

Public relations in strategic management: Strategizing in the communicative organization

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that it is advantageous for organizations' public relations (PR) departments to adopt strategic management as a core function. A series of theories that have shaped our understanding of organizational strategy were reviewed to identify links to PR practice and scholarship, suggesting PR should move beyond providing information and assisting in the implementation of strategy. Instead, PR should facilitate the ongoing process of becoming 'strategized' towards desired organizational characteristics. This perspective provides a link between strategy and PR theory, allowing each to bring new thoughts and insights to the other, providing a future research agenda for PR. Findings also support a resulting pathway per Grunig's (1992, 2013) desire that PR practitioners be included in the strategy apex of an organization (Mintzberg, 1979).

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Researchers have categorized public relations (PR) as an applied science and management discipline in communication scholarship (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). Although the origin of PR is a topic of debate, researchers have generally agreed that modern PR practice emerged during the late 19th century, primarily but not exclusively in the United States (Greenberg, 2014; Heath & Coombs, 2006). The concept and practice of PR has changed over time to reflect the evolving roles of organizations in the social environment (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007). This evolution resulted in multiple socially constructed definitions of public relations (L'Etang, 2013). Common terms used in most definitions of PR include 'deliberate', 'planned', 'performance', 'public interest', 'two-way communication', and a 'strategic management function' (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012), thereby reflecting the dominant functional/normative PR paradigm of James Grunig's (2009, 2013) "Excellence

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Framework" (Gower, 2006; L'Etang, 2013).

The "Excellence Framework" resulted from a landmark study in 1984, which concluded that PR could achieve organizational goals through its interactions with strategic constituencies, its identification of stakeholders, its classification of potential publics, and its use of symmetrical communication to develop and cultivate important relationships (Grunig, 2013).¹ Grunig (2013) argued that excellent PR practice was a management function with strategic design and implementation. He suggested most successful organizations practice two-way symmetrical communication with their publics. However, researchers have often used the terms 'strategic communications' and 'strategic public relations' in PR literature in different ways without a unified body of knowledge or meaning (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014; Wood, 2014). In addition, other studies have indicated a lack of understanding by PR practitioners regarding links between PR and organizational goals (e.g., Stoldt, Miller, & Vermillion, 2009). On reviewing definitions of PR, the terms 'strategic communication' and 'strategic public relations' are often used interchangeably in both the academic and professional circles, but these are nuanced in meanings (Swerling & Sen, 2009). For example, Grunig and Repper (1992) noted the following:

Public relations is managed strategically when it identifies stakeholders, segments active publics from stakeholder categories, and resolves issues created by the interaction of organization and publics through symmetrical communication programs (interactive or catalytic strategies) early in the development of issues. (p. 150)

In their seminal work on strategic communications, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) used a broader approach when they stated that strategic communication was the "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (p. 3). Hallahan et al. (2007) noted that strategic communication differed from integrated communication, "while strategic communication emphasizes the strategic application of communication and how an organization functions as a social actor to advance its mission, integrated communication focuses on how an organization communicates across organizational endeavours" (p. 7). Conversely, Sandhu (2009)

1. In this article, the terms 'stakeholder' (a management term that describes individuals or organizations who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives) and 'publics' (a PR term for stakeholder, although viewed through the lens of recipients or audiences as the receivers of organizational messages) were used interchangeably as they are throughout public relations research (Rawlins, 2006). Though some scholars prefer to talk of 'publics' (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012) instead of 'stakeholders,' mutual dependence remains the central idea.

described strategic communication as multidisciplinary, “intentional” communication that requires a purposeful actor, as well as rational and deliberate decision-making. Zerfass and Huck (2007) argued that strategic communication “prepares organizations for an uncertain future” (p. 108), while Zerfass and Holtzhausen (2013) provided further elaboration and defined strategic communication as “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals” (p. 74).

When discussing strategic communication, PR and communications researchers have often focused on managerial problems, such as improving organizational performance, selling more products, or building relationships (Hallahan et al., 2007). In these cases, researchers and practitioners have focused on goals and management by objectives, using the PR process to achieve specific outcomes (Toth, 2002). One could argue that strategic communication and PR theories and research have taken a justificatory or functional level strategy approach (Rothaermel, 2015) aimed at demonstrating the value of PR to other management departments, products, or members of the c-suite (chair, chief executive officer, chief operating officer, etc.), as opposed to being directly integrated into the strategic decision-making processes of corporate or business strategy.

Such a justificatory approach often leads communicators to be in competition with marketing for influence and boardroom positions (Neill, 2015). Researchers have illustrated this point in PR textbooks, emphasizing operational or campaign planning and communication integration when discussing strategic PR (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012), as opposed to true strategy formulation. Therefore, Tibbie (1997) noted that PR practitioners often use the word “strategy” incorrectly, using it to describe important PR activities, aims, objectives, and goals, as opposed to its true meaning: how firm leaders attempted to achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Herrmann, 2005).

Some scholars have attempted to apply strategic management models to PR (e.g., Oliver, 1997) or create a PR-specific strategy models (e.g., Likely, 2003; Steyn, 2007), but many operate under the paradigm that PR is an enabling function. This function provides a service that facilitates the successful implementation of strategic decisions through functional strategies, campaigns, or providing inputs to those decisions as environmental monitors.

However, the rise of digital communications has elevated the status of the communications in many organizations (Lewis & Nichols, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). Emerging digital communication platforms have allowed

greater dialogue and responsiveness to the organizational environment by PR practitioners than ever before (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). This aspect has created an opportunity to position the PR role as a key management function. Linking a firm to its environment is a principal element of strategy (Darnall, Henriques, & Sadorsky; 2010), which has provided an opportunity for PR to support its managerial role, a role that scholars have advocated (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2014; Grunig, 2013), as well as practitioners (e.g., Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Korn Ferry Institute, 2012; Thurlow, Sévigny, & Dottori, 2018).

A content analysis of the 2012 *Financial Times* Global 500 companies performed by Verhoeven (2014) examined whether the position of communications officers (COs) existed on executive boards. Results showed that three quarters of the companies studied did not have a CO. Accordingly, in most organizations, a CO is not yet included in the company's innermost managerial circle. As Steyn (2012) noted, PR practitioners are not perceived as playing a strategic role in their organizations or contributing to strategic decision-making, instead being viewed as reactive, awaiting the initiative of their chief executives. However, adopting the functions, responsibilities, and processes of strategy as part of the PR role (Sandhu, 2009; Swerling & Sen, 2009; Wood, 2014) can unlock the corporate boardroom for communications professionals (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006).

The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (2016) has initiated a *Global Capabilities Framework Initiative* to explore the skills, knowledge, attributes, and behaviours of practitioners. Inspired by their call to action, this researcher suggested that PR was well-positioned to adopt strategic management as one of its core functions. This aspect would allow the field to increase its representation at the executive levels of organizations and offer new opportunities for inter-disciplinary research in communication studies.

Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2014) noted that the term "strategic" was a "much contested, albeit neglected, concept in communications studies" (p. 20). Therefore, prior to such an argument, a clarification and understanding of strategy's origins, evolution, concepts, theories, and methodological approaches was required. This aspect must occur prior to focusing on the benefits of PR pursuing an interdisciplinary research agenda with strategy.

Understanding strategic management

Despite its wide diffusion and application of central models and concepts, strategic management still includes many definitions and terminologies lacking an integrating nature (Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012). This issue is not unexpected. Strategic management's subject of interest and foundational works overlap with several other fields, including sociology, marketing, finance, psychology, and political science, with many strategy researchers trained from varying traditions (Hambrick, 2004; Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, & Yiu, 1999; Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012).

Hambrick and Fredrickson (2001) pointed out that strategy has become such a broad term that researchers have used it to mean almost anything. More recently, Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin (2012) stated that the absence of a sufficiently agreed-on definition of strategy led to the emergence of new associations of the word, such as a term for integration or planning. These terms have added confusion and a state of disagreement among both scholars and managers. A nonexhaustive summary of strategic management, organizational theory, and research, many of which are mentioned in its evolutionary development, can be found in Appendix A.

In 2012, a longitudinal quantitative analysis was performed to clarify the essential elements of the discipline, defining strategy as "the dynamics of the firm's relation with its environment for which the necessary actions are taken to achieve its goals and/or to increase performance by means of the rational use of resources" (Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012, p. 180). Most scholars have agreed that strategy incorporates the key concepts of firm, performance, environment, and resources; these can be considered key elements of any strategic management discussion (Darnall et al., 2010; Helfat & Winter, 2011). In addition, most scholars have agreed that linking a firm to its environment is a principal element of the field (Darnall et al., 2010; Helfat & Winter, 2011). Researchers have also agreed that competitive advantage, resources, and company performance are also essential elements of strategy (Barney, Ketchen, & Wright, 2011). Conceptually, strategic management tries to answer the question of how firms achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Herrmann, 2005), partly through the following four fundamental queries: how do firms behave; why are firms different; what is the function or value of a corporate headquarters; and what determines success or failure in competition (Rumelt, Schendel, & Teece, 1994)?

As an academic field, the prehistory of strategic management lies in economic organization and bureaucracy (Rumelt et al., 1994), in which early

scholars have linked the study of organization with economic ideas and financial planning (Furrer, Thomas, & Goussevskaia, 2008). In the early 1960s, the concept of strategy emerged from the outcry over the need to help managers translate the chaos of events and decisions they face on a daily basis into a way to evaluate the position of the firm within its environment (Porter, 1983). At this time, research was often exploratory and managerially oriented, with an emphasis on normative prescriptions, rather than analysis, based mainly on in-depth case studies of single firms or industries (Ramos-Rodriguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). As a field of study, strategic management originated in business schools as a capstone course to integrate learnings from a variety of courses; as such, little theory was undertaken (Rumelt et al., 1994).

In the 1970s, strategy scholarship moved toward a research orientation in the United States and separated into two different ontological and epistemological perspectives (Furrer et al., 2008). Those who followed a process philosophy studied strategy determination and implementation, while strategy content researchers were interested in understanding the relationship between strategic choice and performance, strategy antecedents, and outcomes (Herrmann, 2005; Rumelt et al., 1994). Process scholars have focused on the observation and study of the organizational decision-making process (Furrer et al., 2008). Quinn's (1980) logical incrementalism and Mintzberg and Waters' (1978, 1985) emergent strategy concepts are examples of this (Furrer et al., 2008). Conversely, strategy content researchers followed the work of Chandler (1962), creating a portfolio management approach that examined the relationships between corporate diversification strategies, organizational structure, and performance (Furrer et al., 2008; Herrmann, 2005). This movement from industry case studies to quantitative empirical studies of firms and industries used deductive and large-scale statistical research tools (Ketchen, Boyd, & Bergh, 2008) to develop and test hypotheses. This movement was credited with strategic management, thereby earning its status as a modern scientifically-based discipline (Ramos-Rodriguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004).

In the 1980s, the strategy field continued to grow (Roney, 2010). Strategy content scholars continued to build on theories of economics by incorporating transaction cost viewpoints, economic rents, game theory, and agency theory (Rumelt et al., 1994). At the same time, under the influence of the globalization, process scholars have studied how multinational corporations increasingly directed and coordinated more complex functions (Rumelt et al., 1994).

An author co-citation analysis by Nerur, Rasheed, and Natarajan (2008) showed the strong influence of organizational theory on the field of strategy

and its emergence as a distinct discipline of inquiry. Michael Porter (1980) provided the first dominant design in strategic management with his classic book, *Competitive Strategy* (Barney, 2002; Herrmann, 2005). Strategic management became the foundation of strategy curricula, which marked a transition to a systemic theoretical analysis of firm-level strategy, using a structural approach to understand and assess industry attractiveness (Herrmann, 2005). This concept of generic strategies started a new era of research that was characterized by the importance of fitting strategy to environment or the rational selection of best strategies (Kraaijenbrink, Spender, & Groen, 2010). Researchers have used generic strategies to examine the influence of strategy and structure on performance (Herrmann, 2005; Hitt, Gimeno, & Hoskisson, 1998). However, the focus on firm-boundary relationships began to change as the 1990s approached, with studies switching from industry structure as a unit of analysis to that of the firm's internal resources, capabilities, and decision-making processes (Furrer et al., 2008).

In the 1990s, regional economic integration, declining trade, investment barriers, and new emerging economies fostered questions regarding the legitimacy of industry positions as explanations of a firm's competitive advantage (Herrmann, 2005; Roney, 2010). Instead, a firm's competencies and capabilities became viewed as the main sources of competitive advantage (Roney, 2010). This aspect led content strategy scholars to begin microeconomic theorizing about the nature of competitive advantage, thereby resulting in the rise of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 2009). RBV indicates that firms create sustainable competitive advantages internally when resources are costly, rare, and nonreplicable, often becoming so due to complex interactions and social complexity (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 2009).

However, RBV's abstract nature made empirical research even more difficult to advance theories of competitive advantage (Roney, 2010). This aspect was exacerbated by intangible resources growing in importance as a source of competitive advantage (Hoskisson et al., 1999). In addition, attempts to generalize strategy across industries proved difficult because resources were particular to industries and individual firms (Herrmann, 2005). While single industry studies allowed tests to help identify the resources critical to that industry, these also limited its generalizability (Herrmann, 2005).

As RBV rose to prominence, researchers developed the theory of invisible assets (Itami, 1988). In the theory of invisible assets, Itami (1987) proposed that information-based invisible assets, such as brand image, reputation, corporate culture, and management skills, were the real sources of competitive advantage in a growing knowledge-based economy. This aspect occurred be-

cause such assets are difficult and time-consuming to accumulate, and these can be used in multiple ways simultaneously (Furrer et al., 2008).

Building on the concept of dynamic capability, the theory of invisible assets (Furrer et al., 2008; Priem, Butler, & Li, 2013) indicated that skill acquisition, learning, and the accumulation of organizational intangible assets were the greatest contributions to sustainable competitive advantage (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). From this insight, the knowledge-based view (KBV) of the firm was developed, building on RBV by focusing on the acquisition, internal development, accumulation, exploitation, and diffusion of knowledge-intensive organizational capabilities (Grant, 1996; Herrmann, 2005). With competitive advantage becoming increasingly difficult to maintain due to speed to market and new technologies, KBV and dynamic capabilities indicated new ways to theorize the effect of innovation on strategy and organizations (Fagerberg & Verspagen, 2009; Keupp, Palmie, & Gassman, 2012). The interest in organizational relationships and decision-making also led to growth in stakeholder research (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009).

In the 21st century, process scholarship reemerged in the discipline, integrating the internal and external aspects of the firm (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009). Industry analysis and competitive advantage as independent researchers have swayed the viewpoint from internal effectiveness and efficiency of planning, thereby encompassing both realms through analyzing and developing differences within industries and markets relative to the competition (Furrer et al., 2008; Priem et al., 2013). In place of the Porterian emphasis on industry and competition, there is now a broader view of the market, and new sources of advantages have emerged, specifically knowledge and relationships. Process now plays an important role, connecting notions of knowledge, learning, organization, and corporate values (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009).

Strategy's potential as an inter-disciplinary PR research agenda

This review of strategy reveals how its current concepts and methodologies may open a new research trajectory for the PR field, moving it toward its desired position as senior management function. For the strategy field, PR offers new insights to explain socially complex intangible resources, such as trust, change, and creativity (Barney 1991, 2011; Furrer et al., 2008). One could

note many similarities between PR and strategy scholarship, providing a bridge for both fields to add insights to the other. Both are recognized as interdisciplinary fields of inquiry (Cutlip, 1994; Furrier et al., 2008; Ketchen et al., 2008). These have grown from simple concepts intended to give practical advice to managers using a case study methodology. These now seek intellectual foundations with explanatory and predictive power (Cutlip, 1994; Furrier et al., 2008; Ketchen et al., 2008). In addition, the academic advancements of both are increasingly becoming dependent on building theory and methodologies that provide value through explaining and predicting organizational success and failure. In strategy, researchers have illustrated this aspect in the advancement of RBV and KBV theories that endeavor to make intangible assets tangible for measurement purposes (Molloy, Chadwick, Ployhart, & Golden, 2011). In PR studies, researchers have observed this aspect in an ongoing quest to identify approaches to measurement and evaluation of such concepts as relationship management, media impressions, and favorable perceptions (Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2015; Thorson et al., 2015; Zerfass, Linke, & Röttger, 2014).

Including strategy in PR's research agenda could also deliver a deeper understanding of the PR occupation and competencies required. In the early 1980s, public relations scholars Scott Cutlip (1994) and Glen Broom (2006) categorized the actions of practitioners into one of four models, three of which were managerial, expert prescriber (authority on public relations problems and solutions), communication facilitator (a liaison and mediator between the organization and its publics), the problem-solving process facilitator (collaborates with other managers to help them define and solve problems), and the nonmanagerial communication technician role (hired for writing and editing skills; Broom, 2006; Guth & Marsh, 2012). Dozier (1992) determined that knowledge proved the single most important determinant of PR excellence and in the employment of PR in a managerial role. Consequently, expanding the knowledge base of PR practitioners by including strategy as part of the field's research agenda would provide value to practice as it sought to take a seat at the executive level.

In today's business environment, strategic management does not lend itself to long-lasting techniques, methods, or specific approaches; there is not one particular tool or prescription for strategic management that has stood the test of time. Organization leaders are too complex and too individualized; the speed to market and the effects of new technologies are increasingly changing the strategy landscape (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009; Furrer et al., 2008; Raynor, 2011). However, with the continued interest in intangible resources

(Furrer et al., 2008), along with the noticeable trend in research concerning capabilities, alliances, relationships, culture, and social responsibility (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009), there is an opportunity for PR researchers and practitioners to engage in incorporating strategy principles into their work.

Researchers have noted that as strategy continues to evolve, it needs to widen its focus away from the neoclassical economic rationality of supply and demand (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010) and its production roots, or it may miss opportunities to create new knowledge that may come from the consumer or from the demand side of the business (Priem et al., 2013). PR, with its focus on audiences, external publics, and on the co-creation of meaning and value (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Luoma-aho, 2015; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012), is positioned to take a leadership role in furthering this element of strategy at both the practitioner and academic level. Companies, such as Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Google, are all examples of firms that have moved between industries, spurred by expressed, anticipated, or latent needs of consumers and stakeholders.

Further, PR can help with such a stakeholder-driven approach to strategy. One of the key competencies of PR and communications professionals is the ability to monitor an organization's external environment from a macro-societal perspective and become environmental trend spotters. This aspect provides a deep, current understanding of societal trends impacting consumer and societal behavior through its interactions with publics (Alfonsi, 2012; Flynn, 2014). As noted by Marchiori and Bulgacov (2012), Canhada (2009) suggested that the way consumers and stakeholders influenced the development of strategy could be used to understand strategy's socially complex elements. This communication and audience-centred approach to strategy is dependent on the dialogue held by and between those stakeholders involved (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012). Such a perspective integrates the internal and external aspects of the firm, the latest development of process scholarship (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009) and related to Mintzberg and Waters' (1978, 1985) emergent strategy concept, in which strategy emerges and changes over time as intentions collide with and accommodate a changing organizational reality.

Organizational practices that take place in and by communication are a "generating source of knowledge" (Gherardi, 2009, p. 115). The knowledge generated through organizational communication will become increasingly important due to increased environmental turbulence (Furrer et al., 2008), which makes it unlikely that there will be long, stable periods in which firms can achieve sustainable competitive advantages. Instead, the hyper-competitive context will allow only short periods of advantage, thereby making the

re-thinking of strategy more or less continuous (Priem et al., 2013). Whereas strategic management was once a noun that referred to making decisions in the present with aims for particular states in the future, Cummings and Daellenbach (2009) argued that strategy was a verb, mirroring a shift in interest from the content of strategy decisions towards the actual process of strategizing. Traditionally, strategy was something an organization leader did, but due to increasing environmental turbulence, it was argued that to be successful, strategy was an organizational characteristic or group of characteristics. Thus, strategy represents something an organization is, or is in a process leading, to a sought-after future state, in which an organization is becoming oriented to one of the characteristics it wants to achieve to be successful (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009).

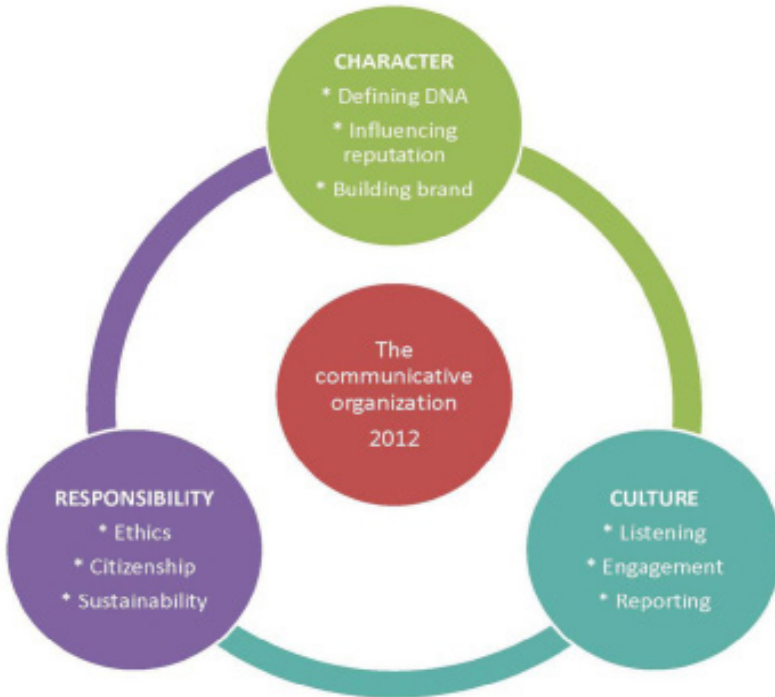
Such a worldview provides an opportunity for PR to contribute to an inter-disciplinary research agenda with strategy, as PR is also a continually ongoing and dynamic process, creating and managing the flow of information within the organization, among its stakeholders, and with the general public (Taylor, 2010). Using such a view, one could state PR was the process of the negotiation of knowledge, meaning, and behavior between an organization and its stakeholders (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009), as the organization adapted and responded to feedback or changes in the stakeholder environment (Gilpin, 2010; Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014).

This potential blending of the PR and strategy fields is already happening for industry-focused PR research, which indicates PR is evolving due to the proliferation of the Internet and social media platforms, increasing media outlets, commercialization, and demands for greater measurement/business impact (Alfonsi, 2012; Ruihley, Pratt, & Carpenter, 2016). PR practitioners must integrate three new roles: strategic counselors, business environment trend-spotters, and digital experts (Alfonsi, 2012). For example, in a strategic counselling role, PR may offer advice across a range of business challenges, such as what The Taylor Group did for NASCAR. The Taylor Group conducted a strategic assessment of the entire motorsport industry to help NASCAR frame a vision of its future to counter declining attendance and media discussion about the relevance of the sport to fans and sponsors (Alfonsi, 2012).

In the role of trend-spotters, PR provides a deep, current understanding of societal trends influencing consumer behavior through its interactions with publics (Alfonsi, 2012). Finally, as digital experts, organizations leaders PR professionals to provide content and guidance in navigating the social media landscape and the resulting increased interactions with the stakeholders they facilitate (Alfonsi, 2012). These findings are collaborated by the initial find-

ings of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management's (2016), in which aligning communications planning with strategy and purpose, critical thinking, relationship management, reputation management leadership, empirical measurement, trusted council (including contextual awareness and business acumen), and effective use of communication technologies were all viewed as key capabilities required by the industry (Thurlow et al., 2018). The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management (2012) has already implicitly suggested such an ongoing and dynamic perspective for its membership through the development of its organizational responsibility model advocated by the *Melbourne Mandate*.

Figure 1: The three dimensions of communication as per the *Melbourne Mandate* (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2012).



According to the *Melbourne Mandate*, there are three dimensions that PR practitioners should define and maintain in an organization: character, responsibility, and culture. All three constructs work together to create a communicative organization (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management, 2012). Such a listening organization is capable of understanding the expressed needs of its environment, whether anticipated or latent, and can be an organization capable of adapting to increasing environmental turbulence. Thus, one could state the *Melbourne Mandate* incorporated a form of process strategy, using PR to link the internal and external environment functions to achieve the desired characteristic of becoming strategized toward a characteristic of being a communicative organization.

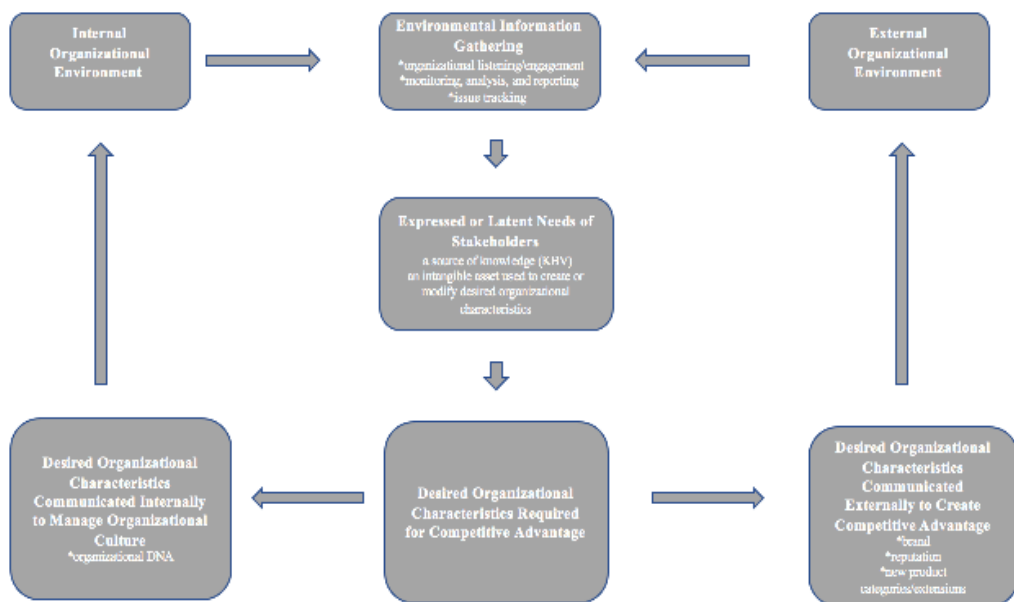
Building on the *Melbourne Mandate's* understanding of a communicative organization, these principles are further explored in the context of strategy to better understand how PR may incorporate strategy functions to further its senior management aspirations. The following section will provide a PR research agenda through the authors' proposition of a strategic communicative organization (SCO).

Bridging disciplines: The strategic communicative organization

The theoretical model of the SCO proposed in this paper is a step toward creating a bridge between PR and strategy in the pursuit of an inter-disciplinary research agenda. The model builds on the concept of creating process-change throughout the organization, as suggested by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management (2012). However, it extends the model by providing the reason why an organization must be communicative, linking it to strategic practice, one that is accountable and aligned with overall organizational goals and objectives. The model shows a role for PR in strategy and the "strategizing" concept. Steyn (2007) proposed that PR assisted an organization in adapting to its social and stakeholder environment by feeding the organization's strategy formulation process intelligence through organizational environmental analysis (both internal and external) and issues tracking regarding stakeholders. This aspect allows PR to not only provide value by aiding in strategy implementation, as it has done in the past, but also through delivering insights into an ever-increasing, turbulent organizational environment.

In this role, PR can help determine future desired organizational characteristics that will add value to the organization in its operating environment through communicative interactions with consumers and stakeholders. PR does this by helping define, shape, and communicate those organizational characteristics and values, both inside and outside the organization, creating shared values and assumptions that provide the building blocks of organizational culture (McShane & Steen, 2009). In such a holistic view of the intertwining of PR and strategy, neither are done or departmentalized; instead, these permeates the foundation of the organization at all levels and activities through shaping organizational character (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2012). The SCO proposed builds on the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management's (2012) *Melbourne Mandate* concept, outlining a PR-centered process for emergent strategy development (Mintzberg & Water, 1978, 1985). This model aligns PR actions directly with organizational goals and objectives, and it helps explain why an organization should be communicative, as the *Melbourne Mandate* advocates.

Figure 2: The strategic communicative organization.



The model begins with the PR function performing its existing role of gathering, processing, and building relationships within the organizational environment. Through this monitoring and information-gathering, the model attempts uncover the latent needs of stakeholders and become environmental trend-spotters. This aspect creates a source of knowledge that can be acknowledged as an intangible organizational asset, which one may use to shape and modify the organization toward its desired “strategized” state. This state consists of the desired characteristics required for it to be successful and effectively use resources. Outcomes of this state can take the form of brand or reputation management, organizational culture, product extensions, or new product categories. These characteristics are communicated internally, modifying organizational culture if required, or externally, communicating brand, reputation, or new product-services/product-service extensions. Once communicated, the strategizing process begins anew through monitoring the organizational environment to understand the effects and acceptance of the created messages and organizational actions.

This effectively answers the question of why an organization needs to be communicative, as proposed in the *Melbourne Mandate* and ways in which

PR professionals can increase their influence with organizational leadership. While not PR experts, presidents, CEOs, and other senior management officers are the ones who make strategic decisions, face stakeholders, and face the public to explain and justify their choices (Modzelewski, 1990). Thus, PR and corporate communications must demonstrate value to CEOs in their strategic decisions (Steyn, 2012), beyond what CEOs view as traditional PR domains, to further their inclusion at the executive level (Neill, 2015).

Pratt (2013) studied National Collegiate Athletic Association Division (NCAA) Division I athletic directors, who in the intercollegiate context were the CEOs of their departments, with control over finances, structure, priorities, policies, and general management (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004), Pratt (2013) sought to understand how they viewed and valued PR. She observed that they did not view PR as a separate, distinct entity or department, rather integrated into all parts of the athletic department that had contact with the public. This aspect included nontraditional public relations disciplines, such as coaching, sport development, marketing, sales, alumni relations, fundraising, and sponsorship.

From this insight, one postulated that PR characteristics were something that athletic directors desired to permeate the entire organization, thus validating the concept of a communicative organization as proposed by the *Melbourne Mandate*. The emergent strategizing process, outlined in Figure 2, takes this concept one step further by suggesting that the purpose of a communicative organization characteristic desired by athletic directors is to move athletic departments towards a desired characteristic (i.e., the strategizing process) of open two-way communication. This aspect is believed to confer competitive advantage to achieve success. These characteristics are influenced by external publics of the athletic department and include sponsors, alumni, students, university management, and team fans themselves (Pratt, 2013) through organizational listening and the communication of those characteristics back to the external environment. These desired characteristics are also communicated to the organization to help ingrain these into organizational culture.

Pratt (2013) also noted that the most valuable contributions athletic directors required from PR practitioners could be encapsulated in three themes: action/interaction, message, and image. Action/interaction included monitoring and reaching out to publics, dialogic conversations, and general involvement. This process meant the entire athletic department was required to be accessible and accountable to the public, and the department can be equated to the internal/external environmental monitoring/issue tracking and interactive strategizing process, as outlined in Figure 2. The message and

image themes represent the verbal communications with internal and external publics, as well as the projected tangible and intangible aspects of the athletic department respectively. This insight parallels the communication of organizational characteristics back to the publics in the strategizing process.

These findings and the significance to the emergent strategizing process were further reinforced in another study of NCAA athletic directors, who indicated that the role of PR was that of a problem-solving process facilitator (Ruihley et al., 2016). This finding showed that strategic planning, along with messaging and relationship management, were the top three PR benefits (Ruihley et al., 2016). Pratt (2013) concluded by suggesting researchers should focus on PR's big picture concepts and place less emphasis on definitions and terminology. She also suggested focusing on how PR was integrated with other disciplines and professions in research and practice to create further insights.

The example above demonstrates how the proposed strategic communicative organization model reflects some c-suite executives' view of the value of PR at a senior business level as an internalized, integrated process that focused on audience needs, concerns, and interests (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Pratt, 2013; Wehmeier & Winkler, 2013). Such a view of PR indirectly advocates a PR role in corporate-level strategy through a communicative, strategized organizational approach. In the illustration, the athletic department was shown to understand its environment and seek new ways of creating value for its stakeholders to help ensure success, the ultimate goal of strategy. PR scholars and practitioners can bridge the gap from simply implementing strategy (functional strategy) or, in the words of Steyn (2012), "being reactive, awaiting the initiative of their chief executives... focused on the achievement of communication goals" (p. 434), to focusing proactively on the organizational mission or "desired state" through contributing to corporate and business-level strategy decision-making. This process can help define and take a role at the strategy apex of an organization; those "individuals charged with overall responsibility of the organization, such as the chief executive officer and any top-level managers whose concerns are global" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 237). Thus, PR's role in strategy can account for the sum total of the stakeholders' experiences regarding the organization (Hallahan et al., 2007) and its influence on strategy development (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012).

The emergent strategizing process of a strategic communicative organization provides PR a construct. This construct can help one take a leadership role in the strategy process itself. This role can shape and evolve an organization's strategic vision based on constant monitoring; a consumer-centric focus

of an increasingly turbulent external corporate environment; and providing an intangible, socially complex competitive resource for the firm, thereby creating a competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Boyle and Haynes (2014) stated there was an immediate communication velocity created by social media that was previously unknown in PR. Social media has allowed stakeholders to interact with organizations and each other more freely and quickly with a large influence on society (Grunig, 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). The relevance of these small interactions between people makes strategies potentially effective (Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007). The result is that, in today's society, all members of the organization have communicated desired organizational characteristics to create value; they have interacted with the external environment, including many junior and non-communication positions that are the "frontline" of the organization (Minkiewicz, Evans, Bridson, & Mavondo, 2011, p. 190). Another consequence of this velocity is that, to be successful, organizations must take a more consumer- or audience-centered approach (Luoma-aho, 2015; Priem et al., 2013).

If PR is to thrive in this new environment at a senior managerial level, it can no longer be a siloed department or a tactical tool for communicating strategy. Instead, PR practitioners must adopt the strategy function as a core responsibility, thereby helping provide the information and leadership needed for an organization to reach a strategized state and provide the persuasive communication required to ingrain the characteristics an organization desires, all so the organization can remain successful. PR does not just provide information and assist in the implementation of functional level strategy, but also ascertains and facilitates the ongoing process of becoming strategized.

Such a role requires senior-level responsibilities and the ability to influence arguably all areas of the organization. Thus, this aspect provides a pathway for Grunig's (1992, 2013) desire that PR practitioners be included the strategy apex of an organization (Mintzberg, 1979). This aspect also meets the goals of practitioner-based organizations, such as the Canadian Public Relations Society and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management (2012, 2016). Their mandates include enhancing the role and value of PR to organizations, thereby becoming a more strategic practice that is accountable and aligned with overall organizational goals and objec-

tives.

Corporate- and business-level strategies could change the shape of the PR discipline and advance the field by providing new perspectives and theories to help it achieve greater impact within the organization and opportunities to empirically identify its value. These strategies also advocates using co-creational approaches, correcting what some have called an overreliance on normative theory, such as Grunig's (2013) "Excellence Framework" (Edwards, 2012; Gower, 2006; L'Etang, 2012, 2013). The PR practitioners have struggled to find its niche in part due to different sets of assumptions, values, and worldviews that have been increasingly subject to debate (e.g., Curtin, 2012; Edwards, 2012; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). However, the amorphous boundaries and inherent pluralism also provide PR scholars the opportunity to "boundary span" their own field and to act as intellectual brokers with multiple research orientations.

Adopting strategy as a core PR responsibility provides a direct link between management and PR theory. This adoption allows each to bring new thoughts and insights to the other, thereby potentially integrating two similarly multi-disciplinary and practice-based fields, delivering new opportunities for research among scholars and new management responsibilities for practitioners, and increasing their domain and value of practice. Strategy can also help provide direction and the tangible skills, knowledge, and competencies required for the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's (2016) Global Capabilities Framework Initiative. The emergent strategizing process of a SCO model provides a path to develop the competencies needed to better meet the expectations of company presidents, a key success-factor that influences PR's ability to obtain and maintain a seat on the executive board.

Strategy also requires PR managers to educate their colleagues and senior management about their domain expertise beyond the traditional associations of media relations, crisis communications, and writing, to include social media, reputation management, internal communications, and government relations (Neill, 2015). By acknowledging the different levels of strategy, PR practitioners can widen their views of what strategy and strategic communication mean. This aspect can bridge the gap between current functional-level strategies common to the field and the desired state of business- and corporate-level strategy occurring at the organizational apex.

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Appendix

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Organizational Population Ecology	Firms do not adapt to their environment, and a process like natural selection occurs. Now primarily a theory of organizational studies.	Hannan & Freeman (1977); Noy (2010)	1970s, 1980s, still in use today
Neo-Institutional theory	Organizations survive through legitimacy by acting in socially-expected ways with neo-institutionalism explaining the causal mechanism's leading to change.	Meyer & Rowan (1977); DiMaggio (1988); Oliver (1991); Greenwood & Hinings (1996)	1980s and onward
Logical Instrumentalism	Organizations refine their general strategic course incrementally.	Quinn (1980)	1980s
Emergent Strategy	Strategy emerges over time as intentions collide with and accommodate a changing reality. Mintzberg's 5 Ps for Strategy (plan, ploy, position, pattern, perspective).	Mintzberg & Waters (1985); Mintzberg (1987); Choo (2002)	1980s, seeing a recent resurgence due to increased environmental turbulence
Structural Contingency Theory	No best way to organize a corporation or make decisions. Action is contingent upon internal and external environment.	Likert (1961); Burns & Stalker (1961); Child (1972)	1950s, 1960s, 1970s

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Critical Perspectives	Reflective assessment and critique of firm and its surrounding social systems.	Whittington (1992, 2010); den Hond, Boersma, & Heres (2012); Burrell (1994); Gilbert (1992); Mintzberg (1994)	1980s and onward
Network Theory	Studies the strength of ties among individuals or organizations as well a structural holes among social networks. Often intertwined with social capital and status.	Granovetter (1983); Burt (2000, 2001)	1980s, 1990s, still in use today
Actor-Network Theory	Includes objects as part of social networks and so take into account new technologies. Maps relations that are material and semiotic.	Callon (1987); Latour (1996, 2005); Law (1992)	1990s and onward
Agency Theory	Explains that modern corporations are characterized by separation of ownership and control, and the interests of shareholders and managers may diverge. Managers may seek to maximize their own interests at the expense of shareholders.	Eisenhardt (1989); Heugens & Lander (2009); Lan & Heracleous (2010); Harris, Souder, & Johnson (2013)	1980s and onward

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Configuration Theory	Addresses how an organization should be structured to be effective.	Miller & Shamsie (1996); Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings (1993); Dess, Newport & Rasheed (1993); Mitzberg (1990); Vories & Morgan (2003)	1990s and onward
Entrepreneurship	The discovery and exploration of profitable opportunities (not profitable advantages, as it does not take into consideration opportunity costs).	Shane & Venkataraman (2000); Shane (2000); Stevenson & Jarillo (1990)	2000s and onward
Innovation and First Movers Advantage	Use of innovation (product, service, process, technology, or structure) to achieve competitive advantage and adapt strategy The effects of being the first significant occupant of a market segment.	Lieberman & Montgomery (1988); Makadok (1998); Keupp, Palmie, & Gassmann (2012); Suarez & Lanzolla (2007); Ireland & Hitt (1999)	1990s and onward
Dynamic Capabilities (Capacity) View	The firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments.	Teece, Pisan & Shuen (1997); Barreto (2010); Zollo & Winter (2002); Teece (2007)	2000s and onward

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Resource Dependence Theory	Describes how the environment constrains the organization and seeks to minimize its effects. Other organizations have an impact on resource acquisition.	Pfeffer & Salancik (1979); Hillman, Withers, & Collins (2009)	1980s and onward
Power, Politics, and Upper Echelons	Organization's reflection of its top managers. Interlocking directorates, the study of boards, CEOs, and top management teams. Leadership and decision-making	Pettigrew (1973, 1992); Hambrick & Mason (1984); Hambrick (2007); Eisenhardt & Zbaracki (1992); Dane & Pratt (2007)	1980s and onward
Stakeholder Theory	A stakeholder is any group or person who can effect or is effected by the actions of the focal organization. Does not currently meet all theory criteria.	Freeman (1984); Mitchell, Agle, & Wood (1997); Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & DeColle (2010)	1980s and onward
Resource based view of the firm	To be successful and achieve competitive advantage, a firm requires resources that are rare, valuable, inimitable, and non-substitutable.	Barney (1991, 2001, 2011); Kraaijenbrink, Spender, & Groen (2010)	1990s and onward, current dominant strategy theory

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Knowledge based view of the firm	Builds resource-based view of the firm by focusing on the acquisition, internal development, accumulation, exploitation, and diffusion of knowledge intensive organizational capabilities.	Grant (1996, 2002); Winter (1987); Peteraf (1993)	1990s and onward, often considered part of intangible assets under RBV
Transaction Cost Economics	The coordination costs of the firm. The appropriate structure for a given transaction is one that minimizes total transaction and production costs bounded rationality and opportunism	Williamson (1981, 1991); David & Han (2004)	1980s, 1990s, not as widely used as it once was
Organizational Image/Identity	Identity: the core, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of an organization. Image: how an organization believes it is perceived by others.	van Riel & Balmer (1997); Hatch & Schultz (1997); Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten (2006); Dutton & Dukerich (1991)	1990s and onward

Theory or Area of Research	Summary of Research or Theory	Notable Author(s)	Peak Popularity
Reputation/Status	The status of a firm among employees and external stakeholders compared to its rivals. Perceived overall quality term that captures the differences in perceived or actual quality or merit. Source of competitive advantage	Fobrum (1996, 2001); Adeosun & Ganiyu (2012); Washington & Zajac (2005)	1990s and onward
Strategic Groups	Groups companies within an industry that have similar business models or similar combinations of strategies.	Cool & Schendel (1988); Dranove & Shanley (1998); Nath & Gruca (1997)	1980s and onward
Competitive Dynamics	The series of competitive actions and competitive responses among firms competing within a particular industry.	Gnyawali & Madhavan (2001); Garud & Kumaraswamy (1993)	1980s and onward
Structure- Conduct- Performance	The structure (or environment) of the industry dictates the conduct of the firm which in turn effects performance.	Porter (1980, 1981)	1970s, 1980s, no longer widely used as findings did not verify concept

Source: Compiled from the various readings of strategic management.