Public Relations Research in the Real World of Business

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Chapter rationale

This chapter is intended to demonstrate the value of public relations research to organizations, provide an overview of current research methods, and identify best research practices. It presents an overview of the state of public relations research today, what public relations research can do for organizations, and how practitioners can use research to develop strategy and programs, monitor programs, and evaluate results. It also includes a discussion on several types of PR research, as well as case studies of successful public relations research activities in the real world.

Chapter Introduction

In the ideal world, public relations practitioners would conduct research before launching any program or activity. What's more, the organizations they work for would demand public relations research as a key element for developing the organization's strategy.

Public relations research has the potential to build the foundation not only for better public relations, but better organizations in general. This chapter presents an overview of the state of public relations research today: What public relations research can do for organizations, and how practitioners can use research to develop strategy and programs, monitor programs, and evaluate results. It also includes a discussion on several types of public relations research.

The chapter also includes in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners who use research for different activities that lead to organizational change. These case studies provide a real-world perspective of the realities of conducting public relations research, and identify how research helps to shape public relations programs.

Role of Research in Public Relations

When the CEO asks what different departments accomplished over the past year, the CEO wants to know how each department contributed to the organization's goals. For the public relations department, accomplishments should not be based on the number of press releases issued, employee newsletters published, or people who visited the intranet site. These are all outputs.

Instead, public relations accomplishments must be related to how they contribute to the success of the business. How did public relations influence the attitudes or behavior of key publics for the betterment of the organization? Public relations research is a fundamental part of identifying important issues to the organization, developing strategically based public relations programs, and measuring the impact of those programs on the organization. Without public relations research, practitioners are left with little but outputs and hunches to report. Without research, practitioners cannot show how public relations makes a difference.

Broom and Dozier (1990) define research as "the controlled, objective, and systematic gathering of information for the purposes of describing and understanding" (p. 4). Research is an integral part of the public relations process. Two steps of the four-step public relations process, developed by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000), depend on research: defining the public relations problem or opportunity, and evaluating the program. Similarly, Hendrix's ROPE model (research, objectives, program, and evaluation) and Marston's RACE model (research, action, communication, and evaluation) rely on research for the first and last steps of the public relations process (as cited by Stacks, 2002).

Cutlip et al. said that research “is the foundation of effective public relations” (2000, p. 343). Stacks said, “Quite simply, without research you cannot demonstrate the efficacy of your program” (2002, p. 4). Gronstedt (1997) says that research gives the hard data necessary to provide value to the organization, and helps provide information to make decisions that have real impact. Research is critical to public relations management because it focuses the practitioner on goals, objectives and results, not on outputs, and creates a systematic method of doing so.

Research is also fundamental to several groundbreaking models of public relations practice, including the open systems model and the two-way symmetrical model. The role of public relations should not be simply to deliver the organization’s messages, at times referred to as an “inside-out” approach to communication (Gronstedt, 1997, p. 39). In the open systems model, public relations also takes an “outside-in” approach by communicating the beliefs, feelings, and concerns of key publics back to the organization (Gronstedt, p. 39). In the open systems model, organizations and their publics exchange information, and are influenced by each other. Research is critical for facilitating this exchange. It provides a means for the organization to scan the environment to identify key publics and issues early. Research uncovers potential areas of concern so that the organization can build relationships, develop programs and take corrective action to prevent small problems from becoming major issues (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000).

The two-way symmetrical model of communication, first proposed by James E. Grunig, emphasizes that the organization and its publics should be engaged in an ongoing dialog to build mutually beneficial relationships. Part of that dialog includes the use of research. “With the two-way symmetrical model, practitioners use research and dialog to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviors of both the organization and its publics” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 308). Further research is being done to measure relationships themselves and identify reliable indicators of good organization-public relationships (Grunig & Hon, 1999).

Grunig et al. found that “Excellent public relations is research based (two-way), symmetrical (although organizations constantly struggle between symmetry and asymmetry when they make decisions), and based on either mediated or interpersonal communication (depending on the situation and public)” (2002, p. 25-26). Research is fundamental. They also said that “Excellent [public relations] programs also are based on environmental scanning research, and they are more likely to be evaluated through all forms of evaluation (scientific, clip-file, and informal), than are less excellent programs” (p. 26).

In addition to benefiting the organization and the public relations department, research can also benefit the practitioner’s career. Broom and Dozier note that several studies, including their own, found a link between PR research and PR participation in management decision-making. “It’s as though you don’t get invited to the table where decisions are being made unless you have systematically gathered information—research—to contribute to the process” (1990, p. 10). Similarly, Austin, Pinkleton, and Dixon (2000) noted, “It seems clear from these data that [public relations] technicians intending to advance to management-level work realize their productionoriented skills will need to be supplemented by formal research abilities if they hope to advance" (p. 249).

Other researchers found similar links between research capabilities and advancement. Grunig et al. (2002) noted that although strategic capabilities are most valued in the organization, most public relations department managers are better at technical and managerial roles than strategic roles. They defined the strategic role to include evaluation research, environmental scanning and research to segment publics. The implication is that communication managers are more likely to become, and be regarded as, strategic managers if they have an expertise in research.

Despite strong evidence that public relations research produces more effective programs, many departments conduct little or no research. In one survey, 50 percent said they rarely or never budget for research (Gronstedt, 1997). The most common reasons for not conducting research include lack of funding, lack of training in research by public relations practitioners, and fear by practitioners that measurement research will show that they have not been successful with their programs. Of those organizations that do conduct research, the cost of research averages about 10 percent of the total budget (Williams, 2003). Public relations practitioners are often unaware that sources of secondary research are often readily available for little or no cost (Hon, 1998). Secondary research "involves examining data already available," including information from academic, trade and professional journals (Lindenmann, 2003, p. 3).

Sources of information for secondary analysis

- U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov)
- Institute for Public Relations (www.instituteforpr.com)
- Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.org)
- National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (www.norc.uchicago.edu)
- National Center for Health Statistics (www.cdc.gov/nchs/default.htm)
- Pew Research Center for the People & The Press (www.people-press.org)
- Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (www.ropercenter.uconn.edu)
- Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois (www.srl.uic.edu)
- Survey Sampling, Inc. site (www.worldopinion.com)

Figure 1 Lindenmann, 2001

The use of public relations research seems to be increasing, at least in the area of programs that win major public relations awards. Stacks (2002) notes that the percentage of PRSA Silver Anvil award winners using formal research in their campaigns rose from 25 percent in 1980 to 75 percent in 1998. IABC's Gold Quill award program also includes a measurement component. The association presents the annual Jake Wittmer Award to the practitioner who uses research effectively to develop a successful communication project (Williams, 2003).

What PR Research Can Do

Public relations research provides the foundation for almost everything communicators do, including identifying and understanding key publics, framing important issues, developing public relations and organizational strategy, and measuring results (Gronstedt, 1997). It can also be used to gain publicity. For example, the Juvenile Diabetes Association might sponsor a survey before

Halloween asking parents of children with diabetes how their children handle a holiday that is all about getting treats. Survey results could be used to gain publicity for the organization.

The Institute of Public Relations identifies eight stakeholder groups with whom organizations communicate. Stakeholder groups include the community, those within the company (employees, unions, managers), customers, suppliers, financial markets, distributors and vendors, potential employees and opinion leaders (media, activist groups) (Oliver, 2001). There can also be subsets of these groups. Few organizations have the resources to maintain intense relationships with every group all the time, nor is it necessary. Research helps public relations departments identify its key publics and issues at the moment, so the organization can focus its attention on areas where it will deliver the most impact, and value.

Research helps identify the existing knowledge, predisposition or behaviors of key publics, their preferred information sources, and how best to reach them. Grunig et al. (2002) found that that research plays a crucial role in how organizations with excellent public relations departments respond to key publics such as activists. “Excellent public relations departments scan the environment [through research] and continuously bring the voices of publics, especially activist publics, into decision making” (p. 27). Excellent departments also use research to plan and evaluate their communication programs.

One area where public relations can make a valuable contribution to organizational-stakeholder communication is by identifying areas of not only *actual* agreement and disagreement, but also of *perceived* agreement and disagreement. Broom and Dozier (1990) developed a coorientational model of communication, based on groundbreaking interpersonal communications research by Jack M. McLeod and Steven H. Chafee in 1973. The coorientational model looks at:

- The actual knowledge, understanding and beliefs that the organization and public have about a particular issue.
- The public’s perception of the organization’s knowledge, understanding and beliefs about the issue.
- The organization’s perception of the public’s knowledge, understanding and beliefs about the issue.

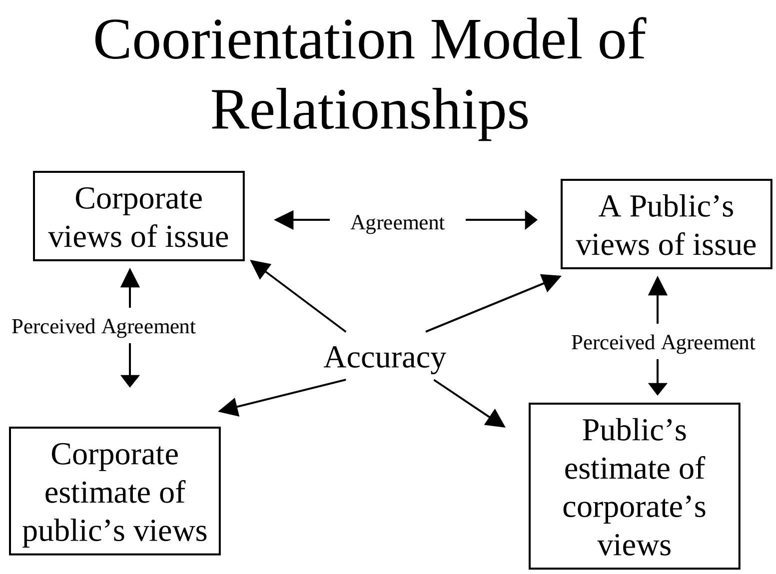

Figure 2 Coorientation Model of Relationships, Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 38

Organizations and their key publics seldom have perfectly accurate or complete perceptions of each other. Public relations research can identify those perception gaps so that public relations programs can lead to better understanding and agreement between organizations and publics (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cutlip et al., 2000).

Conducting Research to Develop Strategy

Business historian Alfred Chandler defines strategy as "the determination of the long-run goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals" (as cited by Grant, 2002, p. 17). Public relations research is essential for helping to determine what an enterprise's goals should be, identifying possible barriers to achieving those goals, and providing knowledge about the environment and key publics so the organization can achieve those goals.

Public relations research to develop strategy can include both informal and formal methods. Potential public relations problems are often first uncovered during informal environmental scanning, while more formal methods are used to confirm problems and describe them further. Cutlip et al. (2000) identified the following informal methods of environmental scanning:

- Personal contacts (such as with key informants inside and outside the organization)
- "Water cooler" conversations
- Casual media scanning (such as observing trends in newspaper and television coverage)
- Participant observation (a research method in which the researcher, or public relations practitioner, participates in the group or situation being studied)
- Unstructured depth interviews (such as interviewing members of an advisory group, or conducting focus groups)

- Analyzing business information (such as statistics about the organization, the organization's competitors, business environment)
- Scanning the Internet to identify rumors that could affect the organization. The Google search engine enables users to search Usenet newsgroups by topic or company name: (http://groups.google.com).

Formal environmental scanning often starts with a search of online databases to determine whether previous research exists on the subject. Formal environmental scanning also includes structured surveys using random samples of publics, media content or logs, and censuses of total publics, media content or records (Cutlip et al., 2000).

After scanning the environment and detecting a possible problem or opportunity, the practitioner should conduct a situation analysis. A situation analysis "is the unabridged collection of all that is known about the situation, its history, forces operating on it, and those involved or affected internally and externally" (Cutlip et al., 2000, p. 347). It includes collecting all relevant available information about the subject and publics involved. It is similar to a literature review in academic research. The situation analysis immerses the public relations researcher in the subject, provides a history of the situation, and helps provide a depth of understanding, frame the research, develop research questions, identify possible issues, and suggest possible means of conducting the research.

The situation analysis usually starts with a problem statement. The problem statement describes the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* of the problem. It describes the situation in measurable terms, and does not imply solution or place blame (Cutlip et al., 2000).

The environmental scanning research, problem statement and situation analysis together provide the groundwork for building effective public relations programs, including designing measurable goals and objectives. Goals "indicate the more general and ultimate outcome the total program" (Broom & Dozer, 1990, p. 40). A goal is "long-term and gives direction" (Stacks, 2002, p. 26). Objectives are more specific, describing the "results to be achieved by a specified date for each of the well-defined target publics" (Broom & Dozier, p. 40) and are "based on projected and actual program outputs" (Stacks, p. 26) and outcomes.

Conducting Research to Monitor Programs and Evaluate Results

Almost everyone today is familiar with political polling. Politicians rely on frequent polling to see if their campaigns are on track, or if they need to make changes. Public relations practitioners can use similar methods to determine if their programs are on course. If not, the practitioner can make corrections to achieve the desired outcomes.

Polling is one type of evaluation research. Evaluation research "uses scientific procedures to collect, analyze, and interpret information to help determine the worth" of public relations activities (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 73). It can be used throughout a public relations program to check the pulse at various times. It is most often used to measure a program's effectiveness at completion. Did the program achieve what it set out to do? If not, why not?

One mistake some public relations practitioners make is in using evaluation research to justify a business decision that has already been made. Research should be entered into with an open mind, and not biased toward a particular conclusion (Cutlip et al., 2000).

A critical issue in evaluation research is determining what to measure. Stacks (2002) identified three possible objectives of a public relations campaign: informational, motivational, and behavioral. Informational objectives identify what the target audience should know or learn as the result of a campaign. Motivational objectives are those that inspire “a predisposition to act” (p. 28). Most important to organizations are behavioral objectives, where members of the target audience change their behavior or opinion in a way that is aligned with the organization’s objectives.

There is a strong relationship among the objectives, notes Stacks (2002):

> “Informational objectives establish what knowledge should be known or is needed by the publics the campaign or program is intended for…Motivational objectives test whether or not the information is having an effect and whether tactical strategies are having an impact on future behavior. Furthermore, the relationship between informational and motivational objectives is interactive; that is, if motivational objectives are not being met, informational objectives can be changed to overcome identified blockages. The behavioral objectives are often what ‘count,’ and they in the end define the success or failure of a campaign” (p. 29).

Measuring intended outcomes of a public relations campaign is more difficult than measuring what Broom and Dozier (1990) call the “many countable and measurable aspects of the communication process” (p. 53). Too often practitioners focus on measuring process rather than outcomes. They count the number of publications produced or press releases issued, rather than whether the publications or press releases contributed to the desired behavioral change in the target publics.

Key points when writing objectives include:

- **Focus on results, not processes.** Identify the program’s desired outcome. Broom & Dozier (1990) suggest starting with the word “To,” followed by a verb such as “increase,” “decrease,” or “maintain.” An informational objective example: “To increase awareness of our anti-drug message among Morris School District students ages 10 to 17 from 5 percent to 50 percent by May 1.” A motivational objective example: “To increase the percentage of Morris School District students ages 10 to 17 who say they will not use drugs, from 50 percent to 75 percent by May 1.” A behavioral objective example: “To decrease the percentage of students ages 15 to 17 who report using marijuana once a month or more from 50 percent to 20 percent by May 1.”
- **State in measurable terms how much change should occur.** Be specific about the percentage changes. “This program will increase employee awareness of the new mission statement from 50 percent to 95 percent by September 15.”
- **Select the most appropriate measurement criteria, based on objectives.** Measuring knowledge, motivational and behavioral outcomes usually requires benchmarking research at the start of the project, and conducting follow-up research to see how attitudes and behaviors have changed. For example, a city enacts carpooling legislation, which restricts the number

> of parking spaces available to employees at area firms. The public relations practitioner at one company must develop a campaign to encourage carpooling and mass transit. The practitioner needs to know how many employees currently park in the parking lot, and how many spaces will remain when the law goes into effect. The campaign's goal needs to be based on specific measures of how employee commuting behavior must change.

Although public relations research has made great strides toward quantifying the value of public relations, it is still difficult to provide the definitive answer to the question, "What is the value of this organization's public relations effort?" Gronstedt (1997) notes that outcomes such as increased sales, lower employee turnover and higher earnings per share are the result of many efforts, not just those in the public relations department. This makes it difficult to precisely determine the degree that public relations efforts contributed to the desired outcome. Williams (2003) cited the difficulty of quantifying the preventive value of good public relations counsel. "If I tell you that you shouldn't take a particular action, and as a result you don't do it and nothing bad happens to you, how do you measure that value? You can't" (p. 9). He added that public relations research has yet to measure the value of "peace and quiet" (p. 10).

Types of Public Relations Research

There are two types of public relations research: qualitative research and quantitative research. The purpose of qualitative research is to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of how certain people think or feel about a subject. However, the results cannot be generalized to larger populations. Qualitative research allows public relations practitioners to "discover rather than test" ideas (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 400). Quantitative research "is the controlled, objective, and systematic gathering of data" (Stacks, 2002, p. 6), which can be generalized to larger populations.

Both types of research are valuable, and can provide critical public relations insights, especially when used together. For example, a public relations practitioner might conduct a series of focus group interviews (qualitative research) to identify possible issues that concern employees. The practitioner could use information from the focus groups to develop questions for an employee survey (quantitative research).

Factors that determine which research methods to use include the nature of the research problem, budget, timing, the degree of accuracy required, and the importance of the findings to the success of the organization. All research requires making tradeoffs among rigor, cost, and timing. Some issues may not warrant extensive research because they will create little impact on the organization. Other issues may be expected to create a tremendous impact, but tight deadlines do not allow for designing and implementing an extensive research program. The reality is that public relations practitioners must gather the best information possible to make the best decisions possible within the constraints of the situation.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research involves only a few cases, but they are examined in great detail. Some qualitative research techniques frequently used in public relations include nominal group technique, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field observations.

Nominal Group Technique: This research technique has been used for organizational decision-making, problem-solving, and idea-generating purposes for market research (de Ruyter, 1996). The researcher assembles a purposive sample of 10 to 12 people. A purposive sample is a “nonprobability sample in which the researcher selects respondents according to his or her judgment as to their perceived representativeness or usefulness to the research process” (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 400). Group members typically are somewhat knowledgeable about the topic. A nominal group technique (NGT) method usually consists of five stages. First, a moderator presents the topic and makes sure participants understand the issue. In stage two, each participant works individually to generate ideas. In stage three, a facilitator records everyone’s ideas in a round-robin fashion. Stage four consists of a group discussion of ideas. Similar ideas may be combined into a single category, but only if the entire group agrees to combine traits. In the fifth stage, participants vote for the ideas of greatest importance (de Ruyter, 1996; Langford, Schoenfeld, & Izzo, 2002; Claxton, Brent Richie, & Zaichkowski, 1980). In some cases, NGT voting includes ranking, where participants give their first choice five points, second choice three points and third choice one point. NGT lacks precision, but is an effective brainstorming technique and often the first step to additional research.

In-depth Interviews: In-depth interviews are open-ended interviews, often conducted in person. Although the researcher may have a line of questioning, the researcher may move beyond it to probe deeper into the subject’s comments. In-depth interviews last from 45 minutes to several hours. They are useful at the formative stages of research (Broom & Dozier, 1990). Two types of in-depth interviews are the structured and unstructured interviews. In the structured interview, the researcher uses a detailed interview schedule with open and closed questions, and knows in advance what questions to cover. The unstructured interview is more informal, where the respondent is encouraged to talk freely; the respondent rather than the interviewer guides the course of the interview. Face-to-face in-depth interviews yield a high percentage of returns, but are expensive to administer. Also, lower response rates are being reported in high-crime areas, which may bias the findings. In-depth interviews also enable interviewers to clarify questions if necessary and present visual materials (Miller & Salkind, 2002).

Focus Groups: Focus groups are moderated group discussions involving six to 12 participants. The late Republican political consultant Lee Atwater said that focus groups “give you a sense of what makes people tick and a sense of what’s going on with people’s minds and lives that you simply can’t get with survey data” (as cited by Davis, Gavagan, & DeLuccia, 2001, p. 2). They reveal the range of opinion that exists surrounding a particular subject. The public relations practitioner might use focus groups when looking: for a range of ideas and feelings; to understand differences and perspectives; to uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviors or motivations; for ideas to emerge from the group; or to pilot test ideas, materials, plans or policies. Focus groups can also be used to develop questions for surveys and other quantitative research, and to shed light on quantitative research data already collected (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Field Observations: Field observations are defined as “a qualitative observation technique that puts you among the public you are studying in a naturalistic setting” (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 149). Public relations practitioners conduct field research whenever they observe or participate in a social behavior and try to understand it. Field observations are used as a data collection activity and theory generating activity. They offer the advantage of probing social life in its natural habitat. There are several types of field observations, ranging from complete participant (where the researcher's true identity and purpose are not known) to complete observer (where the researcher observes social processes without becoming part of it). One public relations use of field research is observing patterns to see how people work their way through trade shows.

Q Methodology: Between Qualitative and Quantitative

Q methodology is the scientific study of subjectivity. Subjectivity is "a person's communication of his or her point of view" (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 12). Q methodology provides a quantitative means to study a participant's point of view or beliefs. Q-study research usually involves a small number of participants. Some Q studies are developed around a single participant.

In a Q study, each respondent sorts a number of statements about a subject (the Q-sample) along a continuum, according to a condition of instruction. The respondent may be asked to sort the Q-sample from "most unlike me" (-5) to "most like me" (+5). In some cases, the condition of instruction may be to sort the Q-sample according to how they think someone else might sort it, or how it would be sorted in an "ideal" world.

Q-sample statements may be culled from media reports, interviews, talk shows, letters to the editor, previous research, and a variety other sources. A researcher conducting a Q study on people's attitudes toward the First Amendment might include such statements in the Q-sample as:

- *The media should have the right to say and print whatever it wants, regardless of truth.*
- *The media have the responsibility of verifying the truth of all information before broadcasting or publishing.*
- *An unrestricted media is the hallmark of a free society.*
- *Pornography should be outlawed.*

And so on. The average Q-sample has 40 items. Each participant's Q-sort is factor analyzed by computer with the other participants' Q-sorts. The computer groups people with similar sortings under a common factor. Each factor represents a particular point of view. How strongly each individual "fits" a particular factor is indicated by how he or she loads on the factor.

Quantitative Research Methods

Quantitative research methods allow researchers to draw statistical inferences about a population. Researchers may conclude, within a certain confidence level (how certain they are that the results are correct), that the findings hold true not only for those surveyed, but also for the entire population within that sample frame (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

Content analysis provides a means to measure qualitative data quantitatively (Stacks, 2002). It systematically analyzes the content of communication to determine whether key messages are being communicated to key audiences. It can be used to analyze documents, news articles and television pieces, speeches, interviews, and focus group results. Possible measurements for content analysis include number of clips, total circulation of the publications, number of inches or minutes, positive versus negative stories, audience type (key audience or general audience), product mentions, whether key messages appear, key media or general media, quality of the publication or program, and prominence of the company in the story (Gronstedt, 1997; Williams, 2003).

Public relations practitioners may be tempted to put a dollar value to media coverage using "advertising value equivalency." This is a crude calculation in which the practitioner measures coverage by column inches in a publication or seconds on the air, and multiplies that by the media's advertising rates. Most public relations researchers do not advocate this method of content analysis for several reasons. No research exists to suggest that news stories have an impact equal to advertising; there is no known relationship between the two. Some practitioners claim that a story from an unbiased journalist is more credible than a paid advertisement. However, the credibility of news media stories varies depending on the subject. Additionally, there is no advertising equivalent for a negative or neutral story. The Institute for Public Relations recommends that public relations practitioners avoid trying to measure what their efforts would equate to in advertising dollars, and instead focus on how coverage helps achieve the organization's goals (Jeffries-Fox, 2003).

Software such as ATLAS.ti can help practitioners develop detailed analyses of qualitative data, such as for content analysis (Miller & Salkind, 2002). Also, many public relations research firms offer content analysis services. For quantitative data analysis, SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is frequently used in public relations research.

Surveys: One common quantitative public relations research method is the survey or questionnaire. The survey sample frame defines the particular population under study (for example, all non-management employees at XYZ Company who have worked there for less than five years). In order for a survey to have external validity (defined by Broom & Dozier, 1990, as "the degree to which a measure is valid for other settings and populations," p. 397), researchers must draw a probability sample. Probability samples are drawn in such a way that the researcher knows the probability of selecting any particular sampling element (Broom & Dozier). In random sampling, this means that every person who falls within the population defined by the sample frame has an equal possibility of being surveyed. The size of the sample depends on budget, and the margin of error and degree of uncertainty with which the researcher can tolerate. A larger sample increases both accuracy and costs (Williams, 2003). There are several free online sites to help calculate sample size based on desired confidence level and confidence interval (margin of error), including Survey Research System's Sample Calculator at http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm.

Survey questions must be carefully constructed. Unlike qualitative studies, quantitative research puts limits on respondents' choices. In a qualitative study, a researcher might ask a broad question such as, "What are some of the things you like about the Morris School District"? A quantitative survey usually provides response choices:

1. *Do you send your child(ren) to a Morris School District school?*
   ○Yes
   ○ No

2. *What characteristic of those listed below is the most important for schools?* (Pick one choice from a list)
   ○ Safe environment
   ○ Strong academic environment
   ○ Excellent sports program
   ○ Diversity
3. *Please respond to the following statements about the Morris School District by circling the number that indicates your level of agreement or disagreement: 1=Strongly Agree 2=Disagree 3=Undecided 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree*

Provides a safe learning environment for my children.	1	2	3	4	5
Provides academic challenges for my children.	1	2	3	4	5
Enables my children to develop to the best of their abilities.	1	2	3	4	5

Questions should also be tested to ensure items not are not ambiguous, irrelevant, confusing, or biased (Gronstedt, 1997). Care must also be taken with the wording of questions, since the questionnaire must attempt to operationalize difficult concepts, such as employee satisfaction, or community satisfaction with the organization. Operationalizing "is the process of connecting an abstract concept to observable phenomena in the real world" (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 163). The questions must be appropriately designed to measure those concepts. For that reason, Broom & Dozier (1990) recommend using existing item sets from previous research; see the *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement* (Miller & Salkind, 2002) for examples.

Surveys can be conducted face to face, by telephone, by mail, and via the Internet. ***Face-to-face surveys*** have the highest response rates. They also have the advantage of enabling the interviewer to show respondents materials to respond. Face-to-face surveys are also the most expensive and time-consuming to administer. Also, the presence of the interviewer may cause respondents to skew their responses to appear more favorable to interviewer.

Telephone surveys are less expensive than face-to-face surveys, and can be completed more quickly. Virtually every home in the United States has a telephone, and the development of random-digit dialing programs (which eliminate the problem of relying on telephone directories, since 30% of the phones nationally are unlisted) theoretically provides access to most Americans. However, telephone surveys have higher refusal rates than face-to-face surveys. Many people use caller ID and answering machines to screen calls, making it harder to reach participants (Dillman, 2000). Although survey calls are exempt from National Do Not Call Registry provisions (as are those by charities, politicians and those with whom people already have established business relationships) (www.donotcall.gov, 2004), the public seems more resistant to responding to calls from strangers. In telephone research, the choices must be easily understood over the telephone. Telephone interviews are usually shorter than face-to-face interviews, generally lasting 10 minutes or less, therefore limiting your ability to analyze difficult concepts or issues (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Stacks 2000).

Mail surveys cost less than telephone surveys and are easier to administer. Mailing lists may be available to target specific publics. However, because mail surveys are easy to ignore, they also have a lower response rate. To increase response rates, Dillman (2000) recommends these five steps:

1. Develop a respondent-friendly questionnaire that is easy to read and understand, and has an attractive layout.
2. Plan to contact the recipient up to five times, with a prenotice letter, the questionnaire mailing itself, a follow-up thank-you postcard, a replacement questionnaire, and a final contact by telephone or express mail.
3. Use first-class stamps on return envelopes instead of business-reply envelopes.
4. Personalize correspondence, using real stationary, the respondent's name on the letter, and an actual signature.
5. Include a token financial incentive ($1 to $5) with the survey. (However, the promise of incentives after a survey is completed, or the chance of winning a prize will not increase response rates.)

Internet surveys are gaining in popularity because they can reach large numbers of respondents without increasing costs. Once the data collection system is developed, costs are similar whether the sample is 100 or 10,000. Many Web-survey systems also provide analyses. Internet surveys "provide survey capabilities far beyond those available for any other type of self-administered questionnaire" (Dillman, 2000, p. 354). However, there are several drawbacks to Internet surveys. Web-based surveys may not be compatible with all browsers, which means some people who want to respond to the survey may not be able to do so. Also, although use of the Internet is growing steadily, many people do not have access to the Internet. Many, also, are not familiar enough with the Internet to navigate through a Web-based survey. Web-based surveys often do not provide researchers with control over their sample. Researchers may know about who is responding to the survey, but not about those who are not. Web surveys, however, may be good for populations with high rates of computer use, such as employees in a high-tech firm (Dillman, 2000).

Research Problem

Little has been written about the role that public relations research plays in helping to shape both the organization's strategies and its public relations programs. I believe that public relations research plays a significant role in shaping strategy and developing programs that help the organization achieve its strategic goals. Through measurement activities, research also helps quantify the value of effective public relations.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) called research "the foundation of effective public relations." These short case studies look at how several public relations practitioners used different research methodologies to develop different types of public relations programs.

Research Questions

The following questions served to focus information gathering and guide the research effort.

Question 1: How does your company (or client/organization) practice public relations research?

This question is designed to determine when, where, why and how research is conducted. That includes determining what methodologies are used, whether research is conducted for strategy and program development, measurement or both, and whether public relations research plays a role in two-way symmetrical communication.

Question 2: How does public relations research fit within your public relations department and within your organization?

This question is designed to identify the perception of public relations research within the organization, and how supportive the organization is to research.

Question 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

Research by Gronstedt (1997) and Williams (2003), among others, suggests that lack of funding is one of the leading reasons why organizations do not conduct public relations research. This question is designed to find out how those who conduct public relations research manage within constraints.

Research Method

A qualitative research design was used to examine, in detail, a small sample of participants' observations on public relations research. According to Broom & Dozier, "a depth interview is an open-ended interview in which an individual is encouraged to discuss an issue, problem or question in his or her own terms " (1990, p. 145). This approach is appropriate for research that is exploratory and descriptive in nature (Yin, 1994). The depth interviews were used to develop several brief case studies/best practices profiles. Purposive sampling, which are "drawn in a manner that meets the special needs of the research effort" (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 123), was used to identify professional public relations practitioners who conduct various types of public relations research. Nine public relations professionals were interviewed to develop the multi-case study. The cases include:

- A large Northeastern bank that used focus groups, executive interviews, employee surveys and Six Sigma methodology to identify communications issues and make improvements.
- A public relations firm in Ohio that conducted an anthropological research study for a regional bank to identify how people feel about money; the results were used to generate nationwide media coverage, and by the bank's marketing department to develop banking products.
- A large insurance company in the Midwest that conducted a series of employee focus groups to identify employees' perceptions about the organization following a merger; results were used to develop programs, and follow-up surveys were used to measure results.
- A nonprofit sporting association that conducted an online survey of those attending one of its events to measure return on investment for a major sponsor; the ROI information will be used to recruit sponsors in the future.
- A large manufacturing company that conducted a series of employee surveys to measure the effectiveness of executive presentations and key message retention by employees; this has led to a steady improvement in both areas.

- A Midwest public relations firm that conducted extensive research to identify and understand the nation's "influentials" (Keller & Berry, 2003) on an issue facing their client, which faces an upcoming battle on Capitol Hill; the segmentation research is being used to target its PR/public affairs efforts.
- A Midwest university that conducted research to provide the foundation for a new reputation building and branding program; research included telephone interviews with various constituent groups, an online survey of faculty and staff, focus groups, and omnibus surveys.

Snowball sampling was used to build the purposive sample. An e-mail was sent to students and graduates of Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications' ISDP Communications Management master's degree program to solicit their participation. It also requested that they forward the e-mail to other communicators who have conducted public relations research who might be willing to participate in a case study.

A case study is one of several methods of social science research. Yin (1994) says the most important condition for determining what type of research strategy to use is the type of research questions being asked. "Case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 1). Case studies provide a means for researchers to analyze real-life events that cannot be controlled in a laboratory setting.

Case studies enable researchers to investigate complex, real-life situations with multiple data points and variables, which may be too complex for survey or experimental strategies (Yin, 1994, p. 15). The method also allows researchers to investigate contemporary events within their real-life context. It also enables researchers to explore situations and identify causal relationships when the boundaries between event and content are not distinct.

The case study should use multiple sources of evidence to increase validity. Case studies should also be built upon a theoretical proposition, which should be developed *before* researchers start their data collection and analysis.

The case study has the same rigor as other research methods when the investigator uses four standard tests to establish the case study's research quality. These tests are construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Construct validity means that the investigator has adequately identified what is going to be studied, and can demonstrate that the types of measures selected do, indeed, measure what the researcher intended them to measure. Internal validity means that the researcher can show, through various data analysis techniques, the causal relationships between conditions. This allows investigators to infer how one event, even though not directly observed, led to another. External validity is when the researcher establishes "the domain to which a study's findings can be generalized" (Yin, 1994, p. 33). Case studies are not surveys, but instead rely on "analytical generalization," in which the investigator generalizes a particular set of results to some broader theory (Yin, 1994, p. 36). Reliability is when the researcher can demonstrate that the operations of the study can be repeated with the same results (Yin, 1994, p. 33). This means that if another researcher analyzed the case using the same procedures and sources of evidence, the results would be the same.

These particular cases are designed to further investigate the role that public relations research plays in the organization.

Case Study: Midwest Insurance Company

Information for this case study was obtained from a telephone interview with the former infrastructure services communications manager at a major insurance company in the Midwest. In 2001, as a result of a company reorganization, various infrastructure groups were centralized into one function. The communications manager was charged with developing a public relations research strategy to identify issues involved with bringing these groups together, and the concerns that employees faced. The resulting communications audit involved conducting 19 focus groups with more than 150 employees (out of 950 employees) in three locations. Each focus group lasted 1 1/2 hours. Focus groups were conducted on every shift and included people in all departments at all levels.

The telephone interview for this case study lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours. Information was also obtained from management presentations, memos, and the situational analysis and communication recommendation, which resulted from those studies.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

The idea for a communications audit arose during a conversation between the head of IT and members of the communications department. The head of IT asked the communications team what value they could add to the newly consolidated infrastructure services group. The communications team proposed conducting a communications audit.

Originally the communications team proposed a quantitative survey. However, the dominant coalition expressed concern that a quantitative survey might not provide the depth of results that they were seeking. Also, the company had conducted a number of quantitative surveys, and there was concern that people were "surveyed out." The dominant coalition wanted the communications team to talk to employees at a grassroots level, to gain deeper insights into employees' thoughts and feelings.

The focus groups took place over an eight-week period in 2001. The communications manager conducted all focus groups. She worked with human resources managers at each site. The HR managers were responsible for logistics at each site and recruiting participants based on the communication manager's requirements. There were 15 participants at each focus group. Participants in each group were from different departments, but were of the same grade level. Thus, there were separate focus groups for middle managers, senior managers, supervisors and line employees. Between four and 12 focus groups were conducted per site.

The communications manager took steps to minimize potential participant discomfort. "The way I did them [focus groups] was different than how I was taught to do focus groups. I went by myself. I did not have someone transcribing for me. I did not make it a big production. I wanted participants to trust me. I knew there were pockets of skepticism. I wanted to be as sensitive to that as I could be." She developed a line of questioning, and asked questions in order. She took hundreds of pages of notes. "At the end of the day, I would tear off handwritten notes, and fax them to the department secretary for transcribing."

Afterwards, the communications team pored over the findings to identify common patterns and issues. Several key issues emerged. Employees expressed concerns about the consistency of information they received. Their managers, management memos, senior management, and company communications often delivered different messages. As a result, employees weren't sure whom to trust.

Although focus groups are not usually generalizable to larger populations, this communicator conducted an unusually large number of them. Management understood that the results were not quantifiable. However, the themes and messages that this communicator reported were expressed consistently in focus groups in all three locations. The dominant coalition felt comfortable in charging the communications team to develop a communications plan based on these results.

A number of new communications programs resulted, including management roundtables, sessions in which company senior leaders spoke to employees, talking points for leaders and managers, and a number of two-way communications initiatives.

Eight months after the communications plan launched, the company surveyed employees to measure results. Scores were up significantly in several areas. Nearly 80% said communication was improving at all levels of the organization, and 87% said they felt they could speak openly and honestly in work groups.

Public relations research was critical for successfully launching the communications program, said the communications manager. Without the powerful statements obtained during the focus groups, it was doubtful that senior management would have provided the resources and support necessary to launch the program. Follow-up surveys indicated that the communications program is moving the needle in positive directions for the organization.

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

The dominant coalition received the research results extremely well, even the negative feedback. Company leadership wanted to know how to use the research findings to make improvements. This was the first time that public relations research had ever been conducted, and its success helped lead to research becoming a regular part of public relations activities.

The communications manager noted that it all started with an innocent question by a senior manager who asked, "What can you do for my team?" The communicator replied that in order to help, she needed to understand the audience and the issues better. "One of the guiding principles of public relations is knowing your audience and what your audience needs. You can't do that unless you ask. The research made all the difference in the world to the success of this project. It gave us credibility, so we knew what was hitting the mark and what wasn't. It provided rigor, and enabled us to talk to managers in the language of the business. There was science behind the results."

Research question 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

One initial constraint was how to obtain management buy-in. In this company, the culture was such that it was easier to obtain management support for focus groups rather than surveys or other quantitative research. One reason, the communication manager believes, is that quantitative surveys required the input and approval of senior-level people. Focus groups could be conducted without going through those levels of approval. They could take place under the radar.

Another issue affecting the research was the sense of urgency, and the requirements that other projects be delayed while this communicator worked on the focus groups. "When I was out having discussion groups, I wasn't working on other deliverables. There was a conscious trade off." The lack of resources meant reprioritizing existing projects. Public relations research could not be added to the existing workload without taking away something else.

Case Study: Northeast Bank

Information for this case study was obtained from a telephone interview with the vice president of communications at a major bank in the Northeast. Following a merger in late 2000, the bank reorganized several disparate businesses into a single consumer-banking arm. At the same time, the consumer-banking arm undertook a productivity program called Six Sigma, which focused on eliminating inefficiencies and realigning business processes. In 2002, an internal communications audit was conducted by an outside public relations consulting firm, which revealed that redundant communications and inconsistent messaging was causing employee dissatisfaction, and kept employees from fully engaging in the company's strategic agenda. The internal communications department decided to use Six Sigma methodology to drill deeper into issues raised by the audit, and identify ways to improve the communications process.

The case study telephone interview was approximately 1 1/2 hours. Information was also obtained from a Gold Quill entry about the project, management presentations about the Six Sigma research, and the internal communications audit report.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

The internal communications audit was conducted shortly after the bank's merger to create a baseline profile of employee communication needs. The audit included interviews with key executives, focus groups with employees around the country, and both online and paper surveys of employees. It also included interviews with managers in each line of business.

Focus group findings indicated that employees were unhappy with several issues involving e-mail. The communicator received a call from one focus group moderator, who said, "It's unbelievable the outrage people have toward e-mail. People in meetings are yelling at us."

The communications audit identified several reasons behind the e-mail outrage. One was lack of access. The communications team assumed that every employee had access to e-mail, but that turned out to not be the case. Another issue involved pre-merger firewalls, which still existed in some cases and prevented many employees from accessing important information. "You can imagine the frustration, if there's something that you need to know about, and you are forbidden from getting it," said the communicator. "If we didn't have the focus groups, we wouldn't have known about the problem."

The employee feedback about e-mail also resonated with senior executives, who complained that they received too much e-mail. The communications team decided to develop a research project to investigate the state of organizational communications, and develop communication strategies to resolve employee concerns. The organization's chief financial officer suggested using the Six Sigma methodology to conduct the research.

The communicator noted that not all communicators initially embraced the idea of using Six Sigma. "As communication people we're supposed to drum up moral support to get people to believe in Six Sigma. It was funny when the table was turned on us. The reaction of some people was, 'We don't use it, we just talk about it.' We were challenged to put our money where our mouths were."

Six Sigma requires following a series of strict protocols designed to determine where variation occurs in a process and how to eliminate it. To achieve Six Sigma, a process must not produce more than 3.4 defects per million. A defect is anything outside customer specifications. The communications team defined a "defect" as any survey response where an employee said he or she was "dissatisfied" or "strongly dissatisfied."

The team started by mapping the "as is" process of producing organizational communications. Using qualitative and quantitative data from the audit, team members looked for "hot spots," or areas that caused employee dissatisfaction. They created a Pareto chart to determine what types of communications produced the most defects. The Pareto effect says that 80% of problems result from 20% of the causes. Pareto charts arrange data to identify those factors that cause the most problems. Concentrating improvement efforts on the 20% will have the greatest impact as a result.

The communications team examined the bank's organizational communications, including broadcast e-mail, print newsletters, memos, and online content. The exercise found that e-mail communiqués contributed to 80% of the variation. This became the area on which to focus.

Team members analyzed the content of mass distribution e-mail by charting three months of e-mail data, including volume, type of information, production and approval times, and messaging. They also conducted an online employee survey to help better understand the six critical communications factors identified by employees in the internal communications audit. According to the audit, employees wanted communication that was (in order): 1) timely; 2) convenient to access; 3) brief/concise; 4) easy to understand; 5) accurate; and 6) important to them.

The team analyzed the data to determine what steps were necessary in order for e-mail to deliver on employees' top six communication factors. Initially, team members suspected that lengthy approval processes were responsible for the variation, but the data did not support this. Research indicated that the real issue was the volume of e-mail that employees received --75% of organizational communications were distributed via e-mail. This translated into 1,200-1,500 mass e-mail messages distributed annually. "Unknowingly, we were smothering employees in information, because we were looking at our own individual parts and not the whole," said the communicator.

Team members began to systematically characterize the types of mass-communications e-mails sent to employees. Through this process, they identified six types of e-mails. The team decided to adopt a bundled e-mail approach to reduce the number of mass communication e-mails from 400 to 190 each quarter. By bundling e-mails, the company eliminated 40 million e-mails a year company wide. This was significant, not only from an individual productivity perspective, but also in the cost of computer storage. The business paid $3.5 million a year for computer data storage. Reducing e-mails saved $116,000 a year in storage costs. More important than the cost-savings, bundling increased employee satisfaction with e-mail communications.

“One of the worst things you can do with surveys and focus groups is not to use the information that you collect," said the communicator. "If you’re not going to use the information, don't collect it. It can only help morale if people say they're sick of getting e-mails, and six months later there's a program that does something about it."

As a result of using Six Sigma, the communications team discovered that their inconsistent communications often caused the variance. "Ironically, in an effort to speed things up, we often postponed the upfront research, need identification and objective-setting that makes communication more effective," said the communicator.

The team introduced other improvements to their communications process. “We learned that we need to add a final step -- measurement -- to our process,” said the communicator. “This enabled us to create a two-way symmetrical model of communications, which benchmarking showed is most effective. Communication is now a loop rather than a start and end process.”

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

Public relations research is initiated differently in each area of the company. The communicator noted that there were common steps that communicators followed – they identified a communication need, developed the plan, obtained approval, and distributed the communication. The problem was that it was one-way communication, said the communicator. "There was no feedback loop, no measurement of any of our processes. We were sending things out, but didn’t know how they were being perceived. Research and measurement are the missing pieces. In the past, evaluation was, ‘What does the top guy think?’ Now, evaluation is based on numbers and facts. Now there is a real commitment to measurement and evaluation.”

The dominant coalition looks at communication as "the squishy side of business, the soft stuff," said the communicator. "They aren't used to looking at it with numbers.” He says that because the dominant coalition is made up of "numbers guys," communication research is an important way of building the credibility of the communications department. "With research, if someone wants to send out a four-page e-mail message at 4 p.m. on Friday in July, we can show them that no one will read it at that time. When we have the research to back it up, they are more apt to listen."

Research questions 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

The communicator believes that constraints still exist, but in his organization it is getting easier to budget for and justify research. "You used to need a big-budget if you were going to measure anything. Now, you can use Web tracking software, and conduct online surveys without much of a cost factor." He notes that audits are expensive, and for that reason, his company conducts them only every three years. The organization is looking at ways to conduct research in smaller bites, such as through monthly mini surveys. These would provide a way to track how people perceive messages on an ongoing basis.

Case Study: Non-governmental Agency

Information for this case study was obtained from telephone interviews with the senior counselor and research director at a Wisconsin-based public relations firm, and the director of public relations and director of issues management at a non-governmental agency representing farmers. The public relations firm conducted a series of focus groups with so-called "influentials" (Keller & Berry, 2003) to help the farming agency prepare for an expected legislative fight about a new farm bill.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was taped. Additional information was obtained from the project's request for proposal.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

In 2001 and 2002, farmers went through a vigorous legislative battle on Capitol Hill to enact a new farm bill. Farm legislation is enacted every five to six years. During the battle, editorial and news coverage in the press was overwhelmingly negative. When President Bush signed the legislation in the spring of 2002, it triggered a fresh round of media criticism. "Our group got most of what members wanted, but individual farmers were quite disturbed about the press attention," said the farm agency's director of public relations. "Even though we won, individual members felt that we lost, and it was widely thought that the scars from this battle would carry over into the next one." Future farm legislation would face continued media scrutiny, and perhaps trigger even more difficult legislative wrangling.

As part of its issues management program, the agency wanted to conduct research to start identifying what the public thinks about farm policy, as well as the impact of the negative press on future farm bills. "We've done numerous research projects over the years, many having to do with the so-called image of farmers. We found that the public has high regard for farmers, but farmers don't necessarily feel that, in part because there is an increasing concern about specific farm practices, such as the use of farm chemicals, how animals are treated and a lot of other issues in the environmental area." The agency wanted to use research to establish a baseline of public opinion.

The agency originally wanted to conduct a series of general consumer focus groups. However, the research director at the public relations firms had become interested in a concept proposed by RoperASW, which suggests that most people's attitudes are shaped by 10% of the population, who are called influentials (Keller & Berry, 2003). Influentials are those who write letters to the editor, run for public office, and go to school board meetings. They are the people who are most likely to take action for or against an issue. The public relations firm proposed conducting focus groups of influentials.

Screening participants for focus groups is frequently time-consuming. Adding the “influential” requirement made the process even more challenging. Screeners asked potential participants if they recently:

- Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs.
- Wrote or called a politician at the local, state or national level.
- Served on committee of a local organization.
- Served as officers of a club or organization.
- Attended a political rally, speech or organized protest.
- Wrote a letter to the editor or called a live broadcast to express their opinions.
- Were active members of a group trying to influence public policy or government.
- Made a speech.
- Worked for a political party.
- Wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper.
- Held or ran for political office.

A "yes" answer to three or more of these questions qualified a person as an influential.

The public relations firm conducted focus groups in three cities nationwide. Two focus groups of eight to 10 people were conducted in each city. Selecting the locations of the focus groups was almost as much of a challenge as identifying the influentials. The agency wanted a Northeast, urban location; a Western urban area, where participants would have some interaction with agriculture; and a crossroads area, where participants came from both urban and agriculture settings.

The focus groups yielded a deeper understanding of how farming issues were perceived by those outside the farm community. Focus-group participants did card-sorts to prioritize where farm issues rated in how the federal government spent money. Researchers found that farm policy never ranked higher than fifth in relation to other programs. Other priorities took precedence over farm policy in the minds of the influential public.

Focus group participants also raised concerns about current farm policy, and opened the door to issues that had not previously been discussed or considered by the agency. The results “gave the agency license to talk about things that a lot of people suspected, but because of its history and tradition, people didn't talk about before," said the public relations firm’s research director. The focus groups also suggested that the agency might need to develop two-way communications relationships with groups that it previously viewed as antagonistic to its mission. The groups suggested that people who may pivotal to farm policy in the future might be involved in organizations with which it does not now communicate. The research results are helping to open discussions between the agency and people in these organizations, so they can start building relationships for the future.

The agency has shared the findings with other agricultural organizations. Although they have not formally measured the success of this research, the public relations director said that anecdotally, people have been paying attention to it. It is the first level of an ongoing research program to identify the changing attitudes toward farmers and farming in the United States.

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

The agency recognizes public relations research as valuable, but the extent of research conducted depends upon the budget. "We look at our budget and see if we have any money left over," said the public relations director at the agency. The organization first started conducting major research programs in the 1990s.

The results of public relations research are “always well received” by those within the agency, said the agency’s public relations director. He believes that ongoing research has helped move the perception needle internally. He said that those in the organization recognize the value of doing research and would want to do more if the organization had the money to do it. The agency’s public relations director questions whether public relations research has lasting meaning for the agency’s members. Research may indicate that the general public does not have negative attitudes toward farmers and farm issues. "But the next time there's a negative story on TV, they'll say, ‘Well, they hate us.’"

The public relations director believes that public relations research is very important to the success of the agency. "It puts everyone on the same page, if only momentarily.” He notes that in this environment, there are a number of conflicting views about how the world works and what should be done about farm policy. "The value of research is to get some empirical evidence that everyone can digest at the same time, and in the best case may be perceived as a basis to proceed."

The “influentials” focus group research findings have been used internally with the agency management and its board of directors, as well as with state farming organizations. It has been useful for questioning perceptions, and developing new, more effective strategies.

Research question 3: How do real-world constraints such as lack of time and money, affect research?

Money is the agency’s primary obstacle to conducting research, said the public relations director. "If we could afford to have ongoing research, then each individual project would be less precious and less of a battleground," he said. "On the other hand, with the research that we have done, there has been consensus.” The decision whether to pursue a research project is not taken lightly.

There needs to be strong organizational consensus that the research will deliver value for the organization before research is pursued.

Case Study: Manufacturing Firm

A large manufacturing firm in the Northeast conducts quarterly Town Hall meetings, where senior managers communicate to all employees about the company's progress toward its goals. A public relations manager developed a research project to answer critical questions about Town Hall events and measure changes in employee responses over time.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

The purpose of the quarterly Town Hall meeting was to provide the company's chief information officer an opportunity to deliver his vision and key messages to team members around the globe. The public relations research project was designed to answer several questions, including the level of organizational participation in Town Hall events, reasons for nonparticipation, how relevant and worthwhile employees felt the meetings were, key messages employees were able to articulate following the meeting, and ideas about how to improve the meeting. It also sought to measure message penetration, i.e., whether employees picked up on the key messages of each Town Hall meeting.

The public relations manager developed a series of Web-based surveys, deciding upon this methodology for several reasons. First, survey results could be compared with data from earlier surveys, which could add to the interpretive power. The second reason was budget; there was none for conducting this research. The department was limited to using resources and technology available within the company. The third reason for this methodology was that all employees had computer access. It was physically possible to reach 100% of the population through this method. Finally, the public relations manager noted that the research design provided results that could be easily understood by managers and readily implemented.

The public relations manager started with standard employee survey questions, and worked with the communications team, the director of communications, and the strategy planner for the office of the CIO to develop additional questions. Surveys were distributed quarterly to a random sampling of employees. Approximately one-third of all employees received each survey via e-mail after each Town Hall meeting. Unlike many post-event surveys, this survey was distributed to both those who attended and those who did not. The public relations manager also wanted to find out why people did not attend.

The internal communications group used several electronic survey tools, and eventually settled on Perseus Survey Solutions, which created the Web survey, tabulated the quantifiable data, and prepared the qualitative data. The public relations manager conducted a content analysis of qualitative responses by coding each response and grouping like items.

After each Town Hall meeting, the moderator gave participants a heads-up that some would receive random surveys. A note was e-mailed to a random distribution of employees (between 460 and 577) and the survey link. Surveys generally remained open for about one week. In some surveys, reminder notes were sent to the sample to increase response rates. Over the course of the multiple surveys, response rates ranged from 35% to 59%, with most in the 50%-plus range.

The internal communications department used survey results to continuously improve the Town Hall meetings. They found that message penetration has continuously improved over time, which the public relations manager believes is the result of presenters honing their key messages better as a result of feedback from previous surveys. Employees were hearing and processing the key messages. The public relations manager notes that organizational messages are beginning to permeate the organization’s culture.

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

The manufacturing firm has a designated communications research function. The vice president of public relations reports to the CEO. There is an operations team within public relations. Communications research is part of the operations team.

Communications research is used in various ways throughout the organization. The company participates in several international trade shows each year. Those involved in trade show planning use public relations research extensively. They look at messaging, penetration, tone, total volume of media placements, and whether key messages are being communicated.

Communications research conducts extensive media analyses, especially following a product launch. This helps communicators determine whether they need to modify messages. The research team also conducts consumer communications research, including a major global questionnaire every 18 months to measure whether people’s attitudes toward the company’s products have changed, and in what direction.

The reception that public relations research receives from the dominant coalition and those who commission research depends on the results. The firm is a data-driven company. One-third of the salaried employees are engineers. There is a tremendous desire for information and data to identify what the company is doing right and where there is opportunity for improvement. Communications research is used to measure strategy and determine whether changes are necessary.

The communications manager believes that public relations research is critical to the overall success of the organization. The organization’s research director said, "Our strategies are more successful because they benefit from research results. Research helps us be more focused." She added, "Metrics collected systematically help our credibility with counseling, which is one of our major focuses, especially with senior leadership. It improves our efficiency."

The general perception of public relations research depends on whom one asks. Employees are more aware if the research measures something that directly applies to their function. Those who work on trade shows find public relations research vital. The research director noted, "They are clamoring for data, even before we have it analyzed and ready to be distributed. They are eager to get that feedback so they can get a sense of what worked and what didn't.” Senior leaders also use public relations research extensively. “They want to know, ‘Are we achieving the goals we set from a functional standpoint?’ For someone like a speechwriter, however, public relations research is not as relevant because we haven't historically measured success for a single speech in a specific venue. That's not something we spend all a lot of time on."

The research director believes the general perception of public relations research is positive. "I think it's helpful that we get soft, qualitative, attitudinal feedback to our engineers in a format that they can digest. They appreciate that we measure the same things over time, so we can make comparisons.”

Research question 3: How to real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

The research director noted that everything is a trade-off. "Obviously, I'd like $50 billion to do this [research], but that's not going to happen. There is a mental calculus we have to go through, which is how much will investing in the program pay back with the kind of counsel we give and the tactical impressions we can make going forward. There's always the question of whether the money is well invested so we can reap a reward. There's always a constraint, but we're very effective in using data that we do collect. We don't collect data on everything, and we wouldn't want to do that."

Case Study: Non-profit Athletic Association

This case study was developed about a nonprofit group that sanctions horse shows in the Southeastern United States.

Research Question 1: How does your organization practice public relations research?

This case study looked at the role of public relations research in sports marketing and public relations. Specifically, it focused on how research can be used to measure the return on investment for major sponsors of sporting events.

The athletic association’s year-end event is the Grand Finale & Finals Horse Show in November, where equestrians vie for ribbons and titles. The value of any horse named Hunter Horse of the Year increases dramatically.

The association’s board has 25 people, who are primarily trainers and riders. The organization constantly struggles to raise the $50,000 required to stage the horse show. Each year board members solicit sponsors from area tack shops to help offset expenses.

A public relations professional was involved with the event as a volunteer. She thought that there was an opportunity to push event sponsorship to a broader group, but she needed to conduct public relations research to make that happen. “We had been trying to get sponsorship money out of the same people, the same equestrian companies every year,” she said. “What I tried to do was remove the horse show from the equestrian world and take it to the corporate world.”

From casual observation, she hypothesized that the demographics of the show's attendees and participants would appeal to certain marketers outside the equestrian realm. "The equestrian sport is more about lifestyle," she says. "We have a lot of people who come to the show not because they ride, but because they want to associate with people in the equestrian world. The equestrian world has a healthy demographic, and high net worth individuals. While we knew this anecdotally, we had no research for our specific membership that we could take to corporations." Although there was demographic information available from the national organization, there was nothing that focused on members in that region specifically.

She offered to develop a Web-based survey that would capture demographic information about the organization's membership, and measure members' awareness of and attitudes toward a key sponsor's products. For the first time, a major luxury automotive manufacturer agreed to sponsor the event after she made a selling feature of sponsorship the survey. "I told them it was a benefit of being a title sponsor. It was a way that we could prove ourselves to them."

Her survey asked participants to describe their level of awareness of the sponsor's various products pre- and post-event. In addition, she developed a semantic differential scale to determine participants' attitudes toward products. In the semantic differential scale, the scale is bounded on either end by opposite adjectives (for example, "safe" and "unsafe"). Survey takers select their attitudes on the continuum:

	Extremely	Very	Somewhat	Neither/ Nor	Somewhat	Very	Extremely	
Safe	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	***Unsafe***
Sporty	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	***Conservative***
Expensive	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	***Affordable***

She selected the adjective pairs by reviewing the automotive manufacturer's sales literature. After developing the scale, she confirmed the adjective pairs with the manufacturer.

The survey was administered via the association's Web site. She selected this methodology for several reasons. First, association members regularly visit the Web site, so completing a Web-based survey would be a somewhat familiar activity. Second, she had just two weeks to develop the survey and get it approved by the all-volunteer board; the Web distribution would save time. Third, and most important, the Web-based survey was most economical.

The Web-based survey had some drawbacks. She noted that response rates were low (12% of association members responded to the pre-event survey, 13% to the post-event survey). There could also have been self-selection issues that affected the results. However, she felt this was the first-year trial run, and believed response rates will increase in subsequent years. She also noted that for all three sponsor products tested, member awareness increased significantly from pre-event to post-event. In addition, more people rated the products more "like my personality" in the post-event survey than the pre-event survey. "We saw the needle move on some key indicators," she said. These results were presented to the sponsor so they could see tangible benefits of their sponsorship.

Research Question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

The association is a volunteer organization. The public relations professional developed the public relations research plan as a volunteer and persuaded the board to approve it. There is no formal public relations department for the organization. Any future public relations research will probably need to be conducted by volunteers. The potential of this research helped persuade a large company to sponsor the event in 2003. It remains to be seen whether the results will increase sponsorship in the future.

Research Question 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

The organization had no budget for this survey. The public relations practitioner developed it as a volunteer. Financial constraints also determined the methodology, since the organization already had a Web site. The two-week timeframe between board approval and administration of the first survey also was a factor in selecting a Web-based survey methodology.

Case Study: Midwestern Bank

Information for this case study was obtained from a telephone interview with the president of a major public relations firm in Cleveland. In 1998, the firm conducted an anthropological research study for a large multiregional bank in the Midwest. The research was developed as part of an ongoing media relations program to increase the bank's visibility across the country.

The telephone interview was approximately 45 minutes. Information was also obtained from media relations analyses developed by the public relations firm.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

The public relations firm worked with bank public relations representatives to develop media relations strategies for the bank. In 1997, the public relations firm and bank representatives brainstormed different story ideas for their ongoing media relations campaign. At that session, someone commented, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get inside the consumer's head and see what they thought about managing finances?"

That comment opened the floodgates. The agency principal noted, "In the financial world, an enormous amount of advice is dispensed to consumers. However, it doesn't always connect with what consumers are thinking. We thought it would be interesting to 'peer through the keyholes of consumers homes,' to get an understanding of what was on their minds."

The agency principal spoke to a friend who ran a research firm in Virginia, who suggested using anthropologists to develop the research study. The idea intrigued both the bank and the public relations agency.

They retained a team of two anthropologists, who traveled to 13 cities around the country and jointly conducted two-hour in-depth meetings with 58 randomly selected Americans in January and February 1998. The public relations firm worked with a research company to generate lists of potential interview subjects. They wanted to include representatives from a range of ages (under 35, 35 to 55, and over 55) and income levels (under $60,000 a year and over $60,000 a year). The anthropologists probed people's feelings about money and the role of money in their lives.

"This was very qualitative research," said the agency principal. "We wanted to get an idea of recurring themes across age categories, and wanted enough ages and income levels to make some observations. We were not looking at plus or minus two percent. There were no charts, tables or percentages. That made this research significantly different from most research conducted by banks."

Anthropologists asked subjects a series of open-ended questions, and let those being interviewed control the direction of the interview. "We didn't want to constrain ourselves," said the agency principal. "We wanted to find out what people thought about their financial lives and the role of money. With that, we wanted the consumers to let the discussion go where they thought it was important. We weren't asking about what their favorite bank was. If the choice of bank came up in conversation, that was fine. In fact, it didn't, which told us something."

The anthropologists recorded not only *what* the subjects said, but also *how* they said it, and the circumstances and surroundings of where their interviews took place. They produced detailed reports about each of the 58 conversations. Analyzing the information took several months. Representatives from the public relations agency and the bank worked with the anthropologists to cull through the research reports, searching for patterns and identifying key findings. The findings were released to the media in July 1998.

Although this research was conducted primarily for media relations purposes, the bank's marketing department also became interested in the results. One recurring pattern that emerged from the research was where people obtained the information they used to make financial decisions. "We found that people put more faith in tips and ideas from coworkers than they did from friends and families at home," said the public relations agency. "As we thought about it, we realized it made sense. People spend most of their waking hours at the workplace." The bank had not considered that before, and had tended to market services in the residential setting. "I can't say it caused a great cause and effect initiative, but it is interesting that over subsequent years there's been much more activity on workplace- based banking. This research helped feed new ideas."

Another surprising finding was that many small-business owners weren't focused on growth. "The conventional wisdom is that everyone wants to grow their business and are struggling daily to finding ways to grow," said the agency principal. "What we found is that small-business owners are often growth-averse. They struggle with whether they should risk everything to grow to the next level. And when their business does grow, it doesn't grow in a straight-line. It grows in steps and plateaus. This was a new finding for the bank."

The public relations agency and the bank developed a media relations kit to report the study's findings. "It was a difficult media sell at first, because media are conditioned to statistical research," said the agency principal. "It took more work to get a story generated from this research because we weren't saying 17% of Americans think this. The results were observational." However, once they educated reporters about qualitative research, the media became very interested in the findings. The research generated stories in major media outlets across the country. As a result of the campaign, the bank increased its positive media presence in key markets compared to its main competitors, according to media analyses developed by the public relations agency.

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

When public relations research is conducted for publicity, surveys are often the method of choice. However, because of the good relationship that it had built over time with the public relations agency, the bank's public relations team was willing to try something different.

What was important about this research, said the agency principal, was the role it played in helping the bank build media relationships. "I think media relations is a core tool of public relations. You have to have something new and insightful to talk to reporters about, and it can't be all about your products or services." This research helped the bank build firmer relationships with the media.

Research question 3: How do real world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

Budget is always an issue, said the agency principal. "In this case, we did 58 anthropological interviews. If we had twice as much money, we could have done 120 interviews. It may have yielded more results. Limited budgets always limit sample size."

Case Study: University

Information for this case study was obtained from a telephone interview with the assistant vice president for community relations and marketing, and the vice president for university relations at a university in the Midwest

The university in 2001 undertook an extensive branding project, which involved in-depth interviews with key internal stakeholders, a competitive analysis of other universities, and focus groups with key internal and external stakeholders. The success of the branding program, which developed from this research, enabled the department to justify conducting additional public relations research, including a comprehensive benchmark market research project, which was conducted in 2003.

The telephone interviews lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours. Information was also obtained from the executive summary of a market research project conducted by the university in 2003, the results for several image-related questions on an omnibus survey conducted in December 2003, a management summary about the university's institutional branding program, and a draft of the university's integrated marketing communications plan.

Research question 1: How does your company practice public relations research?

In 2001, the president of the university asked the public relations and marketing department to undertake a branding project for the university. It had originally been conceived as a program to boost sales of licensed, logo-related merchandise, but grew into a project that focused on re-branding the institution.

The team started working with an outside agency on research to identify how key external stakeholders viewed the university, how internal stakeholders perceived the university and how they wanted to be perceived, and how to span that gap.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 150 key stakeholders within the university. Those interviews indicated that people within the university identified more strongly with their particular college or unit rather than the university at large. Many of the university's colleges had started as independent schools before being integrated into the university. Some schools had already developed world-class reputations. In theory, people felt that as the university's reputation grew, so would the reputation of their particular college or unit. In practice, however, that was not necessarily the case. "In some cases, we heard from people who said that they almost felt that attaching themselves to the university dragged them down," the assistant vice president said. "That was a key learning that emerged from our research. We would need to make the brand valuable to all the key stakeholders."

The project team conducted a competitive analysis of other universities that drew from the same student population as the university. "We looked at how those schools were expressing themselves visually and in general," said the vice president. "One of the things that became quite clear was that schools that had made an investment in managing their brand had far better reputations."

Researchers conducted a communications audit of publications and other materials (including letterhead, business cards, fax sheets and Power Point presentations) to determine how the university presented itself to the public. Research found that the university lacked a consistent visual identity. Its brand image consisted only of what the vice president called a "tired, dated" logo that "did not reflect the institution as it had grown in size and quality." They also discovered what the vice president called "a hodgepodge" of styles. For example, of some 30 different fax sheets collected, no two were alike.

The team developed visual and verbal concepts based on their research findings. Then they conducted additional focus groups to test the language, positioning and visual identity to make sure the new concepts achieved their goals. They tested four radically different visual concepts for a new university logo with focus groups of prospective students, parents of high school students, high school counselors, and university faculty and staff.

The assistant vice president invited campus leaders to “sit behind the mirror” to observe the focus groups. "One of the values of doing this kind of research is that it can be a very valuable tool for getting buy-in for the process." She noted that when campus leaders heard first-hand in real time what consumers had to say, “It was hard for them to dismiss it. It was more meaningful than if they read it in a document later. It's much more effective if they're sitting there.”

The research helped develop the brand identity system and confirm that the brand messages were being communicated. "We sat there in focus group facilities with our mouth hanging open, as the groups talked about the symbols, and connected what they were seeing with the language we'd identified as the critical part of the brand," said the assistant vice president. "If you look at our logo, parts of it are quite open, and not fully realized letters. What people were saying was, ‘I really like that logo, because it suggests that I can finish that picture. From here, I can do whatever I want.’ It indicated the process of transformation. It was one of those times when research really points you in a direction."

What emerged from the research was not only a visual identity for the university, but a real focus on how to build the university brand. "The primary reason we've been successful in implementing this is because the whole process has been grounded in research," said the assistant vice president.

Many for-profit institutions, such as banks, will roll out a new brand identity overnight. The university, as a nonprofit institution, could not afford to do this. Three years later, remnants of the old identity still remain. However, most people at the university have begun to understand the value of a cohesive visual identity. One of their biggest early critics recently told the assistant vice president about his experience at a conference, where three professors from the university were presenting. Each presenter used the PowerPoint templates that had been developed as part of the branding process. He told her, "We were all surprised at the number of people who recognized the university’s presence there. We never had so many people come up and say, ‘You guys are everywhere.’” The assistant vice president noted that people recognized the university’s presence by its visual identity.

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

Many in the university were initially skeptical about the branding process, but research ultimately helped to dispel widespread skepticism. The vice president noted that the branding research began at the time that the faculty union was in the midst of difficult negotiations with the university. "They used it as an example of wasteful spending.” Some initially derided the rebranding project as “$400,000 for a new logo.” The attitude has turned around. “I think we can say that we have brought the entire campus, or at least a majority of the campus, around to understanding the importance of what the branding process is all about.”

Research pointed the project in the right direction and helped the communications team gain credibility, said the assistant vice president. "Having done the research, we were on much firmer ground when we experienced the inevitable criticism about what we were doing…We knew from solid research that this was the appropriate direction for the university to go in, and we continued to validate as we moved ahead with more image related programs. The research was critical."

The research also helped build the value of public relations research within the organization. One finding of the research was that the competition was essentially branding the university by default. The vice president noted that other institutions advertised their safe learning environments, and positioned themselves in ways that suggested that major universities such as theirs were urban and, therefore, unsafe. "When we didn't combat that, they were successfully positioning us," said the vice president. "We would point out to the faculty and staff that institutions all around them were advertising all over the place, and we were nowhere in the market. While we weren't talking about branding, necessarily, it made a difference for them to think that, ‘We can't let the competition get ahead.’”

The attitude toward communications/public relations and public relations research has changed considerably at the university in the years since the branding research took place. "We don't have to fight the same battles anymore," said the assistant vice president.

Research question 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

The assistant vice president noted that financial constraints limit the amount of research that the university can conduct. "We'd like to do more research, but in the nonprofit world, we find ourselves without the budget to do it."

The university recently embarked on a comprehensive marketing campaign that was grounded in extensive communications research. The vice president said that the campaign never had as much funding as it needed, as the university, like many public institutions, has weathered severe budget cuts in the last few years. "We cobbled funding together from various sources, and despite a small budget, the campaign was launched. Initial response to the campaign was highly favorable, and as a result of the campaign being so well grounded in research and on target, it got unanimous approval from the president's budget committee,” said the vice president. The university is providing an additional $500,000 to enable the campaign to run through the end of the fiscal year. “That whole thing about credibility, it's absolutely connected to the research that we've done, and the substantive nature of it."

The assistant vice president said, “It would have been easy to say, ‘We have $100,000, let's just spend it on advertising. But without the research, the advertising wasn't going to be strategic." The vice president added, "The research is first and foremost extremely important in making your case. It guides you in a lot of different ways."

The assistant vice president noted, "In the past, when we had done advertising, we had very mixed reviews about the copy, the content, images, the headline, design, and so on. This campaign was different. It was thoroughly grounded in research, right down through copy testing. It's so on target that it's been received with uniform, positive response."

Conclusion

This chapter covered what public relations research can do for organizations and how practitioners can use research to develop strategy and programs (including media relations and publicity programs), monitor programs and evaluate results. It identified several types of public relations research, and provided case studies of real-life research studies.

The ability to conduct public relations research can benefit the PR practitioner's career. Several studies found a link between PR research and PR participation in management decision-making. Despite the recognized benefits of PR research, many practitioners conduct little or no research. Common reasons for not conducting research include lack of funding, lack of training in research, and fear that measurement research will show that they have not been successful with their program. However, many sources of secondary research are available for little or no cost.

Public relations research helps determine what an enterprise's goals should be, identify possible barriers to achieving goals, and provides knowledge about the environment and key publics so the organization can achieve those goals. Various informal and formal methods exist to scan the environment, including personal contacts and "water cooler" conversations, observation, analyzing business information and structured surveys.

Evaluation research can be used to monitor programs under way and measure effectiveness at completion. There are three possible objectives of a PR campaign: informational, motivational, and behavioral. The PR practitioner must measure the appropriate objective for each campaign.

There are two types of PR research: qualitative and quantitative. Examples of qualitative research are nominal group technique, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and field observations. Quantitative research techniques include content analysis and surveys (such as face to face, telephone, mail and Internet). Q methodology is a research method that lies between qualitative and quantitative research, and provides a quantitative means to study a participant's view or beliefs.

The seven case studies were developed as independent "stories" to illustrate how public relations research is conducted in the real world. There was no dominant type of PR research methodology conducted. In each case, PR practitioners used the research method that best suited their requirements and budget. Cases included a communication audit using focus groups; use of Six Sigma research methodology to build on results of a communications audit; focus groups of influential Americans to gauge public opinion; an online survey of employees to measure message retention after employee meetings; an anthropological research study of people nationwide as part of a media relations campaign; a series of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies as part of a university branding campaign; and an online survey of those who attended a sporting event to measure awareness of and attitude toward the products of a major sponsor.

In most cases research capabilities enhanced the perceived value of the PR department in the eyes of the dominant coalition. Research provided information that those in the organization could use to make decisions. It enabled PR departments to develop programs grounded in science, rather than built around hunches. All practitioners interviewed said that real-world constraints such as lack of time and money affect how much research they conduct, and what projects they pursue. However, all indicated that public relations research provides value, and that it was essential for their projects. Also, several noted that the cost of public relations research is decreasing, thanks to technology, which has enabled their organizations to increase their use of research.

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Appendix A: E-mail to recruit interview subjects

Dear Fellow Communicator:

Have you conducted public relations research that helped shaped your organization's (or client's) strategies and public relations programs? If so, I would like to interview you about your program. I am working on a chapter about public relations research for a Communications Management textbook, which is being written by graduate students in the Newhouse School of Public Communications' independent studies master's degree programs (ISDP) in Communications Management at Syracuse University.

My chapter will feature a series of case studies that illustrate how public relations research is used in the real world to develop internal and external communications programs, and measure the effectiveness of those programs. These case studies will be instrumental in helping to educate current and future public relations practitioners about best practices in research.

If you agree to participate, I will conduct a one-hour telephone interview with you about your program. Questions will cover specifics about your particular research program as well as questions about PR in general.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email at laurel@english-communications.com, or call me at (973) 984-2525. Also, please feel free to call or email me with questions if you need additional information.

Finally, if you know other public relations researchers who might be willing to share their best PR research practices, please forward this email to them, as well.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,
Laurel English
(973) 984-2525 (phone)
laurel@english-communications.com

Appendix B: Line of Questioning

Introduction:

My name is Laurel English. I am a graduate student at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. This interview is part of a research project designed to study the role that public relations research plays in helping to shape the organization's strategies and its public relations programs. With your permission, I would like to record our session. Your comments will be used in a series of case studies as part of a book chapter on public relations research. I would like to use your real name and organization name if possible. Please let me know whether you and your organization prefer to remain anonymous.

Research question 1: How does your company (or client/organization) practice public relations research?

1. What was the catalyst or background that led to this particular public relations research study?
2. When and where did this research study take place?
3. What types of research did you conduct?
4. How did you develop your research strategy?
5. Why did you use the research strategy that you used?
6. How were these research findings used by the public relations department and the organization?
7. What changes resulted from the research you conducted?
8. How did you measure success?

Research question 2: How does public relations research fit within the public relations department and within your organization?

1. What was the process that took place between the time that you identified your research findings and the organization acted upon those findings?
2. How is public relations research in your organization usually initiated? (Who commissions it?)
3. How are the results of public relations research generally received by the dominant coalition? By those who commission the research?
4. How important do you think public relations research is to the overall success of the public relations department? To the organization?
5. How important would others in the public relations department say PR research is to the department's overall success? To the organization?
6. How important do those who commission public relations research think PR research is to helping them achieve their goals?
7. What is the general perception of public relations research within the organization?
8. How does public relations research fit into the overall operation of the public relations department?

Research question 3: How do real-world constraints, such as lack of time and money, affect research?

1. Do barriers exist to conducting effective PR research?
2. How do barriers or constraints affect your ability to conduct research?
3. How do you work around barriers or constraints to conduct research?