# Adding Value to Organizations: An Examination of the Role of Senior Public Relations Practitioners in Singapore

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## Abstract

A key characteristic of public relations excellence in organizations is ensuring that the senior public relations practitioner - the head of the communication function - has the competencies to enact the strategic role of a manager. It is only when the top communicator possesses strategic management knowledge and engages in managerial work with support from colleagues who are technically skilled in traditional craft work can public relations work be considered to be value-generating.

This paper presents the findings of the examination of the role of senior public relations practitioners in organizations in Singapore. It also explores the importance of core communication activities to the role of top in-house communicators, examines the time they allocate to managerial and technical work, and assesses if the managerial role which the practitioners play adds value to organizations. Data collected from both in-depth interviews and self-reported log of daily activities showed that although top communicators in Singapore enjoy strategic reporting and unhindered access to senior management, it also revealed, paradoxically, senior management's mixed worldviews of public relations; and that Singapore's top in-house practitioners lack the strategic knowledge to enact the managerial role as they are too focused on technical work.

The paper concludes with recommendations on how the level of public relations professionalism can be raised in Singapore, starting with the practitioners themselves having to be fully equipped with the relevant academic knowledge of what makes communication excellent.

## Introduction

Our world is becoming increasingly complex, interdependent and turbulent. In the last 25 years, major world events have escalated the process of globalization, giving rise to political and economic developments on a scale that was never witnessed before (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). While those who champion democracy and capitalism rejoice at a "freer" world with tremendous growth potential of different markets, globalization has also brought about the spread of activism and the rush for organizations to merge, downsize or acquire. This has led organizations to continuously devise different practices to respond to new economic, cultural and environmental changes in order to ensure growth and survival (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Entrusted with this new and challenging responsibility to now manage relationships with people from different nationalities and cultures on behalf of their organizations, communication professionals have found themselves at the "interface where institutional concerns and public responsibilities meet" (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, p.xxi). Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995),

echoing the sentiments of the members of the team of what has popularly been called the *"Excellence Project,"* contended that in order to be able to contribute optimally to the effectiveness of the organization, the communication department has to possess "excellent" characteristics, one of which is for public relations to be able to engage in helping set organizational strategies. This would require the department to be headed by professionals with managerial role expertise and who are capable of exerting influence through suggestions, recommendations and proposals.

Building on the seminal work of Broom and Dozier on the roles of public relations practitioners, scholars such as Moss and DeSanto (2003) have stated that the public relations manager's activities ought to be strategic as opposed to technical. Strategic work refers to the potential to create and add genuine value with desirable outcomes to the organization in the long run while technical work involves craft activities that have short-term impact and limited utility value to the organization. It is only with the top communicators' managerial competences as well as support from subordinates who are technically skilled in traditional craft work can the department contribute substantially to strategic management and add value to the overall planning in the organization.  This paper reports on a qualitative study of the activities of a sample of senior-level public relations managers in various types of organizations in Singapore that sought to assess whether these senior managers engaged in the kind of strategic functions that the literature seems to suggest.

*Public Relations in Singapore*

Despite its tiny geographical size, Singapore is among the world's most globalized nations. It was ranked first in the world in 2005 and 2006 in the annual A.T. Kearney/FOREIGN POLICY Magazine Globalization Index (http://www.atkearney.com/main.taf?p=5,4,1,116); and has been placed among the top three positions every year since the Index was launched in 2001 (Tay, 2006). This highly developed cosmopolitan city-state boasts of a successful free market economy and enjoys a high per capita gross domestic product (GDP) with an average growth rate of 7% annually (http://www.cia.gov/library/publication/the-world-factbook/index.html). Its ability to attract foreign talents and major investments in pharmaceuticals and medical technology production has further earned it the title of being Southeast-Asia's financial and technology hub. Culturally, Singapore's multi-ethnic population together with the multi-nationality mix of expatriates has created a supportive environment for cross-cultural communication and socialization among its people and residents.

It is therefore logical to assume that public relations practice in this small city-state ought to be as vibrant and dynamic as the nation itself. According to a local newspaper report by Aggarwal (2006), industry players have openly professed that public relations practitioners in Singapore are now key players in company boardrooms and government agencies. They are called on to provide strategic advice and counsel on information management, risk and crisis communication, in addition to managing corporate reputation. Singapore practitioners are also asked to help influence buying decisions to win the hearts and minds of various stakeholders. The increasing focus on content as the industry matures testifies that although Singapore's talent pool is small, it is credible and professional and that the city-state has the potential to become a regional public relations hub.

Lim, Goh and Sriramesh's (2005) study seemed to also reinforce the view that Singapore's public relations industry has developed significantly over the last 20 years. They

found that there were 116 domestic and multinational public relations consultancies operating in Singapore in 2001. That year, the sector reported net operating profits of S$63.9 million which was considered impressive. Reasons given for the unprecedented growth included Singapore's emphasis on technological development in its drive toward a knowledge-based economy. There was also increased awareness on corporate governance issues, which meant having to deal with matters relating to crisis management, reputation management and corporate transparency.

However, despite a burgeoning public relations industry that was growing in tandem with Singapore's highly competitive economy, Lim, Goh and Sriramesh (2005) also discovered among other things that public relations practitioners lacked the relevant knowledge and experience to engage in strategic and proactive management and were not empowered by senior executives who did not value them enough to include them as key decision-makers of the organizations. Earlier findings by Chay-Nemeth (2003) also supported the proposition that public relations in Singapore is in a transitional stage that is evolving from a "preprofessional to a professional status" (p. 88). She highlighted that public relations here provided mainly "arms-and-legs" (p. 89) support to communication activities and that Singapore practitioners played purely a technician role. Other studies further reiterated the need for Singapore's practitioners to be more trained in strategic thinking as many are too focused on the technical aspects of public relations such as media relation (e.g., Low & Kaw, 2005; Wee, Tan, & Chew, 1996).

All the studies that have assessed the state of public relations in Singapore, however, have so far sampled practitioners of all levels of seniority and from both in-house and consultancy firms. We could not find any studies that studied the specific roles of senior in-house public relations practitioners in Singapore. Given that they head communication departments, enjoy close proximity to the dominant coalition that comes with greater access to intimate and sensitive information, understanding the specific activities they conduct in the name of public relations is important. Not only would such knowledge offer valuable insights to the practice from "inside-out", it would also enable a better assessment on their departments' ability to contribute to the overall strategic management of the organization. Such knowledge is helpful in assessing the role of the public relations department itself in different regions of the world.

Therefore, building on previous studies, this study seeks to understand the role of the in-house senior public relations practitioners in Singapore by studying the organizational context within which they operate and the role of the communication department. In doing so it examines the importance of various core communication activities to the practitioners' role and tries to assess the amount of time practitioners allocate to managerial work versus technical work. It also seeks to evaluate if the work performed is capable of generating value to the organizations.

*The Value of Public Relations*

Although they perform vital communication functions for their organizations, there continues to be doubt that the work and contributions public relations professionals make is influential enough to have a direct impact in realizing organizational goals. Many practitioners have expressed disappointment that senior executives have yet to fully appreciate the contributions that public relations makes to organizations (White & Vercic, 2001).

However, in an increasingly shrinking world there is added pressure on organizations to turn to public relations practitioners for advice on how to make sense of the increasingly complex environment. With the practitioners' ability to look at their organizations in a larger social context and their competency to propose solutions to "social environment" problems, the

public relations function is progressively appreciated by senior management in today's highly competitive and erratic business environment. Nevertheless, there is a constant and nagging perception common around the world that public relations brings few "quantifiable" benefits. As the "results" at the end of the production line from communication works are deemed to be "intangible," public relations practitioners continue to be daunted by the arduous task of having to demonstrate their worth in ways that can be measured and justified (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; White & Vercic, 2001).

However, as public relations primarily helps to build, shape, maintain and manage relationships with the relevant publics of an organization, how should intangible variables such as trust, commitment, satisfaction and mutual benefits be measured? This question has induced many public relations scholars' attempts to demonstrate the value of public relations and its financial contributions to the effectiveness of the organization for several decades (e.g., Hauss, 1993; Hon, 1998; Lindenmann, 1993).

While some like Hauss (1993) have offered solutions that attempt to make public relations outcomes measurable by advocating that practitioners leverage on technology advances and tools that can provide quantifiable measurements to their work, others like Hon (1997) argued that public relations' contribution to the bottom-line is obvious. The latter contended that the financial returns from the meaningful outcomes public relations activities produce for organizations are clearly evident. The efforts in building and enhancing corporate reputation, for example, help organizations to make money and in some cases also save them from collapsing.

Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) rendered their support to Hon (1997) and rejected critics' call for public relations to prove its value in quantifiable (especially fiduciary) terms. They argued that public relations' contribution cannot be measured solely in terms of dollars and cents and cautioned that by merely translating the function's contributions into numerical figures will take the focus away from the real essence and relevance of public relations to organizations. They recommended the endorsement of the "totality of the concept of value" (p. 97), asserting that because the value of public relations is in helping to foster healthy relationships, the bottom-line should be looked at from "a combination of traditional financial return and the risks associated with the organization's long-term relationships" (p. 103). In other words, monetary returns are achieved when public relations, by cultivating win-win relationships with the organization's strategic stakeholders, succeeds in averting costs incurred from consequences brought about by troubled relationships with key publics (giving rise to activist publics).

Grunig (1992) and his team's investigation into how public relations should be practiced and the function organized for it to contribute best to organizational effectiveness uncovered that only excellent communication makes organizations more effective. For them, the key lies in having a communication team that participates in strategic management. It is only when the function contributes strategically can public relations be deemed to have created value. For this to occur, the head of the communication function must be made a part of the organization's top management. The managerial role that the top communicator performs, through the process of shared decision making with the CEO and other members of the top management, would invariably create conditions that enhance excellent public relations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). As the organization's "boundary spanners" and "environmental scanners", the top communicator's knowledge expertise and understanding of the publics allow them to articulate the views of the publics as they simultaneously provide advice and counsel to the dominant coalition. When decisions are made, these practitioners return to their departments to design programs, craft messages and ensure that the implementation of programs communicate

effectively with the targeted publics (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). These scholars acknowledged that many public relations practitioners are creative and highly skilled when it comes to executing tactical tasks such as writing, editing, producing technical aspects of production and organizing events. However, they emphasized that if the communication department only has practitioners with these technical abilities, the programs rolled out by the function are not able to achieve excellence. To distinguish communication departments that deliver excellent versus less-than-excellent communication programs, the function's senior practitioners need to possess the expertise and knowledge to play the managerial role.

Managers, therefore, are expected to have the ability to strategically manage organizational responses to issues; know-how to set goals and objectives for the department; competency to use research to segment publics; capability to conduct program evaluation; and skills to perform budgeting. Their subordinates, on the other hand, would be skilled in technical work such as writing, editing news releases and promotional materials; producing publications and videos; liaising with the media; and organizing events. These two role activities, though different, are neither exclusive nor in opposition to each other. They are inseparable sub-functions belonging to one entity working together to achieve the same goals and objectives of the communication department (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). The value of communication is thus measured by how well the whole department contributes to helping the organization establish mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Dozier & Broom, 1995).

*Roles Research in Public Relations*

Roles research has been a dominant theme within the public relations literature for almost four decades. Broom and Smith (1979) were the first to theoretically conceptually identify four roles played out by public relations - Expert Prescriber, Communication Facilitator, Problem-Solving Process Facilitator and Communication Technician. They concluded that the role a public relations practitioner plays depends on the daily patterns of behavior adopted to deal with assigned tasks. Practitioners are likely to play some or all of these roles in varying degrees and over time, a dominant pattern of behavior emerges which then becomes the dominant role (Broom, Center, & Cutlip, 2000). But Dozier (1984) found empirical evidence that practitioners who play the dominant role of expert prescriber, communication facilitator, or problem-solving process facilitator also tend to play the other two roles and therefore collapsed the four roles into two and classified them as manager and technician roles.

Other researchers, however, criticized the new manager-technician dichotomy, contending that the two-role typology was too narrow and may not take into consideration the range of tasks performed by practitioners (e.g., Culberton, 1991; Toth & Grunig, 1993). But Dozier (1992) was convinced that the two-role typology of manager and technician allows a way to operationalize the concept of roles. He argued that the three roles are simultaneously enacted when communicators engage in value-adding activities such as environmental scanning, issues management, program monitoring and impact evaluation; while the technician role specifically performs technical tasks such as creating and disseminating communication materials (Doizer & Broom, 1995). Despite the on-going debate on the wisdom of the parsimonious manager-technician dichotomy, Moss and Green (2001) contended that this proposition has been accepted as the dominant framework for roles research.

*Shortcomings of Roles Research in Public Relations*

However, researchers (e.g., DeSanto & Moss, 2004; Leichty & Springston, 1996; Moss & Green, 2001) have called for a re-evaluation of role enactment in public relations in particular the managerial dimension of practitioners' work. Moss and Green (2001) highlighted that the majority of studies gave mostly the practitioners' perspective role enactment which provided only a one-sided view, when the role making process is a product of the interaction between role senders and role receivers. Others called for a more dynamic and process perspective in looking at roles, commenting that the manager-technician dichotomy is essentially only abstractions of reality (e.g., Culbertson, 1991; Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000).

Moss and Green (2001) claimed that if public relations is to be recognized alongside other management functions such as human resource, finance or marketing, public relations managers need to demonstrate their ability to also counsel and advise, plan and manage budgets and conduct other generic managerial activities spelt out in the literature by management scholars (e.g., Hales, 1986; Mintzberg, 1973; Watson, 1986). There is a need for roles research to reconcile the managerial activities of public relations with the wider spectrum of managerial activities purported by these scholars.

*Comparison between Management and Public Relations Roles Research*

Both management and public relations scholars have attempted to delineate what constitutes "managerial" work. But although both sets of descriptions appear similar, they cannot be compared directly as the researchers from both disciplines examined the subject of managerial work from contrasting perspectives. Each sought different questions and answers and used dissimilar methodologies to evaluate their findings (Moss & Green, 2001; DeSanto & Moss, 2004). Public relations scholars looked at managerial work from the role of the practitioners in managing communication activities and processes. They used Broom and Dozier's role types and classified practitioners into either managerial or technician role based on the activities they perform (Moss & Green, 2001). DeSanto and Moss (2004) charged that this approach of understanding is problematic because the typologies were not based on empirical analysis of behavior but on consulting literature and secondary sources, and are at best concepts. Management scholars, on the other hand, identified generic elements of management work using quantitative and qualitative research methods such as observation studies, in-depth interviews, diaries and other survey methods to evaluate managerial work patterns from diverse perspectives and organizational settings (Moss & Green, 2001).

Moss and Green (2001) and DeSanto and Moss (2004) therefore asserted that public relations researchers cannot be said to have investigated into the processes by which public relations managers accomplish their tasks. They have not been able to explain the pattern of managerial behavior in the context of public relations. Like management scholars, they need to ask, "What do public relations managers do?" These researchers thus called for a re-examination of the managerial role in public relations to uncover managerial activities performed by practitioners by adopting methods which are more inductive and grounded. We have taken our cue from Moss and Green and Moss and DeSanto in designing this study. By focusing on a sequence of individual and collective events, actions and activities over time in context, this form of data collection offers original insights into how things happen. Understanding the formation of concepts can then be shaped from the data rather than from preconceived theoretical frameworks (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

## Methodology

*Design of Tools and Data Collection Process*

This study answers the call by scholars Moss and DeSanto and adopts an inductive approach - qualitative in-depth interviews - as the dominant primary method for the first half of the study. The questions we posed closely resembled those used by Moss and DeSanto. For the second half of data collection, we assessed how practitioners allocate their time across a range of activities. We had to rely on a self-reported log of daily activities by our sample of practitioners instead of direct observation or conducting our own analysis of logbooks of practitioners given that not all Singapore's practitioners keep log books and requesting for access to personal information in diaries is considered disrespectful.

The list of communication activities we provided our sample comprised four managerial and five technical works, extracted from several roles research literature (e.g., DeSanto & Moss, 2004; Dozier, 1992; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) plus an "others" option. These 10 activities were scrambled so that participants, who responded to our survey after the interviews, were not aware of the classification. This study also examined what practitioners do over a month as opposed to two-weeks (as Moss and DeSanto had done) as the former allows the performance of a variety of communication tasks to be captured more comprehensively. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 38 senior public relations practitioners over a period of five months from June to October 2006. Each interview lasted between one and a half to two hours. All the interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

*Sampling*

In all, 38 senior public relations practitioners from 11 industries in Singapore were interviewed. Sixteen were males and 22 were females. The age of respondents ranged from 32 to 58 years. Other than one practitioner who was a deputy head, the rest were department heads. They were chosen based on how renowned their companies are in Singapore, Asia or the world. Care was also taken to ensure that there were representations of both local and multinational companies as well as those from the private and public sectors.

Thirty-seven interviewees held at least a bachelors degree and one had a secondary school certificate. Only five out of the 37 were schooled in communication related courses such as Mass Communication, Media Studies or Public Relations, which is interesting given that there is ample evidence in the public relations literature lamenting the "influx" into public relations, practitioners from other disciplines. The other 32 were trained in different fields: Architecture, Biochemistry, Botany, Business Administration, Economics, English, Finance, Geography, Law, Microbiology, Pharmacy, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Science, Sociology and Zoology. Of the 37, two had postgraduate diplomas, 14 had masters and one with a doctorate. Singapore's senior public relations practitioners are highly educated although 84% were trained in disciplines other than public relations. They are, therefore, practicing the trade with scant exposure to the scholarly literature of public relations. This finding confirms the observation that there is a tendency to believe that one does not need to be trained in communication in order to practice public relations as it is perceived as a general trade.  As other parts of the world, many of the "older" practitioners did not have the opportunity to study communication as a specialty at the tertiary level because communication (let alone public relations) was offered as a specialty

for study at tertiary institutions in Singapore only 15 years ago. Although it does not necessarily mean that practitioners who are trained in other disciplines lack the competency to manage communication, it does mean that they may not possess the needed theoretical knowledge and framework to practice excellent public relations.

**Table 1: Breakdown in representation of participants according to industry**

| 1 | Banking & Financial Services | 7 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Education | 6 |
| 3 | Engineering Services, Construction & Technologies | 4 |
| 4 | Government, Public & Policy Making | 1 |
| 5 | Healthcare | 1 |
| 6 | Information Communications | 1 |
| 7 | Information Technology | 3 |
| 8 | Petroleum & Petrochemicals | 3 |
| 9 | Property | 4 |
| 10 | Tourism, Leisure & Hospitality | 4 |
| 11 | Transportation | 4 |
| | **Total** | **38** |

## Findings

*Organizational Background and Role of Public Relations Function*

The 38 practitioners held varied corporate titles. Among them were Assistant Director; Assistant Vice President; Communications or Public Relations Manager; Deputy Director; Director; General Manager; Group Corporate Communications Officer; Head; Senior Manager; Senior Vice President; and Vice President.

Only three worked in a department named "public relations." The other 35 adopted one of 14 different names which included Communications, Corporate Affairs, Corporate Communications, Corporate Relations, Marketing Communications, Public Affairs, Public Relations & Marketing, and Policy, Government & Public Affairs. The deliberate attempt to disassociate the function with "public relations" could be due to several reasons. Of course, the names may have been chosen to reflect the departments' overall function and responsibilities clearer. But the more likely reason is because the term "public relations" has negative connotations implying that practitioners are spin doctors. This reaffirms Sriramesh's (2004) report that in Asia public relations suffers from the image of being perceived as a self serving practice that is no more than "spin doctoring" (p. 328). Many people, until recently, also equated public relations executives with pretty ladies working at the front line of the service, travel and tourism, and hospitality industry.

Only three members in the sample of this study did not lead a team of junior practitioners as they relied on external public relations consultancies to provide most of the technical support.

The other 35 took charge of the communication function with the number of subordinates ranging from one to as many as 50. All the practitioners reported that their primary responsibilities included media relations and publicity; corporate branding and reputation; production of corporate literature; issues management; and event management. Ten were also responsible for internal communication while the other 28 worked closely with their human resource colleagues only when it concerned crafting of messages or brainstorming of employee issues. Ten reported that, in addition to their communication portfolio, they were also in charge of marketing communication while another three looked after investor relations as well (see Table on Communication Activities Performed by Practitioners). Five used external public relations firms on a retainer basis. Seventeen engaged external help only on needs basis, such as during crises or when faced with legal issues; while 16 sought no help from public relations consultancies

In terms of direct reporting, 21 reported directly to the CEO and they also occupied a seat at the top management table. Twelve reported to a member of the dominant coalition but not the CEO; and five did not report to any member of the dominant coalition. However, all 38 practitioners had access to the CEO or members of the dominant coalition as they had to liaise with key decision-makers regarding matters pertaining to media interviews, crisis management and communication with key stakeholders.

**Table 2: Practitioners' reporting relationships**

| 1 | Reported directly to the CEO, a member of the dominant coalition | 21 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Reported directly to a member of the dominant coalition who is not the CEO. | 12 |
| 3 | Reported directly to a supervisor who is not a member of the dominant coalition but given access to the CEO or a member of the dominant coalition | 5 |
| | **Total** | **38** |

The findings here seem to suggest that public relations in the sample organizations in Singapore fulfills a key characteristic of public relations excellence in organizations. It is equally interesting to know that seven of the 17 practitioners report to a member of the dominant coalition who is not the CEO, or to a supervisor who is not a member of the dominant coalition. Further, in these instances, the communication function was kept under the marketing function. This shows that there is a pocket of organizations here which subscribe to the Integrated Marketing Communication concept where marketing campaigns and advertising take center stage for all the promotional activities with public relations playing a supporting role to marketing initiatives (Hallahan, 2007).

We also found it paradoxical that while most of the interviewees stated that they reported to a member of the dominant coalition, not everyone was of the opinion that his or her senior management truly valued the role of communication. Four respondents reported that their superiors displayed conflicting sentiments about the value of public relations and five reported that their supervisor had difficulty understanding the role of the communication function. This paradox was not unanticipated because all the practitioners handle media relations and journalists are a formidable group of stakeholders to every organization in Singapore. Giving public

relations access to the CEO is therefore created out of the perceived need to keep a close watch on media reporting and is not indicative that the public relations function is valued or its role well understood beyond this narrow media relations role.

Peers exhibited even less understanding of the role of public relations with five reporting that other functions had difficulty understanding the role of public relations. Twenty commented that only certain functions appreciated them; and only 13 interviewees were confident of peers' positive worldviews of communication. Asked if practitioners participated and provided input to strategic decision making processes, 26 reported that they were consulted on important matters and before decisions were made most of the time; and 12 reported that they participated only occasionally. Here it is unclear whether the practitioners were able to contribute strategically to key organizational issues or simply asked to be involved in the meetings so that they had more time to prepare and execute communication plans. And for those whose views are sought, no elaboration was given as to what they were consulted on and if those inputs pertain to activities such as media relations or strategic issues critical to the organization's long-term survival.

All except one practitioner felt that evolving environmental factors such as globalization, the increase in the number of crises, and the advancement of technology had increased the importance of communication in their organizations over the years. Twenty-five perceived their role as enhancing and guarding the brand and corporate reputation; eight perceived themselves as counselors and advisers to senior management; while five considered themselves as communication strategists employed to plan and manage communication plans.

A high number of practitioners perceived themselves as guardians of the brand but in the same breath emphasized that one of the most important outcomes of public relations was managing the media and generating positive publicity. These practitioners viewed the role of the communication function as supporting, arguing that it exists to help "lubricate" the business units so that the latter can bring in the numbers for the organization. Such a perception is rather disturbing and induces us to question whether Singapore's top in-house communicators truly possess the needed knowledge to be strategic, particularly when an overwhelming majority (36) also commented that there is still a long way more to go for the practice to be truly professional. The reasons were due to senior management's ignorance in recognizing and leveraging on communication as a strategic tool; negative image of public relations; and practitioners' incompetence and lack of strategic expertise.

*Importance of Core Communications Activities to Practitioners' Role*

All the practitioners reported that managing the media was one of the most important communication activities. Not everyone, however, spent a lot of time on this activity. Eleven had the assistance of a media manager due largely to a bigger communication team (with more than 10 members). Twenty-five practitioners, who were responsible for Singapore and the region, handled both local and foreign media while the other 13 managed mainly local media. Three reasons were given for media relations being so fundamental to the communication function: media have the power to make or break the company's corporate reputation; senior management defines the value of communication by the amount of positive publicity generated; and media relations is one of the few areas of communication work that is quantifiable as the amount of publicity generated is measurable particularly when compared with the amount of money that the company would have otherwise spent on advertising.

All the practitioners reported that managing human resources was important to their work. The majority (35) spent more time managing internal as opposed to external stakeholders. This runs in the face of many an organizational communication scholar who argues that public relations should only deal with external stakeholders. Twenty practitioners in the sample spent only a fair amount of time on human resource management while 18 devoted a lot of time to it, identifying it as an essential component of managerial work.

All 38 practitioners also replied affirmatively that planning and strategy-making activity was important to their work. Fifteen spent a good amount of time thinking, strategizing and visioning; while 23 acknowledged that they did not spend enough time on this activity and that they would like to do more of it. Planning and strategizing work often occurred in the beginning or end of the year, during crises or when initiating new projects. Eighteen also commented that opportunities to participate in high level strategizing exercises were limited as these were performed by their direct supervisors. There is, however, a clear association between practitioners reporting directly to the CEO and those doing more of strategizing work. Only six saw the importance of communication research with 32 spending little or hardly any time on it. For those who did, the research tended to revolve around conducting polls or market surveys or customer feedback about the company's products and programs.

It is disturbing to discover that, despite being managers, about half of the interviewees spent a fair bit of time on administrative work. There was also evidence to suggest that this activity has to do with the size of the communication departments as those who led bigger teams could afford to delegate this work to subordinates. Thirty-six acknowledged that they were expected to have strong networking skills with 19 of them placing greater emphasis on networking with internal stakeholders while 17 focused more on external stakeholders such as the journalists, industry players or corporate sponsors. This finding confirms the relevance of the personal influence model to the public relations function. Twenty recognized the importance of troubleshooting and they scanned the environment regularly for issues or events that could lead to a crisis. They also monitored the media closely to keep abreast of unfavorable business trends or adverse global or political developments that could impact the organization. The other 18 either acknowledged that they did not spend enough time on this activity, or commented that this area was not a major focus among their list of work priorities.

All 38 practitioners reported that counseling and giving advice to top management was an essential work component. However, only 21 of them spent a lot of time on this activity while 17 worked on it only when their counsel was sought. It was also found that many were unclear in making the distinction between counseling and giving feedback to top management, stating briefing management on media interviews and reporting regularly on progress of work as giving advice. Thirty-one also commented that negotiating was part of their managerial role with seven considering it as a nonessential work component. Thirty spent a fair amount of time and eight hardly spent much time on this activity.

*Time Allocated to Managerial and Technical Work in a Typical Month*

Only seven practitioners spent more than 50% on managerial work while three spent an equal 50% on managerial work and another 50% on technical work. The majority (28 out of 38 practitioners) spent less than 50% of their time on managerial work. Of the 10 who spent more than 50% on managerial work, nine reported directly to the CEO and were considered a member of the dominant coalition while one reported to a member of the dominant coalition but given

direct access to the CEO. Among the 10, five were males and five were females. Three practiced in the banking and financial services sector; one in engineering services, construction and technologies; one in information communications; two in petroleum and petrochemical sector; two from property; and one in the transportation sector.

**Table 3: Number of practitioners and their corresponding percentage of time allocated to managerial and technical work**

| Percentage of time allocated to managerial work | Percentage of time allocated to technical work/non-typical communication activities | Number of practitioners |
|---|---|---|
| 10% and less | 90% or more | 1 |
| 11% - 20% | 89% - 80% | 4 |
| 21% - 30% | 79% - 70% | 8 |
| 31% - 40% | 69% - 60% | 11 |
| 41% - 50% | 59% - 50% | 7 |
| 51% - 60% | 49% - 40% | 5 |
| 61% - 70% | 39% - 30% | 2 |
| **Total** | | **38** |

As to the average percentage of time that the interviewees allocated to managerial and technical work, the following table shows the breakdown, in descending order:

**Table 4: Average percentage of time allocated to managerial and technical work**

| Ranking | Communication Activity | Type of Work | Average Percentage of Time Spent |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Media Relations / Investor Relations | Technical | 19% |

| 2 | Attending Meetings with Peers / Subordinates | Technical | 15% |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Planning | Managerial | 13% |
| 4 | Counseling / Advising Senior Management | Managerial | 12% |
| 4 | Organizing Company's Events / Promotions | Technical | 12% |
| 5 | Writing / Editing Corporate Literature | Technical | 9% |
| 6 | Scanning / Trouble Shooting | Managerial | 8% |
| 7 | Producing Publicity Materials | Technical | 5% |
| 7 | Communication Research | Managerial | 5% |
| 8 | Others | ___ | 2% |
| **Total** | | | **100%** |

## Discussion

With an average of 32% of their time spent on what the public relations literature terms "managerial" work and 62% on "technical" work, Singapore's top in-house public relations executives cannot be said to be playing a strategic role. This is in spite of an overwhelming majority (85%) of the interviewees reporting directly to the CEO or to a member of the dominant coalition with all given direct or indirect access to the CEO. Our data confirm De Beer's (2001) assertion that reporting to CEOs or members of a dominant coalition is not necessarily a good indicator that public relations contributes meaningfully to decision making if such reporting is not accompanied with active engaging in strategic work and a high degree of participation in the boardroom on issues beyond media publicity. Although more than 60% of interviewees reported that they were "consulted" on "important" matters, we believe in most instances, top management have already decided on key issues and the top communicators' participation in the boardroom was needed only to help facilitate the process of conveying the information to the target audience at worst or public relations' advice was sought only as it related to areas related to communication at best. As such, our data suggest that Singapore's top communicators are taking instructions more frequently than helping craft decisions at the highest level. That 66% perceived themselves as guardians of the corporate reputation as opposed to seeing themselves as counselors, advisers or strategists, further lends credence to the conclusion that public relations rarely seems to provide genuine value to organizational activities. This conclusion is further reinforced with the data suggesting that only an average of 8% of respondents scan the environment or engage in trouble shooting and only 12% engage in counseling and advising senior management.

We also found that members of top management predominantly harbors mixed worldviews about the role of public relations and rarely understand its true value to organizational effectiveness. The fact that some were made to report to marketing heads highlights the challenge for Singapore's public relations practitioners in continuing to prove that public relations can, and often does, make valuable contributions to the bottom line tangibly or intangibly. Equally disturbing was that "peer" disciplines such as marketing saw public relations as a peripheral support media relations function to their more "important and core"

communication function. More efforts are therefore needed to educate senior management and peers about the true contributions that public relations can make to organizations.

It comes as no surprise that media relations tops the list with interviewees spending an average of 19 percent of their time on media relations. This confirms findings of other studies which found that public relations practitioners in Singapore are too focused on media relations (see e.g. Lim, Goh, and Sriramesh, 2005). In addition to the already mentioned reasons for this, another key reason is the nature of the mass media environment in Singapore. With media ownership restricted to only two dominant players, there is precious little competition if one desires media access to place stories. Such limited options for generating publicity and cultivating strong relationships with content makers mean that practitioners cannot afford not to spend sufficient time on this activity if they want their companies to be seen and heard. They are also spending more time than needed on other technical work such as attending meetings, organizing events and writing corporate literature. Then again, as events and corporate literature are "highly visible" communication activities, the tendency is always there for practitioners to want to spend time and be involved in the details.

Needless to say, more time should be allocated to the four managerial activities we had listed earlier: planning, counseling senior management, scanning the environment, and embarking on communication research. To be able to counsel top management, practitioners must have the knowledge base to offer strategic input and insights into corporate issues which requires that time be spent scanning the environment and conducting communication research. It is only when these managerial activities occupy the bulk of practitioners' time can influence be exerted on strategic planning and decision making at the highest level in the organization.

## Conclusion

Despite Singapore organizations recognizing the increasing importance of communication with practitioners playing an increasingly more prominent role in recent decades, this study finds that top in-house communicators in Singapore lack the expertise, and the opportunity (when knowledge is present) to play the managerial role. Their work thus lacks the potential to create and add value with desirable outcomes to organizations in the long run. And if top public relations practitioners like to see the level of professionalism raised in Singapore, they are in the best position to effect changes that can spur desired changes.

This would require them to be equipped with knowledge on communication excellence as well as strategic and operational management so that they can play the manager role effectively. For a start, it helps to be academically trained in public relations. But this training alone is insufficient. As this study has shown, the 10 practitioners who spent more time on managerial work are not trained in communication! But the reverse is also true because this number represents less than a third who were not trained in communication. Theoretical knowledge of what makes communication excellent has to be supplemented with knowledge in finance, operations and management. This is because, while non-communication graduates may not have gone through the rigors of fully appreciating communication academically, they bring with them expertise in other fields which sometimes help to enlarge their understanding of the organization's business. Practitioners who are trained in communication, on the other hand, find themselves equipped with traditional communication skills but sorely lacking the knowledge in other disciplines which is essential in carrying out the manager role.

Being knowledgeable across disciplines also allows the top communicators to enjoy a special rapport with key decision-makers that pure generalists are not capable of having. They are able to comprehend business opportunities and challenges faced by the organization, provide strategic advice, recommend and see to the execution of the communication programs that best meet company's objectives. Invariably, there will be respect for the profession with top management and peers from other functions developing a positive worldview of the role of public relations and communication management.

Professional accreditation and recognition is another avenue to help raise the level of public relations professionalism in Singapore. The Institute of Public Relations in Singapore (IPRS) offers accreditation but it is not being availed by a majority of practitioners in the city-state. The IPRS, for its part, would need to reevaluate its accreditation standards to keep them on part with the rapid growth in body of knowledge of public relations and communication management. Importantly, unless organizations (and clients of consultancies) insist on some kind of standards and qualifications for the public relations counsel they seek, accreditation and other such measures will not become popular.

Top management may also wish to take the initiative to increase and widen their knowledge on the role of communication in the organization so that they can use communication effectively to achieve corporate goals and business objectives. This is because most curriculum content offered by many management institutions devotes little to understanding the broad social environment within which communicators operate, and as such, an education in management is unlikely to be able to equip chief executives to make full use of the potential contribution of public relations (White & Vercic, 2001).

These efforts, easy access to top management which senior public relations practitioners here are already enjoying, together with a thirst to be multi-disciplined would pave the way for these practitioners to play a strategic role and head a communication department capable of creating value-generating outcomes for the organizations in Singapore.

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## **TABLE**

### **Communication Activities Performed by Practitioners**

| Activity Set | Communication Activities | No of Practitioners |
|---|---|---|
| A | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature<br><br>- Worked closely with Human Resource on internal communication | 19 |
| B | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature | 7 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | - Worked closely with Human Resource on internal communication<br>- Marketing & Product Communication | |
| C | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature<br>- Employee Communications | 6 |
| D | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature<br>- Employee Communications<br>- Marketing & Product Communication | 3 |
| E | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature<br>- Investor relations<br>- Worked closely with Human Resource on internal communication | 2 |
| F | - Media relations; publicity; issues management; events management; corporate reputation; corporate literature<br>- Investor relations<br>- Employee Communications | 1 |
| **Total** | | **38** |