

THE PUBLIC ROLE MODEL IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

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Abstract:

A primary role of public relations is the spokesperson, the public face representing the organization, association or political/social movement. What type of person takes on the role of personifying an organization? What traits and determinants predict the extent an individual has personal influence in public situations? How does the individual inspire imitation in the public relations arena? Specific to the institutionalization of public relations, what are the strategic choices for designating spokespersons and supporting their evolving strategic relationships? To develop a basis for understanding the individual in the public relations role of influencing publics, this article draws from the theoretical and empirical contributions of multiple disciplines.

This article provides an explication of the public role model concept through the theoretical and empirical findings of social psychology, political and health communication, advertising and consumer communication, and computer-mediated communication. The purpose of the multi-disciplinary approach is to collect insights from existing scholarship in explaining the social, cultural and political factors that shape the organization's personal face in the form of the public role model and to offer measurements for determining the extent of influence of the public role model. The overriding theme of the explication is that the public role model acts in a complex interaction of personal, behavioral and environmental determinants that shape the PR practitioner's personal influence in the public arena. The article concludes with implications of the public role model concept on the PR industry, including impacts on education and professionalization of PR practitioners, and direction for future research.

“If we observe that wherever there is a social relation between two living beings, there we have imitation.” ~ Gabriel Tarde, Laws of Imitation, 1903

Over a century ago, the French social psychologist Gabriel Tarde (1903) described the idea of social networks, the flow of information through interpersonal contacts, which facilitated the development of society, and the role of influential people in this exchange that led to imitation. (Katz, 2006) Research on the phenomena of social imitation and personal influence has evolved, through scholarship in multiple disciplines, in various conceptualizations, operationalizations and measurements. This article intends to integrate into a multidisciplinary perspective the individual in the public relations environment who holds personal influence in the professional environment.

In public relations scholarship, social networks have been described at the professional level as the personal influence model. (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang & Lyra, 1995) Public relations practitioners foster strategic interpersonal relationships with key stakeholders, in a process of influence that involves the exchange not just of information, but gifts, favors and other personalized interactions. (Sriramesh, 2005) This professionalized interpersonal network represents a social structure that, as Tarde initially philosophized, generates imitation on multiple dimensions. Over time, the social connections accumulate beyond the interpersonal level, to have a broader influence on the public’s opinions and attitudes, the public’s agenda, individual and collective behaviors, and social norms and customs. (Tarde, 1903; Katz, 2006)

At the center of the professionalized network are individuals who are designated to publicly represent the organization, association, or social/political movement.* In public relations practices, that role is defined as the spokesperson. The spokesperson becomes the face of the entity, with the expectations of being persuasive, upholding his or her own reputation, along with the reputation of the organization (Carden, 2004) In the institutionalization of public relations, the role of spokesperson bridges from traditional corporate or managed communication roles to individuals throughout the organization

* Through the remainder of this article, the reference to organization, association or social/political movement is abbreviated to “organization,” but is intended to include any organized entity.

(Grunig, 2006). In PR practices, it is widely recognized that the spokesperson requires a specific status and skill set. (Smith, 2002) The spokesperson requirements are similar to marketing practices to identify the traits and behaviors of individuals who hold greater influence than others within social networks. (Elliott, 2007)

What type of person takes on the role of personifying an organization? What traits and determinants predict the extent an individual has personal influence in public situations? How does the individual inspire imitation in the public relations arena? Specific to the institutionalization of public relations, what are the strategic choices for designating spokespersons and supporting their evolving strategic relationships? To develop a basis for understanding the individual in the public relations role of influencing publics, this article draws from the theoretical and empirical contributions of multiple disciplines.

The concept advanced in this article to describe the individual of influence is the sociological term “role model” (Merton, 1957), but in a public relations sense as “public role model,” for several purposes. First, the sociology context of “public role model” sets public relations in the social arena, which extends beyond the organization-centric positivism dominant in public relations scholarship. (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007; McKie & Munshi, 2005) Role modeling also captures Tarde’s process of imitation and social structuring. Second, the public role model concept is not limited to “spokesperson,” which implies deliverer of verbal or written messages, but encompasses symbolic and cultural meaning conveyed by individuals designated to publicly represent the organization. (Curtain & Gaither, 2005) Third, the public role model concept offers an approach to describe the public relations education and professional development process in a multicultural model, as recommended by Sriramesh (2002). The public role model is imitated, not idealized, in the context of power, social identity and differences that occur in the practice of public relations. (Curtain & Gaither, 2005)

This article addresses the public role model concept in two aspects: first, as a multidisciplinary explication, with methods for measurement, and second, as a method of personal influence among public relations professionals and within the public relations industry. In advancing an integrated conceptualization of public role model, this article does not proffer a comprehensive synthesis of theories and empirical studies. Rather, the

integration offers a selection of insights from various disciplines to enhance understanding of the public role model. The final discussion addresses areas for future research and further multidisciplinary integration in refining and testing the public role model explication.

Contributions from Social Psychology

The foundational aspect of the public role model concept is the psychological processes that allow personal influence to occur. Bandura (2001, 1986) describes two pathways communication systems that shape how individuals think, feel and behave toward others: the direct or explicit path of informing, enabling and motivating; and the indirect, or socially mediated, pathway of influences from the media and community settings. In contrast to public relations scholarship of unilateral (one-way) or bilateral (two-way) organization-public relationships (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2008; Ledingham, 2008), social relations in social cognitive theory are, as labeled by Bandura, “triadic reciprocal causation” in which personal, behavioral and environmental determinants all interact to influence each other.

Operationalized in the PR personal influence model, the triadic interaction sets the framework for PR practitioners and their key stakeholders to learn and practice the rules of professionalized interaction. The rules of interaction are dependent on the situation, differing depending on various factors, such as culture, political climate, professional roles and social status of the interacting individuals.

An important dimension to social cognitive theory is the complexity of social learning that occurs vicariously, through social mediation of media content. (Bandura, 2001) The application of vicarious capabilities in public relations is that media, especially news media and journalists, are typically included in the PR personal influence network. Thus, the public role models are influenced by media and influence media through direct contacts and, equally importantly, are influenced indirectly, or vicariously, because they operate in the public arena. They are required to learn, through direct or vicarious interaction with the media, about the rules of the media and the environment of news. The vicarious learning, even more than direct learning, is symbolic communication, as Bandura notes.

To measure the extent public role models are engaged in triadic interaction, the individuals could provide self-reflection (self-report surveys) on the nature of their professional interactions, the extent they are aware of and adapt to rules of interaction, how they may change their behavior in developing relationships, and what environmental changes lead to new “rules” of interaction. As an example, PR practitioners learn the styles of communication favored by their key stakeholders, whether it is emailing contacts interesting news articles or placing regular phone calls or scheduling one-on-one meetings with key contacts. A more sophisticated measure would involve analysis of how professional relationships adapt to major economic or political changes, for example, when a new political leader is elected or a company merges with another, some professional relationships may end, new relationships may need to be developed, or new rules may apply in the interactions. The public role models take on new roles.

Another measure, incorporating the involvement with media, is the extent the public role models, the PR practitioners themselves and their key stakeholders, are involved directly with journalists or indirectly in monitoring news media. The measure could involve extent of direct media interaction and vicarious media influence, determine through the extent the public role models adapt their attitudes and behaviors as a result of the media monitoring.

An additional social psychological theory applicable in the PR personal influence model is social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Because public relations occur in the public arena, and the environment creates frequent changes in social status and professional positions, there are incentives for social comparison with others with the professionalized social network. Two routes of social comparison have been empirically tested and supported in social psychological scholarship: downward comparison, in which individuals seek to reduce threats to their self by comparing to others less well-off, or upward comparison, in which individuals seek to improve their self performance by comparing to others better well-off. (Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002)

In measuring this occurrence in the PR professional network, the unit of analysis is the comparison: who and to what extent do the PR professionals compare themselves, to other PR professionals, or to key stakeholders within their personal networks, or to

additional social or political influentials? Do they perceive their key stakeholders as equals, or superiors? Is the comparison on a professional or personal level, or a combination of both? The public role model could be engaged in either downward or upward comparisons, but the hypothesis suggested here is the more competitive the professional perceives the environment to be, the greater the tendency for downward comparison. Conversely, the more collaborative the professional perceives the environment, the greater the tendency for upward comparison. The upward and downward comparison are important in setting the social context of the PR professional: the personal influence model has influences of individual personalities.

Contributions from Political Communication

Personal Influence is the classic study on the two-step flow theory, by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) The initial study and subsequent political communication empirical studies on media and personal influence provide substantive insights for the public role model concept. The first is that personal influence occurs at all levels of social class and social status. This translates in public relations as personal influence at multiple levels of professional status and in various cultural and social situations. One measure of effectiveness of public role models in representing their organization, particularly for multinational organizations, would be their personal influence with multiple cultures.

Personal influence followed in Tarde's footsteps in recording social imitation. One aspect that Katz and Lazarsfeld's study did not record, as identified by Lang and Lang (2006) is implicit influence. In the Decatur, Iowa, study, the influence was recorded only in cases in which the influential and the responder both recalled conversations on the topic of interest. However, implicit influence could occur as well, by way of imitation. (Lang & Lang, 2006) In public relations, the implicit imitation is as important as explicit influence. A research question to test is in what situations do the public role models explicitly acknowledge imitation and influence, and in which situations would imitation and influence be implicit? The hypothesis suggested here is in the majority of cases, the influence is implicit. The explicit/implicit influence would provide a test of cultural differences, in the degree that explicit influence would not exist in certain cultural settings.

A final key insight from the *Personal Influence* study is the multiple dimensions of influence. In the case of the Decatur female sample, consumer choice influences differed from the public affairs influences. Bennett and Manheim (2006) note that the influence of media creates more of a “one-step flow” in that media can influence choices at all levels. For public relations role models, the social cognitive and two-step flow theories reinforce a similar idea: that the influence of media is integrated into decision-making. This would be even more so in the public arena of public relations. An important moderator to media influence in political communication scholarship is the relatively modest, almost insignificant, influence of television media on opinion leaders, compared to other sources of news media. (McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999) Print, radio and, increasingly so, online news media sites, feed the broad info-seeking needs of opinion leaders. This offers another test of PR personal influence, and the types of media relied on by public role models. Media consumption is further addressed with findings on a study of opinion leaders by Shah and Scheufele (2006).

The public role model concept parallels the concept of opinion leader found in political communication scholarship. In political science, the triadic of personal, behavioral and environmental determinants are measures of influence on civic participation. In public relations, civic participation of the public role models is at the professional level, which could be considered a unique subset or distinctive from the social level civic participation. Whether there is direct civil involvement will depend on the personal actors and the political environment.

The key findings of Shah and Scheufele (2006) that contribute to explicating the public role model concept are the causal relationship between self-reflection of the opinion leader, expressed as self-assured disposition, innovative disposition, and a cosmopolitan (as opposed to local) perspective, that lead consequentially to participation in civic life. The antecedents of these leadership personalities are cultural, technical and intellectual authority, more so than age, gender, education or income. The opinion leaders are experts in their field and, as such, they are motivated to seek information broadly and to participate in civic life. This causal relationship applied to the PR personal influence model would suggest that personally self-assured and innovative dispositions and cosmopolitan

perspective, along with individual expertise, are significant factors in identifying and/or developing public role models.

The measurements for PR role models, as Shah and Scheufele referenced, could include components of the Strength of Personality Scale developed and validated by Weimann and Brosius. (Weimann, 1991; Weimann & Brosius, 1994; Brosius & Weimann, 1996) This scale is used for self-designation of opinion leaders and includes measures of the individuals' leadership potential in terms of basic social orientation, aptitude in influencing opinions of others, and self-perceived ability to affect social situations.

A final key contribution from political communication to the PR role model concept is scholarly work in the area of effects of political candidate image on voting preference, developed as theories of candidate evaluation by Kinder (1986), conceptualized as candidate source credibility (Aylor, 1999) or candidate source valence (Allen & Post, 2004). Due to the nature of political campaigns, voters' assessments of candidates are mediated, gained from their perceptions of the candidates as conveyed via mass media or through influences of conversations with others. Aspects of source credibility or source valence vary from scholar to scholar. While social attraction (perceived friendliness) and physical attraction (physical image appeal) have been assumed as having strong influence, voters identified competence (perceived expertise, Allen & Post, 2004; Aylor, 1999) and empathy (perceived caring, Aylor, 1999) as the traits most important in their choice of candidates. The consistent finding is source valence or source credibility is multi-dimensional and changes depending on the candidates and situations. Aylor found that in the 1996 presidential election, Democratic President Clinton's ethical and moral character were not important to voters who chose Clinton over Republican Robert Dole. In the situation of 1996, candidate competence and economic choices weighed more heavily on voters.

In public relations, the extent social and physical attraction matter would mostly be implicit, measurably only through observation, not self reports. Competence, or expertise, and empathy are traits that would allow measurement by self-reflection and perceptions of others. A common theme to recognize is the growing emphasis on competence, or

perceived expertise. Considerations for measuring expertise are further discussed in the following section.

Contributions from Mass Media

In consumer behavior scholarship, and other mass media studies, personal influence is conceptualized as the ability of the person to influence on a mass media scale. The trait of competence, or expertise, identified in political communication, is much discussed in mass media literature as the concept of source credibility. Source credibility has been labeled the most significant determinant of how persuasive an individual is. (Stiff & Mongeau, 2002) The source credibility concept is comprised of two variables: trustworthiness and expertise. The extent of trust and expertise are determined not by the source, but the recipients of the source messages. In advertising and marketing, the messages, including the source's credibility, are typically more symbolic than direct, and the more highly credible the source, the more positive the consumer feels toward the product.

There have been conflicting findings in the literature regarding the importance of trust *and* expertise, trust *rather than* expertise, and vice versa. (Homer & Kahl, 1990) found a strong covariance between the two variables, suggesting either trust or expertise may be salient in persuasiveness, but their influence is redundant. Relevant work from advertising and marketing research tested the credibility of celebrity endorsers. (Ohanian, 1991) While the celebrity endorser is successful in gaining consumer interest, generating entertainment, and garnering trust, the translation into consumer intent to purchase the endorsed product or service was weak.[†] On the other hand, non-celebrity expertise (include personal user testimonials) had more significant influence on consumer intent to purchase. With the evolution of reality television, and online consumer Web sites encouraging personal testimonials and ratings, the non-celebrity endorser is becoming the expert. (Kilborn, R., 2006)

The implication for public relations is that credibility is a significant factor in measuring personal influence, but the conflicting findings between trust and expertise call for specific empirical testing for how this would affect PR role models. An approach to

[†] The finding applied to adult consumers; adolescent consumers were more strongly influenced.

measure credibility may be to test the effects when a public role model's expertise is explicitly presented in the interaction. Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion, findings of one advertisement empirical test found when the expertise of the source is presented at the beginning of the advertisement, the recipients have stronger positive responses, presumably because they evaluate the expert using central cognitive processing, and when the expertise is presented at the end of the advertisement, the recipients use peripheral processing, which would evaluate the expert using heuristic or schemas. (Nan, 2007) In public relations, the presumption is explicit presentation of expertise at the initiating of contact would lead to stronger personal influence. But this may be dependent on the situation.

One concern in the public relations industry is the general public distrust for the practice of public relations (Callison, 2001). One result has been PR practices use a variety of terms to describe their work, such as corporate communicator, public affairs director, and a number of other titles, to avoid the negative connotations associated with public relations. In some cultures, there is no equivalent for the term public relations. (Sriramesh, 2002) However, there may exist some shared concerns about avoiding negative associations, such as propagandist or spin doctor, among public relations practitioners. This reinforces the need to test source credibility along the lines of trust and expertise. The question raised here is whether trust matters in professionalized personal influence, or whether trust may be more of a peripheral issue with expertise taking more center stage. (Moloney, 2005)

As public relations transitions to greater presence online, the public role model must also represent the organization in the online environment. Computer-mediated communication scholarship has explored effects on a mass media scale of corporate expressions online. One area of intense research focus is blogging, and the effectiveness of corporate blogs. A sample of findings applicable to the personal influence model: Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found that corporate blogging was effective in times of crisis to reduce public anxiety. Another finding is that online readers preferred the content of a conversational blog rather than traditional corporate factual content as a means of learning about the corporation. (Kelleher & Miller, 2006) Specific to the personal influence model,

the public role model would establish an online presence as a personalized expression of the corporation online. This aspect of personal influence could be measured by traditional Internet exposure, such as online readers of blogs or other public role model postings, and could also be measured in terms of influence in the online environment, through measurements such as links from other blogs to the corporate blog postings.

Contributions from Health Communication

Health communication is an additional scholarly area to provide contributions to explicating the public role model concept. Health communication scholarship has developed an empirically validated integrative model that has identified several consistent predictors for health behavior intentions: attitudes, social norms and self-efficacy, with environmental and priming factors acting as mediators in the process. (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006) The applicability of the variables in this integrated model to the PR personal influence model is that the public role model is able to be strategic in being able to fit in and address these primary factors.

First, the public role model must be aware of, address or attempt to change attitudes and social norms regarding the organization that exist in the public arena, in personal interactions with key stakeholders, particularly the news media. The measurement for identifying or developing public role models is the extent the individuals are aware of relevant attitudes and social norms, and in the public relations crisis situation, are capable of defending an organization faced with negative attitudes or undermining social norms. This is evident especially in environments where the organization, or more often association or political/social movement, faces conflict in the public arena. This is not to presume that the public role model is required only to advocate the organization's position, but is capable of assessing the environment and either defending the organization's position or guiding the organization internally toward change to address concerns regarding the public's attitudes and expectations. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations references the adaptation process at the micro level of organization-public relationship. But the health communication model takes a broader perspective, similar to the triadic interaction of social cognition theory, in taking into consideration the social environment of public attitudes and social norms. For the public role model, the hypothesis to be tested is

the difference in interpersonal interactions when the role models recognize, or disregard, prevailing public attitudes and social norms regarding their respective organizations.

A second applicable aspect of the integrated health communication model to the PR personal influence model is the determinant of self-efficacy. As a predictor of health behavior, self-efficacy is expressed both as personal confidence and learned ability to perform the health behavior. (Fishbein, Ajzen, Albarracin, & Hornik, 2007) On a parallel track, public relations self-efficacy is the personal confidence and learned ability for the PR role model to publicly represent the organization in any situation. In the process of institutionalizing public relations, self-efficacy is a measure of the ability to develop public role models through the organization who can effectively represent the organization in the public arena. The health communication self-efficacy is paralleled in political communication to the extent opinion leaders report higher self-efficacy in affecting civic change. (Shah & Scheufele, 2006)

Collectively, the primary predictors in the health behavior model capture the multi-dimensional interaction of determinants that are controlled or not controlled by the individual. Likewise, the PR personal influence model involves elements that are controlled, or not controlled, by the individual. A measurement for public role models is their self-reflected ability to control, or perceived influence over, various elements in the personal influence process.

Public Role Models in the PR Industry

While the primary purpose of the public role model is to represent, or serve as the personal face of, the organization, association or political/social movement, the public role model can also offer a method of professionalization within the PR industry.

The dominant typology of PR roles in public relations scholarship, reflecting the organization-centric model, has categorized PR into four primary roles: expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem solving process facilitator, or communication technician. (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Dozier, 1992) These role concepts are useful in recognizing the functionalism and structure of PR practices at the organizational level.

The public role model offers an alternative concept for considering PR practice at the social level, in terms of the personal traits and determining factors of effective public

role models, the individuals who act, or are identified, as representing the public face of the organization. The adaptation of the public role model is that the individual in this role may not be explicitly identified as a public relations practitioner. On a multicultural basis, the public role model allows flexibility to describe the PR practitioner's title and role, or to recognize that the public role model is specifically *not* a PR practitioner. In the institutionalization of public relations, it is assumed the organization will seek to identify public role models who are not titled or specifically trained as PR practitioners.

The implications for educating PR professionals regarding the public role model is first, an emphasis on looking at personal influence in the public arena through a multidisciplinary perspective; second, a need to consider not just the public messages, but the individuals who symbolically represent the organization; finally, a professionalization of the PR practice that fosters identification, and development, of public role models at all status levels. In this way, public relations can be effectively institutionalized.

Conclusion

The concept of public role model is one of imitation, a social structure built upon personal influence. The strategic effectiveness of public role models, as explicated here, could be measured on multiple dimensions and tested in various routes. The approach outlined here draws on scholarly work in multiple disciplines to better understand the process of personal influence from the individuals at the center of the public relations process, the public role models (Summarized in Exhibit 1.)

Limitations of this explication are that, while the concept draws upon empirical work in multiple disciplines, the concept has not been tested as explicated. Future research would test the research questions and hypotheses outlined in this article, or other measures to determine the actual, and potential, personality, behavioral and environmental determinants of the public role model.

Exhibit 1:

Public Role Model Explication and Proposed Measures of Personal Influence

| | Contributing theories/ empirical findings | Applicable concepts | Measurements of personal influence |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Social psychology | <p>Social cognitive theory</p> <p>Social comparison theory</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Triadic reciprocal causation of personal, behavioral & environmental determinants ○ Vicarious influences ○ Upward/ downward social comparisons | <p>Assessments of personality, behaviors and environment in PR interpersonal interactions. Adaptations to PR interpersonal interactions attributable to direct/ indirect influence of news media, or environmental changes.</p> <p>Upward comparisons within collaborative social networks; downward comparison in competitive social networks.</p> |
| Political communication | <p>Two-step flow theory of personal influence</p> <p>Opinion leader traits</p> <p>Theories of candidate evaluation: source valence or credibility</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Personal influence at all social levels ○ Explicit and implicit personal influence ○ Media influence ○ Self-assured, innovative and cosmopolitan disposition ○ Expertise (cultural, technical, intellectual authority) and information-seeking ○ Social and physical attraction ○ Competence (expertise) ○ Empathy (caring) | <p>Assessments and observations of public role models' multi-cultural interpersonal interactions. Acknowledgment of interpersonal influence. Observation of media influence. Self-assessment of opinion leader traits (Strength of Personality Scale). Self-perceived expertise. Observed influence of perceived friendliness, perceived physical appearance. Other-perceived expertise. Other-perceived empathy.</p> |
| | | | |

| | Contributing theories/ empirical findings | Applicable concepts | Measurements of personal influence |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Mass media | Persuasion theory: source credibility Elaboration Likelihood Model | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Credibility: trustworthiness/ expertise ○ Timing, explicit labeling of source | Other-perceived importance of public role model's trust and expertise (determine covariance) Test explicit labeling of PR source |
| Health communication | Integrated model of health behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Attitudes ○ Norms ○ Self-efficacy ○ Environmental factors ○ Skills & abilities | Awareness and acknowledgement of relevant attitudes and norms. Self-efficacy in public representation |

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