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MASS MEDIA RESEARCH

An Introduction

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CHAPTER 16

RESEARCH IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Much like advertising, public relations has become more research-oriented. As a leading text points out (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997, p. 107):

> Research is a vital function in the process of public relations. It provides the initial information necessary to plan public relations action and to evaluate its effectiveness. Management demands hard facts, not intuition or guesswork.

Moreover, the downturn in the U.S. economy in the beginning of the 2000s prompted a new era of accountability in public relations that will make research much more important.

Traditional research techniques are widely used in the field, with qualitative methods more widespread than quantitative. Pompper (2006) conducted a census of all research published in two scholarly public relations journals from 1975 to 2005. She found that approximately 58% of the studies used qualitative research, 37% used quantitative research, and the remainder used mixed methods. The most popular qualitative method was intensive interviewing; the most used quantitative method was the survey, followed by content analysis.

TYPES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH

Pavlik (1987) defined three major types of public relations research: applied, basic, and introspective. **Applied research** examines specific practical issues; in many instances, it is conducted to solve a specific problem. A branch of applied research, **strategic research**, is used to develop public relations campaigns and programs. According to Broom and Dozier (1990), strategic research is "deciding where you want to be in the future . . . and how to get there." A second branch, **evaluation research**, is conducted to assess the effectiveness of a public relations program and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. A content analysis by Jelen (2008) found that about 80% of all published public relations research in the last two decades was applied research and 20% was basic research.

Basic research in public relations creates knowledge that cuts across public relations situations. It is most interested in examining the underlying processes and in constructing theories that explain the public relations process. For example, Woodward (2000) offered a theoretical model based on transactional philosophy that could be used in public relations operations, and Aldoury and Toth (2002) presented the beginnings of a theory that could explain the gender discrepancies in the field.

The third major type of public relations research is **introspective research**, which examines the field of public relations. Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) categorized more than 700 abstracts and articles published in public relations academic journal and found that nearly 40% fell into the introspective category. Moss, Warnaby, and Newman (2000) surveyed public relations professionals across a number of specialty areas to determine how practitioners were involved in strategic management. Wrigley (2002) examined how women felt about the perceived "glass ceiling" in the profession. Edwards (2008) surveyed public relations professionals to determine their cultural capital, that is, the knowledge, experience, and/or connections people have that make it possible for them to be successful.

RESEARCH IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROCESS

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RESEARCH IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROCESS

Perhaps a more helpful way to organize public relations research is to examine the various ways research is used in the public relations process. A leading public relations textbook (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006) presents a four-step model of the public relations process:

1. Defining public relations problems
2. Planning public relations programs
3. Implementing public relations programs through actions and communications
4. Evaluating the program

The rest of this chapter uses this model to organize the various forms of public relations research.

Defining Public Relations Problems

The first phase in the process consists of gathering information that helps define and anticipate possible public relations problems. Several techniques are useful at this stage: environmental monitoring (also called boundary scanning), public relations audits, communications audits, and social audits.

Environmental Monitoring Programs. Researchers use environmental monitoring programs to observe trends in public opinion and social events that may have a significant impact on an organization. Grunig (2006) argues that environmental monitoring should be integrated into a company's strategic management function. Generally, two phases are involved. The early warning phase, an attempt to identify emerging issues, often takes the form of a systematic content analysis of publications likely to signal new developments. For example, one corporation may conduct a content analysis of scholarly journals in the fields of economics, politics, and science; another company may sponsor a continuing analysis of trade and general newspapers. Gregory (2001) presents a typology of monitoring that divides the environment into four sectors: political, economic, social, and lifestyles. Gronstedt (1997) describes the SWOT technique of analyzing a company's *strengths* and *weaknesses* in meeting the *opportunities* and *threats* in the external environment. An alternative method is to perform panel studies of community leaders or other influential and knowledgeable citizens. These people are surveyed regularly about the ideas they perceive to be important, and the interviews are analyzed to identify new topics of interest. Grunig (2008) lists several strategies for environmental monitoring including monitoring discussion groups, chat rooms, and blogs. Whether these techniques are used may depend on several factors. Okura, Dozier, Sha, and Hofstetter (2009) found that the use of formal environmental scanning methods was dependent on environmental conditions and also on the internal characteristics of the organization.

Brody and Stone (1989) list other forms of monitoring. One technique is to have the monitors look for a **trigger event**, which is an event or activity that might focus public concern on a topic or issue. For example, the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill in Alaska brought heavy visibility to environmental concerns, and the Columbine High School tragedy sparked interest in school safety and teenage alienation. However, there is no scientific way to determine what is or what may become a trigger event. Monitors are left to trust their instincts and judgment.

The technique of precursor analysis is similar to trigger events analysis. **Precursor analysis** assumes that leaders establish trends that ultimately trickle down to the rest of society. For example, Japanese businesses tend to lead in innovative management techniques, many of which have caught on in the United States. At home, California tends to be a leader in insurance concerns and Florida in health issues. Monitors are instructed to pay particular attention to developments in these states.

The second phase of environmental monitoring consists of tracking public opinion on major issues. Typically, this involves either a longitudinal panel study, in which the same respondents are interviewed several times during a specified interval, or a cross-sectional opinion poll, in which a random sample is surveyed only once. AT&T, General Electric, General Motors, and the Dow Chemical Company have conducted elaborate tracking studies. The Insurance Research Council conducts a program called the Public Attitude Monitoring Series. This continuing nationwide study examines enduring consumer attitudes that affect the insurance industry. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America conducts a tracking study using annual surveys of about 7,000 teens.

An **omnibus survey** is a regularly scheduled personal interview, with questions provided by various clients. Survey questions might ask about a variety of topics, ranging from political opinions to basic market research information. For example, the Opinion Research Corporation sponsors CARAVAN, a twice-weekly national telephone omnibus consumer survey of public opinion. Public relations professionals who specialize in political campaigns make extensive use of public opinion surveys. Some of the polling techniques used include the following:

- *Baseline polling*—an analysis of the current trends in public opinion in a given state or community that could be helpful for a candidate.
- *Threshold polling*—surveys that attempt to assess public approval of changes in services, taxation, fees, and so on. Such a poll can be used to establish positions on various issues.
- *Tracking polls*—polls that take place after a baseline poll and that are used to look at trends over time.

Online databases have made monitoring studies more efficient. Moreover, several commercial firms provide Internet monitoring services. CyberAlert, for example, tracks publicity about a company or product on thousands of news and information sites, discussion groups, and other areas of the web. Pollingreport.com contains a large database of public opinion polls on topics ranging from politics to the economy.

Public Relations Audits. The public relations audit, as the name suggests, is a comprehensive study of the public relations position of an organization. Such studies are used to measure a company's standing both internally (employee perceptions) and externally (opinions of customers, stockholders, community leaders, and so on). In short, as summarized by Simon (1986, p. 150), the public relations audit is a "research tool used specifically to describe, measure, and assess an organization's public relations activities and to provide guidelines for future public relations programming."

The first step in a public relations audit is to list the segments of both internal and external groups that are most important to the organization. This phase has also been called *identifying the key stakeholders in the organization*. These might include customers, employees, investors, regulators, and the public. This stakeholder analysis is usually conducted via personal interviews with key management in each department and by a content analysis of the company's external communications. The second step is to determine how the organization is viewed by each of these audiences. This involves conducting a corporate image study—that is, a survey of audience members. The questions are designed to measure familiarity with the organization (Can the respondents recognize the company logo? Identify a product it manufactures? Remember the president's name?) as well as attitudes and perceptions toward it.

Figure 16.1 A Semantic Differential Scale for Eliciting Perceptions of Electric Companies

The Ideal Electric Company

good	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	bad
unconcerned	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	concerned
responsive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	unresponsive
cold	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	warm
big	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	small

Figure 16.2 Profiles of Ideal ("Os") and Actual ("Xs") Electric Companies Resulting from Ratings Study

The Ideal Electric Company

good	O	___	X	___	___	___	___	bad
unconcerned	___	___	___	___	___	X	O	concerned
responsive	O	X	___	___	___	___	___	unresponsive
cold	___	___	___	___	___	X	O	warm
big	X	O	___	___	___	___	___	small

Ratings scales are often used. For example, respondents might be asked to rank their perceptions of the ideal electric company on a seven-point scale for a series of adjective pairs, as shown in Figure 16.1. Later the respondents would rate a specific electric company on the same scale. The average score for each item would be tabulated and the means placed on a figure to form a composite profile. Thus, in Figure 16.2, the ideal electric company's profile is represented by the "Os" and the actual electric company's standing by the "Xs." By comparing the two, public relations researchers can readily identify the areas in which a company falls short of the ideal. Corporate image studies can be conducted before the beginning of a public relations campaign and again at the conclusion of the campaign to evaluate its effectiveness. A search of the Internet will reveal that many marketing companies offer public relations auditing services.

Communication Audits. The communication audit resembles a public relations audit but has narrower goals; it concerns the internal and external means of communication used by an organization rather than the company's entire public relations program.

Kopec (n.d.) presents a step-by-step guide for conducting both an internal and external communications audit. For the internal audit, he suggests the following steps:

1. Interview top management to pinpoint communication problems.
2. Content analyze a sample of all the organization's relevant publications and other communication vehicles.
3. Conduct focus groups and intensive interviews with employees that examine their attitudes toward company communications. Use this information to develop a survey questionnaire.

4. Conduct the survey.
5. Analyze and report results to employees.

An external communications audit follows the same procedure, but the focus groups, interviews, and survey are done among audience members, shareholders, and other external groups.

Two research techniques generally used in conducting such an audit are readership surveys and readability studies. Readership surveys are designed to measure how many people read certain publications (such as employee newsletters or annual reports) and remember the messages they contain. The results are used to improve the content, appearance, and method of distribution of the publications. Sparks (1997), for example, measured the attitudes of employees and retirees of a large public utility toward its newsletter. She found several areas where readers thought the publication might improve. Readability studies help a company gauge the ease with which its employee publications and press releases can be read.

Social Audits. A social audit is a small-scale environmental monitoring program designed to measure an organization's social performance—that is, how well it is living up to its public responsibilities. The audit provides feedback on company-sponsored social action programs such as minority hiring, environmental cleanup, and employee safety.

Social audits are the newest form of public relations research and the most challenging. Researchers are currently studying such questions as which activities to audit, how to collect data, and how to measure the effects of the programs. Nevertheless, several large companies, including General Motors and Celanese, have already conducted lengthy social audits. When the Unilever company acquired Ben & Jerry's ice cream in 2000, Unilever agreed to conduct a social audit so that the company would continue to carry out the original social missions of Ben & Jerry's.

In the wake of the corporate scandals of 2002–2003, a few companies began conducting **integrity audits**. These audits concern how the organization's ethics are viewed by employees and members of the general public. The results show if the actual practices of the company conform to the stated company value.

Planning Public Relations Programs

After gathering the information from the various methods of environmental scanning, the next step in the process is to interpret the information to identify specific problems and opportunities that can be addressed by a systematic public relations program. For example, the results of the public relations audit can be used

A CLOSER LOOK

Analyzing Annual Reports

The top management of most publicly owned companies is interested in how their company's annual report is received. It is not unusual for a company to spend $50,000 or more to analyze reactions to its annual report.

to identify the needs of each of the key stakeholder groups and construct behavioral objectives that can be achieved with each group. A behavioral objective concerning customers might be to take occasional users of the product and turn them into loyal users. Among investors, the goal might be to increase stock purchases by small investors.

For example, environmental monitoring by the U.S. Army turned up the fact that recruitment numbers were down, and young people were voicing negative attitudes about the military. The army asked a public relations agency to plan a program to increase recruitment. As a first step, the agency needed to find out which specific public relations problems the Army faced. Surveys and focus group research uncovered the fact that young people valued such qualities as independence and individualism, things they thought were lacking in a military career. In fact, the Army was viewed as authoritarian and repressive. The image of the Army among 17- to 20-year-olds was one of screaming generals, pushups, and no respect.

Using this knowledge, the agency designed a new marketing and public relations program. The new program dropped the old "Be All You Can Be" slogan and replaced it with a new tag line—"An Army of One"— that emphasized individuality. The agency pilot-tested a number of variations and executions of this theme. Approaches that did not reflect their target group were scrapped. Eventually, an acceptable program was launched. Measurable goals included increasing recruitment, increasing the number of hits on GoArmy.com, and an increased number of calls to the Army's 800 number ("How Research Helps," 2001).

The program succeeded in raising recruitment levels in 2002 and 2003, but it was criticized by another group of stakeholders—veteran Army officers. They noted that the slogan ran counter to the Army's emphasis on teamwork. Critics preferred a different slogan, "I Am the Army," which was used in Spanish-language recruiting ads. In 2006, the Army changed direction once again as it introduced its "Army Strong" campaign, aimed not only at new recruits but also at their families. Further, the Army introduced *America's Army*, a computer game that can be played for free over the Internet, as another recruitment device.

Additionally, the qualitative techniques discussed in Chapter 5 can be used in the planning phase. For example, State Farm Insurance conducted a campaign in which the company tried to identify the 10 most hazardous intersections in the United States. In an attempt to find a name for the campaign that would resonate with consumers, the company conducted a number of focus groups to try to identify which word would embody the essence of the campaign. Several adjectives were discussed, including *deadly*, *crash-prone*, and *hazardous*, but most focus group participants thought that *dangerous* was the most appropriate. As a result, State Farm labeled its campaign "The Ten Most Dangerous Intersections." In addition, researchers also conducted intensive interviews with local officials in those communities with the dangerous intersections to see how they would react to being named in the "Ten Most Dangerous" list. The results of the interviews suggested that most public officials would welcome the publicity because they felt it might help them fix the problem and that State Farm would experience no significant public relations problems as a result of the campaign (Russell, 2000).

The planning phase also involves research that attempts to determine the most effective media for delivering the program. At its most basic level, this research entails finding the reach, frequency, and demographic characteristics of the audiences for the various mass and specialized communication media.

A second type of media research is the **media audit**. A media audit is a survey of reporters, editors, and other media personnel that asks about their preferences for stories and how they perceive the public relations agency's clients. Most media audit surveys contact about 50–75 media professionals ("Media Audits," 2000). For example, the public relations division at a leading telecommunications market research company conducted a media audit with reporters at 16 trade publications. The survey revealed that the reporters had little knowledge about the firm or understanding about what it did. Other questions asked what kinds of information the reporters would most like to receive from companies. Responses revealed that case studies were the preferred format. As a result, the company changed its public relations approach and was able to place stories in trade and national publications such as *USA Today* ("Score Big Hits," 2001).

Adams (2002) reported the results of a media audit of Florida journalists that revealed, among other things, that "localism" was not an important consideration in evaluating news releases. Journalists ranked news value and an interesting story as the two factors that were most significant in successfully getting a news release covered. The survey also revealed that the chief complaint of the journalists was that public relations practitioners were not familiar with the publications they were contacting. Ledingham and Bruning (2007) provide another example of a media audit.

Implementing Public Relations Programs

The most common type of research during the implementation phase consists of monitoring the efforts of the public relations program. Two of the most frequently used monitoring techniques are **gatekeeping research** and **output analysis**.

Gatekeeping Research. A gatekeeping study analyzes the characteristics of press releases and video news releases that allow them to "pass through the gate" and appear in a mass medium. Both content and style variables are typically examined. For example, Morton and Warren (1992) examined which type of artwork newspaper gatekeepers preferred. They found that smaller circulation newspapers favored hometown photos. Walters, Walters, and Starr (1994) examined the differences between the grammar and syntax of original news releases and published versions. They found that editors typically shorten the releases and make them easier to read before publication. Hong (2007) noted that the newsworthiness of a press release is a strong predictor of whether the release is used but is not related to the prominence given to the story.

Gaschen (2001) surveyed TV stations about their use of VNRs (video news releases) and found that those stations that used VNRs generally used some of the visuals that accompanied the story but seldom ran the entire package. Harmon and White (2003) analyzed the use of 14 VNRs that were aired more than 4000 times across the United States. They found that most were used in early evening newscasts, and VNRs about children or health got the greatest exposure. A study by Jensen, Coe, and Tewksbury (2006) found that labeling the VNR as a product of an outside organization did not affect judgments of the credibility of the story, the reporter, or the news industry.

Output Analysis. Lindenmann (1997) defines outputs as the *short-term or immediate results of a particular public relations program* *or activity.* Output analysis measures how well the organization presents itself to others and the amount of exposure or attention that the organization receives. Several techniques can be used in output analysis. One way is to measure the total number of stories or articles that appear in selected mass media. In addition, it is possible to gauge the tone of the article. A public relations campaign that results in a large number of stories that are negative about the organization is less useful than a campaign that results in positive coverage. It is also possible to measure nonmedia outputs such as speaking engagements, white papers, and the number of people attending special public relations events.

Lindenmann (1997) lists several types of specific output analysis. For example, traditional content analysis is used to determine the type of story that appeared in the media (news, feature, editorial, and so on); the source of the story (press release, press conference, special event); degree of exposure (column inches in print media or number of minutes of air time in the electronic media); and topic variables such as what company officials were quoted, what issues were covered, how much coverage was given to competitors, and so on. Additionally, content analysis is used to look at more subtle qualities. Public relations researchers can judge the tone of the article—whether it is positive, neutral, or negative; balanced or unbalanced; favorable or unfavorable. As Lindenmann points out, this type of analysis must be based on clearly defined criteria for assessing positives and negatives.

Not surprisingly, output analysis can also be extended to the Internet. Analysis of how a company is described on various websites and in chat rooms, forums, and newsgroups can also offer clues about the effectiveness of a public relations campaign. The number of hits on a company website and the number of site visitors who requested additional information or filled out feedback forms can also be measured.

Nonmedia activities can also be studied with output analysis, such as attendance at special events and trade shows. In addition, attendees can be analyzed according to the types of people who show up and their level of influence within the field. Researchers can also tabulate the number of promotional materials distributed and the number of interviews or speaking engagements generated by the event.

Another facet of output analysis is measuring the total number of impressions attributed to a public relations campaign. This measurement is determined by calculating the reach and frequency of the various media in which campaign-related stories appeared to determine the number of people who might have been exposed to the message (see Chapter 15). The reach of a print publication is usually based on its total audited circulation. For example, if an article related to a public relations campaign appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which has an audited circulation of about 400,000, that article generated 400,000 impressions or opportunities to see the story. If two stories appeared, that would create 800,000 impressions. In addition, researchers can determine how many of those impressions actually reached an organization's target group by examining detailed media audience data as compiled by firms such as Mediamark and Nielsen (see Chapter 14).

The problem with using impressions is that the researcher has to make several assumptions. For instance, it is assumed that all readers included in the circulation reports actually read the articles associated with the campaign and that everyone who visits the company website has also read the item. In reference to that connection, Brody (2003) points out the following: Suppose a news release is published in a newspaper that reaches 60% of the households in a market, is noticed by 50% of readers, and read by 25%; the actual exposure rate is only 7.5% (.60 × .50 × .25). In sum, the impressions method does not measure *actual exposure* to the message, but it does estimate the potential audience that might be reached.

Yet another method is to calculate **advertising equivalency**. This is done by counting the number of column-inches in newspapers and magazines and the number of seconds of broadcast and cable coverage for a client and converting them into the equivalent advertising costs. For example, assume a local TV station charges $1,000 for a 30-second spot. A public relations firm manages to place a 90-second VNR on the station's local newscast. The advertising equivalency would be $3,000. The problem with this method is that the public relations firm cannot control the content of the news story or television item. The 90-second spot on the local TV newscast might have been edited so that all references and visuals related to the client were removed.

Evaluation Research. **Evaluation research** refers to the process of judging the effectiveness of program planning, implementation, and impact. Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore (1997) suggest that evaluation should be involved in virtually every phase of a program.

Specifically, they propose the following specific phases:

1. *Implementation checking*. This phase investigates whether the intended target audience is actually being reached by the message.
2. *In-progress monitoring*. Shortly after the campaign starts, researchers check to see if the program is having its intended effects. If there are unanticipated results or if results seem to be falling short of objectives, the program might still be modified.
3. *Outcome evaluation*. When the campaign is finished, the program's results are assessed. These findings are used to suggest changes for the future.

Broom and Dozier (1990) compare evaluation research to a field experiment (discussed in Chapter 5). The public relations campaign is similar to an experimental treatment, and the target public is similar to the subjects in the experiment. If possible, public relations researchers should try to construct control groups to isolate campaign effects from other spurious factors. The public relations researcher takes before-and-after measures and determines if any significant differences exist that can be attributed to the campaign. However, Broom and Dozier call attention to the fact that public relations campaigns occur in dynamic settings, and as with most field experiments, it is difficult to control extraneous variables. As a result, it may not be scientifically possible to *prove* the program caused the results. However, from a management standpoint, systematic evaluation research may still represent the best available evidence of program effectiveness.

Evaluation researchers are interested in the same three levels of effect that were mentioned in Chapter 15's discussion of copy research: cognitive, affective, and conative. At the cognitive level, researchers attempt to find out how much people learned from the public relations campaign. At the affective level, measures of changes in attitudes, opinions, or perceptions are used frequently. Finally, behavioral change, at the conative level, is an important way to gauge public relations impact. Obviously, the techniques used in advertising campaign effectiveness studies—pretest/posttest and tracking studies—can be applied in measuring the impact dimension of public relations campaigns.

Public relations researchers should be aware of some common mistakes that can affect evaluation research. Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore (1997) caution against the following:

1. Confusing volume with results. This is a case of confusing output research with outcome research. A huge pile of press clippings may document effort, but the pile does not document that the clippings had an effect.
2. Substituting estimation for measurement. Public relations practitioners should not substitute intuition or approximations for objective measurement—guesswork has no place in evaluation research (or any research).
3. Using unrepresentative samples. Analyzing only volunteer or convenience samples may lead to errors.
4. Confounding knowledge and attitudes. It is possible that a public might have gained more knowledge as the result of a public relations campaign, but this increased knowledge does not necessarily mean that attitudes have been positively influenced.
5. Confusing attitudes with behavior. Similar to item 4, it is incorrect to assume that favorable attitudes will result in favorable behavior.

Benchmarking is a method used to assess an impact that is gaining popularity. A benchmark is a standard of comparison used by a company to track its public relations progress; research is conducted before the campaign to establish the standards of comparison. Other ways to establish a benchmark might include examining existing data to find industry averages and looking at past performance numbers.

Gronstedt (1997) describes a continuing benchmarking study done by a top European design firm. The company annually surveys its employees with questions such as "My job makes good use of my abilities" and "There are sufficient opportunities for me to improve my skills in my current job." Employee responses are then compared to a benchmark average calculated from a large-scale survey given to other employees in more than 40 countries.

Lindenmann (1988) discusses several examples of evaluation research used by corporations. The Aetna Life and Casualty Company used before-and-after polling as part of a campaign to introduce a long-term health care plan for elderly Americans. The company's precampaign polling revealed that a large majority of Americans incorrectly believed that Medicare coverage routinely extended to nursing home stays. After a communication campaign, the company's polls found that more people were aware of Medicare's limitations than had been before.

The Institute for Public Relations' website contains many articles about evaluation research: (*www.instituteforpr.com/about/measurement_commission/publications*).

Qualitative Methods in Public Relations

The qualitative technique has seen growing popularity in public relations research. Daymon and Holloway (2002) suggest that one reason behind this trend is that public relations practitioners have shifted their focus from one-way communication and control to dialogue and collaboration so that now organizations must hear, appreciate, understand, and identify with those with whom they are talking—tasks that are best addressed by qualitative methods.

Not surprisingly, the qualitative methods increasingly used by public relations practitioners are generally the same techniques mentioned in Chapter 5. For example, Wrigley (2002) used focus groups to study how women viewed the "glass ceiling" in the public relations industry. Reber, Cropp, and Cameron (2003) conducted a case study of the public relations implications of Norfolk Southern's hostile takeover bid of Conrail, and Bardhan (2003) conducted intensive interviews in her study of the cultural context of public relations in India.

Two specific qualitative methods, however, are becoming more popular in public relations research: critical incident technique and discourse analysis.

Critical Incidents

The **critical incident technique** is a combination of in-depth interviewing and the case study approach. Its chief value is that it allows the researcher to gather in-depth information about a defined significant incident from the perspective of those who were involved in it. A critical incident is defined as an incident in which the purpose or intent of the act is clear to the observer and the consequences are definite. Further, the event must have a clearly demarcated beginning and ending, and a researcher must be able to obtain a detailed account of the incident.

In general terms, a critical incident analysis includes the following characteristics:

- It focuses on a particular event or phenomenon.
- It uses informants' detailed narrative descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon.
- It employs content analysis to analyze these descriptions.
- It derives interpretive themes based on the results of the content analysis.

One common method is to ask about both positive and negative incidents. Johnson (2002), for example, used the critical incident technique to examine the public relations implications of the experiences of guests at a large Las Vegas hotel/casino. Guests were asked to identify two incidents during their stay—one satisfying and one dissatisfying. They were then asked a series of questions about the incidents. The researchers next asked employees to also identify one satisfying and one dissatisfying incident and respond to the interviewer's questions from the point of view of the customer. The responses were categorized into major themes and analyzed. The results highlighted those areas that management could emphasize to improve their public relations with consumers.

Advantages and Disadvantages. The major advantage of the technique is that it focuses on real-world incidents as seen through the eyes of those who are directly involved. Further, a number of different critical incidents can be examined and compared, a process that can lead to greater theoretical understanding of public relations operations and a better formulation of public relations practices. One limitation of the critical incidents technique is that it depends on the memory of the informants for its data. Some people may remember more details than others, and some may have their memories distorted by selective perceptions. Researchers using this technique need to consider the reliability of the information that they gather. A second limitation is linked to the sometimes sensitive nature of critical incidents, particularly those that involve negative events. Employees, for example, might be reticent to divulge information that might reflect badly on superiors or the organization for which they work. Researchers should follow established ethical practices concerning the confidentiality of information gained during a critical incident analysis (see Chapter 3).

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a more recently developed qualitative technique that has been used to study public relations communication. At the risk of oversimplification, discourse analysis examines the organization of language at a level of analysis beyond the clause or the sentence. It focuses on larger linguistic units, such as whole conversations or written messages. Discourse analysis is also concerned with the way language is used in social contexts and how people make sense of one another's messages. As summarized by van Dijk (1997), discourse analysis examines who uses language, how, why, and when.

Daymon and Holloway (2002) suggest that researchers who use discourse analysis analyze three specific aspects of language:

1. The form and content of the language used
2. The ways people use language to communicate ideas and beliefs
3. Institutional and organizational factors that might shape the way the language is used

Data collection in discourse analysis involves gathering examples of texts and messages that are relevant to the problem being investigated. These may consist of existing documents, such as speeches by company executives, press releases, internal memos, and advertisements. In addition, the researcher can generate new data by conducting interviews with key informants.

There is no concrete set of procedures for conducting a discourse analysis. Data analysis usually consists of focusing on large segments of language to identify key words, themes, imagery, and patterns in the text. In addition, the researcher might conduct a rhetorical analysis that looks at how various arguments are constructed and arranged within a given body of language. Finally, the investigator should pay special attention to the context of the language, examining such factors as who is speaking, the circumstances surrounding the message, and the intended audience.

Levin and Behrens (2003), for example, presented a discourse analysis of Nike's internal and external communications. They analyzed such linguistic structures as semantic association, opposites, degradation, genre manipulation, pronoun selection, obfuscation, slanting, speech acts, restricted

A CLOSER LOOK

Positive Perceptions

Although public relations studies may show that consumers perceive a company in a positive way, it does not mean that those same consumers will buy products or services from the company. For example, while Sears may be perceived positively, many people may not shop at Sears because they have a difficult time finding a salesperson in the store to help them.

A CLOSER LOOK

Inquiry Studies

Lindenmann (2006) suggests another type of qualitative study for public relations practitioners: an inquiry study. An inquiry study is a systematic review and analysis of the range and types of unsolicited inquiries that an organization receives from the key audience groups with which it communicates. Such a study could be done by traditional content analysis or by telephone or online interviewing.

For example, it might benefit an organization to interview those people who contacted it requesting background, information, samples, or promotional materials. Of course, such a group of people is a self-selected, unscientific sample but interviewing these people would provide information about the very target audience that the organization is trying to reach.

style, and metaphor. They found that during the height of Nike's popularity, both company literature and press reports contained a preponderance of positive imagery. However, this changed when the company was accused of unfair labor practices. The press abandoned its positive portrayal and used the same linguistic devices to create a more negative image. In another example, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) conducted a discourse analysis of interviews conducted with public relations professionals and found that many were endorsing postmodern values. Finally, Brooks and Waymer (2009) used discourse analysis to examine Crystallex International Corporation's mining operations in South America. They looked at press release archives, news and advertising archives of Venezuelan newspapers, and the archives of specialized media in the mining area. They found that the company's public relations efforts improved once it started emphasizing corporate responsibility.

Advantages and Disadvantages. Discourse analysis can be used to study different situations and subjects. It allows public relations researchers to uncover deeply held attitudes and perceptions that are important in an organization's image and communication practices that might not be uncovered by any other methods. On the other hand, discourse analysis can take large amounts of time and effort. A second disadvantage is that this technique focuses solely on language. Although language may be an important component of public relations practice, it rarely tells the whole story. Consequently, discourse analysis should be supplemented by other qualitative techniques such as observation or focus group interviewing.

PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH AND THE INTERNET

Much of the current research in public relations is focused on the Internet. In addition to using the Internet as a research tool for background information and as a data gathering device, researchers have looked at four specific areas: (1) practitioners' attitudes toward the Internet, (2) environmental scanning using the Internet, (3) characteristics of websites used for public relations, and (4) usability studies.

The first category of research is another branch of introspective research mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Several surveys have tried to describe how public relations professionals feel about using the various features of the Internet. For example, Wright and Hinson (2009) surveyed practitioners and found that 73% agreed that blogs had changed the way their organizations communicated, 71% felt that blogs served as a watchdog for traditional media, and 25% reported that their companies had commissioned research looking at blog content. Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) surveyed professionals about their adoption of 18 social media tools and their perceptions of how social media are changing public relations.

As mentioned earlier, monitoring the Internet has become part of the process of environmental scanning. Paine (2002) recommends several methods to monitor chat rooms, to assess the correlation between web public relations campaigns and purchases, and to measure the cost effectiveness of web PR activity. In addition, Paine (2007) outlines several measures that practitioners can use to gauge how their organization is being portrayed on the Internet. They include measures of dominance, tone, positions, and depth of coverage.

Numerous studies have analyzed the characteristics of public relations websites. Reber and Kim (2006) examined 74 activist websites and discovered that one-third had online press rooms and one-third contained press releases, but most did not contain interactive features. Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009) found similar results in their study of nonprofit organizations' websites. Technical and design aspects were emphasized more than interactive features. Finally, Hickeson and Thompson (2007) analyzed wiki health websites (collaborative websites that can be edited by anyone with access to them) and discovered that wikis were more likely to use dialogic public relations techniques than non-wiki sites.

The last area of research uses methods similar to the usability research discussed in Chapter 13. Vorvoreanu (2008) describes this method as Website Experience Analysis. This method requires research participants to use a website and answer a series of questions about their experience. Since first impressions are important, the researcher may interrupt the participants' website experience after about 10 seconds, or at the moment of the first click away from the home page, and ask them to answer questions about the first impression phase. One disadvantage of this technique is that it looks at website usage in an artificial environment.

The next few years will undoubtedly see an increase in the amount and types of public relations research that examines how the public relations process has been changed by the Internet.

SUMMARY

Research in public relations takes place at all phases of the public relations process. Research such as environmental monitoring, public relations audits, communication audits, and social audits are used to define problems.

During the planning stage, quantitative and qualitative techniques are used to test various public relations strategies, and media audits are done to identify the most effective media for a campaign. Gatekeeping research and output analysis are done during the program implementation phase. Evaluation research is done both during and after a campaign to assess whether the stated goals were achieved. Qualitative methods are becoming more common in public relations research. Examining the relationship between public relations and the Internet will be the next major research area.

Key Terms

Advertising equivalency
Applied research
Basic research
Benchmarking
Communication audit
Critical incident analysis
Discourse analysis
Environmental monitoring
Evaluation research
Gatekeeping research
Integrity audit
Introspective research
Media audit
Omnibus survey
Output analysis
Precursor analysis
Public relations audit
Social audit
Strategic research
Trigger event

Using the Internet

For more information on the concepts discussed in this chapter, search the Internet for "*environmental scanning,*" "*public relations audit,*" "*omnibus survey,*" and "*web experience analysis.*"

There are several websites that contain useful information about public relations research:

1. *www.pollingreport.com* Calling itself "an independent, non-partisan resource on trends in American public opinion," this site contains a great deal of data about public opinion.
2. *www.prsa.org/awards/silveranvil/* The Silver Anvil award is to public relations campaigns what the Emmy award is to TV programs. The site has an archive of past winning campaigns. Visitors can learn how research played a role in the way the campaigns were planned, executed, and evaluated.
3. *www.prsa.org* This is the home of the Public Relations Society of America. The site contains a Professional Resource Center that is helpful for researchers.
4. *www.instituteforpr.org* The Institute for Public Relations is an independent foundation whose main concerns are research and education. Several articles directly related to public relations research are available on this site.

Questions and Problems for Further Investigation

1. Assume you are the public relations director for a large auto company. How would you go about conducting an environmental monitoring study?
2. How would you assess the effectiveness of a public relations campaign designed to encourage people to conserve water?
3. What is the difference between an output measure and an outcome measure?
4. What factors might account for the relatively large numbers of introspective studies done in the public relations field?

For additional resources go to *www.wimmerdominick.com* and *www.cengage.com/masscomm/wimmer/mediaresearch9e.*

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