

2nd World Public Relations Festival
“Communicating for Diversity, with Diversity, in Diversity”

Main Implications and Summary of the Contents

by

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Introduction

This paper covers the main and essential points of the conference proceedings produced on the occasion of the **2005 World Public Relations Festival** held in Trieste, Italy, from June 28 to June 30. The Festival was organized by Toni Muzi Falconi, businessman and Professor of the University of Udine, in cooperation with Ferpi (Italian Public Relations Federation) and the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management. It focused on the issue of diversity and public relations in all its richness and different dimensions and explored the many new challenges with which communication professionals need to deal within an increasingly complex and globalised context.

Communicators who wish to build positive and strong relationships with their growing stakeholder publics need to be aware of increasing diversities and to deal with them effectively. Nowadays one of the principal tasks of public relations professionals consists in reflecting the complexity of the environment and understanding the different attitudes, values and expectations of its interlocutors, possibly through a one-with-one dialogue.

There are three main communication issues in the process of dialogue with the stakeholders:

- **communicating for diversity**, considered a value in itself to be communicated as a permanent aspect of organizational policy (*the why of communicating*);
- **communicating with diversity**, in all its features, interacting differently with increasingly diverse interlocutors (*with whom one communicates*);
- **communicating in diversity**, adopting and reviewing all available methods, channels and tools to ensure the effectiveness of communication processes and recognising the fluid and changing environment in which today's organizations perform (*the how to communicate*).

Effective public relations should abandon the current dominant communication-to-publics model, based mostly on one-way, asymmetric and persuasive communications. Instead, the **communicating-with paradigm** must be adopted, since it allows one to deal with diversity by implementing practices which are one-with-one, one-with-few, few-with-few, pull, dialogue-based and negotiative. This in the attempt to meet the requirements of diverse groups, listening and ensuring that communication is an effective two-way dialogue.

As Muzi Falconi has said, “understanding others also implies knowing who they are... if each interlocutor is different, then the organization maximizes effectiveness by adopting a communication mix which is at least oriented to a two way, tendentially symmetric relationship system.” Identifying particular stakeholder groups and tuning organizational behaviour and communications to their different needs is a huge but highly rewarding challenge.

Mutual understanding is vital. A fertile and interactive dialogue can thrive and become an added value only when diversity is recognised in all its facets and implications. From here the final aim is not always to obtain consensus or general agreement, but principally to develop a deeper **understanding** in order to implement a really reflective strategic role in the public relations profession. In order to do so, a new global public relations framework is required.

This summary will focus first on the relevant implications which emerged from the rich and articulated debate, considering the public relations point of view. The following sections illustrate the way and advantages of communicating for diversity, with diversity and in diversity through many examples and case studies.

1. Diversity Issues and Public Relations: Implications

This section illustrates the main implications of diversity management for the public relations profession as they arose in the Trieste meeting. What emerged is that effective diversity management has a strategic value for organizations and for public relations in particular.

There is a strong connection between the strategic management of diversity and that of public relations activities. Inclusiveness today represents a strategic decision and an important aspect of the organizational value system, beyond merely meeting legal obligations and requirements.

There are three implications that invite public relations practitioners to adopt and promote the issue of diversity in all their plans and within their working environments: the creation of an *inclusive and heterogeneous organizational setting*; the effectiveness of a more *symmetric dialogue*; the increase of demand for *multicultural education in public relations*.

1. Recruiting and retaining **members of underrepresented groups** and professionals from diverse backgrounds in organizations and in particular in public relations departments and associations give rise to advantages in both internal and external contexts.

In the *internal context*, diversity policy advantages could be as follows:

- attracting different **talents** through a merit system and a stimulating working environment, in particular within the upper ranks of the public relations industry;
- enhancing **creativity and innovation** in organizational and public relations planning thanks to practitioners of varied backgrounds who provide different viewpoints and experiences which challenge an unfertile groupthink and sterile conformity, on the assumption that diverse teams normally produce better results;
- creating **involvement** and a **shared community** without sacrificing the unique and peculiar contribution of individuals, thus embedding the theme of diversity deeply in the organizational culture and mission.

In the *external context*, one needs to consider the highly competitive and globalised marketplace in which organizations and public relations professionals operate. There is a growing need for cultural sensitivity and strategic tuning towards society. Public relations departments should welcome different people and prize them. In addition, they should provide assistance to other functions in order to help them effectively manage their respective and specific stakeholder relationship systems and to promote diversity within the entire organization. Becoming more heterogeneous and raising the number of diverse actors within all organizational departments is an effective response to **reflect the market**, to assimilate the attitudes and expectations of different stakeholders and sometimes to catch emergent or hidden trends. Publics are more and more diverse: that is why

public relations needs the contribution of different individuals who represent a broad spectrum of existent diversities and are able to **communicate effectively with different constituencies**.

2. The fact that each individual is unique and different from others requires a **symmetric, pull and interactive dialogue** with each group or single component of an organization's influential public. In times of continuous changes, building positive and long-term relationships is fundamental in order to involve stakeholders, who must be well represented in all their differences and facets within the organization. This is the only effective way to create and maintain mutual understanding and trust in a troubled and diverse environment.
3. To establish and promote the issue of diversity, a multicultural educational curriculum is recommended. Including cultural diversity and global knowledge in the **public relations pedagogy** will contribute to advancing the profession. Current and future professionals should be able to integrate the way of communicating for diversity, with diversity and in diversity in their day-to-day communication activities. All students and practitioners should embrace diversity at the core of their profession.

Public relations professionals who communicate for diversity, with diversity and in diversity should contribute to the general performance and to the bottom line of an organization through:

- delivering more effective **tailored contents** for **multicultural interlocutors**;
- promoting a deep **understanding** between the organization and its internal and external publics, so that **mutual goals are satisfied and loyalty and relationships are built and cultivated** over time;
- increasing both **employment attraction and retention**;
- welcoming **multicultural staff and diverse talents** who enrich public relations departments and bring competitive advantages through fertile dialogue and **innovation**;
- improving **social involvement, goodwill and corporate reputation**;
- generating a **good business practice** through the expansion of market shares in diversity segments of stakeholder publics.

The above advantages highlight the fact that there is a great need to increase diversity within the public relations industry.

The challenges and benefits of communicating for diversity, with diversity and in diversity and the implications for public relations will be now explored through many examples. Several case studies and theories drawn from different managers and professionals will illustrate more specifically the strategic role of diversity and public relations in their daily activities.

2.Communicating for Diversity

Empedocle Maffia¹ described how strategic communication is used by the World Bank as a new frontier in the fight against poverty. Communication can become a **social capital** when organizations

¹ Special Advisor to the Executive Director of the World Bank.

and institutions are responsibly involved with stakeholders and community in general, taking into account their real expectations and listening to and understanding the voices of people in need of help.

Religion also has a social role. It represents a “means of cohesion in an uneven world” thanks to sharing and understanding, as Sandro di Castro² has illustrated. A culture of respect and acceptance of diversity takes root through an adequate **education system**.

Larissa Grunig³ explained how diversity is strongly embedded within the profession of public relations and supported the importance of recognising and legitimizing the differences in an organization’s internal and external publics. There are two main points here: the first is the opportunity to build transparent and symmetric relationships between organizations and their **strategic and increasingly diverse interlocutors** in a multicultural and globalised world; the second issue concerns the inclusion of **minorities and diverse practitioners in the profession** in order to harness their expertise and talent and increase creativity and commitment. Nowadays the communication community has become “diversity aware”, but not yet “diversity integrated.” However the emphasis has begun to be an international imperative because diversity “leads toward innovation, the potential for a larger market, exploitation of personal strengths, reduction of hostility, greater job satisfaction, and the avoidance of legal implications.”

Sejamothopo Motau⁴ dealt with the **use of language** in multi-lingual/cultural societies which exist in a diversity conscious world and accentuated the importance of **mutual understanding**. The issue of language, which is a particular way in which societies manifest diversity, has become a communication challenge that today’s public relations professionals must tackle. The stakeholder paradigm implies active participants with specific needs and attitudes and requires focused and tailored contents to ensure effective communications.

There is a wide range of case studies of how private, social and public sector organizations and professional associations communicate “*for diversity*.” The following are some examples.

Andrea Illy⁵ explained how globalisation and responsible sustainability programs create a **virtuous cross fertilization** between different cultures, traditions and ways of life. Valuing diversity stimulates the development of many opportunities and experiences. Illy directly selects and trains coffee growers in impoverished or developing countries while carefully respecting their values and traditions. This is the only way to guarantee high quality coffee and to meet and exchange different know-how and expertise.

IBM has a long tradition of commitment to diversity, which represents a key component of its inclusive company culture, and has often anticipated legislation and social changes. Karla Bousquet⁶ illustrated

² President, Italian Section Benè Berith, international Jewish association.

³ Professor of Public Relations and Communication Research at the University of Maryland; co-founder and co-editor of the Journal of Public Relations Research.

⁴ Chair elect of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, Past president and now Ambassador at large of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) and Chairman of the South African Council for Public Relations and Communication Management.

⁵ CEO of Illycaffè.

⁶ Manager of Workforce Diversity; IBM Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA).

how IBM cultivates and supports a multiplicity of viewpoints and expertise to enhance **creativity** and **internal commitment** and to bring **innovative solutions** to clients and society.

Paolo Landi⁷ described the way in which Benetton's communication has always represented difference and diversity in all its dimensions with the intention of uniting controversial and opposing aspects under a single logo. In 2000, Benetton opened **Fabbrica**, a research laboratory open to young people under 25 from all over the world who create communication projects and campaigns.

Professional associations of public relations can play a key role in advancing and promoting the themes of diversity and interculture within the profession. Diversity represents a major commitment and a strategic objective for professional associations like PRSA (Public Relations Society of America), Ferpi (Federazione Relazioni Pubbliche Italiana) and CIPR (Chartered Institute of Public Relations). In doing so, these associations organize several specific projects, events, networking activities, roundtables and reports. The only way to effectively interact with a global environment and a diverse world population is to reflect and embrace diversity, which becomes a **pragmatic and strategic advantage** in this changing world. The role of professional associations of public relations is to encourage **people from a diverse background and experience** to join the public relations sector and to make public relations practitioners as representative as possible of a society in the midst of real change. Their principal task consists in empowering professionals to reach their fullest potential and providing development, knowledge and support to different members.

Also, there are a number of **social and public sector organizations** which stand for respect of all diversities and which tackle the issue on a national and local level, such as CittadinanzaAttiva (one of Italy's most reputed NGOs), the government of Canada, Rotary Club International, the Federal Senate of Brasil and the Italian Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia. To meet this challenge, they promote diversity in all forms of communication and ensure that diversity concerns are fully represented in recruitment. Nowadays public relations professionals have an increasingly strategic and central role in dealing with diverse stakeholders who live in a varied world which is in a constant state of change. However, as W. Gerhard Bütschi⁸ illustrated, there are several **shortcomings inherent to the public relations industry**. There is, for example, a general and worrying failure in the sharing and consolidating of strategic resources, knowledge, best practices and global standards. A real exchange and cross-fertilization in this sense represents the only way to empower public relations practitioners to move the profession forward and to respond effectively to the complex and different challenges that they must untiringly face in their daily work.

Another example that shows the growing relevance of public relations is the effective response given during the **Indian Ocean Tsunami** by the international PR community, described by Michael Morley⁹. Public relations professionals proved to be extremely important in both donor and affected countries. In the area of need, they provided their expertise in order to communicate timely accurate information, coordinate activities and the aid of local governments, volunteers, NGOs and many other organizations, raise funds, induce greater responsiveness on the part of individuals and organizations and in general give assistance to all initiatives, taking on the role of "facilitators" in a concrete and constructive way.

⁷ Advertising Director of Benetton.

⁸ Managing Director of Digital Management AG.

⁹ Deputy Chairman of Edelman and leader of the task force created by the Global Alliance to draft a report on the Public Relations' response to the Tsunami of 26 December 2004.

The recommendation is to take into account and assimilate this and other similar tragic experiences with the aim of using public relations methods and instruments to improve disaster communication, to help relief activities and to prevent or lessen the impact of future large-scale natural disasters. In particular there is the need to recruit, train and utilize public relations practitioners to manage emergencies on local and national levels.

Finally, a central and recurring theme of the Festival was the urgent need to reevaluate the existing **public relations training and education** that professionals and students receive all over the world, in order to include and enhance the issue of diversity and create a more global and multicultural knowledge base.

Krishnamurthy Sriramesh¹⁰ explained why the emerging theme of diversity requires a reform of university and professional public relations education curricula. The **existing body of knowledge** is **highly ethnocentric**. The current basic public relations textbooks available in English do not include diversity as a fundamental aspect of the profession and do not contain international case studies or effective strategies to communicate with global audiences living in different socio-cultural environments. The challenge becomes that of integrating cultures and diversities to transform public relations pedagogy into a really holistic, inclusive and multi-disciplinary education and to move forward the body of knowledge and skills needed. In doing so, public relations students and practitioners will be effective cross-cultural communicators, able to build and maintain relationships with multicultural and diverse contemporary stakeholder groups.

Renato Ravenna¹¹ placed particular emphasis on the value of public relations students who have lived between cultures and have different backgrounds as a means of challenging the ethnocentric view. **International students** possess cross-cultural viewpoints and engender a sort of *third cultural perspective*, which “enables an individual to integrate the best practice and approaches of the two cultures and work out the task and relational issues synergistically and creatively.” The public relations education system should encourage inclusiveness and diversity in classes, with students from different countries who offer different perspectives, language and cultural backgrounds, and include the issue of diversity in every training program, advancing the profession in a diverse and interdependent world.

To sum up, there is much evidence of how “communicating for diversity” is becoming more and more strategic. Diversity management must turn into a constant feature of an organization’s policy, in order to understand and communicate with different constituencies. In doing so, organizations and professional associations must welcome diverse practitioners and public relations pedagogy must include cultural diversity and global issues.

3. Communicating with Diversity

Diversity management focuses on the inclusion of people of different race, language, age, cultural and educational background, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, religion and social

¹⁰ Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University and winner of the 2004 Institute for Public Relations Pathfinder Award.

¹¹ Completing his Master Thesis on Australian Public Relations Practitioners with a Diverse Cultural and Language Background at RMIT University in Melbourne.

class. Several cases demonstrate that it is possible and useful to engage with minorities in order to promote equality, fight against prejudice and stereotypes and encourage the direct involvement of diverse publics in organizational activities and decisions. This part of the Festival illustrated the challenge of communicating with **minority communities** and with a diverse range of persons, be it the mentally ill, people with learning disabilities, the dyslexic, the blind and deaf, nomadic Tibetan children, the youngsters of the Favelas in Rio, the Maoris in New Zealand, the female miners in South Africa or the gay and lesbian community.

People communicate and understand differently, as a result of social, cultural and genetic diversity. This is a key concept if organizations want to implement communication strategies with the aim of building relationships with their internal and external stakeholders. Public relations professionals should communicate with publics in terms that reflect the latter concerns and conduct an interactive dialogue that listens to various perspectives and requirements. This is a meaningful way to build a society based on openness and mutual trust and to create a sense of common purpose in diverse and changing groups.

4. Communicating in Diversity

A first part of this session embraced the opportunity of communicating in diversity with **publics, stakeholders, influentials and individual persons** and explored the impact of diversity on these concepts.

James Grunig¹² illustrated his **situational theory of publics** that segments the general population into categories based on the perceptions of people who recognize different problems in different situations. This theory helps to identify strategic publics and to manage public relations programs. From this perspective, problems are relevant only to people who experience consequences related to organizational behaviours or decisions. Therefore, organizations do not have permanent interlocutors with whom they interact and communicate, but changing audiences in relation to specific circumstances. The situational theory of publics was also applied to minority groups, following the consideration that diversity engenders diverse publics. Therefore this theory represents a useful tool in order to strategically identify diverse publics and to plan and evaluate public relations activities.

Public relations is used as a strategic means to manage organizational reputation and to govern effective relationships in a diverse and unstable environment. Erik Koper¹³ analyzed the dynamics of diversity and organization-public interactions through **the lava lamp metaphor**. The role of the public relations practitioner could be conceived as that of a “connector” bubble which helps organization and public bubbles to work together and interact until his/her presence and action are no longer needed. Or, alternatively, the public relations professional could be placed outside the lava lamp, to support different stakeholder and organization bubbles to establish their current position and predict their next positionings.

¹² Professor Emeritus, Department of Communication, University of Maryland.

¹³ Leader of the Division of Applied Communication at University of Central Lancashire and President of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association.

João Alves Duarte¹⁴ suggested a **new integrated model of Public Relations’ “Publics.”** He focused on the necessity to understand and discuss the key concept of publics and to support the transition from the communicating-to paradigm to the communicating and acting-with model. He proposed looking at the “integration” notion at three different levels of analysis: the *macro level* “that makes us consider ‘publics’ as greater forms of human association,” equivalent to the notion of institutions; the *meso level*, which conceives a “specific collectivity as the incarnation of an institution” and concerns organizational-public relationships described by the situational theory of publics supported by Grunig; the *micro level*, where the aim is to understand publics as social groupings “formed by individuals with special characteristics,” stressing the human and personal dimension. The integrated model can be applied to the issue of diversity. The awareness of diversity is increasingly visible starting from the first level, the macro one, where there is a large variety of publics-as-institutions. At the meso level, it is possible to examine publics in their specific contexts so as to understand their expectations and interests and explore their particular problems and relationships with a certain organization. Finally, at the individual and personal level, diversity reaches its highest value and can be inspected closely and in detail with reference to specific and intrinsic aspects.

The second part of this session concerned the **use of words, images, events and exhibitions** to communicate in diversity. Today there is a wide choice in terms of media, technologies, narrative forms and languages which can be used to introduce close connections and interactions and to cultivate relationships. The rise of globalisation, complexity, turbulence and interdependency requires an integration and strong interrelation of diversities that can be accomplished and successfully achieved through a meaningful communication and a two-way dialogue which engenders understanding.

As Franco Carlini¹⁵ said, we live in a world which is simultaneously one and different: the human species, its languages, cultures, ways of life, traditions, artistic fields and various forms of expression find their origin in a single source. However, over time and space an untiring and continuous **process of differentiation** has produced a multiplicity of peculiar and heterogeneous aspects in diverse societies and communities. In this context, it is possible to make the most of this growing diversity and diversified heritage in order to create new opportunities and innovative ideas.

The project of Benetton’s Fabbrica (an international and multicultural research centre on communication), mentioned above, has successfully undertaken this challenge.

Another example, which Gianluca Comin¹⁶ illustrated, is the effective and synergic communication management of Enel. The company daily faces a complex and continuously changing environment and it interacts with a plurality of interlocutors with heterogeneous needs and requirements. That is why Enel tries to include and value diversity in all its strategies and activities. The dialogue with diverse stakeholders is conducted using several means of communication (and in particular **events**, which embrace the fields of music, culture, scientific research, respect of nature and youth education). Communication programs are planned and implemented with an eye to the specific publics involved and a scrupulous segmentation of methods and targets.

¹⁴ Assistant Lecturer in Public Relations Theory and Communications Theory at Lisbon’s Superior School of Mass Communication and Media Arts.

¹⁵ Journalist (“Il Manifesto” and “Il Corriere della Sera”), Author and founder of Totem.

¹⁶ Director of Communication and External Relations of Enel. Italy’s largest energy company.

The third and last part of this session concerned the **evaluation and measurement of organizational relationships and communication practices** as a core task for public relations practitioners. Managing successfully the widespread internal and external diversity and all the interaction with organizational stakeholder groups is becoming more and more difficult and requires a renewed attention to these important phases of a public relations program.

Fraser Likely¹⁷ underlined that organizations must create and maintain over time mutually-beneficial relationships towards different constituencies. Effectiveness is reached only when organizations recognize and legitimize stakeholder expectations and when publics perceive a real and concrete advantage from the relationship. In doing this, “PR/Communication managers must evolve from their historical emphasis on creating communications to **supporting stakeholder relations**, from being communicators to being **stakeholder relationship-builders** or relationistes or public relators.” Therefore there is a greater need to evaluate and monitor the contribution of public relations activities to organization-stakeholder relationships, for example the coordination of all external activities, the gathering of relevant information and the help and advice given to other functions in order to face problems and effectively interact with diverse interlocutors.

Sandra McLeod¹⁸ stressed the importance of **research**, whose principal aim consists in exploring and assimilating the different needs and attitudes of the numerous organizational constituencies. Moreover, it is also useful to stimulate management commitment, monitor the progress of actions and research objectives and profit from new opportunities.

Conclusions: A New Beginning

Today we live in a very complex and unstable world where different cultures, ways of life and mentalities share the same spaces and are melting or contrasting in an unceasing process. In a context undergoing considerable change, there is a dire need to take advantage of all positive aspects of this cross-fertilization.

Diversity is both a big challenge and an opportunity of great value for public relations practitioners and scholars. The debate on this controversial and complex topic must continue; there is a need for further research and discussion to explore all the possibilities and evident advantages for organizations and for the profession, beyond scepticism and resistance. The aim is to understand this growing phenomena, without undervaluing its complexity and richness and to move towards a more inclusive and truly committed stakeholder approach.

The body of knowledge and practices in the public relations field concerning diversity is gradually broadening but it is still in an early stage of development and growth. Public relations must promote a fertile mix of different identities and cultures and a meaningful dialogue between diversities. Diversity must permeate and direct the day-to-day public relations activities and become a key business differentiator. Public relations professionals can help organizations to consider diversity as a

¹⁷ Head of Likely Communications Strategies, member of Institute for Public Relations' Commission on PR Evaluation and Measurement.

¹⁸ CEO of Echo Research Ltd. and first International Board Member of the Institute for Public Relations.

strategically embedded organizational value and to move from a simple awareness of this issue toward an institutional commitment.

The Second World Public Relations Manifesto pointed out the urgent need “to undertake a much needed ‘new beginning’ firmly based on dialogue.” Public relations and communication professionals have an important role to play in helping organizations to focus on dialogue and integration, in expanding opportunities for minorities and diverse talents and in becoming committed advocates for promoting and consolidating a culture of diversity as a value. They can really make the difference.