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## The importance of culture in global public relations

### Introduction

PR is changing. International communication, both external and internal, is becoming increasingly important. Because the world is “getting flat” and “spiky” medium-sized companies have started participating on a scale larger than ever before.

PR is experiencing a dramatic paradigm shift. Shift caused by mainstream Internet acceptance. Google, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter have outgrown the vision of Marshall McLuhan’s (McLuhan, 1965) global village and with it unprecedented expectations of public relations practitioners to service a new, intercultural, worldwide audience (Fitzgerald, Spagnolia, 1999).

No one active in public relations needs to be reminded how dramatically the profession has been changed. A question remains whether the change has been for the better or for the worse. It can certainly be argued that the emphasis on speed that has accompanied the spread of the Internet has left both the practitioners and theorists all feeling a little cheated in some ways.

Monocultural approach is no longer valid. People from around the world want immediate access on the Web to the latest information about every aspect of a client. This use of the Web helps PR people because press releases and other documents are available 24/7 to journalists from every part of the world, on the other hand it afflicts PR practitioners with a loss of control. The Web forced PR people to work harder because they’re exposed to the public in ways that didn’t exist before.

Practitioners as well as theorists are required or rather forced, because it’s not a matter of choice, to be global communicators, governed by a whole new set of personal and professional rules to accommodate this new role (Kemper, 1998).

Information travel so fast than within seconds a press release originating in New York is read by thousands of people on their computer, mobile or PDA screens in China, Mexico, Norway, Poland etc.

Similarly, corporate web sites communicate messages instantaneously to a vast international conglomerate of stakeholders.

### **Public relations**

Coombs, Holladay, Hasenauer & Signitzer (1994) indicated that public relations, which is an organisational function is influenced by the way the business operates. Researching public relations cannot be practiced in isolation or deviate from corporate structures and cultures therefore it is necessary to examine the literature outside the public relations field.

Public relations play an important role in the world of international business. From a corporate standpoint, PR can help companies to develop positive images for their businesses. From a marketing perspective, public relations play an important role as part of the marketing strategy. PR help to position the company's product or brand and build brand equity.

### **Should PR be different in every society?**

The debate on whether public relations can be practiced in similar ways in different countries was started three decades ago. (Illman, 1980; Ovaitt, 1988; Botan, 1992;).

Those so called "ethnocentric perspective scholars" have argued that public relations practices should be no different from their own culture (Illman, 1980). "Cultural relativist perspective" scholars have argued that public relations practice should be different in every society (Botan; Huang, 1997).

There were also "the middle way" scholars. Vercic, J. Grunig, and L. Grunig (Vercic, Grunig, Grunig 1996) argued for an approach between ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. They proposed a normative model of global public relations that contains generic principles and specific applications. However, there is a visible lack of truly comparative and international public relations research.

### **Toward a global PR theory**

The early days of public relations knew no theories. With no theoretical foundation, public relations in many cases did more harm than good. First explanations of mechanisms of PR were published in 1976 by Grunig. Gruning et. al. created the 'Four Models of Public Relations' concept (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). These were:

- publicity,
- public information (both one-way communication),
- symmetrical communication

- two-way asymmetrical communication.

Several international studies indicate that there are various public relations models around the world. (Grunig et al., 1995, Huang, 2000, Jo and Kim, 2004, Park, 2002, Rhee, 2002, Sriramesh, 1992). However, an important question - why certain public relation practices are more common in certain countries still remains. (Jo and Kim, 2004).

Since 1985 a team of six researchers (IABC Research Foundation) led by J. E. Grunig (1992) has conducted research on the characteristics of excellent public relations departments and their work to make their organizations more effective. After surveying more than 300 organizations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, the IABC team identified the characteristics of excellent public relations and corporate communications departments.

In 1992, C. Botan (Botan, 1992) pointed out that the tremendous growth of PR was concentrated mainly in the US. A PR matrix developed by him involved four factors:

- level of national development
- primary clients
- legal-political context
- history of the practice.

Nevertheless, one can ask - can a truly global approach be developed with the same generic principles used in different countries?

Based on the excellence study, Vercic et al. (Vercic et al., 1996) proposed a global public relations theory. The group of researchers consolidated the excellence characteristics into 10 generic principles and identified 6 specific contextual variables that should be taken into account in global public relations (Rhee, 2002).

“The generic principles are as follows:

1. *Public relations is involved in strategic management.* An organization that practices public relations strategically develops programs to communicate with the strategic publics, both external and internal, that provide the greatest threats to and opportunities for the organization.
2. *Public relations is empowered by the dominant coalition or by a direct reporting relationship to senior management.* In effective organizations, the senior public relations person is part of or has access to the group of senior managers with greatest power in the organization.
3. *The public relations function is an integrated one.* Excellent departments integrate all public relations functions into a single department or have a mechanism to coordinate the departments. Only in an integrated system of public relations can public relations develop new communication programs for changing strategic publics.
4. *Public relations is a management function separate from other functions.* Many

organizations splinter the public relations function by making it a supporting tool for other departments such as marketing, human resources, law, or finance. When the public relations function is sublimated to other functions, it cannot move communication resources from one strategic public to another the way an integrated public relations function can.

5. *The public relations unit is headed by a manager rather than a technician.* Communication technicians are essential to carry out daily communication activities. Yet excellent public relations units must have at least one senior communication manager who conceptualizes and directs public relations programs or this direction will be supplied by other members of the dominant coalition who have no knowledge of communication or relationship building.
6. *The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is used.* Two-way symmetrical public relations is based on research and uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics. Excellent public relations departments model more of their communication programs on the two-way symmetrical model than on the press agency, public information, or two-way asymmetrical models.
7. Asymmetrical system of internal communication is used. Excellent organizations have decentralized management structures that give autonomy to employees and allow them to participate in decision making. They also have participative, symmetrical systems of internal communication. Symmetrical communication with employees increases job satisfaction because employee goals are incorporated into the organizational mission.
8. Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical public relations. Excellent public relations programs are staffed by professionals — people who are not only educated in the body of knowledge but who are also active in professional associations and read professional literature.
9. Diversity is embodied in all roles. The principle of requisite variety states that effective organizations have as much diversity inside the organization as in the environment. Excellent public relations includes both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.
10. An organizational context exists for excellence. Excellent public relations departments are nourished by organic, decentralized management structures, which allow participative rather than authoritarian cultures. Organizations turbulent complex environments produce activist publics that pressure the organization and actually push it towards excellence (L. Grunig et al., 1998, pp. 337–339).

However, there is a group of scholars who believe that the diversity in culture itself challenges the practicality of the two-way symmetrical communication

approach. That approach was developed in the West, which has dominated public relations research and education (Holtzhausen, Peterson and Tindall, 2003; Bardhan, 1996).

Culture needs to be more clearly understood in the public relations context. It will help to understand why some of the models from the Western region become impractical for non-Western practitioners.

**Overview of cultural patterns**

Undoubtedly adequate knowledge of both language and culture is needed to communicate effectively in any society, but success in the practice of international public relations relies heavily on the recognition of those cultural patterns and values that shape the cross-cultural communications process.

**Dimensions of culture**

Scholars generally agree that variations between groups can exist on multiple dimensions: cognitions, behaviors, and values. However, cross-cultural research has focused on shared cultural values as the major source of differentiation among national groups. The definitions of, and assumptions about, culture in more than 90 studies are quite consistent, but there is great variation in its measurement.

Table1. Cultural value studies

Cultural value	Studies that measured cultural value <sup>1</sup>
Individualism/collectivism	Chen, Meindl, and Hui (1998) Cullen, Parboteeah, and Hoegl (2004) Earley, Gibson, and Chen (1999) Elenkov and Manev (2005) Ensari and Murphy (2003) Gomez, Kirkman, and Shapiro (2000) Huang and Van de Vliert (2003) Smith, Peterson, and Schwartz (2002) Spector et al. (2001, 2002) Volkema (2004)
Individualism	Adair, Okumura, and Brett (2001) Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) Lam, Schaubroeck, and Aryee (2002) Murphy-Berman and Berman (2002) Tinsley (2001) Wade-Benzoni et al. (2002)

<sup>1</sup> Studies were not included in bibliography

Collectivism	Gibson (1999) Gelfand and Realo (1999) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001a) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001b) Murphy-Berman and Berman (2002) Van de Vliert, Shi, Sanders, Wang, and Huang (2004)
Horizontal individualism and Vertical collectivism	Chan and Drasgow (2001) Chen and Li (2005) Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, and Lawler Thomas and Au (2002) Thomas and Pekerti (2003)
Horizontal collectivism	Chen and Li (2005)
Vertical individualism	Robert et al. (2000)
In-group collectivism	Fu et al. (2004)
Independent or interdependent self-construal	Brockner, Chen, Mannix, Leung, and Skarlicki (2000) Gelfand et al. (2002) Murphy-Berman and Berman (2002)
Idiocentrism and allocentrism	Lam, Chen, and Schaubroeck (2002) Schaubroeck, Lam and Xie (2000)
Power distance	Earley (1999) Elenkov and Manev (2005) Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) Hofstede, Van Deusen, Mueller, and Charles (2002) Huang and Van de Vliert (2003) Hui, Au, and Fock (2004) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001a) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001b) Lam, et al. (2002) Peterson and Smith (1997) Smith et al. (2002) Van de Vliert and Van Yperen (1996) Volkema (2004)
Hierarchy	Adair et al. (2001) Tinsley and Brett (2001)
Egalitarianism-hierarchy	Glazer and Beehr (2005)
Hierarchical differentiation	Tinsley (1998) Tinsley (2001)
Achievement	Cullen et al. (2004)
Universalism	Morris et al. (1998)
Conservatism	Glazer and Beehr (2005) Tinsley and Pillutla (1998) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001a) Kirkman and Shapiro (2001b) Smith et al. (2002)
Determination	Kirkman and Shapiro (2001b)
Doing orientation	Smith et al. (2002)
Loyal involvement- utilitarian involvement	Tinsley (1998)
Explicit contracting	Tinsley (2001) Gibson (1999)

Field independence	Fu et al. (2004)
Future orientation	Smith et al. (2002)
Harmony–mastery	Elenkov and Manev (2005)
Masculinity	Smith et al. (2002) Volkema (2004)
	Fischer and Smith (2004)
Openness to change	Morris et al. (1998)
Self-enhancement	Tinsley and Pillutla (1998)
Self-transcendence	Tinsley (1998)
Polychronicity	Tinsley (2001) Cullen et al. (2004)
Pecuniary materialism	Tinsley and Brett (2001)
Self-direction	Spreitzer, Perttula, and Xin (2005)
Traditionality	Tinsley and Brett (2001)
Tradition	Elenkov and Manev (2005)
Uncertainty avoidance	Fu et al. (2004) Smith et al. (2002)
	Volkema (2004)

Source: A. S. Tsui, S. S. Nifadkar, A. Yi Ou, Cross-National, Cross-Cultural Organizational Behavior Research: Advances, Gaps, and Recommendations, 2007; 33; p. 426 Journal of Management

A. Ihator (Ihator, 2000), published an article in which he described some of the approaches used in contrasting cultural values that may be helpful to the international public relations practitioners. According to Ihator these cultural values were defined as: 1. individualism versus collectivism, 2. high-context and low-context communication styles, 3. degree of media independence and cultural impact on media content and channels and 4. orientation to time.

The author will present 3 of those values leaving out the degree of media independence and cultural impact on media content and channels and add power distance and uncertainty avoidance indexes.

### **1. Individualism versus Collectivism.**

Individuals' perception of their place and role in society are culturally determined. What inspires, motivates and impresses individuals is different across the globe. Every society has its unique cultural code that triggers certain behaviors.

Collectivism is typical for almost all Asian countries, while individualism is the major feature of Western countries. Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001, p. 210) points out that the Western region, especially the United States, attribute individualism as the major factor to success. This seem to explain why public opinion campaigns in collaboration with two-way communication models are successful as there is a genuine lack of fear of any negative repercussions in voicing one's own opinion providing its politically correct. Individualism that is perceived as pure greatness in the West is seen as selfishness in Asia (Hofstede, 2001, p. 210). There is a study

conducted by Mattison (Mattison, 1988) which indicates that within the Indian society individuals discontinued pursuing individual goals if elders within the family network showed any signs of discouragement. Confucian worldview that highlights the lack of existence outside the individual's relationship network (So, Walker, 2005, p. 93) shaped the Chinese collectivism. Family is often seen as the archetype of social organisations. So and Walker (2005) also suggest that often in Asia to avoid disturbing family harmony and often people will place family's priorities above their own individual needs. Rhee for instance defines harmony as "...overcoming individuality to maintain harmony in the family" (Rhee, 2002, p. 162).

The Asian business culture complicates PR even further. In the West dominant stakeholders are often external shareholders. Nevertheless, in China and India, community and family networks influence heavily business structure. Board of management while making every decision always considerate how it will affect the family and government network. It happens usually at the expense of minor investors (Kimber, Lipton, 2005).

Independent trade unions and associations often represent employees in Western regions. In many Asian countries trade unions exist but are easily influenced via loyalty to the company (Kimber, Lipton, 2005). In some countries (e.g. Japan) employees are not encouraged to fight for their rights. Their success is relies on their ability to work hard and sacrifice everything else for the company good.

## **2. High-context versus Low-context Communication Styles.**

Every form of communication must take place in a social context. Culture determines the context. In a communication transaction where the sender and receiver of the message come from the same linguistic group and social background, there is more likelihood both of them would ascribe very similar meaning to the message. In some cultures, the message is clearly articulated in the words, there is no hidden meaning, while in others, what was said and not said have to be considered to derive any substantive meaning.

## **3. Orientation to Time.**

Some cultures treat time like a precious commodity. Time is carefully measured, people act according to timetables. The production and distribution of news releases and the organizing of news conferences, among others, have to follow strict schedule. Excuses for not meeting mass media deadlines are not accepted. In other cultures the public relations practice may not follow a strict timelines. There exist no universal meaning of time. Culture influences the way time is perceived, defined and used.

Long-term vs. short-term orientation is the most important one for ethical questions of PR (Hopper et al. 2007, p.98). Discussion about the concept of lie



may have a different outcome depending on the culture of the participant. Long-term perspective thinking is strongly bond with such concerns as reputation building, customer trust and reliability, which actually are classical motivators for ethical behavior within the field of PR.

European and Anglo-American countries, have demonstrated a short-term orientation in systematic global comparisons (Lussier 2009, p. 392). People in those societies place emphasis on short-term results, rapid need-gratification (Samovar et al. 2009, p. 207). This for example can influence such areas as CSR. (Samli 2008, p.115, Riahi-Belkaoui, 1995, p.79).

According to Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001, p. 351), long-term orientation values elements such as persistence and perseverance and prioritises relationships according to status. For short-term orientation cultures status within a relationship holds very little relevance (Hofstede, 2001, p. 351).

#### **4. Hierarchy and Power Distance**

Asian regions have relatively tall, pyramid style business structure, while the West business models show flatter structures. The reason for this is the hierarchical nature and the large power distance which exists in the Asian region, where people seek order and structure (Leichty and Warner, 2002, p. 66). The West scores quite low in power distance as managers rely more on personal experience rather than authority for decision making (Hofstede, 2001, p. 87). Reynolds and Valentine (2004) pointed out that hierarchical structures helped maintain harmony and face preservation in Asia. That model of thinking naturally have been to found in business world where the inequality amongst managers and workers is expected (p. 44). Holtzhausen et. al. suggest that in Asia the need for hierarchy would make two-way symmetry culturally impractical and unacceptable” (Holtzhausen et. al., 2003, p. 310).

#### **5. Uncertainty Avoidance**

The European region scores high in uncertainty avoidance. The dimension of uncertainty avoidance is a ability to deal with uncertain and unfamiliar elements within its culture (Hofstede, 2001). High uncertainty avoidance suggests issues such as resistance to change, pessimism, distrust and lower ambition to advancement.

The current research points out that culture is a major influence on the practice of PR.

It is widely acknowledged that culture impacts on not only individuals but also organisations. As a result functions with the organisation such as public relations are also influenced by culture. Coombs et. al. (1994) suggest that organisational behaviour is directly impacted by culture and since public relations is a form of organisational behaviour, it will be affected by culture as well.

Symmetrical communication usually works in the environment where the publics to be engaged are equipped with equal skills and resources to sustain effective dialogue and contribution to a public relations' activity (Karlberg, 1996). One must admit, that resources and communication skills of publics vary significantly across the globe. The culture itself imposes difficulties in implementing symmetrical communication models. Dimensions such as hierarchy, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance add to the complications in practicing standardised western models.

### **Conclusion**

Cross cultural differences can thwart PR campaign plans. It is therefore crucial that PR practitioners incorporate a cross cultural competence and global thinking approach. With the growth of international business, PR have become more complex. Public relations functions therefore become far more challenging. In addition to the usual professional skills, PR practitioners should expand their knowledge of world cultures, languages, customs, ways of conducting business.

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**Abstract**

*PR is changing. International communication, both external and internal, is becoming increasingly important. Can cross cultural differences thwart PR campaign plans? Is it therefore crucial that PR practitioners incorporate a cross cultural competence and global thinking approach? With the growth of international business, PR have become more complex. Public relations functions therefore become far more challenging. What is the role o culture in PR in the XXI century?*