1997; Bruning, 2002), media still influence public attitudes.

In summary, whilst this issue was not about relationship building, this is how I read articles in the new issue of the *Corporate Communications* journal. What is more, and in line with my previous editorial (Topić, 2024), the behavioural question remains open, and we must ask whether we consider public relations and corporate communications behavioural professions. Just like Lasswell (1948), who, in his influential work asked *who – says what – in which channel – to whom – with what effect*, we can adapt this to the behaviour of *publics* and ask *who – behaves in what way (either online or in person) – which channel is being used for behaviour – with what effect* (for the organisation). Therefore, to build relationships effectively, behaviour must be a focus of industry work and research, and some papers in this issue tackle precisely that and contribute to the existing knowledge albeit not from a behavioural perspective, which remains a neglected area in public relations and corporate communications.

Martina Topic

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