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Time for public relations to transcend communication?

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial for issue two of volume four of the Journal of Professional Communication, the author discusses how public relations is has become a central strategic discipline within management, both from and internal and external relations perspective. He challenges the fact that public relations has focused on communication as its central goal in many industrial applications. The author makes the case that the emerging consensus is that public relations is actually centrally concerned with managing relationships, and that communication is really only one aspect of relationship management.

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The internet has brought about a new age of connectivity, where everyone is just a click away from everyone else. With this change in technology comes a change in the mediascape: as new media rises, older media, such as newsprint, network television, and paper book publishing, decline. These technologies have been replaced by flexible, digital equivalents that offer users greater freedom while developing new relationships between organizations and publics.

Times are changing, and newspapers are becoming a relic of the past. Digital news channels such as Montréal's La Presse or Toronto's Star Touch offer readers a choice between a communal experience, where users can share articles on social media or participate in the comments section, or an individual experience, one similar to how traditional media is consumed. Technology has brought about a sharing economy in news media and turned what used to be an individual pleasure – consuming media – into a relational activity.

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In the past, public relations and communications management measured its results based on a mass communications system. Whether it's advertising value equivalence (AVE), readership, or viewership, all of these metrics imply that a stable and coherent audience that is paying attention. A well-crafted advert could be expected to reach and persuade a desirable number of people to buy a product, vote for a politician, or donate to a charity.

Today, an advert broadcast on network television will reach a much smaller, more fragmented audience. It might not even be seen by the people viewing the television program, many of whom will have PVR'd it and watched it without adverts.

To communicate effectively with consumers, voters, and donors in a digital age, it may be necessary to complement the idea of highly-targeted advertising that directly reaches an audience with a perfect pitch with a relational model. While advertising on social media is a powerful tool, it is eclipsed by the power of individuals to share content accompanied by their editorial and relational comments. The process of internet users re-publishing content and attaching it to themselves—thus lending it their credibility—through online identities is potentially very powerful for professional communicators because it generates a chance to establish a very personal connection between an individual and a brand. When someone feels as though something is a part of their identity or their personal life, they are very likely to be loyal to products or services that brand offers. It is lifestyle branding taken to a whole new level.

The rise of the internet, social media, and digital communications has been accompanied by a loss of trust in experts, organizations, and authority figures. This decline has been countered by a rise in trust of peers, friends, and “people like me,” to quote the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2015). Peers are gaining authority, and word of mouth has become even more influential than before. For brands who are trying to gain influence through word of mouth, the importance of gathering locally salient data and cultivating relationships with key individuals has never been higher.

Assessing relationship strength is notoriously difficult, as many of us see in attempting to deal with our personal relationships. For a brand, individual or cause, it is even more challenging, since there are many fewer touch points between the partners in the relationship than in a typical interpersonal relationship, such as a friendship. As well, complicating factors such as individual differences, a constantly changing social context as well as an evolving inner world for both parties, and the fact that people are often influenced by the last thing they heard all make a lot of noise in the signal. One possible solution to this problem is to move away from the idea of consumers as targets of well-

crafted messages and towards the idea of consumers as partners, equals, or friends. Organizations need to build a psychological bridge to their audiences through conversation and shared experiences. Attitudes, beliefs, and values may in fact prove to be secondary to the basic feelings of affinity, warmth, and affection. The challenge is that these feelings are fundamental aspects of interpersonal communication – the building blocks of relationships.

Of particular interest to practitioners of public relations and communications management is the fact that building and managing relationships goes beyond the act of communication – communication is one element. Communication is already a part of relationships, but effective communication relies on a deep understanding of the personalities and feelings of others. Effective public relations supercede communication and enter the realms of psychology, sociology and culture because the relationships between an organization and its consumers, stakeholders, etc. are the focus of the profession. Communication is but an element of maintaining public relationships, but not it is a tool and process, not the overall goal and purpose of public relations – a field devoted to the relationship – which is much more than communication. Communication is the tactical spearhead of a strategically devised, thoughtful, and psychologically-sophisticated plan. Educated and well-trained professional practitioners need to use the tools offered by the social, behavioural and cognitive sciences – as well as the humanities – to gain the interpersonal communication insights, metrics, and analytics they need to succeed at establishing, growing and sometimes ending relationships.

Articles in this issue

This issue presents a variety of articles for your edification and enjoyment. First, Uma Bhushan presents an international interview with Madan Bahal, the co-founder of India's largest independent public relations firm. Mr. Bahal discusses how India's businesses need public relations professionals to help them navigate the challenges of a hyper-competitive environment.

Heath Applebaum shares his wisdom and experiences in "Staying Ahead of the Curve," a version of a speech he delivered on October 24, 2015 to the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management Autumn Gala at the historic Hamilton Club in Hamilton, Ontario. He explains how successful organizations in the future will be those that adapt to disruptive changes and cultivate authentic relationships. Mr. Applebaum also discusses how, in volatile economic times, reputations are proving to be more vulnerable and

more valuable than ever.

Flavie Desgagné-Éthier and Stéphanie Yates discuss the contested role that communications play in corporate social responsibility in “Authenticité ou opportunisme? La crédibilité des communications en matière de responsabilité sociale de l’entreprise.” Robert Lamberti, in “Police Use of Social Media During a Crisis,” conducts a national analysis of how Canadian police forces have used social media during crises. Lamberti’s analysis includes a series of in-depth interviews with communications professionals working with police departments. In a fascinating piece titled “Social Licence to Operate: Practical Understanding of the Concept and Processes to Attain and Maintain It,” Tatjana Laskovic analyses how Canadian firms have achieved social licence to operate. Dustin Manley presents an enthralling examination of the role and importance of accreditation in his important piece, “What Crisis: An Overview of Professional and Academic Credentials in Canadian Public Relations.” Finally, Jennifer Thomlinson discusses the emerging role of public relations theory and practice in government relations in “Public Relations as the New Lobbyist Rolodex.”

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References

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