

The stakeholder-communication continuum: An alternate approach to internal and external communications

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ABSTRACT

Academic scholarship and professional literature have defined communications as existing in two groups: internal and external/public relations. However, globalism, technology, evolving communication practices, and the maturation of the public relations field have evoked changing attitudes and perceptions regarding stakeholder identification, publics, and communications. This researcher sent a broad, representative survey to university alumni, conducted in-depth interviews with university staff, and performed a content analysis of alumni-facing communications, resulting in an alternate method of viewing internal and external communications. Dubbed the stakeholder-communication continuum, the theory places internal and external communications on either end of a spectrum, with stakeholder groups plotted along the continuum based on their relationship to the organization and each other.

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Valenti, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) posited that globalism and technology has impelled a redefinition of publics by bypassing the boundaries of geography, status, class, culture, and religion to alter stakeholder views and interests while granting people the ability to wield more influence over communication mechanisms and content/product creation. In his discussion of organizational public relations, Spicer (1997) likewise hypothesized that the field's maturation will influence a growing interconnectivity between organizations and the surrounding environment, shifting the way in which communications are conceived and delivered. The implication is that there is an undeviating and important need for scholars and practitioners to periodically examine theories of stakeholder identification and

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communications to ensure alignment with the most recent technological developments, global trends, and communication practices.

Spicer (2008) has written of the lack of clarity surrounding stakeholder definitions, stating that questions related to the topic “have driven stakeholder scholarship for the past 20 years” (p. 28). This is particularly true in light of the changing communication practices produced by the advent and widespread use of social media. Social media has not only altered the ways in which people can communicate with each other but has also challenged our understanding of who constitutes an internal or external stakeholder.

For example, organizations have been encouraged by scholars and practitioners to leverage blogs and Twitter, two social media platforms that have traditionally been geared towards external publics, as internal communication tools to help build employee engagement (Bowen & Men, 2017; Ross, 2014; Varney, 2014). Likewise, the accessibility that social media provides external publics to the dominant coalition not only allows these stakeholders the opportunity to directly relay their feedback but could shift the status of these people from external publics to a hybrid of internal and external publics. For instance, sports-bike manufacturer, Ducati, has asserted that it “genuinely considers its fans as part of the company” (Van Belleghem, 2012, p. 190). One of the many fan-feedback initiatives they have instituted is their online Tech Café. Consisting of approximately 1,000 Ducati fans, the company consults with this community on research and development, product design, and product and commercial management prior to making decisions (Insites Consulting, 2012; Prandelli, Swahney, & Verona, 2008; Van Belleghem, 2012).

This suggests that internal and external communications can be perceived as existing on a continuum. The continuum would consist of internal communications on one end and external communications on the other, with stakeholder groups plotted along the spectrum based on their relationship to the organization and the amount of information these stakeholders are privy to. Depending on where the stakeholders lie in relation to the organization, communications can be internal, external, or varying degrees of both.

Research problem

As products of educational institutions, alumni enjoy unique relationships with their *almae matres*. While no longer involved with their former institutions on a daily basis, these stakeholders exert a certain amount of influence through their time, monetary contributions, and/or feedback. A further

investigation of the alumni relationship relative to their *almae matres* and other stakeholders is therefore appropriate if we wish to better understand the validity of a stakeholder-communication continuum.

The university examined in this study is a mid-sized institution located in southwestern Ontario. New graduates are automatically enrolled in the institution's alumni association upon completion of their program. One of the primary functions of the association is to help the university fulfill its three mandates of research, teaching, and community service through advocacy, fundraising support, and participation in governance. Alumni also have a designated number of seats at key decision-making tables, such as dean advisory boards, the board of governors, and the university senate.

The researcher intends to use a case study examination of the university and its communications and relationships with alumni to compare existing scholarly literature against a possible stakeholder-communication continuum. Given the roles and tasks entrusted to university alumni, this paper will seek to determine if they can be considered internal/external stakeholders of the institution. Communications and relationships with this constituent body will further be explored to determine the plausibility of the continuum.

Figure 1: The stakeholder-communication continuum as proposed by the researcher.



Research questions

The researcher aims to test the validity of a stakeholder-communication continuum through the utilization of three overarching research questions.

RQ1: How and to what extent does the university view and treat alumni differently than other external stakeholders?

RQ2: How and to what extent do university communications to alumni differ from communications to other external stakeholders?

RQ3: How and to what extent do university communications affect alumni relationships?

Literature review

Organization-public relationships

Defined as “the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62), an organization-public relationship is one in which assets, actions, and stances are influenced by a mutual interconnecting interest that links the concerned parties (Hung, 2008; Smith, 2012). This common interest does not need to be acknowledged by those involved so long as a “system of mutuality” is practiced among the stakeholders (Smith, 2012, p. 842).

Hung (2005) identified eight types of organization-public relationships, ranging from having the most concern for one’s self to having the most concern for others. They are, in order, exploitive, manipulative, contractual, symbiotic, exchange, covenantal, mutual communal, and one-sided communal. Exchange, covenantal, and mutual communal relationships are considered the most effective for organizations and publics because they represent “win-win” relationships (Hung, 2008, p. 458).

The measurement and cultivation of organization-public relationships can allow stakeholders to improve intangible assets, while contributing to the formation and management of strategy. Specifically, organization-public relationships can allow for better environmental scanning (Men & Hung, 2009), more informed decision making (Hon & Grunig, 1999), and increased loyalty and support from stakeholders on strategic initiatives (Men & Hung, 2009).

Control mutuality

Control mutuality is a relational outcome arising from organization-public relationships, which has been defined by scholars in various ways. Hon and Grunig (1999) understood control mutuality to be an agreement between two parties who both wield a certain (though not necessarily equal) amount of

power over the other on the “rightful” degree of influence exercised by each stakeholder (p. 19). Stafford and Canary (1991), on the other hand, asserted that control mutuality is “the degree to which parties agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behaviours” (p. 224). What has remained consistent across both definitions is that control mutuality requires consensus between stakeholders who are in an interdependent relationship with each other.

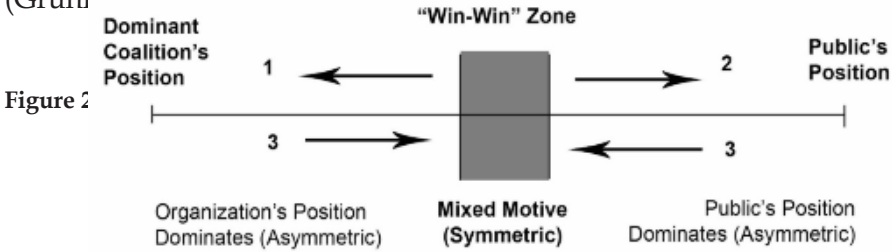
For control mutuality to be present in stakeholder relationships, a few conditions need to be met. First, parties must endeavour to assure the other of their sincerity so as to ensure one side does not “exploit the other” (Hung, 2008, p. 464). Next, trust is essential for control mutuality, as “relationship outcomes are undermined if at least some degree of trust is not present” (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013, p. 195). Finally, the organization must have a participatory culture that fosters two-way, symmetrical communications between parties (Garvey & Buckley, 2010; Gurabardhi, Gutteling, & Kuttschreuter, 2005; Hung, 2008).

Two-way, symmetrical communications and the mixed-motive model

The concept behind two-way, symmetrical communications is that reciprocal discourse promotes mutual respect and understanding, resolves conflicts, and changes existing attitudes and stances (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Dialogue is not only essential for the management of stakeholder needs and interests but also necessary for environmental scanning and stakeholder buy-in (Heath, 2008; Stacks & Watson, 2008). Hagan (2008) espoused that the transparency and candor of two-way communications is the means to achieving short- and long-term organizational goals.

Practitioners and theorists who criticize two-way, symmetrical communications argue that the model is idealistic and not an accurate reflection of actual practices. As a response to some of these concerns, Grunig proposed a revised communications model. Deriving from Murphy’s (1991) game-theory continuum, Grunig suggested a mixed-motive model of communication in which asymmetrical and symmetrical communications exist along a continuum (Moncur, 2006; Plowman, 2008; Spicer, 2008). Despite having their own self-interests, stakeholders on both sides are encouraged to practice cooperation and symmetrical communications to reach a common middle ground, typically known as the win-win zone, on issues, benefits, and/or decisions

(Grunig, 2001; Hagan, 2008; Plowman, 2008). The ability of communicators to reach the win-win zone serves as a means to evaluate successful relationships (Grunig



Internal communications

Through its linkages to human resources and organizational structure, internal communications has generally been defined as correspondence to individuals and groups within an organization, typically employees (Bowen & Men, 2017; Ćorić & Vokić, 2009; Hon, 2008; Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013). Initially disseminated as a form of public information via one-way communication channels (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), internal communications is now regarded as a mechanism for open communications (Theaker, 2004).

Berger (2008) posited that there exists three levels of internal communications (interpersonal, group, and organizational), and that technological developments, such as social media, have altered the way in which communications have traditionally been executed. For example, corporate social media channels potentially provide front-line staff with direct access to the dominant coalition, effectively bypassing their managers and causing dialogue to be transmitted diagonally instead of vertically (Berger, 2008).

Internal communications helps an organization in qualitative and quantitative ways. Qualitatively, better communications increase employee loyalty and satisfaction (Berger, 2008; Hon, 2008; Kim & Ni, 2013), create brand ambassadors (Kim & Ni, 2013; Sriramesh, Rhee, & Sung, 2013), cultivate an inclusive organizational culture (Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), and build stronger organizational relationships (Ströh, 2008). Quantitatively, meaningful internal communications help improve an organization's bottom line. Specifically, internal communications can potentially increase employee productivity (Ströh, 2008), promote innovation (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), assist in boundary scanning (Kim & Ni, 2013), and espouse organizational effectiveness (Kim & Ni, 2013). It is

also thought to be able to decrease costs associated with negative publicity (Grunig, 1992), employee absenteeism (Clampitt & Downs, 1993), and litigation (Grunig, 1992).

Public relations

More commonly known as public relations, external communications has often found itself the subject of debates regarding its identity and role within society (Kotler & Mindak, 1978). According to Edward L. Bernays, a pioneer of modern public relations, the function serves three main objectives: "a) informing people, b) persuading people, and c) integrating people with people" (Kotler & Mindak, 1978, p. 16).

Flynn, Gregory, and Valin (as cited by the Canadian Public Relations Society, 2018) defined public relations as being "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest" (para. 5). From its management of long-term stakeholder relationships, public relations has the ability to gather and parse key insights that can aid in the achievement of organizational goals.

Grunig (2013) and his colleagues highlighted the financial, reputational, and organizational benefits of public relations functions within organizations. From a financial perspective, public relations' stakeholder relationships can lead to reduced litigation and loss of revenue through negative publicity (Likely & Watson, 2013). The function's ability to boundary scan can also increase revenue through the provision of innovative and/or refreshed products and services (de Bussy, 2013; Grunig, 1992; Likely & Watson, 2013). From a reputational perspective, the public relations function preserves the organization's standing by influencing stakeholder perceptions and communicating in a symmetrical fashion (Adler & Kranowitz, 2005; Coombs, 2015). Finally, public relations is able to contribute to the development of organizational goals and decisions through its identification of potentially contentious issues (de Bussy, 2013; Likely & Watson, 2013).

Research methods

The research use a single-case case study in order to gain contextual understanding from a real-world scenario (Yin, 2014). As part of the inquiry, a triangulated research methodology that addresses both qualitative and quantitative measurements was utilized (Yin, 2014): a survey to university alumni, interviews with university staff, and a content analysis of alumni-facing communications.

Data collection

Alumni survey

A LimeSurvey-hosted probability sample survey was sent by email to a randomized list of 15,000 alumni (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). 204 of 404 respondents (50.5%) successfully completed the survey. Survey responses were systematically charted and objectively analyzed, with specific inferences drawn from the data collected (Stacks, 2011).

Staff interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with university employees who hold a leadership position (defined as a Manager, Director, or Vice-President) and/or work in the communications or alumni advancement departments. Of the 12 people interviewed, six were in alumni advancement, five were in communications, and one handled both alumni advancement and communications. Two of the 12 employees opted to conduct their interview together, and while their answers aligned, the possibility of influence cannot be discounted, especially since one had more seniority than the other. The researcher recruited respondents by email and conducted the interviews in person.

Content analysis

With the exception of the website (which was analyzed in real time in February 2018), analysis was conducted on 11 alumni-facing items within the

2017 calendar year. These items include five print magazines, four social media platforms (two Facebook pages, one Twitter account, and one Instagram account), and one blog. A total of 940 posts and articles were examined. Items that were not authored by the account holder (such as retweets on Twitter) were not analyzed. User reactions to social media posts were also recorded.

Communications were scrutinized using both latent and manifest content analyses. First, communications were grouped into one of nine sections based on topic: direct messages, staff-related articles, faculty-related articles, alumni-related articles, student-related articles, research, event-related articles, campus-related articles, and university-wide achievements. Next, communications were determined to be partial or impartial in tone. Finally, commonly used terminology in direct messages were counted.

Data analysis and results

Alumni survey

1.1 Qualifying questions

The first section aimed to understand the respondent's profile and engagement style. The majority of respondents were graduates between the years of 2005 to 2014 (24.51%, n=50). Most were bachelor-degree holders (68.63%, n=140). Alumni who had studied in the sciences comprised close to half of all respondents (40.69%, n=83), with arts graduates following closely behind (32.35%, n=66). Alumni largely recalled receiving communications from the university a few times a month (37.95%, n=74), and donation requests (64.1%, n=125) and event information (63.59%, n=124) were perceived to dominate institutional communications.

Over half (52.94%, n=108) of the respondents considered themselves to be only slightly engaged with the university. Approximately half (49.51%, n=101) of the respondents said they have not donated money to the university, while over three-quarters (84.31%, n=172) of the respondents said they have not volunteered.

1.2 Current relationship with the university

Questions in this section consisted of Likert scales where alumni were asked to rate their agreement to statements. The first four questions measured alumni perceptions of university communications. Alumni were largely satisfied with communications, selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” on the following four questions: a) I find the university’s communications to be effective (67.16%, n=137), b) I am interested in the information that the university currently sends (54.9%, n=112), c) I am satisfied with the frequency of the university’s communications to me (59.81%, n=122), and d) I believe the university currently engages well with me (54.9%, n=112).

The next four questions examined the control mutuality of the alumni-university relationship. The first two questions asked alumni to rate their perceived influence over the institution, and results from this section varied. While most alumni “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the university is or would be receptive to their opinions (40.68%, n=83), they also “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that they do or would have influence over the institution’s activities or plans (48.53%, n=99). Table 1 illustrates the full results:

Table 1

Q17: I believe the University is or would be receptive to my opinions, n=204; Q18: I believe I do or would have influence over the university’s future activities and plans, n=204.

| | Q17 | | Q18 | |
|--------------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|
| | N | % | n | % |
| Strongly agree | 16 | 7.84 | 5 | 2.45 |
| Agree | 67 | 32.84 | 21 | 10.29 |
| Neith agree nor disagree | 60 | 29.41 | 57 | 27.94 |
| Disagree | 24 | 11.76 | 66 | 32.35 |
| Strongly disagree | 9 | 4.41 | 33 | 16.18 |
| Don’t know | 25 | 12.25 | 21 | 10.29 |
| Not applicable | 3 | 1.47 | 1 | 0.49 |

The next two questions asked alumni respondents to describe their relationship to the university. Responses for these two questions were largely positive, with 36.76% (n=75) and 50.8% (n=104) of alumni agreeing or strongly agreeing that they considered themselves important stakeholders and that they felt invested in the university, respectively. Considering the minimal en-

agement respondents said they have with their Alma mater, the results are particularly of note (see Table 2):

Table 2

Q19: As an alumnus / alumna, I still consider myself to be an important stakeholder at the University (n=204). Q20: As an alumnus / alumna, I feel invested in the university, n=204.

| | Q19 | | Q20 | |
|--------------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|
| | N | % | n | % |
| Strongly agree | 16 | 7.84 | 22 | 10.78 |
| Agree | 59 | 28.92 | 82 | 40.2 |
| Neith agree nor disagree | 53 | 25.98 | 48 | 23.53 |
| Disagree | 49 | 24.02 | 36 | 17.65 |
| Strongly disagree | 19 | 9.31 | 13 | 6.37 |
| Don't know | 7 | 3.43 | 2 | 0.98 |
| Not applicable | 1 | 0.49 | 1 | 0.49 |

The final three questions aimed to determine if more frequent communications would inspire changed behaviours. In all three instances, more than half (64.71%~76.96%, n=132~157) of all alumni “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the suggestion that increased communications could alter their stances toward engagement, volunteering, and donating.

1.3 Desired relationship with the university

This section asked alumni to describe their ideal communication style. Alumni largely agreed that email communications should be the primary form of contact (83.82% n=171), and the majority (33.33%, n=68) felt it would be preferable to receive communications only a few times a year.

Alumni were also given the opportunity to provide feedback on what the university could do to make them feel more engaged, via an open-ended question. Of the 68 people (33.33%) who left a response, approximately one-quarter (26.47%, n=18) indicated that they were happy with the university communications and relationship to date. One-third (33.82%, n=23) of the respondents said they would engage more frequently if there were more opportunities that catered to their needs, affinities, and/or situations. Approximately one-fifth (23.53%, n=16) of the respondents stressed the need for communications to be

less frequent but more “personalized” and “meaningful.” Specifically, alumni desired communications that were relevant to their undergraduate degrees, featured their former classmates, and/or showed the impact of their donations. The remaining respondents (16.18%, n=11) said they were unsure and/or felt that there was nothing the university could do to improve engagement.

Staff interviews

Q1: What is your role and responsibility when it comes to alumni communications?

Of the 12 people interviewed, five work directly with alumni, and seven oversee staff who are responsible for alumni activities. Exactly half of the respondents saw their role as being that of a technician, responsible for maintaining and creating communications with alumni and/or organizing alumni events. The other six respondents described themselves as relationship builders, responsible for developing and maintaining alumni engagement.

Q2: How do you view alumni in relation to the institution?

With the exception of one respondent, everyone used the terms “key stakeholder,” “ambassador,” and “advocate” to describe alumni. One respondent referred to alumni as the “[university’s] largest constituent group,” while another called alumni an “extension of the [university] family.” Three respondents saw alumni as being “earned media” and the “embodiment” of everything the institution represents. Four other respondents called alumni “contributors,” highlighting the university’s dependence on the group to volunteer, mentor, donate, and support the institution. Two of the respondents also referred to alumni as influencers, citing their roles in university governance and their occasional involvement as full- or part-time faculty members.

Q3: Do you specialize messaging and / or communications to alumni? In what ways do you adjust messaging and / or communications?

There were varying interpretations of this question. Three respondents interpreted this question as the differentiation of communications to the

alumni population compared to other stakeholders, while the remaining eight interviewees understood this question to mean the personalization of alumni communications. When it comes to the former, the three respondents agreed that communications are “subtly tailored” for an alumni audience. Aside from choosing topics that would better resonate with alumni, communications are also created with the underlying assumption that the reader better understands and is “more interested” in the university.

The remaining eight respondents who interpreted the question differently agreed that alumni audiences are typically segmented by gender, interest, graduation year, and “level of activity.” Where there was disagreement was the customization of communications by channel. Of the eight, only three believed that communications are customized by channel depending on where the alumnus/alumna is located.

Q4: Do you reveal more to alumni than to other stakeholders? Why or why not?

Respondents were very much divided on this question. Eight of the 12 respondents felt the university does not reveal more to alumni, with the exception being alumni who serve as representatives on governing or advisory boards. Two interviewees argued that the university’s status as a public institution implies that they have to be “transparent” with everyone and not “withhold information or share more with one group over the other.” Three of the respondents felt that, while the institution does not intentionally reveal more to alumni versus other stakeholders, the alumni population’s shared memories of and experience at the institution gives them a “stronger appetite” for the “consumption” of university-related information.

The four people who felt that the institution reveals more to their alumni constituents offered different explanations as to why they felt this to be the case. Three of the respondents highlighted the university’s tendency to reach out to alumni for feedback on “challenges,” in addition to providing advance notice of certain events (such as new staffing hires). Alumni are, as one respondent put it, considered “an internal community, rather than an external one.” In another interviewee’s opinion, the reason why more information is not revealed to alumni on a more frequent basis is due to a fear of people “tun[ing] them out,” and not out of reluctance.

Q5: In your view, do alumni have a larger influence over institutional decision-making than other stakeholders? Why or why not?

While two respondents opted not to answer the question due to a lack of knowledge, the remaining interviewees responded in the affirmative, albeit with caveats. One respondent stated that alumni would only influence alumni-related initiatives. Another respondent said that the degree of alumni influence depends on the issue at stake. She provided the example of alumni having influence over academic-program design, as they were the ones who had previously been “touched” by the program. Six respondents said that alumni in senior governance positions, such as the board of governors, would have influence but that the common alumnus/alumna would not. In the same vein, one respondent wryly noted that alumni who donated money to the institution had more influence than those who did not. Finally, one interviewee was of the opinion that, while alumni did have more influence than a “general audience,” their influence would probably be on par with other important stakeholders, such as “major corporate donors, parents of students, local community members, and government.”

Q6: Has there ever been an instance when alumni feedback has influenced the institution’s actions? Please give one example.

As a follow-up to question five, respondents were asked to describe a time when alumni feedback influenced university actions or decisions. Three respondents specifically highlighted the alumni population’s influence over alumni-facing events. Three other respondents discussed how they sought alumni for feedback on their curriculum, departmental direction, and programs. Two respondents brought forth the example of how they sought out alumni opinion on marketing initiatives through the creation of focus groups. Two of the respondents observed that more opinion-solicitation surveys go out to alumni than to any other stakeholder group. Finally, one interviewee said that alumni do affect budget use in his department, as they often prioritize initiatives that affect alumni directly. Respondents also highlighted instances when unsolicited alumni feedback altered university decisions, such as the time when a department added a new element to their curriculum after receiving alumni criticism.

Q7: Is there something important that I forgot and / or is there anything else you think I should know about the institution's relationships and communications with its alumni?

This question gave respondents the opportunity to express anything that was not mentioned during the interview. While interviewees did not offer any additional information, responses to this question yielded insights into the university's stance regarding alumni. Specifically, several respondents used the analogy of family to discuss the alumni relationship. Particularly of note was one interviewee's observation that the alumni relationship is unique in that it is predicated on a "moment in time," and not as a result of an "opt in."

Content analysis

Of the 940 articles and posts analyzed, alumni-focused topics comprised more than half (62.4%, n=589) of the analyzed communications. Topics identified as being alumni-related include alumni profiles, alumni achievements, alumni-and-university co-created blog and Instagram content, alumni events, and direct messages to alumni. Direct messages to alumni made up 17.3% (n=163) of all communications, and the most well-liked social media posts featured recent campus events.

Close to one-third (71.17%, n=669) of the communications displayed partiality towards the institution, as ascertained by the tone and subject matter of the message and/or the use of affirmative adjectives and verbs by the university. Upon a further analysis of the 163 direct messages, the word, "thank you (n=40)" appeared the most often, followed by "gift (n=28)," "support (n=24)," and "students (n=16)." This is understandable given the fact that the majority of direct messages referenced alumni donations. Other words that were used more than five times reiterated feelings of community, achievement, and positivity. Table 3 displays the 11 most commonly used words.

Table 3

Words used more than five times in direct messages, n=163.

| | Count M | % |
|-----------------|---------|-------|
| Thank you | 40 | 24.54 |
| Gift | 28 | 17.18 |
| Support | 24 | 14.72 |
| Students | 16 | 9.82 |
| Awesome | 8 | 4.91 |
| Congratulations | 8 | 4.91 |
| Success | 8 | 4.91 |
| Welcome | 7 | 4.29 |
| Family | 6 | 3.68 |
| Generosity | 6 | 3.68 |
| Proud | 6 | 3.68 |

Note: Figures represented are mean scores.

Discussion

Specific conclusions were derived from the assembled data and then applied to the respective research questions. The data was also examined against the literature studied, and specific inferences were drawn from the university’s communications to and perception of its alumni population.

RQ1: How and to what extent does the university view and treat alumni differently than other external stakeholders?

There is no doubt that alumni occupy a very special place within the university’s growth and engagement strategy, with the group considered a key stakeholder by both university staff and alumni themselves. Connected by a mutual interest in the continued and growing success of the university, the university and its alumni constituents can best be described as being in a covenantal relationship where both parties have the opportunity to engage in “open exchanges” to reach “win-win” outcomes (Hung, 2008, p. 456). Within their organization-public relationship, the university appears to view its

alumni population as fulfilling a number of roles, including ambassador, advisor, contributor, and extended family to the university.

As people who have experienced the campus and academic programs first hand, alumni are seen as living proof of the university's educational quality and effectiveness. Wittingly or not, they become representatives upon their graduation from the university. As such, several university staff consider alumni essential to the development and maintenance of the university's reputation. Relationships with alumni are therefore nurtured from the perspective that these people are, or have the potential to become, the university's largest champions.

As alumni possess a deeper understanding of the university compared to other external stakeholders, university staff also make formal and informal advisory roles available to the constituents. Formally, alumni are given opportunities to express their advice and opinions at major decision-making tables and advisory boards. Alumni members involved in these groups naturally exert more influence over the university, and are entrusted with more information, than their colleagues. However, the general alumni population also possesses some informal influence over the university. In situations where the university does something that contradicts the constituents' collective memory or perception of their alma mater, alumni have been known to successfully advocate against and alter the course of the university's actions.

The university also sees alumni as being contributors to the university. As people who have had lengthy relationships with the university, the university often requests the constituents' support in various operational and promotional initiatives. Alumni are typically asked to participate in welcoming, mentoring, volunteering, and/or fundraising functions, with some specific alumni additionally called upon to contribute their expertise to relevant initiatives, issues, and events. When it comes to this aspect of the alumni-university relationship, one university staff member described the institution as being reliant on its alumni, introducing a power dynamic between the two parties that may not necessarily be present with other stakeholders.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what differentiates the alumni constituents from other stakeholders is the university's belief that they are extended family members. Not only does this put alumni in an interesting position relative to the university, but the designation also confers certain privileges and places certain expectations upon alumni. Alumni privileges can include specific benefits, a closer relationship to the institution, and facilitated access to the university through a larger array of communication channels and touchpoints. Additionally, they are also given the opportunity to access

privileged information and contribute to university decision-making, should they wish to pursue one of the designated seats available to them on advisory and governing boards. However, the alumni constituents' shared history with the university, unchanging status as alumni, and automatic enrollment into the alumni association following graduation does impose certain expectations on the group. Specifically, there is an assumption that these alumni will be pre-disposed to engage with and support the university in the years ahead, whether this turns out to be true or not.

RQ2: How and to what extent do university communications to alumni differ from communications to other external stakeholders?

The university's shared history with its alumni constituents does influence its communications to them. Specifically, the university differentiates its communications to alumni from the perspective of media, content, and approach. When it comes to media, alumni have several dedicated communication channels, including a website, magazines (published centrally by the university's alumni advancement office and departmentally by some individual faculties), and three social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). The social media platforms particularly help facilitate two-way, symmetrical communications between the alumni constituents and the university, allowing both parties the opportunity to reach each other freely and instantaneously. In fact, the university actively seeks the opinions of their alumni constituents, using social media to pose questions to and interact with alumni.

The university also designs content to alumni with an underlying assumption that the audience consuming the information has a higher baseline of understanding regarding the university as well as a continuing propensity and interest in consuming institution-related information. To illustrate this point: the university announced its intention to become a smoke- and tobacco-free campus in 2018 on its alumni Facebook page, eliciting a record number of likes from alumni users upon the post's release.

While it has already been established from the content analysis that over half (62.4%) of the university's communications in 2017 were geared specifically towards an alumni audience, alumni were also taken into consideration in posts that seemingly had little to do with them. This sentiment was made apparent through the university's choice of words and images. Specifically, the large majority of messages were positive in tone and crafted to invoke feelings of nostalgia, unity, and pride. For example, campus-related posts includ-

ed photos of popular student haunts in and around the university, incoming students were referred to as joining the “university family,” and news of staff, faculty, student, and/or university-wide achievements were often described as being “leading,” “cutting edge,” or “awesome.”

What particularly differentiates the university’s communications to alumni from its work with other stakeholders is the trust that the university displays towards the group. The university has used its alumni constituents as a sounding board in the past, turning to alumni for informal and formal feedback on issues, events, initiatives, and programs. Additionally, similar to how one would inform their family and/or supporters of news first, there have been instances in which the university has let alumni know of their triumphs, decisions, and/or developments prior to official press releases. Finally, by inviting its alumni constituents to participate in content co-creation, as seen through some alumni-authored blog and alumni-taken Instagram posts, the university further demonstrates that it treats communications to alumni differently than other stakeholders.

RQ3: How and to what extent do university communications affect alumni relationships?

Scholars have long posited that two-way, symmetrical communications help organizations maintain and improve relational outcomes, such as control mutuality, within their stakeholder relationships (Bowen & Sisson, 2015; Sisson, 2017). In the case of the university, the institution does appear to be effective at using communications to maintain its relationships with the majority of its alumni. However, the university does not seem to be successful at using these communications to convert positive sentiment into tangible action, thereby creating alumni relationships that are quite passive in nature.

Alumni see themselves as being important stakeholders of the university and claim to be invested in university outcomes, yet approximately half of the alumni who responded to the survey have never donated to the university. An even larger number of alumni respondents (approximately three-quarters) have never volunteered at the institution. While low volunteering turnouts could be explained by a lack of relevant opportunities (as only 14% of alumni recall seeing any volunteer-related communications), donations are perceived by alumni to be the most communicated-about topic. Additionally, a little over half of the alumni surveyed saw themselves as only being slightly engaged with the university. Thus, there is an obvious gap between emotional senti-

ment and action.

This rift can perhaps be attributed to the university's communication style. Some alumni respondents criticized the university's communications as being frequent but not very meaningful. Specifically, these alumni felt communications were generic and did not fully address their needs and/or consider their situations. Alumni also wrote of wanting more information as to how their actions affect the institution, a request that suggests a misalignment in how they view their roles compared to staff. While university staff have referred to alumni as ambassadors whom they rely on for reputation, contribution, and support, the alumni population does not appear to have the same understanding. In fact, only two-fifths of the alumni surveyed felt the institution would be receptive to their opinions and close-to-half believe they have very little influence on the university's decisions or actions. These results do have certain implications on the relationships that the university has with alumni, particularly when the relational outcome of control mutuality is taken into consideration.

Control mutuality requires each party to have a certain amount of influence over the other (Gallicano & Heisler, 2011; Palenchar & Heath, 2006). Despite the university's attempts to practice two-way, symmetrical communications with its alumni, the constituents' desire for more impact-related information suggests current communications have not shown alumni where their power rests. As such, one of the possible reasons why alumni are not engaged could be because they doubt their ability to change anything within the university. Additionally, Hung (2008) posited that control mutuality is dependent on parties believing that one is not trying to capitalize on the other. As most alumni have felt that donations requests (of which they see no visible impact) dominate the university's communications to them, they may in fact see their relationship with the institution as being unbalanced, uncaring, and perhaps even exploitive.

One of the ways in which the university can improve their alumni relationships is to promote a feeling of control mutuality in their communications. By acceding to alumni requests for more relevant, impactful content and by giving the constituent a chance to participate in the design and frequency of disseminated communications, staff may be able to increase alumni involvement and satisfaction with the university.

Conclusions

What can reasonably be concluded from the study is that alumni are viewed as stakeholders who are both internal and external to the university. While no longer physically on campus, they are considered by institutional staff to be “extended family” with privileges and expectations assigned to them as befitting their status. As products of the university, they have naturally established relationships with the institution and, whether they realize it or not, opportunities to influence the institution in a number of ways, including at the highest levels of governance. With this access, however, comes an assumption that alumni are more inclined to engage with, support, and/or receive communications from the university.

In keeping with their status as hybrid internal/external stakeholders, communications are tailored in several ways. While the general alumni populace does not receive more information than other stakeholder groups, the constituent is often addressed in a more familiar tone and manner than its counterparts. Through the utilization of images and phrases designed to evoke shared memories, the highlighting of individual and institution-wide achievements, and the references to “family,” the university attempts to use communications to instill a sense of unity and pride within its alumni constituents in ways that cannot be mimicked with other stakeholders.

Through the various social media platforms and feedback mechanisms available to them, alumni are also invited to practice two-way, symmetrical communications with the university and to participate in content co-creation. While most alumni do not take advantage of these opportunities, choosing instead to be passive in both their consumption of information and their relationship, this does signal a willingness by the university to engage in conversations.

The institution’s approach to alumni communications therefore incorporates aspects of internal communications and public relations. By communicating to alumni as if they are a part of a larger family unit, the university aims to build stronger relationships (Ströh, 2008), create ambassadors (Kim & Ni, 2013; Sriramesh, Rhee, & Sung, 2013), and cultivate continued loyalty and satisfaction in the institution (Berger, 2008; Hon, 2008; Kim & Ni, 2013). Yet the distance alumni have from the university, be it measured in years or physical proximity, does cause the constituent body to be occasionally treated as external stakeholders as well. Specifically, there are instances in which the institution attempts to use communications to influence alumni perceptions for reputational purposes (Adler & Kranowitz, 2005; Coombs, 2015).

In conclusion, the university's treatment of and communications to alumni does appear to support the possibility of a stakeholder-communication continuum.

Limitations and areas of future study

When evaluating the results of this study, three limitations need to be taken into consideration. The first concerns the number of survey and interview respondents. In both cases, respondents represent less than 1% of all university alumni and staff. Thus, their opinions may not be characteristic of the larger alumni and administrative body. The second concerns the interpretation of questions, as respondents could have understood words and phrases differently. The third relates to the possibility of human error in the content analysis, particularly given the high volume (940) of items analyzed.

Despite these limitations, however, this paper does provide some preliminary insights into the concept of a hybrid internal-and-external designation as well as the possibility of a stakeholder-communication continuum. It would be beneficial if others could build upon this theory through further research and testing. Specifically, the researcher would suggest that the theory be tested on other sectors and industries, particularly the private sector, where there appear to be fewer restrictions on information sharing.

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