THE INTERNAL STRUGGLE OF ENCROACHMENT FROM WITHIN THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION: WHAT ROLE SHOULD MARKETING AND ADVERTISING PLAY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS?

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines communication to members from two professional associations: the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators, as well as examines recent data from the organizations' 2011 home pages. An analysis of 36 multi-part messages about social media and member training opportunities provide insight into association ideology and internal encroachment into the professional association by marketing and advertising.

INTRODUCTION

The body of literature in public relations has evolved over the last fifty years to include a number of unique theories and principles. Most recently, scholars have argued that the field of public relations is in the midst of a revolution, influenced by a number of theories ranging from Heath's (2011) "Fully Functioning Society," Botan and Taylor's (2004) "Co Creational," and Cameron's (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, Mitrook, 1997) "Contingency theory," to theoretical approaches such as Ihlen's (2007) sociological research, Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic theory research, and Ulmer, Seeger, and Selnow's (2007) rhetoric of renewal.

However, another revolution that has been quietly taking place among our professional associations has been to downplay the role of public relations as strategists and organizational counselors, trivializing what they do. Public relations is being recast. Professionals are regressing to mere technicians from the early days of the profession, whose job is just to produce content (blogs, tweets, Facebook postings), not to engage in strategic management, counseling, or critical thinking.

This study reports on the results of a generic analysis of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicator's (IABC) e-mail and website messages. The conclusion: "encroachment from within" is taking place as the PRSA focuses its attention on technology at the expense of more sophisticated communication skills.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ENCROACHMENT

Public relations is a communication oriented profession with its own distinct body of literature and assumptions that have evolved to deal with the nuances of the profession. Although public relations scholars often turn to other fields for inspiration and insight, notably communication and psychology, the field rarely turns to marketing or advertising for insight because the practice of public relations is broader than these two professions and its focus is very different.

Sometimes turning to an everyday source for a definition such as the U.S. Government's Bureau of Labor Statistics is helpful because we see the definition without any ideological baggage:

> Public relations specialists handle organizational functions, such as media, community, consumer, industry, and governmental relations; political campaigns; interest-group representation; conflict mediation; and employee and investor relations. Public relations specialists must understand the attitudes and concerns of community, consumer, employee, and public interest groups to establish and maintain cooperative relationships between them and representatives from print and broadcast journalism. (www.bls.gov/oco/ocos086.htm)

Encroachment

Encroachment occurs when non public relations managers supervise public relations functions (Kelly, 1993; Lauzen, 1991, 1992). The uninformed managers, often from marketing or human resources, change the nature of the public relations practice in an organization. Historically, encroachment has been seen as an external threat. The public relations literature often treats encroachment as coming from outside of the practice, something that is imposed on weak departments (Lauzen, 1991). However, the data presented here suggest that the professional organizations themselves are participating in, and even propagating, the blurring of the lines of the practice, and leading to "encroachment from within."

Encroachment and New Technology

One of the biggest influences on the practice of public relations now is technology. Clearly, technology has altered the way that many professions think about public relations and communication. Phenomena like blogging, social media, website analytics, micro content, and site optimization are driving the field forward.

Internal encroachment is clearly seen in the way that public relations professional associations privilege new technology and social media (mere communication channels in public relations but primary tools for modern marketers and advertisers) over all other public relations skills and knowledge. Indeed, data from Kent, Taylor, and Ferman's (2010) study indicated that more than half of the messages from the PRSA were devoted to new technology:

PRSA	IABC
Technology 58%	Technology 8%
Marketing/Networking 21%	Measurement (including tech.) 46%
Pitching 8%	Other 46% (internal comm., presentation
Other 13% (media training, crisis, etc.)	skills, photography, work/life balance, etc.)

The PRSA focus is essentially a corporate focus that privileges corporate and agency professionals. The "corporate" orientation of new technology pushed by the PRSA ignores the fact that approximately half of all public relations professionals do not work in agencies or for corporations, and most public relations professionals spend very little time on media relations. Advertising and marketing professionals, on the other hand, have more interest in such practices. Although public

relations professionals all have different needs and serve multiple stakeholders, advertisers and marketers typically care only about media coverage and enhanced sales.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROFESSION

As mentioned above, Kent, Taylor, and Ferman (2010) conducted a multi-method study of the PRSA and IABC's messages to members. This study extends their findings with data from a Genre study of PRSA and IABC websites. In particular, ideological language found in the mission statements and content of both websites are considered.

To see whether the PRSA or IABC have changed over the last two years, the content of the home pages and the free content offered on both sites was examined for stories and themes relevant to public relations. Although the IABC is not a public relations organization per se, as professional communicators, the focus of much of their content is on relevant public relations issues. Membership in both organizations is common among public relations professionals.

By contrast, the PRSA is a professional organization devoted solely to public relations. However, as Kent at al. (2010) argued, the PRSA focuses much of its attention on marketing and advertising (cf. also, Taylor & Kent, 2010), and treats professionals like undergraduate college students rather than skilled communicators. The PRSA offers abundant seminars on topics like social media, new technology, marketing, branding, and self-branding.

Examining the Messages

As noted above, Kent et al. (2010) found that the two professional associations had almost opposite focuses. The PRSA seemed obsessed with new technology and marketing, while the IABC focused most of its attention on research driven topics and theory based issues (measurement, effective communication, etc.).

The current 2011 topics discussed by the IABC (www.iabc.com) on the home page are little changed and include the following: "Internal measurement for results" (a ten minute podcast on how to conduct effective internal surveys and interpret data). "Leadership's role in employee engagement" (the second installment in a three-part series that looks at the skills needed for effective leadership). "Children's Healthcare of Atlanta takes on the flu" (a research-based report on a healthcare campaign). "Getting started with your social media policy" (a multipage discussion of how to institute an organizational social media policy). "When numbers aren't enough: Japan's tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster offer critical lessons for crisis communicators" (an article on how to communicate technical terms and numbers within context).

The current topics found on the PRSA (www.prsa.org) website have also changed little and include the following: Media generated content that includes links to news stories on the PRSA and an assortment of news items about and for members, and links to the current and upcoming seminars offered by the PRSA to members and non-members (for a fee). Indeed, the main thrust of the PRSA website seems to be about getting embers to pay for seminars. Topics include: "Strategic Communication Planning and Action: Learn How to Set Priorities, Be Proactive and Improve Your Business Relationships" (a $650 teleseminar on strategic planning that begins

with how to tell a strategy from a tactic and appears very simplistic). "Key Message Development: Building a Foundation for Effective Communications" (a $150 webinar where "In less than one hour, learn what to say, what is needed to back it up and how to make messages resonate with your target audiences"). "Personal Branding: Develop Yourself as a Thought Leader" (a $150 webinar on personal branding). "Advanced Crisis Communication Strategy: How to Think and Advise Management Strategically During Tough Situations and Crises" (a $925, daylong seminar on crisis communication). "Take the Mystery Out of Market Research: Learn to Better Understand Your Clients and Prospects" (a $150, one hour, webinar on the value of research in strategic planning). Clearly the PRSA does not give away anything for free. The content of most seminars is still fairly simplistic and marketing oriented.

Examining the Mission of the PRSA

Taken at face value, the three-month slice of organizational e-mail messages from 2009 (Kent et al., 2010), synced with few of the PRSA's goals outlined in its mission statement, just as the more recent content, mentioned above fails to follow the lofty goals articulated in the mission.

The first clause of the PRSA mission statement includes this claim: "PRSA maintains and continually enhances all existing Professional Development programs using media opportunities at all levels…" This is clearly not the case, based on the descriptions of just the social networking Teleseminars, there is great similarity across each program. The focus seems to be on acquiring skills and taking "professional development" classes geared toward accreditation, rather than actually understanding the media technology itself. By contrast, the IABC relies much more heavily on "research" and content rich essays—a knowledge focus rather than a skills focus.

The skill-based verses knowledge-based split has changed little over the last few years. The PRSA still assumes that practitioners are ignorant of basic technological knowledge and poorly trained. Each of the teleseminars offered by the PRSA was over topics that students should have (and probably did) learn about in their undergraduate educations. Indeed, even when seminars cover new information, would anyone actually absorb much from half-a-dozen topics about market research presented in *one hour*? If the content is *that* simplistic, why not offer a text-based discussion on it, as the IABD does, rather than charge members $150–1,000 for such facile knowledge?

The truth is, social media (the focus of most of the 2009 telesominars) is not really that complicated. Any public relations professional could read a couple of books, half-a-dozen articles, and a dozen newspaper stories over the course of two weeks and know as much or more than most of the professional presenters. Moreover, PRSA's "continual enhancement of professional development" (from its mission) is achieved only through for-profit seminars. Members are asked to pay, and keep paying, for professional enhancement knowledge that is fairly rudimentary.

As the 2009 data show, and as other scholars have argued (Taylor & Kent, 2010), PRSA has been pushing "new technology" heavily for more than five years and social media has become one of the biggest areas in its publications. Virtually none of the PRSA messages appear to deal with substantive issue like "suitability," "usefulness," or "appropriateness" in their discussions of new technology.

Examining the Mission of the IABC

Turning to the IABC's mission, obvious connections to their mission content can be found. The IABC wants to "Shape the future of the profession through ground-breaking research," and they provide actual research studies for *free* to members, rather than asking them to pay extra for *everything* via teleseminars. The IABC also offers teleseminars, but assumes that simple Internet skills like using Twitter or a Blog can be acquired on one's own. One change from 2009 has been that introduction of "premium" services for $99 per year (for a 12 month subscription). However, in contradistinction to the PRSA, most of the IABC content is already available for free to members, and is research based and scholarly. The added services (the author did not pay for them in order to evaluate both organization's websites equally) seem to cover additional, substantive, text-based, content.

Additionally, the IABC wants to: "give IABC members the tools and information they need to be the best in their chosen disciplines…Share among our membership best global communication practices…[and] Lead the way in the use of advanced information technology." Most issues of *CW Bulletin* do all of these things. The correlation between the mission (long-term goals) and the vision (how to do it) is very close.

The crux of the technology differences between the PRSA and the IABC lies in what we already know about new technology. And worth emphasizing is that the data have remained constant over the last decade. According to a 2011 Pew Internet and American Life study, most people go online to have fun, not for business (Rainie, 2011). Indeed, as Smith (2011) suggests, the major purpose of social media are to keep in touch with family and friends, and connecting with old friends (p. 3). The data from late 2011, are more or less the same as from several years earlier.

According to Lenhart (2009), "Overall, *personal use* of social networks seems to be more prevalent than *professional use* of networks, both in the orientation of the networks that adults choose to use as well as the reasons they give for using the applications" (p. 2, emphasis added). Although the number of social media users have doubled in just the last few years, the use of social media has remained the same. Only one in four adult users, about 3–8% of the adult population use social media for business or professional purposes (Lenhart, 2009, p. 6). No more than 1–3% of the population has ever used social media for active political purposes like requesting information or joining a political group (p. 11).

Given such compelling data, why are half of the PRSA messages focused on encouraging members to "jump into social media," and "learn how to use it effectively for their organizations?" Similar data were reported a few years ago for Blogs by PEW (Lenhart, 2006), and Kent's (2008) *Public Relations Review* article on blogging argued that the data do not support such a blind rush to embrace social media.

The explanation that emerges in this study from the PRSA is that of significant encroachment of marketing and advertising. As the PRSA is a professional association devoted to "public relations," one might ask "*where is the public relations content?"* When someone picks up almost any introduction to public relations textbook, we find hundreds of topics besides how to use new

technology. We also find little focus on marketing and advertising. Yet, the content we see from PRSA seems heavily weighted toward fairly simplistic skills training (that most professionals should have moved past years ago) associated with no-longer-new technologies, marketing, and advertising. Moreover, where is the international focus, described by the PRSA as one of its "three core areas?" In the PRSA, the encroachment seems to be coming from within the professional organization itself.

The genre analysis conducted here suggests that the IABC is doing a much better job of adhering to its own mission and meeting member needs. Although neither organization identifies the demographics of its member base, the types of issues raised by the IABC suggest both a more sophisticated professional who thinks strategically and is more interested in problem solving, as well as a more sophisticated view of what professional communication can accomplish.

By contrast, the mission of the PRSA (to provide continuing education to its members) seems to have become reified as "community college" or "remedial" education, rather than "graduate education," which would seem to be the level that *every* public relations professional should be at since virtually all members have Bachelor's degrees, many have Master's degrees, and some have doctorates. As long as the majority of the seminars are skill-based, and *basic skills*-based, PRSA members will derive very little of substance from their professional associations and have every reason to believe that there is little to know to be a public relations professional.

At least a dozen obvious management skills would seem important for public relations professionals to learn, including, motivation, dialogue, conflict management, coaching, socialization, presentational skills, decision making, etc. Indeed, many of these topics have received considerable attention in the professional literature over the years. Why are the skills brought to professionals through the PRSA so trivial?

CONCLUSION

In some ways, this generic analysis has revealed a number of issues that might ordinarily have only been apparent through a more comprehensive method or a full-blown communication audit. Based on this study, thinking about the IABC as an organization of value only to international communication professionals is a mistake. Public relations professionals would find membership in the IABC valuable. Conversely, members of the IABC would obtain *little of value* from teleseminars telling them how they can get a "tweet new job with social media skills," when they are already spending time on measurement of social media, webmetrics, and researching issues and publics. If an undergraduate public relations major asked for advice on what professional association to join, the answer would be IABC.

As a public relations professional we have to ask with great concern, "how is it possible that the R and the E in RACE are being completely ignored? Where is the focus on research, on persuasion, on understanding theories of motivation, human psychology, and social science, on issues management, on crisis management, and on theory and knowledge? As this study shows, other professional associations have already passed us by. Even marketing associations are working to "provide methods for effectively using digital data and building loyal digital relationships"

(www.marketingpower.com/Calendar/Pages/default.aspx). Sadly, the word "relationship" *literally* does not appear in *any* of PRSA's messages, except in the bios of two teleseminar presenters!

The time has come to spotlight encroachment within our own discipline, to push marketing and advertising out of the PRSA, and to get the organization back on track. Yes, of course we use marketing and advertising on behalf of our clients. However, we have a lot more to offer than simply running the company website and twittering about our corporate brand. Twitter is a publicity tool. Management skills are what public relations professionals should be learning. Public relations professionals should be building and strengthening relationships, counseling management and clients, monitoring issues, and developing and implementing strategic plans.

Professional associations need to focus on the competencies (not just skills) that members will need at various stages in their careers to serve their organizations and publics. Technology and social media are not unimportant, but they are not the *raison d'être* of public relations.

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