

Public relations behavior of public and private sector organizations in Pakistan: An exploration of Grunig and Hunt's models

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Abstract

The existing conditions of PR field in Pakistan are analyzed in this qualitative study by investigating the consumption of four PR models (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical) proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Twenty public relations practitioners heading PR departments in various public and private sector organizations were purposely online-interviewed by the researcher. The participants of this qualitative study are particularly chosen from organizations working in education, telecommunication, health, tourism, rehabilitation & reconstruction, hoteling, national security and development fields. The results of this study signified the consumption of all the four models by the Pakistani PR practitioners with varying tendencies. This study concluded that the employment of one-way models (press agency and public information) is dominant among Pakistani PR practitioners as compared to two-way models (two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical).

Keywords: Public Relations, Grunig & Hunt models, PR education

Introduction

The development in the public relations sector is seen as an opportunity in this media clutter era to counter vibrant global changes.¹ With the invasion of cross-media culture in Pakistan, the practices of public relations need a one-eighty-degree turn rather using old methods. Especially in the present scenario of terrorism, uncertainty and lack of mutual trust between governmental organizations, it has become imperative to practice modern techniques of public relations to counter new emerging problems and challenges. The adoption of public relations as a social institution is a very important concern in a democracy like

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Pakistan so that we would be able to build our own theory base in this field.²

Usage of public relations models is an area less explored in Pakistan and less research work is available in this area. Lin (2007) conceives PR models as theoretical rudiments that reflect the direction and intensity of professional public relations practice in various organizations.³ Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models are well established theoretical perspectives and are widely applied by researchers to explore the land scape of public relations in different nations and cultures.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13}

Press agency is the primary model of public relations. The practice of this model can be historical tracked during the period of middle decades of nineteen century. Communications based on propaganda are the genesis of this model. The communication linearity of this model is based on one-way dissemination of unauthentic, non-accurate and non-credible information towards publics to gain media notice and public attention. This model uses persuasive communication techniques to create effects on public understandings and to impact the attitudes and behaviors of the public.¹⁴

Public information model is the second model in the excellence theory. The practice of this model can be historically traced during industrialization phase of the twentieth century. This model was adopted by organizations as an outcome of the industrialization process to counter rigorous image attacks from media industry.¹⁵ The communication process of this model involves in dissemination of positive and credible and favorable but accurate information on linear scales to highlight organizational image and philosophy in public circles.

Based on their communication process, press agency and public information models are considered as one-way models. Both models lack proper feedback mechanism.¹⁶ The communications originated by employing these models are prepared and packaged without conducting any formal research on public attitudes and behaviors exploring their communication needs. These models are labelled as 'craft public relations' in the excellence theory.¹⁷

The excellence theory describes "two-way asymmetrical model" as the third model of public relations. Public relations practices during the first quarter of the twentieth century (World War I period) gave recognition to this model. The communication circle of this model is based on persuasion model i.e. influencing public attitudes and behaviors as the organization want to persuade these. To understand the public pulse, conducting attitudinal and behavioral research is an important

component of this model (Grunig and Grunig, 1995; Grunig et al, 2002). Petersone (2004) examined that practitioners employing “two-way asymmetrical model” were involved in conducting formal research to better understand public’s attitudes and behaviors and to better influence public opinion to create consistency between public expectations and organizational objectives (p.18).

The excellence theory identified “two-way symmetrical model” as the fourth model of professional practice in public relations. As per Grunig and Grunig (1995) conceptions, the urge of practicing excellent public relations by organizations is the reason behind practicing two-way symmetrical model (Petersone, 2004, p. 18). This model adopts a dialogic communication route based on proper research infrastructure and tries to adjust controversial issues having social significance with the public. The ethical authenticity of this models is recognized by Grunig and Grunig (1995) as being the most professional and ethical model among all. The open ethical communication parameters of this model allow the practitioners to negotiate with their publics using various communication forums to resolve public policy issues. Adoption of a dialogic route to adjust or change organizational practices as per public interest is the most dominant feature of this model.¹⁸

Both symmetrical models (Two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical) are considered as fittest to satisfy symmetrical communication purposes due to their research-oriented applications. Both models monitor organization’s environment and assess operations and impact of communication programs. Grunig and Grunig (1995) considered the application of these models as ‘professional public relations’.

Symmetrical models offer their practitioners to perform similar role and obligations but involves in different objective requirements. Asymmetrical communications are based on securing goals related with atmospheric dominations of organizational image while symmetrical communications are concerned with cooperative measures.¹⁹

This paper explores the status of public relations in Pakistan and determines that whether and to what extent public relations practitioners in Pakistan adopt Grunig and Hunt’s four models. The paper also focuses on differential uses of public relations models in public and private sectors.

This study is a pioneer study in the field of public relations in Pakistan. This paper provides the academicians as well as the professionals with a practical insight into the usage of public relations models and also gives an in-depth understanding about different PR

activities being carried out in public and private sectors. Further, it serves as basis for future research on the particular aspect of PR model usages in the field of public relations in Pakistan.

Research questions

Q1: What models of public relations are being practiced in Pakistan?

Q2: What are the differential usage of public relations models in public and private sectors in Pakistan?

Methods

The online survey interviews were conducted to explore the status of Public Relations in Pakistan and to determine that whether and to what extent public relations practitioners in Pakistan adopt Grunig and Hunt's four models. Twenty purposively selected public relations practitioners were interviewed to know differential uses of Public Relations models in public and private sectors and to look at the roles and duties mostly performed by the public relations practitioners in Pakistan in public and private sectors.

By using an open-ended structured questionnaire, the understanding of the practitioners were probed regarding the evaluation of PR Programs, use of research in PR, reasons for launching PR programs, methods to respond public opinion, PR programs purposes and how do they conduct PR activity in general. The answers of the practitioners related to these quires contributed to understand the adaptation of Grunig and Hunt's public relations four models and the variations in the model usage in public and private sectors in Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

Profiles of the practitioners

The names of the practitioners interviewed, and their organizations names are not disclosed in this study as per practitioners' own limitations regarding organizational prestige. The respondents are represented with Capital English Alphabets. The ten public sector respondents are represented with A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J. The ten private sector participants are represented with K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S and T. In this study the researcher purposely selected only those practitioners which were heading PR department or PR setup in various public and private sector organizations with different nomenclature and designations.

Out of twenty respondents, six are females and fourteen are males. This gender distribution is similar in public and private sectors with three

females and seven males. In public sector female respondents are A, B and G, and male respondents are C, D, E, F, H, I and J. In private sector female respondents are K, S and T and male respondents are L, M, N, O, P, Q and R.

Out of twenty respondents, eleven respondents are working as part of the middle management. Two practitioners are working on senior management positions and seven respondents are junior level practitioners in the hierarchy of management within their organizations. In public sector seven respondents (A, B, C, D, E, H and J) are part of the middle level management, two are senior executives (G and I) and only one respondent (F) is a junior practitioner. In private sector six respondents (K, L, M, N, Q and S) are attached with junior executive positions as practitioners, and four (O, P, R and T) are middle level managers.

Eleven participants of this study claim that they have 1-5 years' work experience in the public relations field. Four practitioners say that they have 6-10 years' work experience in Pakistani public relations industry. Two practitioners say that they have been working in this field for the last 11-15 years. One practitioner tells that she has 16-20 years' work experience and two respondents tell that they have 21-25 years of experience. Four public sector respondents (A, B, C and F) claim 1-5 years' work experience, three (D, H and J) claim 6-10 years' work experience, one respondent (G) claim 11-15 years' work experience and two (E and I) claim 21-25 years' work experience. Seven practitioners (K, L, M, N, P, R and S) working in private sector organizations share that they have spent 1-5 years in PR industry, one respondent (Q) says that he has spent 6-10 years, one respondent (O) said that he has 11-15 years' experience and one respondent (T) told that he has 16-20 years' work experience in this field.

Out of twenty respondents of this study three possess M.Phil. degree in journalism and mass communication, six respondents possess Master degree in journalism and mass communication, eight respondents have Master degree in disciplines other than journalism, mass communication or public relations and three respondents have bachelor degree in management sciences discipline.

Out of ten public sector respondents, three (C, D and G) possess M.Phil. degree in journalism and mass communication; three (B, F and I) have Master degree in journalism and mass communication and four (A, B, E and J) have Master degree in other social sciences disciplines. Out of ten private sector practitioners, three (L, M and N) possess master degree in mass communication, three (Q, R and T) possess master degree

in management sciences, one (K) possesses master degree in anthropology and three (O, P and S) have bachelor degree in management sciences.

General practices of public relations

What does public relations activity mean in your organization?

The fundamental reason behind asking this question was to explore and analyze that how public relations practitioners in Pakistan give preference to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four PR models while conducting general public relations activities in different public and private sector organizations. Another reason behind this question was to analyze the practical understanding and concepts of the practitioners about public relations vis-à-vis their organizations in terms of PR models usage.

Out of twenty respondents, the organizational PR definitions given by twelve practitioners explored that they were using public information model more frequently. The organizational PR definition provided by six practitioners showed that press agency model was their most frequent choice while generating public relations efforts. The organizational PR concept of one practitioner was closer to the practice of two-way asymmetrical model and similarly the organizational PR understanding of only one practitioner was match able with the practice of two-way symmetrical model.

The organizational PR practice as described by practitioners C, D, E, G, H, I, J, N, O, Q, R and T explored their reliance more on public information model. Respondent I described PR activities in his organization as to project the company in a positive, true and credible manner by highlighting their achievements and to avoid negative coverage.

Respondent N said, "Public relations department in my organization is responsible for co-ordination with all the stake holders by providing them with true in time information and ensuring smooth optimistic flow of information. To establish cordial relations with the media is also our responsibility so that negative coverage can be minimized and positive coverage can be highlighted in a credible and prestigious style".

Six practitioners (A, B, F, K, L and M) were seemed to conduct PR activities in their organization according to the principle of press agency model. According to Respondent A "public relations activity in our organization means to focus on publicity and try to get media attention in every possible manner". Similarly, respondent 'B' said,

“We create closer liaison with the media and focus on event management. To generate publicity by sending and publishing news releases, op-ed page pieces and articles is also our responsibility. Second most important component is the communication with internal publics through our own in house publications”.

Respondent ‘K’ said, “In my organization PR activity means to raise awareness in the society by highlighting our cause in the media for general public notice”.

Respondent ‘L’ said, “Since my organization is health care services provider and it runs on donations, therefore, the major role of public relations is to project its services in the media by every possible way for building its image in the masses and particularly within donors community”.

Respondent ‘M’ says that through public relations my department promotes the organization in the media by placing news releases, feature stories and interviews of the top management.

One practitioner (P) describes public relations activity in his organization in a way closer to the practice of two-way asymmetrical model of public relations. Respondent ‘P’ says that our focus is on creating such messages which can affect publics trends in a way we want to formulate, intensify or change these. We try to produce positive public attitudes and behaviors toward our company products.

Only one practitioner’s definition (S) was applicable on the practice of two-way symmetrical model of public relations. Respondent ‘S’ said, “PR is an essential ingredient in our recipe of an effective and successful internal and external communication initiative. We look closely with our agency to integrate our core communication values and thus are able to mitigate PR challenges progressively. We respect the media and all its forms and commitments and try our best to create a positive win-win approach so that together we can meet our respective organizational objectives. This all we do through interactive dialogues with important publics negotiating issues and analyzing organizational practices”.

Reasons for launching PR programs

Why do you start a PR program?

The needs, requirements and challenges calling for starting a consolidated PR program also determine the opportunity to adopt a particular PR model or models. Multidimensional organizational public relations needs and challenges require the practitioner to use a PR model by assessing the availability of infrastructure and skills for applying a

particular PR model or a combination of PR models. Secondly it is also important that how public relations practitioners assess and prioritize their organizational needs and challenges for starting a consolidated public relations effort. This question was asked to explore that how public relations practitioners decide on the use of models as per their organizational prioritized public relations requirements.

Out of twenty respondents, five respondents (A, B, K, L and M) said that they liked to practice proactive public relations and whenever they discovered an opening to generate publicity, they immediately started their efforts to publicize an event or effort. Thus their reasons for starting a PR program gave explanation for the use of press agency model of public relations.

Seven respondents (G, J, N, O, Q, R and T) said that whenever they observed a chance to issue positive and accurate information in the media for public consumption, they put a PR effort to secure it. The basis to initiate a PR program as provided by these seven practitioners showed that they preferred to apply public information model.

Five respondents (C, E, F, H and I) were of the view that they started a PR program due to two reasons. Firstly, when they found an opportunity to place positive and accurate information in the media to secure good image and secondly, when they came across an option to publicize an event. This reply showed that they used two models as per the requirement. Firstly, they preferred public information model and secondly, they applied press agency model when appropriate.

The reasons explained by two respondents (D and S) for starting a PR program explored the use of two-way symmetrical model. Respondent 'S' says that the public relations department is the face and voice of the company in front of standard publics and especially the media publics. It is how we interact with them to avoid low level of understanding. We think that image building is related to how our publics do understand our organization. And whenever we find low level of understanding within our publics circles, we immediately address them by launching a PR program. Similarly respondent 'D' says that public understanding about controversial issues is our basic concern. We launch a PR program when we unearth negative or low public understanding on issues necessary for our organizational image and survival.

The reason given by only one respondent 'P' confirmed the adaptation of two-way asymmetrical model. According to respondent 'P', "we are much concerned with the public attitudes and behaviors and for assessing public attitudes and behaviors we continuously use

research tool. When our research statistics illustrate more negative attitudes and behaviors we start a PR program to change the negative attitudes and behaviors of the publics”.

PR programs purposes

What is the basic purpose of your PR programs/campaigns?

The PR program purposes are relevant and compatible with the model use. The PR model usage can also be determined within an organization by analyzing the purposes of its PR programs/campaigns formulated by the practitioner.

The basic purpose of PR programs told by eleven respondents (C, E, G, H, I, J, N, O, P, R and T) was relevant and compatible with the practice of public information model. PR program purposes as described by six respondents (A, B, F, K, L and M) were pertinent to the application of press agency model. PR programs objectives as explained by three respondents (D, Q and S) were related to the function of two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Eleven respondents (C, E, G, H, I, J, N, O, P, R and T) told that the basic purpose of PR programs was to portray positive image by disseminating positive and accurate information on a one way track and we never volunteered for negative and unfavorable information. This reply showed that they were more likely to use public information model. Six respondents (A, B, F, K, L and M) elaborated that the basic purpose of their PR programs was to create newsworthy stories for media attention and public notice. This answer mentioned their inclination towards press agency model.

Three respondents (D, Q and S) said that the basic purpose of their PR programs was to understand public desires by applying in-depth PR research methods and to start a research oriented dialogue between our management and publics so that our management and standard publics could adjust/negotiate controversial issues. This respond indicated their practice of two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Use of research in PR

How do you start a PR program? Do you conduct research before starting a PR program?

Application of formal research determined the symmetrical nature of PR programs. PR programs that lack formal research tool exhibit a non-symmetrical nature. In other words symmetrical public relations mean

the use of symmetrical models i.e. two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models of public relations. While non-symmetrical public relations mean use of nonsymmetrical models of public relations i.e. press agency and public information.

Out of twenty, fifteen respondents (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, O and T) claim that they do not conduct any formal research before launching a PR program. This means that they are using non-symmetrical models of public relations i.e. either press agency or public information model.

Five respondents (I, P, Q, R and S) agree that they use formal research methods before initiating PR programs. This shows that they are using symmetrical models of public relations i.e. two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical model.

Out of these five respondents, three respondents (J, P and Q) were of the view that before starting a PR program they conducted in-depth attitude research to understand publics attitudes and behaviors towards their organization and then they found out to how these attitudes and behaviors could be addressed. This answer further clarifies that they are using two-way asymmetrical model of public relations.

Out of these five respondents, two respondents (R and S) said that they did conduct research before launching a PR campaign because they had to study attitudinal/behavioral survey so that they could formulate their policies in a way acceptable for their publics. This reply shows that they are benefiting from two-way symmetrical model.

Evaluation of PR Programs

How do you evaluate the effectiveness/success rate of your PR programs/campaigns?

Evaluation criteria applied at the end of a PR program also explain the use of specific PR model or models. PR departments that apply scientific research based evaluation criteria for their PR program conduct PR activities on symmetrical scales. PR departments that lack statistical research oriented evaluation procedure work on non-symmetrical scales. Similar results were obtained against this question as in the earlier question. Out of twenty respondents, fifteen (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, M, N, O and T) told that they did not conduct evaluation research at the end of a PR program. They explained that they used informal methods of evaluation e.g. by counting attendance figures in a function, by calculating the amount of generated publicity and by news clippings and published materials records. Their explanation confirmed that they mostly used press agency and public information models.

Five respondents (I, P, Q, R and S) agree that they conduct formal evaluation research at the end of PR programs. This response shows that they are using symmetrical models of public relations i.e. two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical model.

Further when they were asked the way of conducting evaluation research, out of these five respondents, three respondents (J, P and Q) shared that they evaluated impact objectives i.e. to evaluate the level of change in attitudes and behaviors. This was what practiced in two-way asymmetrical model.

Out of these five, two respondents (R and S) further shared that they calculated the level of raised understanding between their organization and publics and in other words they preferred two-way symmetrical model.

Methods to Respond Public Opinion

How does your department respond to public opinion?

Public Relations model usage by organization can also be viewed by analyzing the methods they adopt to respond to public opinion. Observing methods to respond to public opinion as described by the practitioners it was explored that eleven organization were seemed to practice public information model, five organizations were involved in practicing press agency model, three organizations were using two-way symmetrical model and only one organization was opting for two-way asymmetrical model.

Eleven respondents (C, E, F, G, H, I, J, N, O, Q and T) were of view that they approached public opinion by placing positive, credible and accurate information in the media. This showed their reliance on public information model.

Five respondents (A, B, K, L and M) accepted that they manipulated public opinion by exposing excessive newsworthy and beneficial information in the media. This confirmed their dependence on press agency model.

Three respondents (D, S and R) said that they preferred public desire and tried to shift, change and adjust their policies as per public demand. This tendency showed the use of two-way symmetrical model. Only one participant (P) was of the view that he used to go for changing negative public opinion by changing negative attitudes and conserving positive behaviors in the selected market of their consumers. In other words, participant 'P' was applying two-way asymmetrical model.

Q1: What models of public relations are being practiced in Pakistan?

The results of this study confirm the use of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models (Press agency, Public information, Two-way asymmetrical and Two-way symmetrical) by Pakistani public relations practitioners with varying intensity and proportion.

Out of these four American oriented PR models, Public information model is most frequently adopted model among Pakistani practitioners working in both public and private sectors. Analyzed responses of ten practitioners (C, E, G, H, I, J, N, O, Q & T) pointed out the use of public information model in their PR departments.

Press agency is the model appeared to be the second most preferred choice of Pakistani PR practitioners. Six practitioners (A, B, F, K, and L & M) were practicing this model to run PR business in their organizations.

Responses gathered from three practitioners (D, R & S) spell out the use of "two-way symmetrical model" of public relations in their organizations.

Two-way asymmetrical model was least practiced in public relations industry in Pakistan as it was reflected by the responses of the twenty public relations practitioners that they were providing least priority to this model while choosing their public relations options. The practitioner "P" conformed the employment of this model in his public relations programs. The results indicated that the usage of one-way models (Press agency, Public information) of public relations was dominant and more frequent in public relations industry of Pakistan. The symmetrical models (Two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical) were less practiced by practitioners in Pakistan. Thus, it can be established that Pakistani PR industry is operating more on non-symmetrical purposes than symmetrical purposes. Interestingly, it can also be determined that dialogic communication process is more practiced in Pakistani PR sector as compared to persuasive public relations strategy. The results indicated the usage of dialogue by three practitioners to adjust their organizational practices with the public but only one practitioners agreed that he was using persuasive communication to influence public attitudes and behaviors as per his organizational objectives.

Q2: What are the differential usage of public relations models in public and private sectors in Pakistan?

Practitioners were purposely interviewed by the researchers taking ten from public and ten from private sectors to generate comparative understanding of public relations phenomenon in Pakistan. The gathered responses from public sector confirmed the application of three models of PR. The frequently adopted PR models in public sector included “press agency, public information and two-way symmetrical”. The public-sector practitioners did not confirm any adoption of “two-way asymmetrical model”. Contrary to this, the collected responses from private sector professionals confirmed the usage and application of all four models of the excellence theory.

As per results of this study, the mostly used model in both sector is “public information model. The usage patterns of this model were 60% in public sector and 40% in private sector. Six practitioners (C, E, G, H, I & J) from public sector and four practitioners (N, O, Q & T) from private sector confirmed the application of this model while disseminating their program efforts.

Then, the practitioners were employing press agency model as their second most choice in both sectors collectively. The adoption of this model was 30% in public sector and similar 30% in private sector. Thus, Employment percentage of public information model was more among public sector practitioners than private sector practitioners. Six out of ten practitioners in public sector were benefiting from public information model and four out of ten practitioners were employing this model in private organizations. The results showed an equal share of press agency model practice in both sectors.

Within symmetrical models, the practice of two-way symmetrical model was more dominant and frequent in private sector organizations. twenty percent of the practitioners were employing this model in private sector while only 10% of the practitioners were adopting this model in public sector organizations. Similarly, the two-way asymmetrical model holds a share of 10% in private sector only.

Lin (2007) produced similar kind of results while exploring these four models for practitioners within basketball league in Taiwan. Alanazi, A. (1993) concluded that all four roles of public relation were practiced in public relations industry in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the press agency model was preferred most.²⁰ Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh (2005) also explored similar usage patterns of these models in Singapore. The results of this paper are comparable with excellence

theory assumptions. The excellence theory assumptions are supported by these results and it proved that excellence theory assumptions are equally applicable in public relations industry in Pakistan. ²¹

Conclusion

The results of the study throw light on the growing nature of PR industry in a developing country like Pakistan. The results of the study confirm that western PR trends are prominent in Pakistani PR sector with regard to the application of PR models and all the four models are being consumed and benefited by Pakistani PR professionals. The study divulges that the utilization of one-way models (Press agency and Public information) is more dominant and prominent than the employment of two-way models (Two-way asymmetrical and Two-way symmetrical) in Pakistani PR practice. The causes behind this excessive use of one-way models of public relations are provision of less financial resources to the PR department by their top management, lack of research infrastructure, ignorance about the use of formal research in PR strategy formulation, deficiency in powers regarding allocation of PR budget and less opportunities of professional education in PR field.

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