

A Genre Perspective on Public Relations Message Design

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Human beings are captivated by categories. The eras of classical music are marked by styles: baroque, classical, romantic, etc. Oscars and Tony Awards are given for Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, and so on. We have the need to make distinctions of hierarchy, classifying things by their similarities and differences. It's actually pretty useful. The entertainment industry's use of genre conventions to create works of art depends on the audience's understanding of how a play, movie, book, or song fits the characteristics of a particular type. Some of this is a matter of taste, but the functional power of genres enables people to make sense of these and other types of communication without having to think hard about it. Not only this, but they have been adapted for audiences with particular needs (e.g., the visually and aurally impaired).

It is this basic ability or need to create and use categories that is at the heart of public relations. We believe public relations can become both more understandable and more effective for all parties through a genre-based view. More important, we believe a stronger grasp of the theoretical and the practical dimensions of public relations discourse genres is vital to successful strategic planning. In this essay we lay the foundation for these contentions by grounding the theory of genres in past and contemporary times. We also explain the prevalence of discourse genres in today's organizations and how they function. Finally we present our view of the "generic" nature of public relations as a method for analysis and practice.

A Historical Perspective on Genre and Discourse Conventions

The practice of public relations and the development of rhetoric in Ancient Greece have a common starting point: democracy. Democracy arose after the overthrow of the last Athenian tyrant, Cylon, and the codification of oral standards into written laws (Raaflaub, Ober, & Wallace, 2007). Those in power established courts of law and a legislature and therefore depended upon successful message strategies to avoid a repeat of the uprising, effected in part by the sheer number of citizens that brought about Cylon's downfall. Because civil strife is common, we use symbols and forms—genres of discourse—to forestall the need for physical conflict and, of course, to pick up the pieces after wars when they occur.

With the creation of written law, courts to apply it, and public assembly to extend or modify it, oral rhetoric blossomed in Athens. To debate laws, adjudicate them in court, and to inspire citizens to respect the rule of law, Greek leaders and landowners learned to engage in public argument, and teachers arose to help them improve strategies of developing, organizing, framing, and expressing ideas so that audiences could be persuaded (Murphy, Katula, Hill, & Ochs, 2003). What is most important to understand here is that rhetorical genres arose because of the *practice* of rhetoric. Aristotle merely organized what we might call a book of "best practices" of rhetoric, and he organized his ideas according to broad, common situations that any speaker might encounter.

Aristotle was the most renowned of the Athenian teachers. Perhaps this is because he wrote on so many topics: rhetoric, politics, ethics, and biology—and others. We don't know in

what order he wrote his different works, but his *On Nature* is the epitome of category systems. What high school graduate does not know that animals and plants are divided into genus and species? From that word, *genus*, we have the related word, *genre*. Just as he divided all knowledge into the various disciplines, and flora and fauna into categories based on their similarities and differences, Aristotle divided public speaking situations into three broad categories: one for legal argument, another for public debate, and a third for special ceremonies. He also suggested that some arguments were more appropriate in the courtroom than they were in the legislature or a community event.

Likewise, public discourse today has its genres. The average person may not know that there are five components to creating a suitable tribute at a funeral, for example, but he or she recognizes when a speaker has given a poor eulogy. Violations of style are obvious: We should not speak ill of the dead or dwell on matters not directly related to the deceased, for example. Eulogistic strategies are less obvious on a surface level (cf. Kunkel & Dennis, 2003), but sometimes violations of these implicit audience expectations are obvious. Consider the eulogies at Richard Nixon's funeral. California Governor Pete Wilson focused too much on himself and his positive connections to what Nixon stood for. In contrast, Robert Dole came closest to fulfilling the expectations of the situation. Dole emphasized the loss to the nation that had occurred. He eulogized Nixon as a consummate politician who was as complex as the average person: He was "one of us." Dole met the difficulties of the situation, eulogizing a man whose greatness in conducting foreign policy was eclipsed by scandal and resignation from office. Dole's word choices ("style") and strategies (or "substance") were, overall, appropriate to the situation.

Corporate discourse also has its genres (see Figure 1), and we can think about them at various levels. The layperson knows that organizations use memos, quarterly and annual reports, etc., to conduct business – what management communicates. Students, however, learn the patterns of organization required to create news releases, public service announcements, and other genre conventions – the craft of what public relations practitioners do. At a deeper level, genres are grounded in the situations they address and the purposes organizations bring to their use. They are strategic because they rely on linguistic and rhetorical principles that suggest the style, form, and function appropriate to the situation – the reasons *why* all organizational communicators create discourse and *how* they do so. It is at this deeper level that we will focus primarily throughout the rest of this essay.

FIGURE 1. Representative genre set for corporate discourse, including those for public relations.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formal letters• Memos (printed & electronic) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annual corporate reports (e.g. financial and public-interest) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews• Articles |
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| • Meetings (e.g. team, department, company) | • Tax forms | • Matte releases |
| • Shareholder meetings | • Corporate image pieces (e.g. brochures, Websites, advertisements) | • White papers |
| • Project/progress/trip reports | • Prepared statements | • Case studies |
| • Research reports | • Press releases | • Public service announcements (PSA) |
| • Proposals | • Video news releases (VNR) | • Advertorials |
| • Formal presentations | • Photo news releases (PNR) | • Newsletters |
| • Public Speeches | • Audio new releases (ANR) | • Video programs |
| • Strategic planning documents | • Fact sheets | • Pitch letters |
| • Employee handbooks | • Backgrounders | • Pitch calls |
| • Training manuals | • FAQs ("frequently asked questions") | • Conversations (telephone, face-to-face, or real-time video conference calls) |
| • Owners manuals | • Biographical statements | • Blogs |
| • Periodic financial reporting documents | • Press conferences | • Podcasts (video & audio) |
| | • Press kits | • Wikis |

Although, in everyday parlance, we talk about organizations issuing statements, news releases, and the like, the messages themselves are not merely the product of an organization's various departments. Genre conventions are co-created through interactions with publics: media contacts, consumers, communities, investors, legislators/regulators, etc. Audience understandings of recurring situations and expectations that arise from those perceptions impinge upon what the organization says and how it says it. Some situations provide greater flexibility than others. News releases have an obvious, standard form (the inverted pyramid) and strategies that frame a story's main point and build the organization's image. Additional strategies for them vary, however, depending of the situation (e.g., investor news, personnel announcements).

Because his categories are so broad, all corporate discourse genres fit within Aristotle's three situations. The most recognizable for publics and practitioners alike is a specific type of courtroom discourse, although today it also takes place in the court of public opinion. Crisis communication, in part, employs the Greek rhetorical genre of self-defense, the *apologia*. Although it may include an apology, when corporate *apologia* is used, the organization has an array of strategies to choose from when it does not admit to wrongdoing (or only partially takes the blame). In the case of *Dateline NBC's* 1992 test of the C/K pickup (with the alleged exploding gas tank), in 1993 General Motors relied on counterattack to show that NBC News had rigged its tests of the vehicle. During its press conference, the company also used differentiation to distinguish its expert testimony and scientific evidence from NBC's, creating doubt regarding the latter. It used minimization to demonstrate that the risk of explosion was not nearly as likely as the news program had implied (Hearit, 1996; Smudde, in press). In the case of the Mercedes A-class situation in 1997, the company at first denied that design flaws could be responsible for a vehicle overturning during its own tests of the vehicle (Ihlen, 2002). When trade publications and other publics did not believe Mercedes Benz, it adopted changing strategies over time – and used different combinations of them within particular discourse conventions (e.g., a news conference). Due to the wide variation in crises that occur, the specifics of the accusation against organizations, and the purposes that they have in alleviating the crisis,

corporate *apologia* most likely does not fit a definition of “genre” when it requires that particular combinations of style, strategies, and situation recur over time.

The combination of situation, audience expectations, organizational purposes, and rhetorical choices thus suggests some important assumptions that we can make about genres – and a few remaining important questions. Genres somehow become agreed upon between message sources and receivers, but why do some genres stabilize through repeated use (e.g., eulogies, PSAs,) and yet invite variation (e.g., news releases, corporate *apologia*)? Certainly the key aspects we must recognize when using a generic perspective for message planning include attention to the constraints imposed on strategic choices by the situation, the audience, and organization’s purpose in communicating. But how do these genres come into being, and what influences their persistence, evolution, and perhaps demise?

According to Campbell and Jamieson (n.d. [1978]), genres indeed have a life cycle: Figuratively, they are born, mature, perhaps change, and sometimes go dormant through lack of use. The news release had its origins in journalism. Although the basic form remained the same, when journalists left the profession to do public relations on behalf of business, efforts to build up clients and organizations were added to an objective-sounding style and the inverted pyramid. This, of course, has persisted, with variations, even with the migration of news releases to electronic formats. Although some have hailed its demise in recent years, the news release continues to play a central role in corporate communication. Some genres maintain their basic, strategic integrity across media (e.g., public service announcements). Other types of discourse (e.g., annual reports, employee newsletters, press kits) have been adapted to new technologies, changing audience expectations, and the explosion of information available through multiple channels.

Corporate discourse conventions therefore are more than just recipes for organizing ideas. The principles behind genre theory require communicators to have intimate knowledge of the organization and its goals, values, and purposes. Research of the situation that a campaign and its messages are designed to address takes on even greater significance when we realize that information drawn from research directly informs the substance of what should be said. The same is true for audience research. Moreover, good writing skills and experience become even more important because an understanding of style and message strategies is central to the better use of genre conventions. These imperatives require sensitivity to the relative stability and flexibility of specific genres. (After all, some of the best jazz artists are classically trained: They know the rules and when they can bend them.)

Genre as a Method for Strategic Message Planning

Broad understanding of the underlying assumptions of genre theory thus guides our appreciation and use of specific writing conventions. Let’s reconsider each component of the genre theory we covered earlier. In this section, we recap the basic assumptions regarding corporate discourse conventions and then illustrate and extend them.

1. *Why genres?* Discourse genres exist because of the recurring confluence of types of situations that suggest appropriate symbolic responses to them.

One of the key controversies in late 20th century rhetorical study has been a chicken-or-the-egg question: Which comes first, the message or the situation? A good deal of the time, discourse conventions are employed to respond to situations: a product introduction, an increased need for organ donors, etc. This does not mean, however, that such messages might not be employed to *shape* perceptions of a situation. In the early 1990s, Ketchum worked on behalf of SunSweet

Growers to change the image of the lowly prune, “the Rodney Dangerfield of fruit,” as a feature story placed in the magazine *Eating Well* put it. Certainly the use of the feature as a discourse convention was a response to the prune’s image as a laxative and something people ate in their old age, but the story also capitalized on the development of new uses for the product (e.g., prune puree as a shortening substitute) that would appeal to health-conscious publics. Although growers eventually changed the marketing label to “dried plums,” such publicity items helped to change audience perceptions of why and when prunes could be used.

Messages also may be employed in advance of a situation. Much of corporate strategic planning includes anticipating what might happen. This effort includes public relations professionals thinking about the future and what may lie down the road so the organization avoids obstacles or, at least, is better braced for impact. Proactive situations, like the introduction of a wholly new and innovative product or special events, rely on sound future-oriented thinking about, in the case of innovations, the great value that can be obtained and, in the case of events, the exceptional community development that can be shared. Other instances, like emergencies, require advanced, contingency planning as well because corporate officials have good reason to be prepared “when the shit hits the fan.” Although contingency plans provide much of the material needed to manage and communicate about an emergency situation, contingency plans include places for the exact specifics of a situation to be filled in.

Discourse genres, then, work both ways: as reactive and proactive ways organizations communicate with their publics (and vice versa). The communication is conducted in ways that invite degrees of literal participation with an organization’s work (e.g., understanding more about causes and effects, agreeing with a policy, or buying a product or service). Publics and organizations co-construct meaning about what is going on and the influence and effects it has.

2. *Form follows function.* The purposes that drive the use of a particular genre are governed by sound rhetorical strategies, not simply an adherence to a familiar pattern of organization.

Perhaps one of the oddest news conferences on record has to be the October 4, 2005, announcement of a partnership between Sun Microsystems and Google (Sun, 2005). The respective principal speakers, Scott McNealy, Sun’s CEO, and Eric Schmidt, Google’s CEO, talked about Schmidt’s credentials and commented on how he had worked for Sun at one time. After a long discussion of the ups and downs of Sun’s history, McNealy introduced Andy Bechtolsheim, saying that Bechtolsheim had invested money in both companies at their beginnings, not mentioning that he was a cofounder of Sun – but trade publications found no real news: “The announcement left many bloggers less than thrilled, and blog entries with titles such as ‘Big whoop,’ ‘That’s it?’ and ‘Google and Sun announce yawn’ abound on blog search site Technorati” (Guevin, 2005). The two CEOs also were vague during the question-and-answer period that followed. WebProNews reported, “A few attempts to gain some deeper meaning to the press conference, besides seeing Messrs. McNealy and Schmidt trade a Sun server and software for a Google-branded lava lamp, were brushed aside by the duo” (Utter, 2005). Reporters and technorati in the blogosphere were left to speculate about what degree the two companies were taking on Microsoft and what products would result from the partnership. By failing to follow discourse conventions, the only news gained from what the *Los Angeles Times* called “an often confusing Silicon Valley news conference” (Gaither, 2005) was that the news conference occurred and that great things could be expected from Sun and Google.

Those organizations that use genre conventions properly can build upon them to create messages with visual and discursive impact. Honda, in addition to its full-color annual report in a PDF file, provides a similar report on corporate social responsibility. Two of these sections are expanded into separate annual reports on environmental efforts and, in Japanese only, its Driving Safety Program (Honda, 2008a, 2008b). General Electric (2009) has made its “Our Company” heading on its website easy to follow so that investors, consumers, and other interested publics can link to a separate page for investor relations and individual sites dedicated to GE’s Ecomagination environmental campaign and to its efforts at corporate citizenship.

3. *Two-way communication.* Genres are not simply responses that the organization employs to respond to situations. Audience perceptions of the situation – and expectations of what the organization should say and how it should say it – are as much a part of what shapes the strategic, organized response as the organization’s interpretation of what needs to be said and done.

The ideal of ethical public relations as “symmetrical communication” can be recast as dialogue that is a co-creation of meaning. Shared meaning is negotiated meaning. The genre conventions associated with employee relations serve as cases in point. Willihnganz, Hart, and Leichty (2004) tell of difficult changes in a small manufacturing company. A married couple, owners of Auto Tech, decided to retire and move out of state. A CEO change resulted in organizational decisions no longer made through informal communication, but via memos and formal meetings. The change in genre conventions created a crisis situation that was finally resolved with the return of the original owners. In contrast, when Dow Chemical and Union Carbide merged in 2001, Ketchum Public Relations assisted Dow, among other things, in implementing a “merger mailbox” to answer employee questions and having Dow leaders give in-person presentations on the first day of the merger at all 90 company sites (PRSA, 2002). This Silver Anvil award-winning campaign achieved 85% employee satisfaction with communication on Day 15 of the merger and less than 1% resignations during the first month.

Organizations and audiences need to be on the same page regarding what genre conventions are appropriate. This is not only true when organizations communicate, but also when publics address them as receivers. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) rarely are given a hearing by organizations because of its penchant for outrageous behavior reminiscent of the protest genre, the diatribe, employed by the Greek Cynics and, more recently, the Yuppies in the 1960s (cf. Windt, 1970). Consumers can be more effective when they use reasonably stated letters, e-mails, and telephone calls to convey their concerns. This is what happened when New Englanders learned that Nabisco was stopping production of Crown Pilot Crackers, a product associated with growing up with the weekly evening meal of chowder. Sustained consumer communication and resulting media coverage changed the company’s mind (Escrock, Hart, D’Silva & Werking, 2002).

4. *Stability and Flexibility.* Public relations practitioners not only should know the characteristics of a given discourse convention. They should recognize how much latitude they have in using them. Some genres allow for great creativity. Others, especially those prescribed by government agencies, restrict the strategic choices the communicator may make.

The beauty of discourse genres is they are rule-governed, which means people can use any discourse exactly as prescribed by the rules or bend or even break the rules to fit specific

rhetorical purposes. The stability of discourse genres for public relations is especially needed when time is of the essence. Emergency situations (i.e., organizational crises, issues, and disasters) leave practitioners little time to consider other artful ways to handle communications. Hurricane Katrina is an example of all three types of emergency communication. It naturally was a disaster because of the havoc it wreaked on the city of New Orleans and the surrounding area, including southern Mississippi. It precipitated organizational crises for the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Indeed, FEMA was the “poster child” for ineffectiveness because of, in part, the top administrator’s misuse of internal communiqués via e-mail, as reported by journalists. It also stood as an issue of public safety that was poorly addressed over the years because, as news reports revealed, civil engineers and government officials knew well about the limitations and weaknesses of New Orleans’ levy system and what should have been done to better protect the city (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007). The art of effective public relations in emergency situations is more concerned with content than its innovative presentation. Traditional conventions for press releases, news conferences, interviews, and so on work like recipes for what to say about what happened, why, and how it can be avoided in the future.

The conventions for public relations discourse also are flexible so they can accommodate situational needs for both an organization and its publics. The requirements for publicly traded companies to report on their annual performance are an example of genre flexibility in the face of stability. Regulations, like the U.S. Securities and Exchange Act of 1934 (and its subsequent regulations that fall under the purview of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission), specify particular kinds of information and their presentation that must be shared with investors. Corporations are obligated to annually publish a simple, text- and table-heavy, black-and-white Form 10-K. But many companies also choose to publish a “flashy,” four-color report that shows more about the organization’s story for the previous year in addition to the required information. For example, Indian Oil’s 2007-2008 annual report provides readers with its document totally online through dedicated links to it and its sections, which seems at first blush innovative and appropriate. The document, however, is simply divided up into excerpts in separate PDF files of black-and-white pages for each section, and each simply presents fundamental messages about the business area or topic required without innovation highlights. In contrast, Samsung’s 2007 annual report provides a full-color report that, along with the detailed financial data and analysis, features artistic photography of personnel and products, but beneath these “flashy” images are straightforward messages about company performance on required subjects.

5. *Generic Adaptability.* Since genres have a life cycle, we extend that metaphor to recognize that discourse conventions do not merely change over time in response to audience expectations and organizational needs. Some readily transfer to new media channels; others require adjustment to be more, we might say, user friendly.

Today’s variety of media choices make possible what business today calls “repurposing” – using items in ways different from the original intent behind them. To some degree, public relations professionals have done this with genre conventions for the past century. Some material in press kits is made specifically for it, while other items have been used in previous campaigns. Biographical statements and backgrounders are frequently repurposed. Yet our point is more profound: Today’s corporate communications environment invites novel use of genre conventions in ways that might, at first blush, seem questionable choices.

Consider the case of Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, who in 2004, twice had to defend his reputation. The first situation, in which a visitor to Australia Zoo videoed Irwin feeding Murray the Crocodile while holding his one-month-old son in his arms, created an ethics stir which polarized even his most loyal fans. Despite a rather disjointed apologia on NBC's *Today Show* (Touchet, 2004), the media firestorm that January died down, with only the Australian state of Queensland considering some regulation to cover such incidents of alleged child endangerment (Callinan, 2004). That summer, however, another reputational crisis occurred when scientists accused Irwin of swimming far too close to animals while filming a documentary, *Ice Breaker*, in the Antarctic (Middleton, 2004). This time Irwin's crew created a well-framed apologia, a program episode called "Confessions of the Crocodile Hunter" (Irwin & Stainton, 2004). Aired on the Discovery Channel in the United States, the program presented Irwin's life story with an emphasis on his philosophy regarding and practices in the wild. So much more effective than his earlier apologia, this program was repurposed and continuously run in tandem with "Steve's Story" (Irwin, 1996) on the Discovery Channel for at least the first 24 hours after Irwin's accidental death on September 4, 2006. The apologia became part of a fitting eulogy.

Not all repurposes are successful. During the second author's former life in radio broadcasting, he saw many times when companies and nonprofit organizations would send print news releases without any adaptation to the needs of audio presentation. Indeed, often print releases were sent for use on the radio station's community calendar without being converted into what today would be called a media alert. This one-size-fits-all mentality even can occur in Top 100 media markets. When the second author was working in public radio, the city's arts foundation created its theme for its annual fundraising event, replete with preproduced public service announcements. At the time the station aired both classical music and jazz. However, the agency hired to produce the PSA had used a country music bed for the recording. At the request of the station's manager, a script was provided for use by its announcers, although the foundation representatives would have preferred to have the recorded announcer's voice used for the entire campaign.

Clearly, attention to genre conventions in corporate communication can make public relations efforts more coherent and appealing. Although they can be used reactively, the best use of genres is proactive. With awareness of their characteristics, degree of flexibility, and adaptability to different uses, professional communicators can use these genre conventions more effectively and, most important, strategically. These genres for public relations (see Figure 2) are specific types that fall into Aristotle's broader, tripartite system. It is our contention that most of what public relations does falls under one of those categories, *epideictic*, i.e., celebratory rhetoric.

FIGURE 2. Public relations discourse genres

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| Prepared statements | Biographical statements | Newsletters |
| Press releases | Press conferences | Video news programs |
| Media advisories | Press kits | Corporate reports |
| Video news releases | Interviews | Corporate image pieces |
| Photo news releases | Articles | Pitch letters |
| Audio news releases | White papers | Pitch calls |
| Fact sheets | Case studies | Written correspondence |
| Backgrounders | Speeches | Conversations |
| FAQs | Public service messages | Blogs |
| Tip Sheets | Advertorials | Podcasts |

Public Relations Genres as Celebrations of the Organization

Public relations involves the measured and ethical use of language and symbols to inspire cooperation between an organization and its publics. This work subsumes various purposes, such as persuasion, education, celebration, and so on. Of these purposes, much of the literature about public relations puts the greatest emphasis on persuasion (e.g., Fawkes, 2007; Miller, 1989; Read, 2007). Indeed, public relations and persuasion are often equated with one another (and sometimes with manipulation; cf. Grunig, 1989). This is not surprising, since public relations' most noticeable efforts are usually when organizations face Aristotle's forensic situation – i.e., the courtroom – actually, the court of public opinion. Our earlier examples certainly include efforts to persuade – e.g., General Motors' defense against NBC *Dateline's* accusations of making trucks with gas tanks that could potentially explode, the Crocodile Hunter's *apologia* of being more concerned for showmanship than the safety of his child or of the natural world that he so loved. Similarly, Aristotle's deliberative genre is not confined to the legislature but can apply to any occasion in which people are being asked to change how they will do things in the future. The *Eating Well* feature article was an attempt to get consumers to use prunes (hopefully Sunsweet prunes) in new ways, and the failures of FEMA in the wake of Hurricane Katrina stemmed from a lack of proper timing and persuasion to tell storm survivors what to do next.

We believe, that the focus on persuasion is limited and over-privileged, although this perspective has been well defended. Public relations books and scholarship have used myriad pages to examine campaign mistakes (“I can't believe they did. . . .”) or celebrate Silver Anvil Award winners. Case studies have their place, but public relations is not just focused on audience behavior, purchasing patterns, and the bottom line (although we must not forget those important goals). The quest for cooperation between an organization and its publics truly seems more appropriately encompassing because professional communicators are purpose-driven, whether that purpose is to persuade, inform, refute, or celebrate. In short, the essence of public relations is to establish identification between publics and organizations such that they see themselves in each other's positions no matter what their respective stances on matters are (cf. Smudde, in press). For this reason, we maintain that the bulk of what public relations people do on a day-to-day basis is *epideictic*.

The Epideictic Nature of Public Relations Discourse

There is no exact translation of the Greek word, but its origins are found in the games and festivals of ancient Athens, when part of the event's program included public speaking and written composition (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Confined to such situations, scholars typically explain to students that *epideictic* messages are ceremonial in character, focused on "praise" and "blame" (i.e., extolling the virtues that the community holds dear, and sometimes vilifying what it does not stand for, at times even casting aspersions on enemies). Thus funerals are *epideictic* situations that invite eulogies of praise for the deceased. Today, all sorts of celebrations provide opportunities for *epideictic* discourse: a ribbon cutting, a retirement dinner, all sorts of organizational events. Its utility for organizations, however, is far greater and untapped (pragmatically and academically).

As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) assert, the *epideictic* genre of discourse conventions form "a central part of the art of persuasion, and the lack of understanding shown toward it results from a false conception of the effects of argumentation" (p. 49). As such, we argue that much of what public relations does stems from its celebratory nature (see also Crable & Vibbert, 1983). Scholarship has moved well beyond viewing epideictic messages as opportunities for speakers to display rhetorical skill and audiences to appreciate it. From this scholarship, we have determined epideictic's four core functions: celebratory, performative, epistemic (i.e., knowledge producing), and preservative. These functions are not simplistic, unidimensional terms: Each has specific components that make public relations key not only to organizational success, but also to a more enlightened view of publics as audiences and how organizations seek to inspire cooperation with them.

Celebratory Function

The celebratory function of epideictic discourse includes ritualistic and axiological dimensions. Ritualistic dimensions concern how a special occasion is particularly memorialized. This means that speakers make a special point to follow established, accepted patterns of language and behaviors for exalting or decrying something. Public relations discourse in this case need not be as dramatic as that sounds. In public relations, the ritualistic dimension is obvious in new-product unveilings, statements of self-defense, and news conferences, but it also is subtle in news genres, in which the writer should temper word choices so that the message conforms to the journalistic standard of objectivity. The other dimension of the celebratory function is axiological, which focuses on values-oriented statements that address something in terms of praise and blame. Public relations' axiological function is seen at its best when organizations explicitly or implicitly communicate values that the organization stands for, values that its products or services represent, or, through issue advocacy, values associated with the corporate position regarding the issue at hand. Simultaneously, the values expressed through the discourse also should reflect those held by target publics. Public relations influences society through invocation of organizational core values, but must be a reflection of the environment in which their clients operate as well. Values appeals, therefore, work best when they are shared by the organization and its publics.

Performative Function

The performative function of epideictic discourse is chiefly concerned with *ethos*, and, in the case of public relations, performative epideictic discourse establishes who the organization is and how it develops a relationship with the audience (Black, 1970; McMillan, 1987). There are three components to the performative function. First, the political component sees the speaker as

a leader that is acting as a member of a community. In this social role, the speaker has a “bardic” (i.e., grand promoter or evangelist) and/or prophetic voice (Lessl, 1989), both of which mean the speaker “sings the praises” of the organization and the past, present, and future value the community derives from it, although the prophet also might cast aspersions on enemies or chastise a community for not living up to its values. By the same token, audiences have the role of observer, judge, and participant as they experience the speaker and the message, evaluate what is said, and choose to take action or not. In public relations the political component of its discourse is evident in feature articles and annual reports, for example. Second, the identity management component concerns reputation building through *ethos* (cf. Sullivan, 1993) so that audiences acknowledge and embrace a speaker’s credibility and authority. In public relations fact sheets and corporate social responsibility reports, for example, fulfill this need to manage an organization’s identity. Third, the rhetorical (or symbolic) component of performative epideictic discourse involves the creation of consubstantiality between an audience and the speaker. The discourse in this vein is designed to influence audiences immediately and over the long term, defining their roles and relationship to each other. In public relations, Lindeman’s (2006) view of outputs, outtakes, outcomes and outgrowths are dimensions of the range of results sought to inspire cooperation between an organization and its publics.

Epistemic Function

The epistemic function of epideictic discourse focuses on the knowledge-building capacity it has for speakers and, especially, audiences. This function covers two dimensions: educational and explanatory. The educational dimension features messages that inculcate values and encourages the imitation and buy-in to certain virtues that are established through socialization. Public relations practitioners exercise this dimension when they publish advertorials or public service announcements. The second epistemic dimension is explanatory, which involves defining or otherwise facilitating audience understanding of something. This dimension can be realized when discourse addresses what the audience already knows as the basis for connecting it with something new they do not know and should embrace, and that new knowledge balances audience and organizational needs. It also can be realized as discourse, which

refers to the power of epideictic to explain the social world. Audiences actively seek and invite speech that performs this epideictic function when some event, person, group, or object is troubling. The speaker will explain the troubling issue in terms of the audience’s key values and beliefs. (Condit, 1985, p. 288)

Thus the epistemic and celebratory functions work in tandem. The celebratory function reflects the worldview that the organization and its publics share; the epistemic function attempts to influence how audiences think about the world and what they believe to be true.

Preservative Function

The preservative function of epideictic discourse conserves and reinforces the community values that may be celebrated or vilified through messages (cf. Cherwitz & Hikins, 1982, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). There are three important components to this function. The first is coherence, which concerns how the language and the very structure of the discourse itself helps everything work together within the text and, especially, among all other epideictic

functions. Public relations discourse must always cohere with other corporate discourse on many levels, at the very least to “stay on message.” The second preservative component is reflexive: Rhetoric functions for the organization as a means of self-persuasion (cf. Burks, 1970). Discourse becomes part of the public record and, therefore, influences how the organization and its members perceive themselves in relationship to their surroundings. Rhetoric thus becomes a historical record of what the organization says and does – a repository of organizational memory from which anyone may draw ideas for new discourse. Finally, epideictic preserves messages for future usage. The most obvious way this occurs is repurposing, in which practitioners create premises for future communication to inspire cooperation (even forensic or deliberative discourse; cf. Cheney & Vibbert, 1987) and for other epideictic situations. In the practice of public relations, discourse is regularly reused for multiple purposes, and that can include the reapplication of text from one document or occasion to another, like information from a fact sheet to a news release to a speech. However, the public availability of organizational discourse allows others – publics, opinion leaders, the news media, activists – to quote, paraphrase, or recast ideas as they see fit. This futuristic dimension can be quite far-reaching, because public discourse may be invoked long after its original moment of communication (cf. Courtright, 1991). For example, what an organization’s founder said or wrote becomes fodder for press kits, speeches, annual reports, and advocacy advertising. Also, what an organization says in its financial discourse about its past performance has implications for people’s perceptions of its potential future performance (e.g., whether investments in a publicly traded company may be prudent).

A Holistic View of Epideictic Public Relations

Taken together, the four functions of epideictic discourse provide us with a usable and useful view of public relations that can be used at the tactical level, but they are especially potent at the *strategic* business level. This view represents an untouched and powerful way to plan, act, and evaluate public relations. Because celebratory rhetoric showcases community (or societal) values, much of what passes for newsworthy information is focused on those values that organizations and their publics share – and these are shared through the conventions of the discourse genres in Figure 2. Corporate officials must take into consideration their constituents’, stakeholders’, customers’, markets’, and other audiences’ viewpoints, needs and expectations when making *epideictic* arguments about what is going on. (This approach is no different than it would be with forensic or deliberative discourse.) Epideictic arguments are not only about the news or other matters, although that is important. The arguments are invitations to participate, even if it is only momentary or intellectually if not ultimately behaviorally, in the dramatic celebration of what is going on within, for and about an organization that also concerns its publics. The invitations also include claims, backed by evidence and reasoning (cf. Toulmin, 1958), that participation would be good. When the news is good, bad, or neither, the invitation to the celebration is relevant.

During his years in industry, the first author felt this kind of dynamic was the root cause for communications (but could not put his finger on it), not just merely releasing news or information. Indeed, the use of information in the service of persuasion, education, celebration, etc., was always the means to the end of inspiring cooperation between an organization and its publics. Some audiences are friendlier than others. Communicating with particular audiences should be helpful in some ways while targeting others not so much: Detractors will almost never change their minds against something and should be targeted cautiously, advocates can help

evangelize about something and should be targeted as ambassadors, and those in the middle are more numerous and most prone to moving toward one extreme or the other depending on the forcefulness and effectiveness of the discourse directed to them. Publics are not mere observers, although admiration of the organization-as-speaker's abilities certainly contributes to positive impressions. Indeed, Oravec (1976) maintains that Aristotle linked such discourse to practical wisdom, common-sense understandings of the world. Such discourse contributes to audience learning and asking them to make judgments that may serve as the basis for later persuasion. (This is exactly what Crable and Vibbert [1983] argued that Mobil Oil did with its "Observations" series of advertisements in Sunday supplement magazines.) Values-based arguments reinforce or change beliefs (what publics accept as true), which in turn prime specific attitudes that lead to somewhat predictable behaviors. As Edward Bernays observed, "People want to go where they want to be led" (Blumer, Moyers, & Grubin, 1983).

These connections are vital to practicing professional communicators also. Public relations efforts that extol the innovativeness of a product or service, for example, are engaging in *epideictic* discourse. The purpose is to celebrate the launch of a new product or service, and that celebration is worthy, virtuous, important, etc., because of specific persuasive arguments about its value, benefits, and so on. Public relations efforts to thwart attacks on an organization, for example, also are *epideictic* discourse. The purpose in such cases is to persuade people that the attacks are baseless, inappropriate, ill-informed, etc., while people should join the organization in the celebration of itself and what good it stands for. And public relations efforts to support a public policy measure, for example, also are *epideictic*. The purpose in this case is to promote the soundness, efficacy, value, etc., to society and invite participation and support from publics as the organization leads the charge. (Note that the first example of these three would be a purely *epideictic* form, the second could follow a forensic form, and the third example could follow a deliberative form.)

The conventions for the discourse in Figure 2 not only can prepare audiences for action, but they also are reputation-building opportunities for organizations (cf. Beale, 1978). The formal *epideictic* dimensions of public relations discourse generally involve what is fine/crude, honorable/abhorrent, noble/base, virtuous/shameful, and so on. The discourse forms that are chosen and the messages designed must be those that best meet with the target audiences' needs and expectations while balancing the organization's position. The nature of *epideictic* discourse, then, necessarily involves ethics, and Aristotle makes clear connections between them. Not only must organizations try to identify with live up to societal values, but they also must use the discourse forms that audiences use to gain information—and they must do so without insulting the audiences' intelligence or affronting their sensitivity to what they consider proper, ethical communication. Related to our word ethics, though, is one of Aristotle's principal means of argument, *ethos* – the character of the speaker as implied within messages.

Persuasive aspects of public relations may indeed be the most noticeable and, therefore, most public. However, as a graduate student of ours once observed, the best public relations is obviously subtle. With appropriate attention to situations as opportunities to present corporate values, address audience values, and invite cooperation as a result, public relations messages at heart are *epideictic*. The true test of any campaign is not only its immediate goal, but also how the organization's use of discourse conventions within it serve the organization and its publics over the long term. Public relations genres build and sustain relationships with publics and, simultaneously, strengthen corporate reputation. Every message is an opportunity to inspire

cooperation. Of all the purposes that public relations seems to fulfill in its quest to inspire cooperation, celebration is key.

We use the category epideictic as an overarching orientation to these discourse conventions, because it really is a broader category than genre. "Genus" is a nice word for it, but we won't pursue the biological analogy to its discourse parallels. Within the broad category of epideictic, we treat public relations discourse conventions as genres that have specific characteristics with implications for message design. Our generic approach to public relations recognizes the important role that rules play in effective public relations discourse. Our approach also recognizes how important competence in those discourse genres is to effectively planning, executing, and evaluating communications.

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