

Excellence Theory in Public Relations

James E. Grunig

University of Maryland

The excellence theory is a general theory of public relations that resulted from a 15-year study of best practices in communication management funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation. Three books were published from the research (J. E. Grunig 1992; Dozier et al. 1995; L. A. Grunig et al. 2002). This general theory incorporates a number of middle-range theories of → public relations, including theories of publics, public relations and strategic management, models of public relations, evaluation of public relations, employee communication, public relations roles, gender, diversity, power, activism, ethics and social responsibility, and global public relations (→ Public Relations Evaluation). The theory was tested through survey research of heads of public relations, CEOs, and employees in 327 organizations (corporations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and associations) in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (→ Survey; Interview). The survey research was followed by qualitative interviews with heads of public relations, other public relations practitioners, and CEOs in 25 organizations with the highest and lowest scores on a scale of excellence produced by statistical analysis of the survey data (→ Interview, Qualitative).

The excellence theory first explained the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. For an organization to be effective, according to the theory, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management (→ Stakeholder Theory). If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. To behave in socially acceptable ways, organizations must scan their environment to identify publics who are affected by potential organizational decisions or who want organizations to make decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them. The interviews with CEOs and senior public relations officers revealed that good relationships were of value to organizations because they reduced the *costs* of litigation, regulation, legislation, and negative publicity caused by poor relationships; reduced the *risk* of making decisions that affect different stakeholders; or increased *revenue* by providing products and services needed by stakeholders.

Based on this theoretical premise about the value of public relations, the excellence theory derived principles of how the function should be organized to maximize this value. First, the research showed that involvement in strategic management was the critical characteristic of excellent public relations. Public relations executives played a strategic managerial role as well as administrative manager role. Public relations also was empowered by having access to key organizational decision-makers (the dominant coalition).

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Second, the study showed that public relations loses its unique role in strategic management if it is *sublimated* to marketing or other management functions. Sublimation to another function resulted in attention only to the stakeholder category of interest to that function, such as consumers for marketing. Sublimation to marketing also usually resulted in asymmetrical communication. An excellent public relations function was *integrated*, however. Programs for different stakeholders were gathered into a single department or coordinated through a senior vice president of corporate communication. An excellent public relations function did work with other management functions to help them build relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Third, the excellence study showed that a symmetrical system of internal communication increased employees' satisfaction with their jobs and with the organization. However, internal communication generally was not practiced unless organizations had a participative rather than authoritarian culture and a decentralized, less stratified (organic) structure rather than a centralized, stratified (mechanical) structure.

Fourth, the excellence study examined the effect of the growing number of women in public relations and evidence that women had difficulty entering managerial roles. The research showed that organizations with excellent public relations valued women as much as men for the strategic role and developed programs to empower women throughout the organization. The emphasis on gender also led to inclusion of diversity of race and ethnicity as a fifth part of the excellence theory. This focus, along with the international nature of the project, expanded the theory to make it appropriate for use outside the United States – in diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts. Replication of the study in Slovenia (L. A. Grunig et al. 1998) showed that the excellence theory is generic to many contexts, as long as the theory is applied differently when contextual variables are different. The research in Slovenia also resulted in the addition of ethics to the excellence theory – a sixth component (→ Public Relations Ethics).

Since the completion of the excellence study, scholars in this research tradition have continued to improve and enlarge the theory by conducting research to help public relations professionals participate in strategic decision processes. This research has been on environmental scanning and publics, scenario building, empowerment of public relations, ethics, relationships, the return-on-investment of public relations, evaluation, relationship cultivation strategies, conflict resolution, complexity theory, specialized areas of public relations, and global strategy (J. E. Grunig 2006; Toth 2007).

SEE ALSO: ▶ Consensus-Oriented Public Relations ▶ Interview ▶ Interview, Qualitative ▶ Organization–Public Relationships ▶ Public Relations ▶ Public Relations Ethics ▶ Public Relations Evaluation ▶ Public Relations: Global Firms ▶ Public Relations Planning ▶ Public Relations Roles ▶ Publics: Situational Theory ▶ Stakeholder Theory ▶ Survey

References and Suggested Readings

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