The Issues Management Process & Effective Media Relations:

A Drive For Positive Publicity

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Introduction

The premise of this study is that organisations can achieve positive publicity by using effective media relations to publicise their issues management planning; proactively increasing the return on investment in issues management. A number of theoretical concepts underpin this hypothesis. These are namely Grunig's (1987) situational publics theory, open-systems theory, ecology theory, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). By placing emphasis on these premises and aligning them with corporate goals and policies—particularly that of issues management—it is assumed that corporations will achieve greater success.

This research will establish the issues management process directly in the remit of public relations departments. It will provide an overview of the current major concepts surrounding issues management in public relations planning; and review primary research into the current level of issues management planning conducted by public relations practioners.

Many organisations have ignored or undervalued the importance of issues management, either because they misunderstand the foundation of crisis management, or because they simply do not take the time to formulate public relations strategies.

This field of study is of strategic importance to organisations, and while there is a variety of research available that relates to the topic, it does not directly state how issues management with respect to public relations can actively improve corporate bottom lines. Most research recognises the value of issues management in reactive PR – once an issue or crisis arises in the media and the PR practitioner has to respond. The logic behind the proposition presented is that organisations should use public relations to act as a vehicle to proactively communicate corporate policies and views on relevant industry issues. This will improve the bottom line and increase return on investment.

It has been documented that the origins of public relations are in issues management. Many early PR initiatives in the US were aimed at educating the public on the expansive power of the railways and other topical issues. As such, "Much of what we define as public relations was labelled press-agentry when it was being used to promote land

settlement in [the] unsettled west" (Cutlip, Brown & Center quoted in Burton 1998 p. 32).

Issues Management

There is a wide variety of definitions for issues management, although we believe it may be best defined as the "systematic identification and action regarding public policy matters of concern to an organisation" (Grunig & Grunig, 1990, p. 30).

The issues management process consists of seven key stages. These are namely:

1. **Issues monitoring**: where the business environment is continually scanned for emerging issues and changes in existing known issues. To effectively scan one's environment it is important that relationships are developed with all stakeholders and the media.

2. **The identification of important issues**: this stage involves the identification of key issues that may affect an organisation's business environment. This exercise helps to bring to light potential threats that are present but not prevalent.

3. **The prioritizing of key issues**: once issues have been identified, they must be prioritised with respect to the amount of resources dedicated to actioning said issues.

4. **Selection and analysis of key issues**: the issues that have been identified as those which require further action need to be further researched. A research document identifying the history, status, potential development and policy options open to the organisation needs to be compiled and circulated amongst decision makers.

5. **Decision on strategy**: it is necessary at this point in the issues management process for an organisation to come to a consensus on what issues will be tackled and the strategies and tactics that will be employed in addressing those issues.

6. **Programme mplementation**: once a course of action has been decided upon, a programme to achieve the desired objectives must be implemented. The programme must effectively communicate the organisation's position and messaging to key stakeholders.

7. **Programme evaluation**: any programme instituted must be evaluated after completion as to its effectiveness regarding message communication with targeted stakeholders.[i]

The Relationship between Issues Management & the Media

Communication is central to issues management. It strengthens core values, distributes information, fosters relations and accurately portrays corporate goals (Hargie & Tourish, 2004). Given that issues management directly informs external stakeholders – such as customers, suppliers, competitors, the government and the media – effective communication within these spheres can have a positive influence on corporate policies. As noted, "issues management is not only designed to protect a company against unwarranted public policy; it also seeks favourable public policy" (Grunig & Grunig, 1990, p. 31). Public relations departments are in a unique position to build relationships with external stakeholders. The relationship between public relations and issues management serves as a vehicle to assist a company's goals (Lauzen, 1997).

It would be naïve to assume that the media is completely neutral in its coverage of issues. Proposals put forth by Dyer separate the media's issues reporting agenda into three separate and measurable components: salience, visibility and valence (Dyer 1996 p.139). Salience is defined as "the personal relevance or importance that an audience ascribes to an issue in the media agenda" (Dyer, 1996, p. 139). This can be measured through opinion polls and market surveys. Visibility is defined as the degree to which a particular issue is reported by the media and can be measured by accounting for the number of times an issue is reported. Visibility reports should include information on the source of coverage (Dyer, 1996, p. 141). The third aspect of the media's agenda, as defined by Dyer, is that of valence. Valence is "the assessment of the portrayal of an issue in the media as positive, neutral or negative" (Dyer, 1996, p. 142). As positivity, negativity and neutrality are qualitative measurements, human judgment plays a role in the assessment of the valence of coverage (Dyer, 1996, p. 142).

Relationship between Public Relations & Marketing[ii]

Public relations can be defined in terms of what practitioners do as opposed to what it is. For a clear definition, the field of public relations can be delineated as "the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various

publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center & Brown, p. 1). Public relations plays a crucial role in organisations. An organisation's profitability, appearance to the public, and its reputation is the remit of public relations. There are multiple analyses, conceptual roles, and theoretical frameworks provided within the field of public relations. Such differentials provide a necessary examination and discussion in relation to contemporary public relations practice.

The literature reviewed pertaining to the relationship of public relations and marketing is rife with debate. James Gruing and his colleagues argue that public relations management and marketing are two distinct disciplines that will fair better if they do not act in conjunction with one another (Gruing et al, 1992 & Gruing & Dozier, 2002).

We argue against such purism. While Gruing's studies have provided an excellent background for organisations to follow, this model proposes that by combining public relations activities with the marketing of organisational policy as defined through issues management, a positive return on investment will be incurred.

Theoretical & Conceptual Foundations—Literature Review

Open Systems Theory

The open systems theory supports the multidimensional view of organizations as it pertains to its relationship with society. This theory purports that organizational effectiveness can be improved by intertwining sociological concepts and the network of relationships that an organisation interacts with.

There are few important concepts that underpin open systems theory. The first states that an organisation exists in psychical and social environments that evolve over time. Social environments include, but are not limited to, other organisations, the community, and departments within the company. Thus, the organisation has a vested interest in a complex network of relationships. Secondly, the network of relationships refers to "physical organisms" and "psychological processes" (Olmstead, 2002, p. 137) that are combined. Researchers suggest that relationships between people establish particular states where the activity and psychological state of an individual is largely influenced by another person (or even a department). Boundaries, however, can be established, which can occur through relative autonomy or 'purpose' and

'perceived membership' (Olmstead, 2002).

To understand the nature of the relationship corporations share with its publics, it is important to consider the potential influence policies and practices have on internal operations as well as the community at large.

Social Concepts

The first concept that encourages the assumptions made above is related to the social, political, and economic relationship between society and public relations management. Cutlip, Center & Broom (1985) argued that:

> "the political-social-economic environment defines the need and the purpose of the public relations function and shapes public reception and interpretation of an organisation's deeds and words. Careful assessment of this ever-changing opinion climate is essential if an organisation is to steer a safe, steady course through the reefs and shoals in today's volatile socioeconomic environment" (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 101).

The environment is not only relevant to domestic, but also international relations. The expansion of organizations into new industries and geographical locations has a major bearing on the public environments in which the organisation exists. The nature of the Internet also means that all organisations must be globally aware. These environments must be monitored and analysed for issues that directly relate to the policies made by organisations. These activities can be delineated as environmental scanning.

Environmental scanning includes the analysis of six different external factors that relate directly to issues management. These factors are; political changes, legal changes, economic changes, technological changes, societal changes, and cultural changes (Ford, Honeycutt & Simintiras, 2003). Constant analysis of environmental factors will help organisations create long-term plans ensuring that they conform to changes within their environments, and enable them to conform to new regulations that may affect business practices.

One may conclude that if an organisation fails to assess different policies and changes within public spheres, its profit margin will be negatively affected. Legal problems could arise were an organisation to fail to evaluate new regulations that may impact the way the business operates. These will also affect the company's revenue. Comprehensive issues management is therefore crucial for an organisation to effectively operate.

Furthermore, societal changes can have a large effect on an organisation. Ford, Honeycutt & Simintiras, 2003 reported that:

> "increasing concern for eating healthy foods, better use of leisure time activities, increasing sensitivity to ethical issues and social responsibility (particularly in light of the Enron crisis in the United States), and increasing concerns over safety and security (e.g., the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001) are all examples of issues which will change the habits and expectations of both consumer and industrial customers. Awareness of these kinds of changes offers astute firms profitable opportunities" (p. 241).

For that reason, there needs to be an established relationship with any organisation and its community.

One of the concepts that derives from the sociological relationship between organisations and the community is the ecology theory coined by Cutlip, Center & Broom, (1985).

It is an efficient concept that demonstrates an understanding of inter-reliant relationships within the organisation or environment. Simply put, with an ever-changing society, public relations amplifies its importance by understanding and conforming to the needs of an organisation while at the same time comprehending the needs of society.

This conceptual framework can be seen in real life organisations. There are various ways that ecology presents itself within the system of organisations as well as governmental agencies. The theoretical framework here provides insight into how organisations depend on or are affected by environmental factors. For example, specific regulations of the business depend upon their publics and stakeholders such as: what location they are in, their operating revenue and employees. Based on this, it is fair to conclude that regulations and an organisation's environment go hand in hand. While it is true that the business could be negatively affected by its environment—a new office building may not be accepted due to new government regulations—the unwanted affects could be drastically reduced by involving effective public relations in the debate prior to the new regulations being set. That's good issues management.

Companies are often able to generate a good reputation through community involvement. For example, America's Wal-Mart has a considerably more difficult time building new facilities because the general public does not like their policies and doesn't agree with its ethical standard of business practices.[iii]

However another company that is well-regarded by the communities it affects, such as Johnson and Johnson, would have less trouble building a new facility. Thus, providing that an organisation has a good reputation among its publics and communicates its corporate goals through the media, more opportunities for expansion are created, resulting in more revenue.

A prime example of an organisation publicising its issues management process is the *AOL/discuss* initiative. The Internet industry can be very tricky and some of the content and activity online is controversial. Internet service providers like AOL often find themselves on the receiving end of blame – even though in most instances they are a mere conduit of information. Through the

/discuss initiative, AOL recognises that:

> "The Internet is an incredibly powerful tool, but as with all things, power can be used for good and bad……We believe in the power of discussion in harnessing the very reason the Internet was created to make it better. Through */discuss*, it's our hope that by raising these issues we can get people thinking and talking, for it is through discussion that we gain understanding, and it is through understanding that we can change things."[iv]

Through the */discuss* initiative, AOL is seen to be engaging with its stakeholders and fostering discussion and potential resolution on some of the most difficult and unsavoury issues it, and the entire Internet industry, faces.

BP is another organisation that actively speaks out and institutes proactive initiatives on some of the toughest issues facing its industry such; alternative energies, climate change,

development, human rights and community investment.

Another important theoretical model surfaces with adjustment and adaptation. The systems perspective also addresses the role of PR in the interaction between an organisation and the public. Cutlip et al defined this as "a set of interacting units which endures through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to changing pressures from the environment in order to achieve and maintain goals." (Cutlip et al, 1985) Public relations often functions as if organisations were closed systems. However, by doing so they are not appropriately responding to their environment. The organisation must be run in accordance with changing pressures and mutually beneficial relationships. The systems can be viewed as three subsets: the outside environment,

the organisation itself and then its subsystems. Each of these factors relates to how well an organisation can adjust in different circumstances.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In the business world a variety of performance measures such as; business rules, ethics, communication techniques, competencies, quality of service and business drivers, undergo constant change. Most organisations have a broad variety of performance measures and sophisticated systems for collecting, recording, analysing and reporting this information. In the current climate it would be fair to say that one of most important of all performance measures can be corporate social responsibility (CSR), along with its implementation and execution.

First of all, it is important to understand what corporate social responsibility really means. Corporate social responsibility is essentially the configuration, or conforming, of business operations with socioeconomic principles. In other words, CSR is the:

"decision-making and execution process that conducts all company activities in the fortification and advertising of international human rights, manual labour and environmental standards and compliance with legal requirements within its operations and in its relations to the societies and communities where it operates. CSR involves a commitment to contribute to the economic, environmental and social sustainability of communities through the on-going engagement of stakeholders, the active participation of communities impacted by company activities and the public reporting of company policies and performance in the economic, environmental and social arenas" (Krausz & Pava, p. 12).

While companies are duty-bound to serve both their own interests, they are also compelled to serve the interests of various stakeholders.

In the current societal context, the general public generally expects businesses and other organisations to act in a socially responsible manner. The demands of our complex social and economic climate all point toward increasing expectations that many businesses will assimilate CSR activities into their core values. Many organisations operate with a new found understanding of CSR as it is considered the hallmark of an established and successful business.

It is necessary at this point to tie together the importance of environmental scanning, specifically the identification of emerging issues with an organisation's choices of CSR initiatives. The early identification of potentially problematic issues enables

organisations to define messaging, set objectives and decipher which tactics will best fulfil those objectives. Organisations thus are presented with the opportunity to tailor CSR initiatives to ease the minds of, and ideally appease, disaffected stakeholders.

What is the Meaning of Broader Measures of Organisational Performance?

There are many domains in which CSR initiatives can be pursued by organisations. These actions can be identified as the appreciation for ecosystems, ecological value, honesty in consumer protection, contribution to education, service to community needs, identifying and valuing workforce's diversity and merit, a dynamic approach to supporting employees and general corporate benevolence. In many cases,

companies use social audits along with financial audits to determine its commitment and actions for implementing and executing organisational performance. These social audits generally include four criteria:

- Is the organisation's **economic duty** met?
- Is the organisation's **legal duty** met?
- Is the organisation's **ethical duty** met?
- Is the organisation's **optional duty** met?

There is no doubt that an organisation meets its economic duty when it earns a profit. Legal duty is met when an organisation conducts its business within the law and according to the requirements of external regulations. Preferably, economic duties are met with a legally responsible approach. This enables an organisation to

meet its ethical responsibility by voluntarily conforming to both legal expectations and broader values of moral expectations of the society. The highest level of social responsibility performance comes via the satisfaction of an organisation's optional responsibility. In realizing the execution of an optional duty, organisations willingly move beyond the basic economic, legal and ethical ideals and provide leadership in advancing the well being of individuals, communities and society.

Today's investors, consumers, and workforce are more refined than ever before and many organisations are seeking to reduce their environmental footprint and better serve their various stakeholders.

Grunig's Situational Publics Theory

Grunig's situational publics theory may seem an odd inclusion in this research, but it is in fact this exact theory which serves to question Gruing's belief that public relations should be separate to marketing. To understand what is meant here, it is necessary to examine Gruing's theory and find out how it underpins our presumption that public relations activities focused on issue management, coupled with media relations, can improve profitability.

Grunig's situational publics theory relates to information processing on an individual level and the influence of the media. 'Publics' are broken down into separate groups who are most likely to interact with a company. Though the definitions of segments have been refined over time (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000), stakeholders are regarded as people that recognise a relevance of an organisation's policies or activities with themselves and decide to take action. Thus, people who are called 'stakeholders' are not only those who are actively involved in the company, but people who feel that the organisation's behaviour involves them. Those who did not fit into this category were called 'nonpublics,' which relates to people who may recognise a problem but do nothing about it either because they see no ability to change anything or because they do not want to be involved. 'Nonpublics' could otherwise be seen as people who are unaffected by an organisation's activities.

The above theory is discussed to show that 'publics' who gather together to voice their concern about an organisation's practices or policies can have a tremendous impact on a company. They've got the ability to change the way a company operates. One just has to look at Barclays Bank's 1986 withdrawal from South Africa, PepsiCo's 1996 pull out of Myanmar and the furore caused by the marketing tactics used by Nestle in promotion of their baby milk products in western Africa. If supporting an organisation and its policies publics can increase profits.

It is clear, then, that organisations (1) are open systems; they interact with external stakeholders and policies and practices affect people both positively and negatively; (2) organisations share a relationship with the community at large, and what they do will have an impact on

how the public perceives them— leaving the corporation to expand or fail; (3) corporations have a social responsibility to serve the public, and (4) the community will react to a corporations goals and procedures which *will* affect the bottom line.

Conclusion on Theoretical Foundations

This study suggested that combining issues management and effective media strategies through public relations will ultimately increase profitability. There are ample theories and concepts in the field of management to support this assumption, as noted through the literature provided. At one time, a company's value was exclusively based on its economic performance. Today, however, there is amplified demand from investors, customers and workforce to consider social and environmental criteria in the way a company conducts its business. Now, not only is financial data the key benchmarking criteria but social and environmental factors are also considered when evaluating the performance of an organisation. Companies are now expected to perform well in non-financial arenas such as human rights, business ethics, environmental policies, corporate contributions, community development, corporate governance and workplace issues. From local economic development concerns to international human rights policies, companies are being held accountable for their actions and their impact. Were organisations to couple their issues management process with an effective media relations strategy, the organisation would enhance its reputation and subsequently increase its chances for long-term financial success.

Research

To only identify the theoretical foundations for using the issues management process to achieve positive publicity, thus aiding organisational success, would result in a normative formulation of how issues management should be practiced. It is, however, also necessary to identify how the issues management process is currently being managed. To this end, a qualitative survey was devised and circulated amongst public relations practitioners with the aim of gleaning information as to which activities are currently performed, and to what degree resources are dedicated to issues management.

Methodology

To gain access to a cross section of practitioners within the PR industry, we targeted members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) via an online database of members found on the CIPR's website. We set up a questionnaire using an online survey tool that was emailed directly to a randomly selected group of PR practitoners. Recipients of the questionnaire were selected at random from the CIPR database. In order to ensure a random selection of PROs received the survey, participants were chosen by surname. A random selection of CIPR members whose surnames began with "A", "B", "C", "M", "N", and "R" were sent the survey. Such a selection method ensured a random sample of male/female and in-house v. consultancy practitioners from across the PR industry.

The survey consisted of eight questions (See Appendix A) and received 82 responses from 376 sent. Achieving a response rate of 21.8 per cent.

Findings

Disclaimer: It is important to note at the outset of these findings that there is likely to be a certain degree of bias regarding the amount of resources invested by organisations into the issues management process as reported by respondents of this survey. There is a significant possibility that those practitioners or organisations that do not partake in any issues management activities would not have responded to this survey. Therefore there is a likelihood that respondents consisted mainly of those practitioners who do partake in a certain degree of issues management and planning, rather than a true cross-section of the industry.
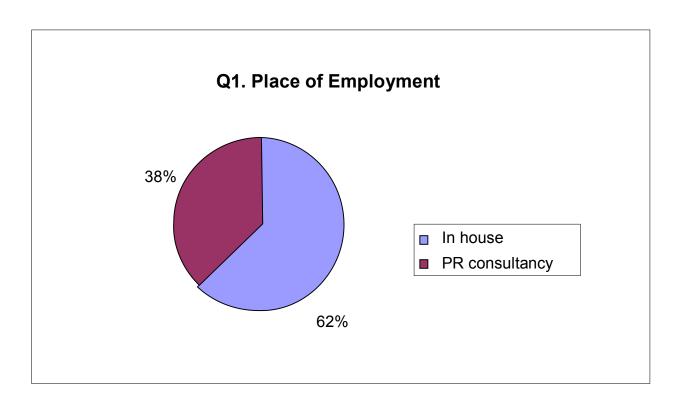
Question 1: In house or in a consultancy?

In a bid to understand from whom I was gleaning information, I inquired as to whether practitioners were employed in an in-house public relations department or at a consultancy. The graph below indicates that the responses I received were from 62 per cent in-house consultants and 38 per cent from practitioners based out of a consultancy.

Q1. Place of Employment

38%

62%

■ In house
■ PR consultancy

(See Appendix A)

Question 2: Types of press releases disseminated

In order to gain a general understanding of organisations' priorities for media relations, respondents were asked which category the **majority** of press releases they disseminated fit into.
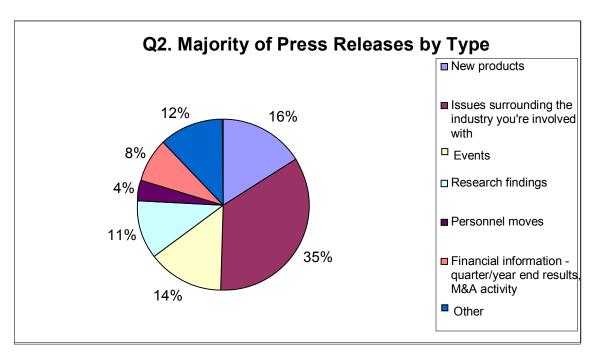
The responses gleaned from this question were very positive with respect to the importance issues management plays within organizational priorities.

Q2. Majority of Press Releases by Type

- New products
- Issues surrounding the industry you're involved with
- Events
- Research findings
- Personnel moves
- Financial information - quarter/year end results, M&A activity
- Other

12% 16%
8%
4%
35%
11%
14%

(See Appendix A)

Over one third of respondents (35 per cent) reported that the majority of press releases they disseminated were focused on issues surrounding the industry they are involved with. Such a response shows that organisations are aware of the issues affecting their industry, have formulated messaging on those issues, deciphered strategies and tactics on how those issues should be handled and are actively publicising their stance on those issues in order to achieve specific objectives.

Not surprisingly, the second largest category of releases (16 per cent) was about new product launches, followed closely by press releases announcing events (14 per cent).

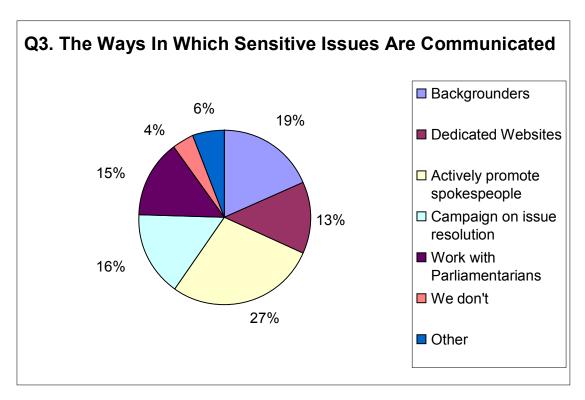**Question 3: The ways in which sensitive issues are communicated**
Respondents were asked to list all the ways in which they communicated on the most sensitive issues affecting their organisation or industry. The purpose of this question was to glean information on how PR practitioners are using all the communication channels available to them.

Parker
Wayne
& Kent

Heroic
Public Relations
Consultants

Q3. The Ways In Which Sensitive Issues Are Communicated

6%

4%

19%

15%

13%

16%

27%

- Backgrounders
- Dedicated Websites
- Actively promote spokespeople
- Campaign on issue resolution
- Work with Parliamentarians
- We don't
- Other

(See Appendix A)

In order to communicate an organisation's position on its most sensitive issues, 27 per cent of respondents actively promote spokespeople. Promoting a company spokesperson enables the public to associate a human element with what is likely a nameless, faceless organisation. This human element is essential in enabling the public to identify with the organisation. It can,

however, backfire terribly if the spokesperson chosen does not show an adequate amount of humility and understanding for the importance of the issue and how it affects all stakeholders.

Only one in five organisations (19 per cent) compiles backgrounders on sensitive issues. Backgrounders enable an organisation to define an issue

and put together clear and concise messaging on an issue and disseminate such information to any party, including the press. Backgrounders also often provide the corner stone to many media relations activities. The fact that less than 20 per cent of organisations put the time and resources into compiling backgrounders on sensitive

issues concerning. This leads to questions on the dedication of organizations to the issues management process.

Similarly, only 16 per cent of respondents campaign on issue resolution. This statistic is indicative of the reactive nature of public relations as concerned with issues management. By not becoming actively involved in the issues resolution process, organisations limit themselves to reactive medi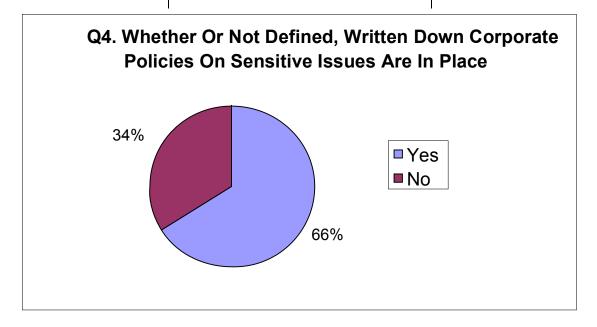a relations. They are also left to adjust to the consequence of an issue, rather than playing an active role in resolving the issue and possibly limiting the negative effects it has on the organisation.

It is worth noting that 96 per cent of respondents do engage in some form of communication on sensitive issues on behalf of their organisation. With only four per cent of respondents admitting that they do not engage in any issues communications whatsoever. This is a positive finding for the degree to which public relations plays an active and strategic role within the organisational framework.

Question 4: Whether or not defined, written down corporate policies on sensitive issues are in place

Respondents were asked simply whether or not their organisation had formulated written down corporate policies on sensitive issues, and whether those policies were known to PR practitioners.

Q4. Whether Or Not Defined, Written Down Corporate Policies On Sensitive Issues Are In Place

34%

66%

- Yes
- No

(See Appendix A)

It is concerning that only two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents reported knowledge of official corporate policies on sensitive issues, with the remaining one third (34 per cent) reporting that no such policies existed. This finding is extremely distressing regarding the importance of issues management within the org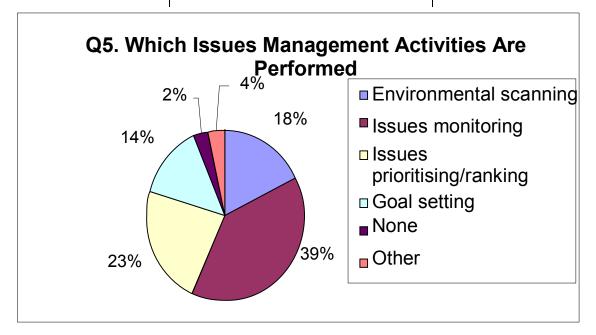anisational framework. It begs the question "If one does not have official corporate policies on sensitive issues in place, how is one to communicate an organisation's position on said issues effectively?"

The formulation of an organisation's position on an issue is one of the first steps in the issues management process. Without knowledge of where an organisation stands with respect to an issue, it is impossible to provide clear, concise and consistent communication on that issue.

Question 5: Which issues management activities are performed?
Respondents were asked to report on all the aspects of the issues management process that their organisation is engaged in.

Q5. Which Issues Management Activities Are Performed

- Environmental scanning — 18%
- Issues monitoring — 39%
- Issues prioritising/ranking — 23%
- Goal setting — 14%
- None — 2%
- Other — 4%

(See Appendix A)

The largest aspect of the issues management process that was engaged in by respondents was issues monitoring, with almost two fifths (39 per cent) of respondents reporting to perform this activity. This finding is not surprising as the monitoring of media coverage of issues

affecting an organisation or industry is a fairly basic and fundamental PR activity and is likely covered by the general media monitoring activities of an organisation.

Surprisingly, less than one fifth (18 per cent) of respondents reported environmental scanning activities. By not conducting environmental scanning, organizations leave themselves 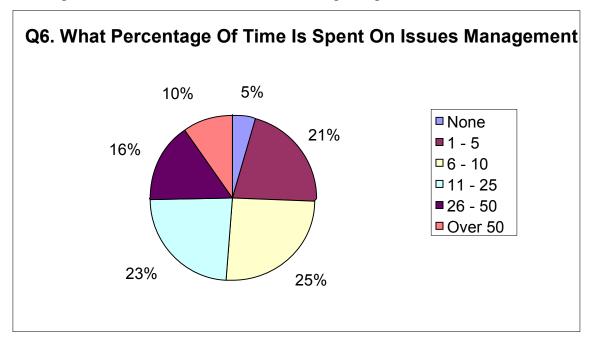open to issue recognition at a relatively late stage in issue development thus having to respond in a reactive manner. Less than one quarter (23 per cent) of respondents reported prioritising and ranking issues with only a mere 14 per cent reporting goal setting activities.

These findings exhibit a lack of priority for the issues management process within the organisational framework and lead to conclusions regarding the lack of importance placed on issues management by organisations and the PR industry.

Question 6: What percentage of time is spent on issues management?
Respondents were asked to give an approximation of the amount of time spent on the issues management process.

Q6. What Percentage Of Time Is Spent On Issues Management

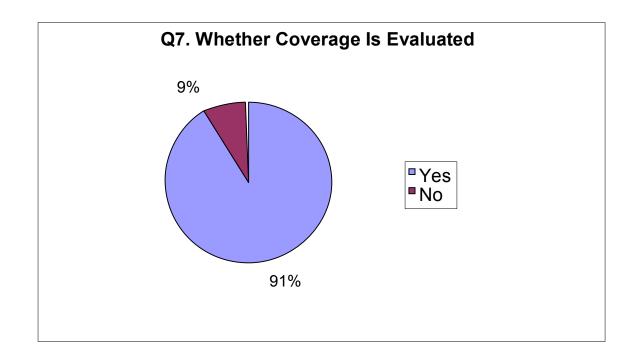|	
■ None	
■ 1 - 5	
□ 6 - 10	
□ 11 - 25	
■ 26 - 50	
■ Over 50	

(See Appendix A)

Responses to this question lack some consistency with earlier responses on whether or not organizations have formulated corporate policies on sensitive issues. A staggering one in ten (10 per cent) respondents reported spending over 50 per cent of their time on the issues management process and approximately one sixth (16 per cent) allotting between 26 to 50 per cent of their time on such tasks. One quarter (25 per cent) of respondents reported spending between 11 and 25 per cent of their time on issues management with the second largest segment (23 per cent) reporting spending between six and ten per cent of their time budgets on these activities.

These findings seem to be fairly high given the lack of issues management activities respondents reported performing and the fact that almost a third of respondents previously reported not having formulated corporate policies on sensitive issues.

Question 7: Whether or not coverage is evaluated

Respondents were asked simply whether or not the coverage they achieved was evaluated.

Q7. Whether Coverage Is Evaluated

9%

91%

Yes
No

(See Appendix A)

Over nine out of ten (91 per cent) of respondents reported evaluating the coverage achieved by or on behalf of an organisation.

Conclusions on Research

The conclusions reached on the time and resources put into the issues management process within the public relations industry provide some insight into what is currently being practiced in the field. It was reported that a wide variety of tasks relating to issues management were being practiced and PROs were utilizing a variety of channels to communicate their organisation's most sensitive issues. It was impressive that nearly half of respondents, 49 per cent, reported spending over 11 per cent of their time on issues management related activities.

Further research including a more in-depth study linking specific issues with the issues management process would provide more insight into how the issues management process is really practiced within the PR industry. In addition, it would be helpful to inquire as to the degree to which senior management is involved in the issues management and resolution process.

Media Research

In order to formulate a conclusion on organisations' abilities to gain positive publicity thus increasing organisational success through media relations associated with the issues management process, it is necessary to analyse reporting trends of issues within the media.

Methodology

In order to analyse the reporting of issues through the media, a service called Newsmap was used. Newsmap is an application that visually reflects the constantly changing landscape of the Google News news aggregator. A treemap visualization algorithm helps display the enormous amount of information gathered by the aggregator. Treemaps are traditionally space-constrained visualizations of information. Newsmap's objective takes that goal a step further and provides a tool to divide information into quickly recognizable bands which, when presented together, reveal underlying patterns in news reporting across cultures and within news segments in constant change around the globe.[v]

In order to obtain insight into reporting trends, I analysed the

Newsmap reporting of UK business news at six o'clock every evening for a one week period.

Findings

For a full list of the top stories reported see Appendix B. It was found that issues reporting played a large role in the reporting of business news within the UK. Issues associated with trade unions were widely reported on, with the position of both organizations and unions covered by the media. Closures and downsizings also made up a significant part of business coverage. Corporate scandals involving payoffs and a lack of appropriate corporate governance by firms were also of intrigue to the media. Overall 43 per cent of the business coverage for the week pertained directly to industry issues.

Media Coverage Conclusions

Analysis of the media coverage over a one week period within the business sector shows that issues are of interest to the media and will be covered whether or not an organisation chooses to play a role in making their position publicly known. By engaging the media in the issues management process, organisations increase the likelihood of the media reporting on "their side" of the story, thus either achieving positive publicity or mitigating negative publicity. Both positive publicity and the mitigation of negative publicity will serve to promote the success of an organisation.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire distributed to PROs on the practicing of issues management related activities.

Issues Management in the PR Industry

The following is a questionnaire I have constructed in order to assess the amount of issues management currently taking place within in the PR industry.

Thank you for your participation

Do you work in house or in a PR consultancy?

⊙ In house

⊙ PR consultancy

What are the majority of the press releases you disseminate about?

☐ New products

☐ Issues surrounding the industry you're involved with

☐ Events

☐ Research findings

☐ Personnel moves

☐ Financial information - quarter/year end results, M&A activity

☐ Other ⬚

In what ways do you communicate your clients'/organisation's most sensitive issues?

☐ Backgrounders

☐ Dedicated Websites

☐ Actively promote spokespeople

☐ Campaign on issue resolution

☐ Work with Parliamentarians

☐ We don't

☐ Other [   ]

Do you have defined, written down corporate policies on the most sensitive issues for your clients/industry?

○ Yes

○ No

Which issues management activities do you currently perform?

☐ Environmental scanning

☐ Issues monitoring

☐ Issues prioritising/ranking

☐ Goal setting

☐ None

☐ Other

What percentage of your time is spent on issues planning and management?

○ None

○ 1 - 5

○ 6 - 10

○ 11 - 25

○ 26 - 50

○ Over 50

Do you evaluate the coverage you achieve?

◯ Yes

◯ No

What kind of media relations gets you the most publicity?

[   ]

Complete findings

Question 1:

Do you work in house or in a PR consultancy?

In house   51
PR
Consultancy   31

Question 2:

What are the majority of the press releases you disseminate about?

New products	16
Issues surrounding the industry you're involved with	34
Events	14
Research findings	11
Personnel moves	4
Financial information - quarter/year end results, M&A activity	8
Other	12

Questions 3:

In what ways do you communicate your clients'/organisation's most sensitive issues?

Backgrounders	32
Dedicated Websites	22
Actively promote spokespeople	48
Campaign on issue resolution	27
Work with Parliamentarians	25
We don't	7
Other	10

Question 4:

Do you have defined, written down corporate policies on the most sensitive issues for your clients/industry?

Yes	54
No	28

Question 5:

Which issues management activities do you currently perform?

Environmental scanning	30
Issues monitoring	64
Issues prioritising/ranking	38
Goal setting	24
None	4
Other	6

Question 6:

What percentage of your time is spent on issues planning and management?

None	4
1 - 5	17
6 - 10	21
11 - 25	19
26 - 50	13
Over 50	8

Question 7:

Do you evaluate the coverage you achieve?

Yes	75
No	7

Appendix B

Newsmap screen grabs.

September 19th 2005

Parker Wayne & Kent

Heroic
Public Relations
Consultants

September 18th 2005

September 17th 2005

Parker Wayne & Kent — Heroic Public Relations Consultants

September 16th 2005

September 15th 2005

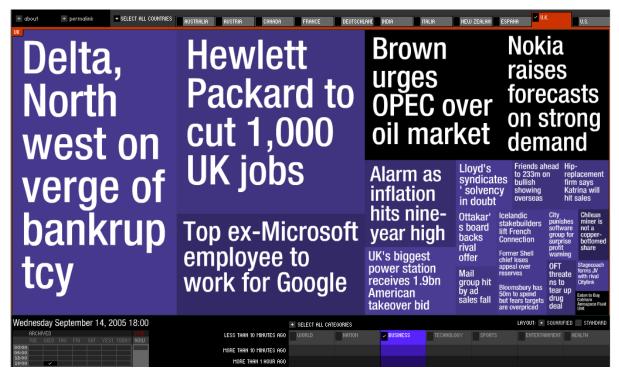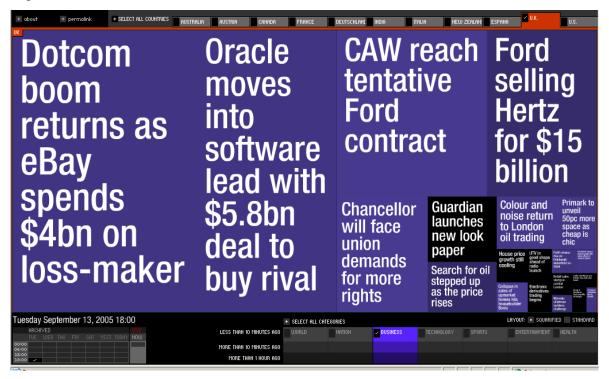Parker Wayne & Kent — Heroic Public Relations Consultants

September 14th 2005

September 13th 2005

i As outlined by Skinner & Mersham 2002, <u>Disaster Management: A guide to issues management and crisis communication</u>, pg. 16

ii It is important to define the use of the term 'marketing' in this context. It is not being used in the traditional context in terms of the sale of products or services. 'Marketing' in this context means to market the company's position on current policies and goals to achieve positive public attention.

iii See Cevallos, D. 2005, 'Wal-Mart's Plans for Indigenous Areas under Fire' *Inter Press News Agency*. [Online] Available at: http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30025

iv http://discuss.aol.co.uk/involved.aspx?id_Content=2225

v http://www.marumushi.com/apps/newsmap/index.cfm