

# A Theoretical Basis for Public Relations

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## PREVIEW

**W**hy have a chapter on theory in a beginning public relations principles textbook? Whereas most textbooks describe public relations—its history, its practices, and its processes—we believe that it is also important to provide some perspective about why and how public relations is practiced as it is. More important, theory explains how to make public relations most effective for organizations and society.

Theories predict the way things work or happen. They provide an understanding of the relationship between actions and events. As a public relations practitioner, you will need to be able to explain why and how your plans and proposals will work. Your supervisor and your co-workers will be more convinced to support your opinions if you have theories and evidence to back them up.

There is no one theory that will explain all public relations practices. Public relations practitioners consider several theories when they make decisions about how they can build successful relationships with their publics. This chapter introduces six types of theories that public relations practitioners use every day: relationship theory, persuasion and social influence, mass communication, roles, models, and approaches to conflict resolution.

## THEORY DEFINED

What would happen if we used Facebook to reach our volunteers? Why did our audience agree to donate money? How will investors learn about our stocks? How can we be sure that our position will be picked up by the media? Questions like these should sound familiar to anyone working in public relations. Public relations practitioners evaluate why a plan worked or didn't work so that they can adjust their strategies for future efforts.

Some of the questions we ask as practitioners are routine, and some are not so routine. When someone knows answers to routine questions, we say that person has common sense. When someone can correctly answer the nonroutine, we say that person is astute or experienced. But to answer either type of question, a person needs to understand the relationships between actions and events.

A **theory** is a prediction of how events and actions are related. For example, *pr reporter* described as a failure a federally funded message campaign to frighten kids off drugs.<sup>1</sup> Research showed that kids who reported seeing the ads were using marijuana even more than those who had not seen the ads. What caused this waste of \$180 million a year? One expert said, "Scaring kids doesn't work. When people try pot for the first time, they wonder what the big deal is. Then, they don't believe the other stuff. The ads are not realistic."<sup>2</sup> This opinion reflects a great deal of theory on the use of fear appeals. Fear appeals theory predicts that there will be little change with an overreliance on fear appeals that threaten physical harm. More persuasive are balanced arguments with incentives for changing behavior.<sup>3</sup> We call this prediction a theory.

We have theories about many actions and events in public relations. Some theories serve us well because we test them regularly and observe the same relationships over time. For example, thank-you notes to express appreciation will almost always lead to an improved relationship between an organization and its customers, clients, employees, and other stakeholders. Other theories are dynamic and evolving and need more testing and refinement so that they will have better predictive value.

As a public relations manager, you should have knowledge of different theories so that you can make the right decisions for your public relations plans and programs. Your value to your employer or client will be directly related to how well you use theory in your work. Read some of former PRSA president Pat Jackson's lasting theories for public relations in spotlight 3.1.

No single theory covers all you need to know in public relations or any other discipline; therefore, it is valuable to look at theories by grouping them according to how they are used. We start with theories of relationships. Then, we discuss theories of persuasion and social influence; that is, theories about how people take in information and what moves them to act. Next, we consider theories of mass communication. Finally, we look at ways to describe what public relations people do and how organizations approach public relations.

## THEORIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

Both systems theory and situational theory are considered *theories of relationships*. We look at each theory here.

### **Systems Theory**

**Systems theory** is useful in public relations because it gives us a way to think about relationships. Generally, systems theory looks at organizations as made up of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic, and social environments in which they operate. Organizations have recognizable boundaries, within which

## Pat Jackson's Lasting Contribution to Public Relations

## Spotlight 3.1



- Any profession exists by public consent only. Public relations provides an overriding social benefit when people have a voice.
- Harmony is an outcome of public relations practiced over a long time.
- Harmonious relationships, not just relations, fortified with trust require co-authorship.
- Remind managers that their communication role is to transmit not only information but also emotions and intuition.
- The most important effect is to change behavior.
- The public relations practitioner's chief role is to serve as a catalyst.
- The triggering event is an activity that motivates stakeholders to act on their latent readiness.

Sources: From *pr reporter*, April 2, 2001, pp. 1–2; Allen H. Center, Patrick Jackson, Stacey Smith, and Fran R. Stansberry, *Public Relations Practices*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson), p. 15.



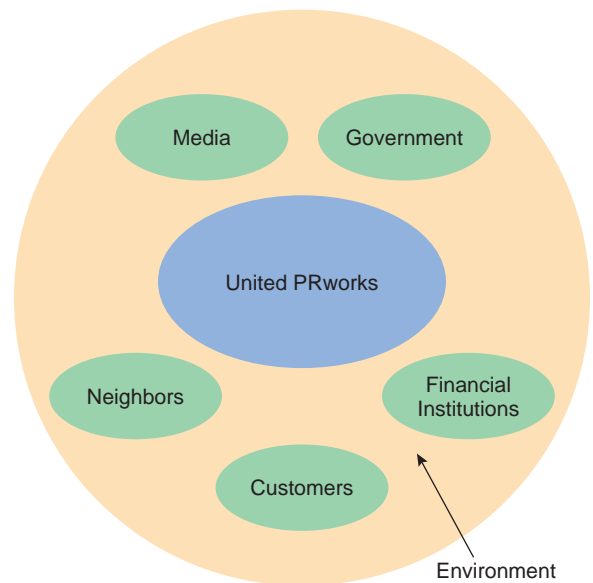
Pat Jackson

there must be a communication structure that guides the parts of the organization to achieve organizational goals. The leaders of the organization create and maintain these internal structures.

Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier state that the systems perspective emphasizes the interdependence of organizations with their environments, both internal and external to the organization.<sup>4</sup> According to the systems perspective, organizations depend on resources from their environments, such as “raw materials, a source of employees, and clients or customers for the services or products they produce. The environment needs the organization for its products and services.”<sup>5</sup> Organizations with **open systems** use public relations people to bring back information on how productive their relationships are with clients, customers, and other stakeholders. Organizations with **closed systems** do not seek new information. The decision makers operate on what happened in the past or on their personal preferences.

Organizations are part of a greater environment made up of many systems. We use as an example a hypothetical organization—United PRworks. It is depicted as an oval in the center of figure 3.1. Moving out from the organization, you can see that it has an environment—the area between the large circle and our organization. In that environment we see most of the groups we considered in chapter 1—customers, media, community, financial institutions, and government. These groups are called **stakeholders** because “they and the organization have consequences on each other”<sup>6</sup>—they create problems and opportunities for one another.

We can use systems theory not only to examine relationships with our external stakeholders but also to look at the internal functions and stakeholders of our organizations. Organizations structure their employees by specific jobs and functions. Many different departments, such as accounting, legal, and public relations, make up the managerial function. The production function of an organization might include skilled and unskilled employees who actually make the product or provide the service to customers.



**FIGURE 3.1** Systems Model of an Organization and Its Environment

The marketing function is made up of sales staff. All of these different employees are interdependent.

Consider this real-world example of systems thinking by a corporate social responsibility director at Merck & Co., Inc., a worldwide pharmaceutical company. Merck helps fight AIDS by creating stakeholder partnerships: Merck corporate directors, the government of Botswana, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This requires constant communication and problem solving. To prepare for a presentation at an international AIDS conference in Bangkok, Maggie Kohn described her efforts to bridge effectively many different internal and external systems: “I had weekly meetings with the two Merck representatives, daily communication with the Botswana communication director, and bimonthly calls with Gates Foundation communicators.”<sup>7</sup>

The monitoring of relationships is a major one for public relations people. Through systems theory, we think of public relations people as **boundary spanners**, straddling the edge of an organization—looking inside and outside of an organization. Public relations practitioners are the go-betweens, explaining the organization to its stakeholders and interpreting the environment to the organization. Public relations people advise the **dominant coalition**,<sup>8</sup> the primary decision makers of the organization, about problems and opportunities in the environment and help these decision makers respond to these changes.

The **environment** imposes constraints on organizations. For example, customers can boycott an organization’s products. The courts can make a business pay damages to people who are injured by its products. Banks can choose not to lend money to an organization. Because we use systems theory, we can identify an organization’s stakeholders, and by spanning organizational boundaries, we can anticipate each side’s relationship needs.

If decision makers keep their systems open, they allow for the two-way flow of resources and information between the organization and its environment. They use that information for adapting to the environment, or they may use the incoming information to try to control the environment. For example, to control potentially negative media stories, a Nike corporate communicator created the “Issues Brief” to be used when media questioned Nike products. The Issues Brief gave Nike spokespersons information to explain company policies or positions. “For example, if a top athlete were in the middle of a marathon and a Nike running shoe fell apart, we have a one-page document that provides in a very concise fashion the history of that product or issue, approved legal statements and language that can be used when discussing the issues, and a list of the most-likely questions that the media or other external stakeholders will ask.”<sup>9</sup>

Using the concepts of organizations and environments we can begin to create theoretical statements about relationships with stakeholders. For example, we might say: The more turbulent the environment, the more flexible the public relations department needs to be because the stakeholders that could have positive or negative consequences for the organization are constantly changing. Organizations that remain slow to respond, such as the U.S. Post Office, or closed to new information from the environment are less likely to build effective relationships with key publics. If organizations have closed systems, it may take a crisis for an organization to accept environmental changes.

### **Situational Theory**

Grunig and Repper agreed that it was a good start to use the concept of stakeholders as a way of describing relationships.<sup>10</sup> However, they concluded that not all people in stakeholder groups would be equally likely to communicate with an organization. They felt that public relations people could more effectively manage communications by identifying specific publics within stakeholder groups (see spotlight 3.2). These **publics** were subgroups that



James E. Grunig, PhD, Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland, contributed a landmark theory focused on public relations as a strategic management function of organizations. Based on the Excellence study, he helped explain how public relations contributes to building valuable relationships between organizations and their publics in order to achieve organizational goals. His work helped explain how public relations professionals participate in the strategic decision-making processes of organizations. Grunig and other scholars

have explained the strategic role of public relations in environmental scanning and publics, scenario building, empowerment of public relations, ethics, relationship cultivation strategies, evaluation, and return on investment (ROI).

*Source:* Excerpted from James E. Grunig, "Furnishing the Ediface: Ongoing Research on Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18, pp. 151–76.



James E. Grunig

were more or less active in their communication behavior. An example of a stakeholder public would be active voters within the broader group of all registered voters. Candidates for political office focus their communication efforts on those voters who can be counted on to go to polls on election day. Grunig and Hunt proposed what they call a situational theory of publics to give us more specific information about publics' communication needs.<sup>11</sup>

Grunig and Hunt theorized that publics range from those who actively seek and process information about an organization or an issue of interest, to those publics who passively receive information. According to these researchers, three variables predict when publics will seek and process information about an issue: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. The key is that publics are situational. That is, as the situation, problem, opportunity, or issue changes, the publics, with which the organization must communicate, change.

**Problem Recognition** Publics facing an issue must first be aware of it and recognize its potential to affect them. For example, parents of school-age children will be more aware of subpar school facilities than will taxpayers without children.

**Constraint Recognition** This variable describes how publics perceive obstacles that may stand in the way of a solution. If they believe they have a real shot at influencing an issue, they will tend to seek and process information on that issue. Think again about parents with school-age children. They have more access to school decision makers because they have more contact with school principals, teachers, and administrators than do taxpayers without children.

**Level of Involvement** This variable refers to how much an individual cares about an issue. Those who care a lot would likely be active communicators on an issue. Those who care little would likely be more passive in seeking and processing information. We anticipate that the level of involvement would be much higher for those parents who saw firsthand substandard school facilities than those who had not.

Using these three variables, Grunig and Hunt described four responses that follow from being high or low in these dimensions. For example, those publics who have high problem recognition, low constraint recognition, and high involvement in an issue are much more likely to actively engage in communication about it.

**Situational theory** also helps explain why some groups are active on a single issue, others are active on many issues, and others are uniformly apathetic. The specific relationship is determined by the type of group (active, passive) and how an organization is linked with the issue. Public relations people can plan their communication strategies much more accurately if they know how actively their stakeholder publics will seek information from the organization.

Situational theory keeps us focused on the kinds of information that publics want rather than the organization's choice of information to distribute. It also assumes that publics will pay attention and seek out information that is in their best interests.

## THEORIES OF PERSUASION AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Public relations people try to persuade audiences to learn new information, to change emotions, and to act in certain ways. Pfau and Wan define persuasion as “the use of communication in an attempt to shape, change, and/or reinforce perception, affect (feelings), cognition (thinking) and/or behavior.”<sup>12</sup> As Miller and Levine stated, “At a minimum a successful persuasive attempt generates some type of cognitive, affective, or behavioral modification in the target.”<sup>13</sup> We use the following terms to talk about **persuasion**:

*Awareness*: accepting information for the first time

*Attitudes*: predispositions to like or dislike things

*Beliefs*: assessments that things are true or false

*Behavior*: observable actions<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes we are not even aware that we are being persuaded. Consider a common activity, like going to the bank. When you enter the bank, there are tent cards and brochures explaining how to open an account and new services that the bank says will save you money. Free coffee and popcorn are available. With each of these subtle “touches” the bank's public relations people are seeking to change your awareness, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.

Several factors will influence how persuasive public relations messages or actions will be. Among them are the **source** of the message, the **message** itself, and the **receiver**. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that the more credible or believable the source is, the more likely we will accept the message. Studies of effective messages consider such characteristics as language intensity, message-sidedness, and the quality and quantity of the evidence.<sup>15</sup> Gender, personality traits, and the argumentativeness of the receiver will also influence the impact of persuasive messages.<sup>16</sup> (See mini-case 3.1 for another example of these terms in use.)

We will discuss four theories of persuasive and social influences: social exchange, diffusion, social learning, and elaborated likelihood model.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

**Social exchange theory** uses the economic metaphor of costs and benefits to predict behavior. It assumes that individuals and groups choose strategies based on perceived rewards and costs. This theory, developed by John Thibaut and Harold Kelley, applies to many fields of study, including interpersonal communication, public relations, and theories of organizations.<sup>17</sup>

Social exchange theory asserts that people factor in the consequences of their behavior before acting. In general, people want to keep their costs low and their rewards high. Get-rich-quick schemes have been using this principle for a long time.



Teenagers aged 16 to 19 are far more likely to be killed in a car crash than any other group. This is primarily due to driver inexperience, or lack of maturity behind the wheel. Research shows that when teens are eased into driving and when parents take an active role in their teens' driver education by setting driving guidelines, their teens' chances of being in a car crash can be reduced by up to one-third. DaimlerChrysler sought to reinforce its position as a safety leader with con-

sumers by raising awareness among teens and their parents about the risks teens face as new drivers and by providing them with tools and tactics to survive the high-risk years. To this end, DaimlerChrysler made available free and on the Internet ([www.roadready-teens.org](http://www.roadready-teens.org) in English and Spanish) a video game called StreetWise. Results showed that more than 1.8 million games of StreetWise were played, with game play averaging 19 minutes per player.

### Questions

1. DaimlerChrysler wanted what kinds of persuasive effects for this campaign: awareness, attitude, belief, or behavior change?
2. How did this campaign consider the source, the message, and the receiver to create its effects?

*Source:* DaimlerChrysler, Road Ready Teens, accessed March 27, 2008, <http://69.20.125.164/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll>.

But what does this have to do with public relations? Let's say we want people to respond to a survey. Remember, we want to keep costs to potential respondents low and perceived rewards high. What can we do to keep costs low?

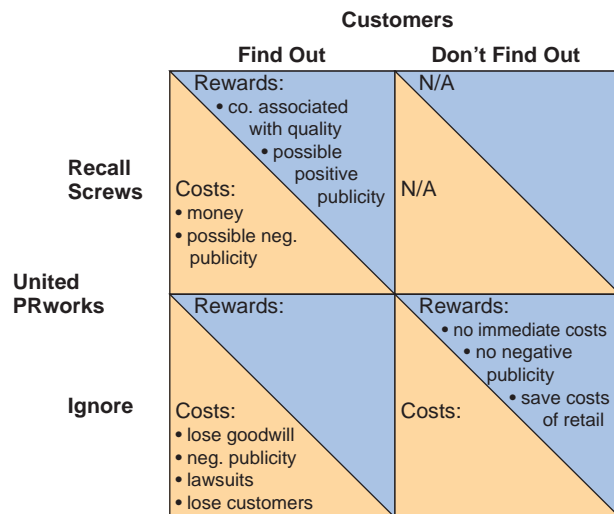
- Keep the instructions simple.
- Keep the survey short.
- If mailing is required, provide a prepaid return envelope.
- If returning by fax, use an 800 number.
- Avoid open-ended, complex, and personal questions.

Now, how can we increase the rewards for the respondent?

- Make the survey interesting.
- Emphasize that the person is being "consulted" for his or her thoughts and that her or his ideas are important.
- Tell respondents how the results will be used—presumably to contribute to something worthwhile.
- Offer an opportunity for a tangible reward, for example, a copy of the results or a chance to win something of value.

This same logic can be applied to more complex behavior by using a payoff matrix. Let's say our company, United PRworks, becomes aware of defects in a product that has already been shipped to customers. The defect may mean that the product will need repairs much sooner than a promised three-year guarantee. We can look at this situation as a set of possible decisions, with each decision having costs and rewards. In figure 3.2, the upper part of each cell contains perceived rewards, and the lower part, possible costs. Some of the consequences, like recall costs, are certain. Others, like the possibility of lawsuits and negative publicity, have some probability associated with them.

If the head of United PRworks could see the decision this way, the company would recall the products



**FIGURE 3.2** Payoff Matrix Showing Costs and Rewards Involved in a Recall Decision



and accept the short-term loss. The trouble is that human nature can blind us to the information in the cells associated with customers finding out about the defect. It would be human nature to ignore the problem, hoping it would go away. The public relations practitioner's job is to let the decision maker see a whole range of options along with the associated costs and rewards.

### **Diffusion Theory**

**Diffusion theory** is another way to look at how people process and accept information. Diffusion theory says that people adopt an idea only after going through the following five discrete steps (or stages):

1. *Awareness.* The individual has been exposed to the idea.
2. *Interest.* The idea has to arouse the individual.
3. *Evaluation.* The individual must consider the idea as potentially useful.
4. *Trial.* The individual tries out the idea on others.
5. *Adoption.* This represents final acceptance of the idea after having successfully passed through the four earlier stages.<sup>18</sup>

This theory is useful for explaining how we reach important decisions—not acts of impulse. We know from testing this model that mass media are important in the first two stages; personal contacts are important for the next two.

Let's take an example. United PRworks's annual family picnic is two weeks away. You are selling tickets at \$1 per family as a way to plan how much food to order. You tell the boss at the morning staff meeting that ticket sales have been slow. If your boss is typical, she or he will say, "Make sure every employee gets a flyer."

Sending out more flyers virtually guarantees awareness, but you are still four steps away from getting people to decide to go (adoption). By knowing how people accept and process information, you plan systematically to move the employees through the remaining stages. The next step is to arouse interest in attending the picnic by sending individual invitations that tell employees how their families will enjoy the event. How about entertainment for the old and young? A special "snack" table for the kids, games and door prizes for adults and kids. Then, have your picnic organizers asked employees for their evaluations for how to make the event mesh with their interests. Free parking? Baby-sitting service? Get some "buzz" going by having the CEO talk about the picnic with employees. Finally, you will need lots of people at the shop level to talk about the picnic to their fellow workers. Then, they need to go sell the tickets.

### **Social Learning Theory**

So far, we have discussed theories that consider the receiver to be actively involved in information processing. **Social learning theory** attempts to explain and predict behavior by looking at another way receivers process information. This theory helps us understand that personal example and mass media can be important to receivers acquiring new behaviors.

Social psychologist Albert Bandura says that we can learn new behaviors merely by observing others.<sup>19</sup> When we see behavior that interests us, we note whether that behavior seems to be rewarding the actor. These rewards can be external, as in praise, or internal, as in "it looks cool." Bandura says that we vicariously try out the behavior in our minds. If we agree that the behavior is potentially useful to us, it can lie dormant for long periods until we need it. The likelihood that a specific behavior will occur is

determined by the expected consequences from performing that behavior. The more positive and rewarding the consequences, the more likely the behavior will occur.

Knowing this, public relations people can anticipate that new or inexperienced employees will model the behavior of more experienced employees, particularly if that behavior is rewarded. If a company recognizes with achievement awards the employees who are willing to give their best efforts to satisfy customers, then you can predict that those wanting to get ahead will model those behaviors.

Remember: You get the behavior you reward. Social learning theory explains one of the routes to this behavior. (See mini-case 3.1 for another example of these terms in use.)

Three popular theories that apply especially to the mass media are uses and gratifications theory, **framing theory**, and agenda setting theory.

## THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

It's important to remember that not everyone regularly reads the daily paper, watches the 6 o'clock news, checks a Facebook page, or listens to talk radio. Papers, TV, and radio are called mass media, but each person chooses how and when to use mass media. Similarly, you shouldn't presume that employees uniformly read internal publications or view company videos. Even a note in every pay envelope could go straight into the wastebasket.

How do we explain this behavior? **Uses and gratifications theory** asserts that people are active users of media and select how they will use it.<sup>20</sup> Researchers have found that people use media in the following ways:

- As entertainment

- To scan the environment for items important to them personally

- As a diversion

- As a substitute for personal relationships

- As a check on personal identity and values

For public relations practitioners this means that not everyone will see or hear the bad news about a company or product. It also means you can't count on people seeing or hearing the good news. Just because a message is available in some medium does not mean that people attend to it and remember it.

Public relations practitioners should expect that messages in the mass media will be shaped, selected, and interpreted in multiple ways if these messages are seen or heard at all! For example, the American public never did understand why President Clinton's personal life should interfere with his presidency, even with hours of televised hearings and printed transcripts. Plenty of opinions were aired, even by Jay Leno and *Saturday Night Live*. But American opinion never changed from a position of distaste for Clinton's morals and support for his presidency, despite the media. Publics use mediated messages for their uses and gratification.

### **Framing Theory**

Mass media scholars such as Entman<sup>21</sup> suggest that the messages and information sent to audiences carry with them a preexisting set of meanings or frames. Entman defined framing as an active process of drawing out dominant themes from content. These meanings come from the cultural and social groupings in which we live and work. For

example, the U.S. culture includes a deeply held belief in individualism. This belief shows up in mass media stories all the time—stories of individuals overcoming difficulties or excelling at sports, for example. We read these stories framed by “individual behavior” so often that “individual effort” has shaped the way that we communicate about our society.

A preexisting interpretation or frame that audiences instantly know and accept is very useful to communicators. Common devices used in media and public relations stories are “catchphrases, depictions, metaphors, exemplars, and visual images.”<sup>22</sup> Think how easily we can communicate a meaning by simply stating “War on Terror,” or “Fourth of July.” As public relations advocates for organizations, we seek to get our frames adopted by our publics. In fact, theorists suggest that if we want to communicate successfully with one another, we are bound to use common frames as a necessary condition to being understood.

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Bernard Cohen noted that although the media can't tell people what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about.<sup>23</sup> This was an interesting idea but not widely accepted in 1963. About a decade later journalism scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw demonstrated that Cohen was onto something.<sup>24</sup> During the 1968 presidential campaign, they followed public opinion and media reports of the key issues in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They found that a strong positive relationship existed between what voters said was important and what media were reporting as important. Because the issues were evident in the media several weeks before they appeared in public opinion, McCombs and Shaw were reasonably sure that the media set the agenda and not the reverse. Even more amazing was that voters were more likely to agree with the composite media agenda than with the position of the candidate they claimed they favored.

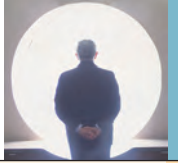
McCombs and Shaw do not say that simple agreement with the media changed voting behavior. They simply demonstrated that the media can set the agenda for what we talk and think about.

This talking and thinking can lead to information seeking and processing, following the situational theory of publics, but only if other conditions are met. That's an important point for public relations practitioners to remember when their organization is taking a beating in the press. People may be talking about you, but it doesn't necessarily mean that strong opinions about your organization will be changed. You will need to do some research before you can draw such a conclusion.

Public relations practitioners attempt to influence the **media agenda** by providing news items for public consumption. To accomplish this, they identify subjects that editors and news directors consider news, localize their messages, and help media representatives cover the story. (See spotlight 3.3 for a summary of the public relations theories.)

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES**

Some of the most important theory building that has been developed in public relations is about the roles of practitioners in organizational life. Some of these roles are managerial; some are tied to marketing. There are communication demands from the human resources function. Even the legal department influences public relations activities when there is an organizational crisis. At issue is whether public relations practitioners play the right roles to achieve organizational effectiveness.



The nine theories highlighted in the chapter are summarized as follows:

### I. Theories of Relationships

1. Systems theory: evaluates relationships and structure as they relate to the whole.
2. Situational theory: maintains that situations define relationships.

### II. Theories of Cognition and Behavior

3. Social exchange theory: predicts behavior of groups and individuals and is based on perceived rewards and costs.
4. Diffusion theory: suggests that people adopt an important

idea or innovation after going through five discrete steps: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption.

5. Social learning theory: states that people use information processing to explain and predict behavior.

### III. Theories of Mass Communication

6. Uses and gratifications theory: states that people are active users of media and select media based on its gratification for them.
7. Framing theory: suggests that individuals use preexisting in-

terpretations to make sense of information and events.

8. Agenda setting theory: suggests that media content that people read, see, and listen to set the agendas for society's discussion and interaction.

### IV. Approaches to Conflict Resolution

9. Nine strategies: contention; cooperation; accommodation; avoidance; unconditional constructive; compromise; principled; win-win or no deal; mediated.

**Roles** are the collection of daily activities that people perform. Glen Broom and David Dozier have studied public relations roles for more than 20 years. Their role types have helped us learn about the power of the public relations function in the organization and how the activities of public relations people produce the right programs, influence strategic planning, and affect the short-range (bottom-line) and long-range (survival) goals of organizations.<sup>25</sup>

In research on public relations activities, two broad roles consistently emerge in public relations: the technician and the manager. The **technician role** represents the craft side of public relations: writing, editing, taking photos, handling communication production, running special events, and making telephone calls to the media. These activities focus on the implementation of the management's overall communication strategies. The **manager role** focuses on activities that help identify and solve public relations problems. Public relations managers advise senior managers about communication needs and are responsible for broad organizational results. Public relations managers carry out three roles:

*Expert prescriber:* the person who operates as a consultant to define the problem, suggests options, and oversees implementation.

*Communication facilitator:* the person on the boundary between the organization and its environment who keeps two-way communication flowing.

*Problem-solving facilitator:* the person who partners with senior management to identify and solve problems.<sup>26</sup>

To perform all three roles, much depends on the knowledge of the individual manager. If managers can deliver both manager and technical functions, they achieve higher status in organizational decision making. Public relations professionals cannot expect to achieve a "seat at the table" where they can influence how to achieve beneficial relationships with stakeholders unless they perform both roles. They especially must execute the manager role in such a way that top management will understand its value and demand it of the public relations function.<sup>27</sup>

## MODELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

One of the most useful ways of thinking about public relations has been through the description of public relations **models** that identify the central ideas of public relations and how they are related to each other. In 1984 James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt proposed four models of public relations that are based on communication, research, and ethics. Since that time Grunig and a team of scholars have proposed new models that have enriched our understanding of how public relations is practiced.

The original four models were press agency, public information, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model.<sup>28</sup> The first three models reflect a practice of public relations that attempts through persuasion to achieve the organization's goals. The fourth focuses on balancing self-interests and the interests of the other group or public.

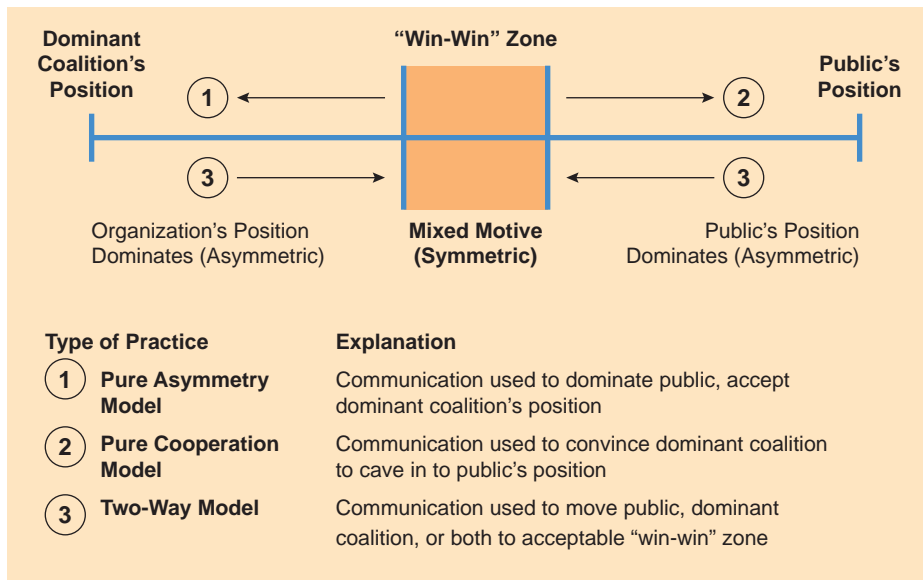
*Press agency* is the model where information moves one way—from the organization to its publics. It is perhaps the oldest form of public relations and is synonymous with promotions and publicity. Public relations practitioners operating under this model are always looking for opportunities to get their organization's name favorably mentioned in the media. They do not conduct much research about their publics beyond “counting the house.” This model includes propaganda tactics such as use of celebrity names and attention-gaining devices such as giveaways, parades, and grand openings. Although press agents are not unethical, they don't desire to be ethical either. The louder the noise, the more attention-getting the story, whether true or false, the better they are doing their jobs.

*Public information* differs from press agency because the intent is to inform rather than to press for promotion and publicity, but the communication is still essentially one-way. Today this model represents public relations practices in government, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and even in some corporations. Practitioners operating under this model do very little research about their audiences beyond testing the clarity of their messages. They are “journalists-in-residence,” who value accuracy but decide what information is best to communicate to their publics.

The *two-way asymmetrical model* considers public relations to be scientific persuasion. This model employs social science research methods to increase the persuasiveness of messages. Public relations practitioners use surveys, interviews, and focus groups to measure public relationships so the organization can design public relations programs that will gain the support of key publics. Although feedback is built into the process, the organization is much more interested in having the publics adjust to the organization than the reverse.

The *two-way symmetrical model* depicts a public relations orientation in which organizations and their publics adjust to each other. It focuses on the use of social science research methods to achieve mutual understanding and two-way communication rather than one-way persuasion. In 2001 James E. Grunig created other names for the symmetrical model: mixed motives, collaborative advocacy, and cooperative antagonism. His intent was to present a model that “balanced self-interests with the interest of others in a give-and-take process that can waver between advocacy and collaboration.”<sup>29</sup> Grunig argued that this model was the most ethical because all groups were part of the resolution of problems.

In 1995 David M. Dozier, Larissa A. Grunig, and James E. Grunig presented a new model of public relations that came from their research on excellence in public relations and communication management. They found in a study of 321 organizations in three countries that public relations practitioners who exhibited the most effective or excellent public relations practices used the “new model of symmetry as two-way practice.”<sup>30</sup> This depiction of public relations placed the organization and its publics on a continuum (see figure 3.3). Because in the best practice of public relations, public relations practitioners and their supervisors reported using both two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models, Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig reasoned that given each specific



**FIGURE 3.3** New Model of Symmetry as Two-Way Practice

public relations situation, organizations *and* their publics would seek to persuade each other as much as possible. They are pictured at opposite ends of the continuum, either as a pure asymmetry model in which the dominant coalition tries to force a public into accepting the organization's position or as a pure cooperation model in which the public uses communication to convince the dominant coalition to accept the public's position. The middle of the continuum is the "win-win" zone in which the organization and the public use communication to achieve a decision acceptable to both sides. This new model advances our thinking about the practice of public relations because it considers both parties in the public relations situation. Because the organization and its publics will be employing communication strategies as well, we have to be as savvy about our publics' communication strategies as we are our own. See spotlight 3.2 for James E. Grunig's most recent theories of public relations.

The work on developing models of public relations that more effectively describe how public relations is carried out continued in 1996, with the report of two different models: the **cultural interpreter model** and the **personal influence model**. Although both models fall into the asymmetrical category, they give us more to think about in our understanding of the practice of public relations. Both models were found in research by University of Maryland graduate students who returned to their home countries of India, Greece, and Taiwan to test whether practitioners in these countries were using the four original models of public relations. Although these two new models may represent public relations practiced in other cultures, we see applications of them to practices in the United States. A brief summary of the two models follows:

The *cultural interpreter model* depicts the practice of public relations in organizations that do business in other countries, "where it needs someone who understands the language, culture, customs, and political system of the host country."

The *personal influence model* depicts a practice of public relations in which practitioners try to establish personal relationships with key individuals, "as contacts through favors can be sought."<sup>31</sup>

## APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

If we begin with the notion that **conflict resolution** is just one of many states in a relationship, we have a better theory about conflict and how to deal with it. All of us have a common understanding of conflict. It involves an individual or group actively opposing another's values or goals. As with individuals, corporate conflict occurs when a stakeholder moves in a direction different from the organization, producing friction among the parties.<sup>32</sup> When this occurs, public relations professionals must often move the organization and its public toward a resolution.

Plowman, Briggs, and Huang identified nine types of conflict resolution strategies and linked them to the motives of organizations and publics (see figure 3.4):

1. *Contention*. Involves one party forcing its position on another.
2. *Cooperation*. Both parties work together to reach a mutually beneficial solution.
3. *Accommodation*. One party partially yields on its position and lowers its aspirations.
4. *Avoidance*. One or both parties leave the conflict either physically or psychologically.
5. *Unconditional Constructive*. The organization reconciles the strategic interests of both the organization and its publics, whether the public follows guidelines or not, even if the other party to the conflict does not reciprocate.
6. *Compromise*. An alternative agreement that stands part way between the parties' preferred positions.
7. *Principled*. Both parties hold to higher ethics that cannot be compromised.
8. *Win-Win or No Deal*. Both parties hold off on any agreement until they are ready for the deal to be struck.
9. *Mediated*. Involves use of an outside disinterested party.<sup>33</sup>



**FIGURE 3.4** Mixed-Motive Model of Public Relations Source: Kenneth D. Plowman, William G. Briggs, and Yi-Hui Huang, "Public Relations and Conflict Resolutions," in *Handbook of Public Relations*, ed. R.L. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), p. 304.



Plowman has substituted *perseverance* for mediation because he reasoned that mediation was useful across all nine strategies.<sup>34</sup> He offered a new word—“humwillity”—combining humility and strength of will or perseverance.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, not all of these strategies will result in mutually satisfied parties. The conflict may be “resolved,” but the public relations practitioner’s job is far from over.

## Ben and Jerry’s “Hubby Hubby” Campaign

### Case Study

In September of 2009, Vermont became the fourth state to legalize gay and lesbian marriage. Ben & Jerry’s, the iconic Vermont-based ice cream maker, desired to celebrate Vermont’s same-sex marriage unions in its home state while reinforcing its longstanding commitment to social justice and equality for all people despite race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference. The result was “Hubby Hubby”—a traditional and social media campaign surrounding the symbolic renaming of Ben & Jerry’s flavor “Chubby Hubby” to “Hubby Hubby,” in partnership with the nonprofit organization Freedom to Marry.

Although directly focused on celebrating the legalization of same-sex marriage in Vermont, the campaign had a national approach targeting all Americans to (1) raise awareness of Ben & Jerry’s commitment to social justice, (2) activate consumers to support marriage equality, and (3) engage consumers with the Ben & Jerry’s brand.

Ben & Jerry’s worked with Cone/Cone Inc. to develop the research and planning for the campaign. Cone conducted primary research to understand the political legislature and timing surrounding the legalization of gay marriage in Vermont. Cone interviewed Ben & Jerry’s employees to understand further their commitment to the issue. After conducting research, Cone chose the Freedom to Marry nonprofit organization and began discussions to build a mutually beneficial partnership. Cone identified supportive media and bloggers to communicate with about the campaign as well as opposition and planned protests in Vermont. Cone developed crisis preparedness plans with key messages to guide spokespeople (including Ben & Jerry’s executives, franchisees, and retail partners) in advance of possible positive and negative information.

The campaign sought to build on the successful legislation legalizing gay and lesbian marriage and Ben & Jerry’s stances on social justice. It formed a partnership with a third-party organization that would lend credibility to the campaign; and it utilized online and offline elements to engage consumers and promote a “call-to-action” to sign Freedom to Marry’s online marriage resolution.

Ben & Jerry’s media relations efforts consist of a national press announcement of the symbolic renaming of “Chubby Hubby” to “Hubby Hubby” for the month of September in celebration of the September 1, 2009, Vermont legislation. Ben & Jerry’s gave an exclusive to the Associated Press within a larger political piece three days prior to the announcement. Ben & Jerry’s gave morning-of-broadcast interviews with all local Vermont network affiliates. Finally, it directed its media relations efforts with gay community, mainstream print, online, and broadcast outlets.

Two mobile Ben & Jerry's "Just Marriage" vehicles traveled throughout Vermont, including the State House and city halls. Free "Hubby Hubby" samples were provided to celebrate the legislation with locals. Each store received information to display about the flavor renaming and nonprofit partner, plus made available a new special "Hubby Hubby" sundae.

Ben & Jerry's distributed information in its "Chunkspelunker" e-mail newsletter and online database. It posted the campaign information via Facebook and Twitter. Information was available at BenJerry.com and FreedomtoMarry.org. It bought search engine marketing ads on Google, inserting the campaign messages in relevant real-time Internet searches.

The campaign reached more than 433 million people in September alone, including key placements with "Early Today," "The Jay Leno Show," "Late Show with David Letterman," Associated Press, and PrezHilton.com. Interviews led to feeds via ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and CNN. Overwhelmingly, 89 percent of media coverage was rated positive/neutral. More than 15,500 visited FreedomtoMarry.org within the first week, a 720 percent traffic increase. Some 919 signed the nonprofit organization's Marriage Resolution, a 45 percent increase. And, nearly 500 celebratory flavor samples were distributed in Vermont on September 1.

Source: Excerpted from PRSA Silver Anvil Awards, 2010, Ben & Jerry's "Hubby Hubby" Campaign, [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org).

### Questions

1. How do the three theories of mass communication—uses and gratifications theory, framing theory, and agenda setting theory—help explain the success of the Ben & Jerry's "Hubby Hubby" campaign?
2. How do social exchange theory and social learning theory help explain the success of the "Hubby Hubby" campaign?
3. The campaign issue surrounding legalizing gay and lesbian marriage could have created conflict for Ben & Jerry's, despite its reputation for social justice. What did Ben & Jerry's do to create a "win-win zone" between it and key audiences? How do the new model of symmetry and two-way practice and the mixed-motive model of public relations (figures 3.3 and 3.4) help explain the success of the campaign?
4. What other theories do you think help explain Ben & Jerry's campaign success?

## Summary



For self-testing and additional chapter resources, go to the Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/lattimore4e](http://www.mhhe.com/lattimore4e).

Theories of how public relations is practiced continue to develop. The original four models of public relations were a good starting point for describing the key activities that public relations practitioners perform: communication, research, and ethics. They gave us a way of organizing our concepts by types of public relations practice. James E. Grunig proposed to move on from the models of public relations to more specific sets of measurable variables: symmetry and asymmetry (research method choices); the extent of one-way versus two-way communication; the use of mediated and interpersonal forms of communication; and the extent to which public relations is practiced ethically.<sup>36</sup> These four dimensions give us even deeper and more sophisticated ways of thinking about public relations than did the original models. They help us predict more effectively what will and will not work in our practice of public relations.

boundary spanners  
 closed system  
 conflict resolution  
 cultural interpreter model  
 diffusion theory  
 dominant coalition  
 environment  
 framing theory  
 manager role  
 media agenda  
 message  
 models  
 open system  
 personal influence model

persuasion  
 publics  
 receiver  
 roles  
 situational theory  
 social exchange theory  
 social learning theory  
 source  
 stakeholders  
 systems theory  
 technician role  
 theory  
 uses and gratifications theory

## Key Terms

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