The Payoff of Pro Bono: Conversations with Agency Principals

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This study examines the strategic cohesive decision-making and "smart" pro bono client selection and retention in public relations firms. Through a series of research questions, selection and retention of pro bono clients was considered through the lens of institutional theory to explore some possibilities for agencies to improve their legitimacy.

Legitimacy in a profession has been defined as "a general perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The legitimacy framework is grounded in institutional theory. This study focuses on legitimacy for public relations agencies, in the form of social responsibility through pro bono public relations efforts. This work grew out of an examination of literature relating to the practice of pro bono work by law firms.

Public relations has long struggled with the issue of legitimacy. And while legitimacy is "at the core of most, if not all, public relations activities" (Metzler, 2001), the subject has attracted very sparse attention from public relations scholars (Wærass, 2009).
Can public relations agencies enhance their professional status and enhance workplace satisfaction through careful selection of pro bono clients that match an agency's core practices? Should there be institutional guidelines for pro bono practices? These are just two of the questions that spurred this line of research.

The method for this study was depth interviews. A series of interviews were conducted with public relations agency principals at agencies with $10 million or greater in annual revenues to get a richer picture of their motivations and ideas regarding pro bono work. The interview instrument consists of 19 open-ended questions designed to gain insight into the agency's attitude toward pro bono work, their criteria for pro bono client selection, and how they view pro bono work as a means to greater professionalism for their firms and their staff members.

Here, we draw an analogy between public relations firms and law firms. PR practitioners should discuss the practical implications of considering pro bono work to be a social obligation. Such work, while providing valuable services for a community, can also enhance the legitimacy of public relations as a profession. Literature from the study of the legal profession can also provide value to future research in public relations from a legitimacy perspective.

As much as practitioners would like to argue otherwise, the practice of public relations is still in the process of becoming the profession of public relations. The issue is one of

legitimacy. With its colorful history, public relations has long been, in turns, a scapegoat, an afterthought, and a proverbial whipping boy. Legitimacy in a profession has been defined as "a general perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). An area that can help to solidify PR as a profession lies in a legitimacy framework, grounded in institutional theory. This study focuses on legitimacy for public relations agencies, in the form of social responsibility through pro-bono public relations efforts.

A large body of work on legitimacy and corporate social responsibility has been done within the domain of institutional theory (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Brammer, Jackson & Matten, 2012; Thornton, Ocasio, & Loundsbury, 2015). Institutional theory deals mainly with inter-organizational processes and assumes that forces shaping an organization and its behavior are largely external to the organization, whereas much of organizational culture deals with intra-organizational processes (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Pedersen & Dobbin, 1997, 2006). A view that organizations are rewarded for behaving in a legitimate manner is a "ubiquitous theme" in organization studies (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992, p. 700). Despite this, however, the literature is fragmented and can broadly be classified in two distinct approaches to managing legitimacy – an institutional approach and a strategic approach (Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Can agencies enhance their professional status and enhance workplace satisfaction through careful selection of pro bono clients that match an agency's core practices? Should there be institutional guidelines for pro bono practices? To understand and explore these questions, it is helpful to analyze the situation along DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) three isomorphic processes (mimetic, normative and coercive) from institutional theory to develop a framework for how pro bono work becomes a mechanism for more positive reputations. This work presents a model for pro bono client work and explores the attitudes and opinions of agency principals regarding pro bono work. An argument is made for cohesive decision making and "smart" pro bono client selection and retention through a series of hypotheses derived from mimetic, normative and coercive processes to explore some possibilities for agencies to improve their legitimacy. This work also attempts to provide the beginnings of a typology for pro bono client selection and subsequent relationships, and calls for more established pro-bono programs for agencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional Theory
Institutional theory has taken on a variety of guises, but the central thrust has been to explain the homogeneity of structure, culture and output of organizations sharing an organizational field or "organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). This homogenization is referred to as isomorphism and deals with domains of operation, principles of organizing and criteria of evaluation (Kondra & Hurst, 2008). As such, organizational environments are "characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy" (Scott & Meyer, 1983, p. 149).

Despite its ubiquity, the quest for legitimacy remains a problematic concept in institutional theory. The question of service to the public or in the public interest is one that has concerned nearly all professions at one time or the other (Bivins, 1993). Given PR's almost monomaniacal quest for professional status, it is striking that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has not put forth suggested guidelines for pro bono work. Indeed, it is a subject that has been called the "double edged sword" by using the fundamental challenge faced by claims of the clients on one hand and the public on the other hand (Merkelsen, 2010). Unlike the legal profession, in which many states have requirements on pro bono hours worked by attorneys, public relations agencies do not. It is also interesting to note that the literature on PR ethics details few consciously positive PR activities, and the literature that does exist deals in generalizations rather than in specific illustrations (L.A. Grunig, 2013). It is also important for the argument presented here that agencies subscribe to a more careful selection of pro bono clients that best match the core practices of the firm for good "fit" between what the agency does and the core mission of their pro bono clients.

A Legal Model?
Should public relations agencies model themselves on a legal profession model? Several law schools require pro bono work for graduation, and the American Bar Association recommends that every lawyer perform at least 50 hours of pro bono work every year (ABA Policies, 2015). PR has compared itself so often to the legal profession that textbooks have accepted the analogy as fundamental:

> "The public relations person is an advocate of an idea or point of view, much as an attorney is an advocate for a client. Public relations practitioners have a right and responsibility to defend their client's point of view before the court of public opinion as much as attorneys have a right and an obligation to defend their client's action before a court of law" (Hiebert, et al, 1988, p. 302).

As public relations is comparing itself to law in the quest for true professionalism, the point should be made that public relations is every bit the profession that law is, and should be recognized as such (Ferré, 1993). This also speaks to the need of public relations agencies to conform to an industry norm. This idea can easily be transferred to public relations and its work in communicating between an organization and its publics. While pro bono work may not be absolutely necessary from a business standpoint, it is an important part of adhering to a larger dictum of actually *doing* business. In 2006 and 2007, state bars and state supreme courts were faced with revising lawyers' ethical codes in response to the American Bar Association's decennial update of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct to include the 50-hour a year recommendation. In her book, *Pro Bono in Principle and in Practice: Public Service and the Professions*, Deborah Rhode casts doubt on the viability of such a precatory strategy, although she seems resigned to exhortation rather than compulsion as the best means of increasing pro bono service (2005). The issue of compulsatory pro bono work is one that is of issue with public relations practitioners as well. PRSA calls for ethical advocacy work, but no mandate has been placed on professionals to perform work on a pro bono basis.

If codes of ethics are simply public relations pieces furthering a professional ideology, then service to society is merely one of the more useful "cloaks" with which professions disguise their primarily self-serving machinations (Bivins, 1993). If any profession, then, would move from merely posturing on ideology to the realm of effective action on behalf of society, a first logical step might be to spell out its obligations to the public interest in terms that are unambiguous enough to provide clear guidance to its members and forceful enough to send a clear signal to society (Bivins, 1993).

Organizations conforming to rules and requirements may do so not necessarily to increase efficiency but rather to increase legitimacy which in turn increases chances for survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983;Brammer, Jackson & Matten, 2012). This work does not call for mandates by PRSA on pro bono activities; it simply suggests that more definitive guidelines will assist practitioners in better defining their strategies in considering pro bono work.

Under What Conditions do Firms Act in Socially Responsible Ways?
Service as altruism belongs to the realm of broad, global service to society: it is the idea that what the professional does for his or her work benefits the greater communal good (Serini, 1994). Perucci (1976) defines the service ethic as "dealing with man's needs without a consideration of self-interest" (p. 216). Hughes (1958) sees service as indigenous to professionals, saying that when "an occupation…claims for itself the status of profession, it is saying to the world that…the work it does has somehow become a matter of broad public concern" (Work, p. 116). Jackson (1970) discusses the occupational niche of professions as being "defined around problems of universal, or at least widely experienced, social concern" (p. 7). Some scholars see service as a positive ideology. Professional ideals that encompass service are constructed sincerely and are not just what others call "self-serving verbiage" or "deliberately deceitful smokescreens" (Foley, Shaked & Sutton, 1982, p. 7). The authors go on to state that, "while economists are generally uncomfortable in dealing with altruistic, rather than selfish, marketing agents, this is probably a field where such motives may need to be recognized in dealing with certain issues" (Foley, Shaked & Sutton, 1982, p. 6). Research has also focused on the importance of corporate social responsibility programs to society as a whole rather than just how they will benefit the organization (e.g. Brammer, Jackson & Matten, 2012; Chernev & Blair, 2014; Day, 2014).

To a More Normative Approach
Public relations professionals are granted wide latitudes of freedom to use the public trust to further their private causes. To date, there is no existing typology of motivations for pro bono work in public relations. Managers, therefore, can (and do) take different actions regarding their level of environmental scanning (Fahey & Narayanan, 1986), their management of stakeholder relationships (Clarkson, 1995; Harrison & Freeman, 1999) and their activities regarding emerging and developing social and political issues (Chase, 1984, Greening & Gray, 1994; Wartlick & Cochran, 1985). These different actions result in considerable variability in the organization's social programs and policies, which, in turn, are expected to affect the organization's reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

In order for service to "work," in public relations, it must be an orientation that is "deeper than just compliance with a set of standards" (Larson, 1977, p. 62). The service ideal is a combination of "work ethic based on a blend of calling and craftsmanship ideals" and an "orientation toward the advancement of the profession's function" (Larson, 1997, p. 62). It is these ideals that combine to support "social credit and the public's belief in professional ethicality" (Larson, 1997, p. 63). Normative pressures are created primarily through professionalization (Kondra & Hurst, 2009). Attempts to standardize, and eventually impose through socialization, a set of professional behaviors provides a focal point for external legitimization.

Professionalism Through Relationship Management
Company citizenship has been considered a synonym for social responsibility, but it may be that it is the next step forward in organizations becoming more informed and enlightened members of society, and understanding that they are both public and private entities (McIntosh, et al., 2003).

For public relations, the notion of public responsibility has long been an issue in practice and theory development. With public responsibility comes the necessity of forming relationships with various publics to serve the public interest. In order for pro bono work to be beneficial for all parties, it is important here to consider the concept of public relations as *relationship management,* as proposed by Susan Dimmick, Traci Bell, Samuel Burgiss and Caroline Ragsdale (2000). The perspective that views public relations as relationship management argues for the practice unfolding within the four-step management process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). In this way, public relations is conceptualized as a management function that utilizes communication strategically. To better establish the field as a profession, the focus then turns from what public relations *does* to what public relations *is* (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). By considering pro bono clients from a strategic perspective, all parties can be better served in the relationships that are created.

It is important here to address the issue of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as it relates to the practice of public relations agencies. One of the putative fathers of modern public relations, Edward Bernays was quoted as saying simply, "Public relations is the practice of social responsibility" at the 1980 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism at Boston University (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 47). One of the earliest theorists on the process of CSR was L. E. Preston, a consultant of the Royal Commission on Corporate Concentration in Canada (Clarkson, 1995). Part of this study included Preston's ideas on the corporate social response matrix, the focus of which was the management of social issues by corporations (Clarkson, 1995). His matrix is useful here in considering the selection process for pro bono clients by PR agencies.

The stages included:
- Awareness or recognition of an issue
- Analysis and planning

- Response in terms of policy development; and
- Implementation

His study helped to establish the idea that business and society are interdependent and was later expanded to include responsiveness strategies. These stages mirror the popular RACE acronym (research, action, communication, and evaluation) taught in many public relations curriculums as a model for PR as a management process (Marston, 1979). This also speaks to the desirability of a good "fit" for agencies and their pro bono clients.

A Two-Way Relationship
J. Grunig suggests that for public relations to be valued by the organizations it serves, practitioners must focus their efforts on developing long-term behavioral relationships between organizations and their key publics, rather than relying solely on symbolic efforts designed to enhance organizational image (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Scholars have long approached the discussion of public relations from a relational perspective. Wilson calls for the use of public relations as a vehicle for building responsibility in contemporary companies (1994). Acknowledging that public relations practitioners need to have a "finger on the public pulse," she contends that the focus of public relations ought to be toward the development of "relational responsibility" (Wilson, 1994). Similarly, Heath argues for a focus on social responsibility, employing a traditional rhetorical perspective (1992).

While relational responsibility may be good for companies' bottom lines, it may be a bit of a straw man to suggest that all social responsibility behavior is motivated entirely by expected profitability. If social responsibility is good for business and good for profession-building, then research must look to ways to provide evidence to support that point. The term "relational partner" is a good way to define the ideal relationship between an agency and its pro bono clients, in that, since little or no money is changing hands, the work being done should be to the benefit of both parties. In a 2008 article in *Public Relations Tactics*, Bob Senior states: "If you choose your nonprofit with passion and commitment, pro bono public relations can provide an incubator for innovation and risk taking for you and your team while enhancing the nonprofit cause – and your company's reputation"

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

If following the model of pro bono work as a means of gaining legitimacy, it would seem that following the American Bar Association recommendation for pro bono work would work well for public relations. This would have to take the form of recommendations from the Public Relations Society of America. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: Do public relations agencies subscribe to the idea of a suggested industry standard for pro bono work?

The second research question in this study addresses the altruistic component of pro bono work. This particular also speaks to corporate responsibility and, most importantly, reputation which directly impacts legitimacy.

RQ2: Do agency principals who subscribe to more established pro bono practices and have stronger, more established relationships with pro bono clients in their community perceive their agencies as more altruistic agencies than their competing agencies?

Standards of professionalism have long been of importance to the public relations profession. An examination of the work of Larson (1977) leads us to believe that charitable work enhances "professional ethicality" and creates a higher sense of purpose. This might manifest itself in opinions regarding professionalism through pro bono work. Hence the third research question:

RQ3: Do public relations agency principals who have established pro bono programs perceive their agencies as having higher levels of professionalism than their counterparts?

With the high value placed on social responsibility and credibility, it would seem that there would be a selective process through which PR firms select their pro bono clients to best serve them in terms of practice areas and specialties. It would also seem that agencies would treat their pro bono clients just as they would paying clients. This leads to research question four:

RQ4: Do agencies subscribe to a strategic RACE-like process in the selection and retention of their pro bono clients?

The concept of clients as relational partners could not only help client retention, it could also increase client satisfaction. This goes for pro bono clients as well. The relational partner concept could indeed be the "sweet spot" for agencies in pursuit of business interests and social responsibility, affecting the legitimacy of the entire profession. This brings us to the final research question:

RQ5: Do agencies see their pro bono clients as relational partners?

Based on these research questions, a definitive method was established for data gathering to explore what agencies think about legitimacy and pro bono work.

METHOD

The method for this study was a series of interviews conducted with public relations agency principals to get a richer picture of their motivations and ideas regarding pro bono work. Eight interviews with public relations agency principals with total annual revenues of at least $10 million were conducted. Revenues were based on the agency-wide earnings even though "agency principal" referred to the general manager of a

particular office within a national or global organization. The interviews were arranged through an initial e-mail or telephone inquiry, and subjects were selected on the basis of whether the agency is involved in any pro bono activities. The interview instrument consists of 19 open-ended questions designed to gain insight into the agency's attitude toward pro bono work, their criteria for pro bono client selection, and how they view pro bono work as a means to greater professionalism for their firms and their staff members. Interviews were analyzed, and the results, including specific quotes, follow in the next section.

RESULTS

Results are reported through practitioners' quotes that answer the research questions.

To answer the first research question (*RQ1: Do public relations agencies subscribe to the idea of a suggested industry standard for pro bono work*) respondents were asked: "The American Bar Association provides guidelines for pro bono work for attorneys. Do you think an 'industry standard' for pro bono work (as in a certain number of hours per month) as a recommendation from PRSA is a good idea? Why or why not?"

Public relations leaders were split on this question. Four said they believe such standards would be positive. "I think it could be healthy for our industry, so yes. I think our role as PR practitioners is to be engaged and understand the challenges and opportunities in our community," said the principal of a large regional firm (telephone interview, 10/18/11).

The director of a local office for a global agency said,

> I think that's a good idea. Why? Because I think it's every PR agency's responsibility to do pro bono work and to be a good community partner, so I think if we formalize an expectation that we would probably get more people participating. (telephone interview, 9/29/11)

Another leader said he had never really thought of the idea, but agreed it was a good one. "If it encourages more PR firms and more PR practitioners to help out charities and support local initiatives, then I definitely think it is a good idea," said another (telephone interview, 10/20/11).

The other four leaders were less enthusiastic about industry standards. "It's a bad idea. I don't need or want somebody telling me what I should or shouldn't be doing in terms of giving my work away," said the local director of a global firm (telephone interview, 12/1/11). Another was more measured,

> I think I am of the mind that every firm should decide what is best for themselves. I think we are all interested in engaging our community and making a community impact. I think that is the context generally, and firms and companies have their own view of this. I don't think it needs to be

mandated or required. I think that is a little over the top. We are trying to set guidelines, but I don't think it needs to be mandated. People will take on what they can take on and make this a better world. (telephone interview, 2/24/12)

"I can understand PRSA wanting to hold a position that can give guidelines, but I don't know if that would influence us one way or another," said the local director of a global firm. "I am not waiting around for an industry body to help get me guidance on that" (telephone interview, 10/5/11).

Agency principals were more uniform in their answers when asked about the strength or their relationships with their pro bono clients and the altruistic nature of their agencies. These principals uniformly believe that established relationships with pro bono clients lead to stronger contributions to the community.

When asked whether they categorized the nature of their pro bono work as improving the local community, all eight said "yes" (*RQ2: Do agency principals who subscribe to more established pro bono practices and have stronger, more established relationship with pro bono clients in their community perceive their agencies as more altruistic agencies than their competing agencies?*). All but one agreed that they think pro bono work is necessary for good business practice. Each leader said they would characterize the nature of their pro bono work as being "the right thing to do". All but one said they were motivated to do pro bono work because it helps their reputation with paying clients or their reputation in the PR industry at large. Six of eight said they are motivated to do pro bono work because such work brings in new paying clients.

These leaders have been working with their current pro bono clients for anywhere from four months to twenty years. Most were ones of two to four years. That does not represent the number of years the organizations have been doing pro bono work generally.

All eight respondents said they believe their agency is an active member of their community in terms of making the community a better place to live.

When asked whether their agency was doing work they considered "for the greater good" these leaders provided detailed illustrations.

The local director of a global agency said,

> [F]inancial literacy, especially in this economy and the economy we have seen in the past three years, is a really strong thing. And if we can help the youth be a little bit wiser and a little bit more prepared with their own finances and personal finances, they will make better choices and be in a better position when they, not just graduate high school, but if they move on to graduate college. It's that kind of influence that we think will help them in terms of living their life in society. (telephone interview 10/5/11)

The director of global outreach at an agency headquarters explained their process:

> Hunger and poverty is our global cause as selected by our employees. We let the local offices determine how they want to leverage their skill sets against hunger and poverty. …We really like this model because…we engaged our employees and managers, who liked global guidance, but lets them activate locally because they get buy-ins and engagement at each of our local office levels. (telephone interview, 2/24/12)

These principals said their work ran from managing "all the media relations from two 10-minute segments on *The Today Show* to one upcoming on *CBS Evening News*" (telephone interview, 10/5/11) to "…raising support and funds for a lot of nonprofits without those resources. We design logos, brochures, and collateral materials" (telephone interview, 10/18/11).

"All the things we are doing have a great impact on society," said another director (telephone interview, 9/29/11). "…If we are enabling an organization that does good work in the community to do better work, then I think we are helping," said yet another (telephone interview, 12/1/11).

The third research question addressed how established pro bono activities affect staff professionalism. *RQ3: Do public relations agency principals who have established pro bono programs perceive their agencies as having higher levels of professionalism than firms without established pro bono programs?*

When asked how satisfied they were with their pro bono client relationships and the work their firms are doing, the responses were highly affirmative. One said, "I feel great about the work we are doing." He continued, "One of the things I didn't mention in terms of why we do it is employee retention." He explained that when employees work in the for-profit realm, taking on a pro bono client is refreshing and rewarding.

"They pretty much mirror all relationships we have professionally," a leader said of his company's pro bono relationships. "Some are absolutely outstanding and some are fine and some are entirely professional and some are troublesome at times" (telephone interview, 12/1/11).

A similar refrain was heard from the local director of a global agency.

> We have a lot of young college graduates working here – two or three years of work experience – and I think, in general, there is an expectation that people don't want to work for companies that are not socially responsible. It's also part of building morale. Whether or not the pro bono clients are nice to us…, I think people really enjoy doing work that's a service. …People like to feel like they are making a difference. (telephone interview, 9/29/11)

Another respondent was pragmatic. "Because we are not being paid, we are not going to continue on the road of a non-fulfilling project" (telephone interview, 10/18/11).

Respondents were asked about the satisfaction and frustration experienced by employees regarding their pro bono activities.

One leader in the headquarters of a global agency said:

> Everyone is very positive… We had allocated money [for local community grants]… We had no idea how many grant [requests] we would receive. But then, to see, within the first year, $150,000 go to 50 organizations around the world is pretty incredible. We had Mexico City, Asia, we had Latin America, we had Chicago, we had Vancouver… People were very proud about this program. Not only did we recognize their individual contributions through this grant, but it also reinforced our message that being a good citizen is key as a global company. We have addressed it globally, locally, and individually. People have been very positive about it. …I don't think there is any frustration about it. (telephone interview, 2/24/12)

"It's nice to do something that you believe helps the community at large or addresses an issue or problem the community faces," another leader said. He continued:

> I think that is where the reward comes in. There are other parts that are rewarding. You meet people you wouldn't normally meet in the course of your day or in the course of your career even… It puts you together with people who often see the world through [different] lenses… That can be an enlarging, ennobling, and stimulating thing to do. (telephone interview, 12/1/11)

One principal said that his employees are frustrated by not having as much time as they'd like to dedicate to the pro bono client. Another source of frustration is that pro bono accounts are taken on and become entrenched. That is, the agency gets attached to the client and, while the agency might like to take on different pro bono clients, employees don't want to give up working with the existing pro bono account and time doesn't allow taking on new pro bono initiatives.

In order to understand the strategic nature of the selection process of pro bono clients, the fourth research question was explored. *RQ4: Do agencies subscribe to a strategic RACE-like process in the selection and retention of their pro bono clients?*

Agencies may be very informal in the way they select and retain pro bono clients. Selection may be based solely on interests and relationships of agency associates with prospective pro bono clients. Other entities have a more formal process by which selections are made.

One principal explained the structure of their competitive process:

> We do brainstorming for seven pro bonos and they have to nominate
> themselves to be chosen. We brainstorm against each of those seven and
> we write them a PR program or marketing plan. And then out of that we
> choose the cause we want to work for in the year ahead. Several apply.
> (telephone interview, 9/29/11)

"We actually do have a process around a couple of things: Can we get passionate about
the cause? Does the organization have a need?," explained one leader. He mentioned
the American Cancer Society, which is large enough to pay for their agency work.

He continued:

> But what about those organizations that have a great cause but simply will
> not have the resources necessary to get their cause elevated in
> awareness and drive to have an impact in the community? That is
> important to us. Can we use our talents and gifts in an appropriate way
> that will help elevate that organization: I mentioned passion, but also will
> the employees get excited about it? (telephone interview, 10/5/11)

When asked whether pro bono clients get the full complement of resources that are
available to paying clients one director said, "Yes. We treat them like we would treat any
other account" (telephone interview, 12/1/11).

Another said,

> It depends. Theoretically yes. We can only do what we can do with the
> money we have, but yes, we follow the same exact protocol with our pro
> bono clients that we do with any other client. (telephone interview,
> 9/29/11)

Some said that the resources are pared down for pro bono clients. "There is planning
and implementation and some informal evaluation," said another principal. "I wouldn't
necessarily say I do the research. They tend to do the research on their own"
(telephone interview, 10/11/11). Yet another noted, "It depends on the project," he said,
"but typically we don't engage in the full process like we do for a paying client"
(telephone interview, 10/18/11).

Finally, we explored the relationships and prospective partnerships between agencies
and their pro bono clients with RQ 5. *Do agencies see their pro bono clients as
relational partners?*

When asked whether they would describe their clients as "relational partners," the tone
of the responses were positive, but the tenor was nuanced. "Absolutely [we are

partners]. …I would say from that first year we started working with them, they saw we are good people and really enjoy helping the purpose they are serving. We like to help promote their cause," said one respondent (telephone interview, 10/13/11). Another said, "The client we work with we have worked with for several years so we have developed a relationship with them and that's really important" (telephone interview, 10/20/11).

Some linked the pro bono relationship to business relationship outcomes. The principal in the headquarters of a global agency said,…

> [O]ne of our grant winners… was… dedicated to the conservation of the polar bear and its habitat through research, education, and stewardship. …[W]e gave a $2,500 grant to this organization and I find out about a week or two ago that [they] hired [our agency] as its agency of record to further increase awareness… That is something I did not even anticipate and was totally pleased to see that type of outcome. Not only is there a positive effect to our employees in that we are supporting an organization, but it has a bottom line effect of now we have a paying client as a result of that. (telephone interview, 2/24/12)

In a similar vein another principal cited the value of the relational partner model. He said,

> A few years back we did some of the traditional things where we looked at who's on the board and what's this going to turn into if we do this assignment. Will we get a bigger opportunity down the road? I know it sounds terrible to say that but we were looking more at the business side of it and about two years ago, maybe two and a half, we flipped it on its head and said, first thing this is going to be about using our gifts and talents for the best of our ability with our focus on making an impact. Then we took all the pressure off how it could turn into money for [our agency]. Since that time, what's interesting is that we probably made more money with that approach than we ever did before. But do we get really close with them? Yes. With our new approach of not seemingly having ulterior motives at all, almost every single one of them says let me introduce you to this board member or that board member because we are not asking for anything. We get introduced all the time and we have developed some fantastic relationships with our pro bono clients, and also their partners. So it has really been great. (telephone interview, 10/5/11)

DISCUSSION

Interviews with eight public relations professionals who are at the top of their organization and who are involved in the selection and development of pro bono projects were useful in revealing the place of pro bono work in both individual public

relations agencies and the profession overall. Both applied and theoretical aspects of the findings are now discussed.

Most public relations leaders did not strenuously object to the notion of an industry standard for pro bono work akin to the legal model. Most found the idea at best interesting but not essential to direct their efforts. In fairness, we only spoke with agency principals whose organizations were doing pro bono work. But for those leaders, a nudge from industry was unnecessary at best and intrusive at worse. It seems fair to say that while the notion of an industry standard may be attractive to some, these principals did not find a strong need for such standards.

Agency principals whose relationships with their pro bono clients were lengthy did seem to see their organizations as doing good and making a difference. All leaders said that their pro bono work made their communities better and was simply the right thing to do. Seven of eight said that pro bono work is both necessary to build a good business and serves to enhance the agency's reputation both among its clients and within the public relations profession. This suggests that pro bono work adheres to the win-win, mutual benefit model of public relations practice supported by excellence scholars. Furthermore, these conversations suggest that while financial gain may not be a primary motivation, it can often be an outcome over time.

Employee engagement and morale were also motivating factors in pro bono programs, according to these leaders. Especially for employees who are doing straightforward commercial public relations, the break from a bottom-line focused project to a better-world focused project is enriching and another testimony for the positive side effects of pro bono work.

Strategy did not seem to be the dominant driver in deciding how pro bono clients were selected. While some leaders did suggest that their organizations had a formal process for pro bono client selection, the focus was on meeting community needs and not business outcomes. Preston's Corporate Social Response matrix (e.g., awareness or recognition of an issue, followed by analysis and planning, response through policy development, and finally implementation) seems logical and fits with some of the processes that principals described, but the selection process did not seem to be rigidly linear and strategic. There was little, if any, what's-in-it-for-me sentiment evident among these principals.

Finally, these agencies did seem to see their pro bono clients as partners in the relationship. As noted in the results, responses were nuanced. While these principals did note that they were working together and building relationships with their pro bono clients, they also noted the positive business outcomes and the sometimes "transactional" nature of a we-need-something-from-you relationship that the clients bring to the relationship.

These findings lead to consideration of how pro bono relationships can be both good public service and good business. The intersection of these interests suggests the

potential for a model that recognizes this common good.

A Model of Converging Interests

Using a model of converging interests originally proposed by Porter and Kramer (2002, pg. 7), figure 1.1 proposes a model for public relations agencies to develop better relationships that serve both economic and public interests. The triangular area shows where philanthropy has an important influence on a company's competitive context. It is here that philanthropy can help to enhance public relations' professionalism.
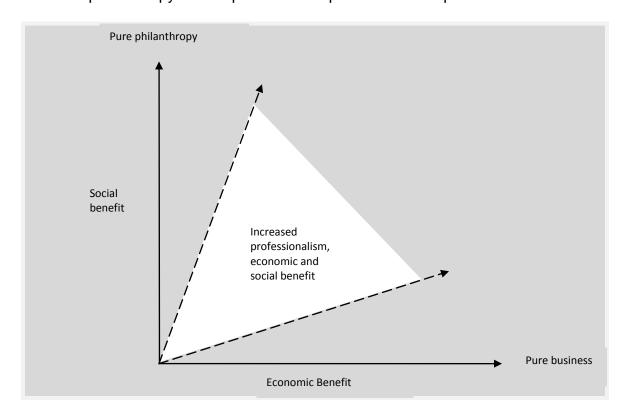

Figure 1.1

There is a "sweet spot" that can be realized with the proper mix of variables, and which may be better actualized through greater isomorphism in the agency practice of public relations. Here, we can also see the value of the "relational partner" concept. While more should be done to define such a concept, the foundations for such a framework are inherent in this model. Future research can build upon the foundations of this study to further develop what actually may benefit agencies in the proper mix of social and economic factors in ideal pro bono client relationships.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is much work to be done before public relations is truly seen as a profession with inherent value. It is hoped that from the findings presented here, public relations agencies will perceive the value of established pro bono programs in helping the field gain legitimacy. Future research can better identify the appropriate mix of social and

economic benefit for agencies and their pro bono clients. It also may be that an appropriate number of hours per year for PRSA to recommend can be determined from the foundational work done here. This work also fits into the body of work on corporate social responsibility, and it may be that some of the insight gained from the work with public relations agencies can be extended to apply to public relations departments of corporations as well.

CONCLUSION

Deliberating over issues involved in pro bono work can help public relations practitioners refine their ethical reasoning. Much could be gained from explicit professional recognition of pro bono work. If the analogy between public relations and law is appropriate, then PR practitioners should discuss the practical implications of considering pro bono work to be a social obligation. Given the level of interest and activity in pro bono public relations as well as the belief that PR has social responsibilities, it is important to recognize that greater institutionalization of pro bono work can lead to greater professionalization in the field.

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