

Expanding Public Sector Communications: Moving beyond Public Affairs to Facilitate Collaborative Public Relations

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Abstract—Traditionally, public sector agencies communicate to their publics to inform and resolve conflicts. By using a review of the literature, this study describes broadening the role of public sector communications by moving beyond a traditional public affairs model to a more collaborative public relations model utilizing two-way symmetrical communications. Technology and social media in today’s society can be an asset to public agencies in terms of communications that allow for a collaborative model. Results of the study illustrate public sector agencies using two-way symmetrical communications can build stronger relationships with their publics that can benefit the agency and their publics in building and maintaining collaborative long-term relationships.

Keywords: *collaboration, public relations, social media, two-way symmetrical communications*

INTRODUCTION

The success of public sector agencies and the relationship they develop and maintain with their internal and external constituencies are dependent on communications.

Internal and external communications are vital to foster successful public sector agency operations. Traditionally, communications disseminated by public sector agencies are part of a public affairs model. Public affairs focuses on agency activities and communications to external publics (Chen, 2007, p. 479).

The public affairs model may be grounded on a foundation of honesty and accuracy, but can lack complete transparency when incorporating feedback from the agency’s internal and external constituencies that are used to create a collaborative long-term public relations model. According to Public Affairs Networking, “public affairs is a term used to describe an organization’s relationship with stakeholders.” Furthermore they note, “public affairs practitioners engage stakeholders in order to explain organizational policies and views on public policy issues, assisting policy makers and legislators in amending or laying down better policy and legislation” (What is Public Relations? 2014).

Conversely, public relations is focused on true transparency and incorporating feedback from the agency’s constituencies or publics to create two-way symmetrical communications that allow for a collaborative relationship with a public agency’s publics and stakeholders. According to the Public Relations Society of America, “public relations is a strategic communication process that build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (What is Public Relations? 2011).

Ultimately, public relations incorporates public affairs but is broader in terms of focusing not just on dissemination of communications, but also on relationship management to provide for a collaborative working relationship between a public sector agency and their publics.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMUNICATIONS Traditionally, public affairs communications utilize a public information or two-way asymmetrical communications model. The public information model focuses on disseminating information to constituencies, while the two-way asymmetrical model allows for information from internal and external constituencies to flow into the agency without a feedback loop to these publics. Scholars argue that responsibility and proactivity in public agencies need to allow their publics to actively engage in the process of governing by the public sector. According to Brainard & Edlins (2014), “some scholars suggest that public administrators should be obligated to assume at least partial responsibility for civic engagement and more proactively involve citizens in governing”. Furthermore, this type of governance in public sector communications allows for two-way symmetrical and collaborative relationships with publics. Nabatchi (2010) has argued that the field “should refocus its attention on the role citizens in the work of government” (as cited in Brainard & Edlins, 2014, p. 2).

COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a process that creates a context and decision that allows others to choose to work with you toward a shared goal (Rubin, 2002). Although, many public agencies lack a collaborative relationship with their constituencies in terms of communications, planning, policy decisions, and implementation of these decisions. This lack of collaboration may create agency politics with the public that Hoy and Miskel (2008) conclude, “inevitably produce conflict” (p.246). In today’s advances in technology and the use of social media communications, global societies are allowing public agencies to communicate with their publics and create a collaborative atmosphere. Not all administrators in public agencies have adapted to these rapid changes in the use of technology, social media, and two-way symmetrical communications. Bronson, Royo, & Ratkai (2014) noted, “however it also means that public administrators should engage with citizens to identify and define problems in collaboration,

and implement solutions for the problems detected.

Doing so can allow for collaboration between the public sector and their publics. Brainard & McNutt refer to the use of digital communications in the public sector as “e- government”. Ultimately, E-government is allowing public agencies to disseminate information by the use of the Internet and digital technology including the use of social networking sites.

PROACTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS Proactive public relations provides public agencies more opportunities to build and maintain long-term relationships than simply using a reactive public relations approach. Typically, public agencies communication strategies disseminate information to their constituencies that informs or reacts to public policy issues. According to Viteritti, “Meaningful communication between government and the people is not merely practicality. It is political, albeit moral, obligation that originates from the basic covenant that exists between the government and the people” (as cited in Liu & Horsley, 2007, p. 379). When a proactive public relations model is implemented, public agencies look to develop communication strategies that seek public opinion and input so the agency can speak to the concerns and issues facing the agency and their publics.

PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATIONS One role of public relations is to communicate to the public. In terms of communications in public agencies, traditionally messages are disseminated to the public in a linear fashion. Although the communications may be honest and transparent, these efforts may lack feedback from internal and external constituencies to the public agency.

A. Two-Way Symmetrical Communications

The two-way symmetrical communications model provides public agencies the ability to foster and maintain collaborative relationships with their publics. This collaborative relationship helps to resolve conflict and allow public agency constituencies the ability to have their input validated and implemented in the agency’s planning and operations. Stacks (2006) concluded, “A symmetrical model represents a balanced flow of communication whereby all parties are communicating with each other as equals, seeking to maintain a relationship based on mutual understanding and needs” (p. 67).

B. Counseling Management and Organizational Change

One effective way to build coalition and collaboration between public agencies and their publics is the use of social media. Social media networks like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn can provide the necessary communication channels that build and sustain two-way symmetrical communications. According to Thomas & Strieb (2005), “the Internet now serves as a major new linkage between society and government, and has emerged as a driving factor for citizen participation initiatives because of its potential for informing, educating, and empowering citizens” (as cited in Bonson, Royo, & Ratkai, 2014, p. 1). The use of social media has opened the doors for a balanced communication tool for public agencies and their publics.

C. Collaborative Public Relations through social media

Although two-way symmetrical communications allow for a balanced flow of communication, public agency communications may not incorporate this model in all of their communications efforts with internal and external constituencies. The lack of the use of a two-way symmetrical communication model can require the communications director to consult and counsel management on the need for incorporating balanced communications between the agency and their constituencies. This shift in communications and public relations to a two-way symmetrical model can be difficult for those managing public agencies to adopt, especially when differences occur between the public agency and the values of their publics. Lee noted (2010), “ethical dilemmas, emerging when values clash, are especially challenging in public relations where practitioners encounter numerous public, stakeholders and competing priorities” (p. 185).

SUMMARY

Public sector agencies communicate to their publics to inform and resolve conflicts. This study found broadening the role of public sector communications by moving beyond a traditional public affairs model utilizing two-way symmetrical communications creates more collaborative public relations. Also results of the

study illustrate public sector agencies using two-way symmetrical communications can build stronger relationships with their publics that can benefit the agency and their publics in building and maintaining collaborative long-term relationships. These relationships can assist the public agency and their constituencies to work together to successfully achieve their goals to work as a holistic team moving beyond a basic public affairs model to a proactive public relations model.

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