

We'll Get Right Back to You: The Effect of Responsiveness, Accessibility, and Information Utility on Journalist Perceptions of Organizational Media Relations Efforts

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Introduction

Previous research has indicated that the public relations-media relationship is rife with antagonism, conflict, and misperceptions and based on different needs and orientations (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Shin & Cameron, 2004). This state of affairs reflects the inherent conflict of interest that exists within the relationship between the two professions and why the public relations-media relationship has been described as “adversarial...at its core” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000, p. 323). At the same time, Sallot and Johnson (2006) propose that “the crux of the newsgathering process is the relationship between these groups facilitating transactional information exchanges that become the news of the day” (p. 151). Therefore, it should be a priority for public relations practitioners to foster healthy relationships with the media as a means of strengthening the organization’s overall media relations efforts and to earn favorable media coverage. Two-way symmetrical communication has been proposed as an ideal means for fostering these types of mutually beneficial relationships (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). The principles necessary for fostering dialogic communication can be considered analogous to two-way symmetrical communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) and suggest strategies for improving the public relations-media relationship. Specifically, providing stakeholders with useful information and utilizing a dialogic loop may allow public relations practitioners to be perceived as a responsive, accessible, and useful resource to the media.

This paper examines, over a five-year period, the evolution of journalists’ perception of the media relations efforts of Southwest Airlines, a Fortune 500 company renowned for practicing exemplary public relations. Quantitative measurement and analysis is coupled with an in-depth qualitative investigation to understand the media’s perceptions of Southwest’s public relations effectiveness, media relations value, use of two-way symmetrical communication, perceptions of communication channels, and perceptions of the principles necessary for generating dialogic communication—specifically in regards to utility of information, accessibility, and responsiveness. The longitudinal study afforded opportunity for three biennial surveys of key national journalists who routinely report on Southwest Airlines. Synthesizing data garnered through relationship, utility and perception scales as well as robust open-ended responses, results support and advance media relations best practices by providing insight into how Southwest Airlines consistently garners favorable media coverage by fostering favorable associations with journalists. Ultimately, the study results provide foundation for recommendations to corporate public relations practitioners in their efforts to secure and maintain propitious media relationships.

Literature Review

Media relations is one of the primary functions of public relations practice. Properly managing the relationship with the media is an important strategic objective for media relations professionals given the historically contentious nature of the practitioner-media relationship. Bridges and Nelson (2000) acknowledge that “media personnel are generally very wary of being manipulated, and those in an organization responsible for media relations should carefully cultivate and develop these relationships by acquiring a reputation for both truth and availability... individuals attempting to establish media relations have an obligation to provide accurate and timely information and to respond to inquiries in the same manner... they also have an obligation to avoid flooding the media with time-wasting, self-serving material that has no news value” (p. 108). Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2009) stress the importance of the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists in achieving beneficial outcomes for both parties: media coverage for the organization and providing resources to journalists. To facilitate a healthy practitioner-media relationship, Broom (2009) suggests five basic rules for effective media relations: (1) practitioners should act honestly and ethically when dealing with journalists, (2) practitioners should help journalists do their job, (3) practitioners should not badger journalists to cover a particular story or to frame a story in a specific way, (4) practitioners should never ask journalists not to cover a story that may be embarrassing to the organization, and (5) practitioners should ensure that they are sending materials to the appropriate journalist and that the stories being pitched are considered relevant and newsworthy. Broom (2009) places particular importance on media relations practitioners providing journalists with good service since “the quickest, surest way to gain the cooperation of journalists is to provide them with newsworthy, interesting, and timely stories and pictures that they want, when they want them, and in a form they can readily use” (p. 257). Following these guidelines assumes that a media relations function will prove to be effective at advancing an organization’s public relations objectives, which consequently should contribute to organizational success. For media relations efforts, positive outcomes of these quality practitioner-media relationships might manifest themselves as perceptions of effectiveness by journalists, greater effectiveness in pitching stories to journalists, and awareness of specific organizational efforts (e.g., introduction of a new service or initiative).

Excellence Theory provides a theoretical framework for investigating practices that would contribute to media relations, public relations, and overall organizational effectiveness. The theory proposes that “public relations is a unique management function that helps an organization interact with the social and political components of its environment... [organizations] have relationships with individuals and groups that help set the organization’s goals, define what the organization is and does, and affect the success of its strategic decisions and behaviors” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006, p. 51). The development of the Excellence Theory therefore represents an effort to establish a general theory of public relations that explains how, why, and to what extent public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness and that provides recommendations as to how public relations at both the functional and program level should be practiced. Programs and departments that engage in excellent practice should achieve positive outcomes for the organization in terms of stronger, longer-lasting relationships with strategically important publics such as the media. One of the key propositions of the Excellence Theory is that excellent public relations programs and functions are based around the two-way symmetrical model of public relations practice (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested four models of public relations practice: (1) press agency, (2) public information, (3) two-way asymmetrical, and (4) two-way symmetrical. The two-way symmetrical model has been proposed as an ideal means for fostering mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). Most of the activities engaged in by public relations practitioners that the media find objectionable are behaviors that would be indicative of a public relations function practiced using the press agency or public information models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The use of two-way models of media relations may represent a step in the right direction toward building mutually beneficial public relations practitioner-media relationships and addressing some of the criticisms that arise on both sides of the relationship. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984) practitioners utilizing the two-way asymmetric model of media relations “set objectives for what information they want the media to disseminate. In contrast to press agents, however, they understand news values and package the information in ways journalists will accept” (p. 227). Problems may still arise when applying the two-way asymmetrical model “because media relations specialists usually try to control coverage of their organization and to limit it to organizational public relations objectives. Journalists frequently want open access to an organization, something the asymmetric model may try to limit” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 227).

The two-way symmetrical model differs from the asymmetrical model in that practitioners utilizing it attempt to balance the interests of the organization against those of the public (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). The model places a premium on understanding publics and then working to reach outcomes that create mutual benefit for both parties in the relationship. An excellent public relations department should not only employ the two-way symmetrical model of public relations practice at the functional level but also seek to build public relations programs to communicate with strategically important publics, such as the media, and base these programs on two-way symmetrical practice. To this end, practitioners managing the public relations function must not only have an appreciation for the two-way symmetrical model but must also possess the knowledge and skills required to implement programs based on two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). For a media relations program, this would entail not only listening to journalists and being responsive to their needs but also fostering greater access to the organization and providing useful information in a form that journalists need and want (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

One of the benefits of two-way symmetrical practice is the likelihood that it will foster dialogue between an organization and its publics. Dialogic communication represents “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) and has been proffered as an “ethical and practical approach” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 21) to public relations that contributes to the formation of satisfying, long-term relationships built on trust and mutual understanding. Therefore, dialogic communication represents an important outcome of two-way symmetrical communication, i.e., dialogue should be the product of practicing the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The communication principles necessary for fostering dialogue are somewhat analogous to principles of two-way symmetrical communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002); these principles suggest strategies for improving the public relations-media relationship. In an effort to clarify the role of dialogue in public relations, Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five features that they proposed would result in a dialogic orientation for public relations practice: “*mutuality*, or the recognition of organization-public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and

confirmation of public goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, pp. 25-26). Subsequently, Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed three ways in which public relations practitioners could facilitate dialogue in their interactions with publics: (1) by building interpersonal relationships with publics, (2) by building mediated relationships with publics, specifically noting the potential to do so online, and (3) by setting up a process for communication with publics that will result in dialogue.

Michael Kent, Maureen Taylor, and William White have also extended the understanding of the dialogic principles necessary for building and maintaining relationships between organizations and publics through a series of studies investigating the identification and use of dialogic principles by organizations online (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed the following principles for facilitating relationship building in an online, mediated space: (1) providing a feedback loop to facilitate dialogue, (2) providing useful information to publics, including the media, (3) providing incentives for visitors to return in order to continue engaging in dialogue over time, (4) providing an easy to use interface for visitors (i.e., to make information easily accessible), and (5) conservation of visitors (i.e., maintaining engagement in the dialogue). Seltzer and Mitrook (2006) extended the investigation of the use of dialogic communication in online relationship building through an analysis of weblogs and found that many of the dialogic principles were utilized to a greater extent by weblogs than via traditional Web sites.

In summary, these perspectives provide a basis for exploring how the media relations function in an excellent public relations department could be practiced to facilitate mutually beneficial public relations practitioner-media relationships. Specifically, media relations practitioners should provide journalists with useful, organized, and relevant information; should utilize a dialogic loop in order to be responsive to journalists’ needs, and make both themselves and organizational officers accessible to the media. These principles should be applied both in an interpersonal context and in mediated spaces such as Web sites and weblogs. Following these principles may allow public relations practitioners to foster stronger relationships with media that lead to organizational effectiveness. This could take the form of perceptions of effective media relations practice among journalists and positive organizational outcomes in terms of favorable media coverage. To investigate the connection between excellent media relations practice and favorable media relations outcomes, this study analyzes journalists’ perceptions of the media relations function at Southwest Airlines, an organization that has been consistently recognized for outstanding public relations.

Southwest Airlines Public Relations

Southwest Airlines (SWA) is a Fortune 500 company with headquarters in Dallas, Texas. SWA employees 35,000 people, operates a fleet of over 500 aircraft, and services 64 cities with over 3,000 flights a day, making it the largest domestic carrier in the United States. In 2008, *Fortune* recognized SWA for the twelfth year in a row in the magazine’s annual corporate reputation survey; SWA is the only airline to appear in the list’s top 20 and was recognized as the most admired airline in 2005 (Southwest Airlines, 2008).

Southwest Airlines Public Relations (SWA PR) has been repeatedly recognized for its expertise in corporate communications, media relations, and public relations practice. In 1999, The Texas Public Relations Association awarded SWA its top award, the Lone Star Award, for

its commitment to practicing creative public relations. In 2000, *PR Week* named SWA's corporate communications department the top communication department in the nation. Other accolades include a Gold Quill award from the International Association of Business Communicators for outstanding media relations, a Public Relations Competition Platinum Award, and awards for "Best Blog" in 2007 and 2008 from *PR News* (Southwest Airlines, 2008; Southwest Airlines Media, 2009c). The company's "Adopt-A-Pilot Program" has won numerous awards since its inception in 1997, including a Silver Anvil Award from the Public Relations Society of America, a Golden Bell Public Relations Platinum Award, and a 2002 Katie Award from the Press Club of Dallas for Most Outstanding Media Relations Campaign (Southwest Airlines, 2009).

SWA PR's media relations function appears to be committed to being responsive to the needs of journalists. On its media Web site, SWA PR proclaims that it is "charged with ensuring members of the media get the information they need...any spokesperson can answer an inquiry when a journalist is on a deadline. Our goal is to be interchangeable for the media to ensure someone always is available" (Southwest Airlines, 2009a, para. 1). To this end, SWA PR operates a 24-hour hotline through which the media has access to an on-call public relations representative. SWA PR also has utilized the Web to reach out to the media, employing a variety of online resources including a media Web site and a weblog to communicate with – and potentially build a relationship with – journalists. The media site, swamedia.com, features downloadable press kits, fact sheets, backgrounders, a news release archive, photo and video galleries, management team biographies, speeches by SWA officials, helpful industry links, contact information for the public relations team, RSS feeds, current news, suggestions for story ideas, and options for signing up to receive news releases and news alerts via e-mail (Southwest Airlines, 2009b). In addition to a traditional media site, SWA also operates an award-winning weblog, "Nuts About Southwest" (blogsouthwest.com), which features RSS feeds, podcasts, options for uploading and downloading multimedia, and links to SWA social media profiles on YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Nuts About Southwest, 2009). Many of these activities appear to implement the suggestions made by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as to how a media relations function might practice a two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Through these tools, SWA PR seeks to answer the needs of the travel and business journalists who cover the airline industry. Lubbers (2005) points out that public relations practitioners and journalists are extremely dependent on each other in the travel and tourism industry, making the media relations function vital in facilitating this relationship. Additionally, many business reporters may not be adequately trained to cover business and financial news; this, coupled with the reticence of corporate executives to communicate openly with journalists, especially in times of crisis, places added emphasis on public relations practitioners to play a boundary spanning role between the organization and the media by supplying reporters with access to officers within the organization and to ensure that business reporters have adequate background information about the organization (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007).

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Excellence theory posits that "excellent" public relations departments are not only managed to meet the needs of strategically important publics – such as the media – but that the practitioners within those departments should have a knowledge of, an appreciation for, and the ability to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). Additionally, employing two-way symmetrical communication is a means for fostering an

open, honest dialogic communication with external and internal publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) identified principles intended to foster dialogue. Testing the prevalence of these dialogic principles in an excellent public relations department requires first identifying a department that is recognized as exemplary. With a department selected, investigations can then be made into the antecedents of the determinations. To establish that journalists' perceptions of SWA PR mimic those of agencies applauding SWA PR efforts, the following hypothesis is posited to allow a foundation on which the antecedents of quality media relations can be investigated:

H₁: Journalists perceive SWA PR as an excellent PR department in comparison to other airlines' PR departments.

As Excellence Theory posits that an excellent public relations department will practice a two-way symmetrical model of public relations that in turn will lead to organizational effectiveness (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006), and in that two-way symmetrical communication built on dialogic principles of responsiveness, accessibility, information quality, and professionalism should lead to dialogic communication, the following hypotheses are forwarded to establish how the adherence of SWA PR to these standards are key to its public relations effectiveness:

H_{2a}: Journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as responsive.

H_{2b}: Journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as accessible.

H_{2c}: Journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as providing quality communications.

H_{2d}: Journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as professional.

To obtain a thorough understanding of what Southwest Airlines Public Relations does right (and wrong) in regards to their media relations efforts, the following research questions were investigated:

RQ₁: In what form do journalists want to receive materials from SWA PR?

Online communication tools, specifically Web sites and weblogs, have been proposed as avenues for facilitating dialogic communication and building healthy relationships between organizations and external publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2006). Therefore, we were especially interested in how SWA PR utilized these channels in communicating with journalists. Therefore:

RQ₂: What role does SWA PR's online communication efforts play in their media relations efforts and are journalists utilizing these online channels?

Method

Project overview

Beginning in 2004, Southwest Airlines Public Relations contracted a faculty research team at a large Southwestern university's college of mass communication to investigate how key journalists see the PR efforts of the airline. Biennially from 2004 to 2008, the study has progressed through three installments in the ongoing project. While methodology has morphed from telephone survey in its first form to web surveys in the last two, efforts have been made to maintain consistency between questions from year to year in order to establish how perception has evolved over time. Likewise, the responses of individual journalists were tracked where possible to provide insight not only into how the media as a whole sees SWA PR but also to uncover how individual opinions changed.

Participants and Procedure by Year

In 2004, 26 telephone interviews were conducted with key journalists from March 5 through April 7. A list of 59 journalists outlined as key reporters covering the airlines was supplied by the SWA PR department. The journalists were business or travel reporters for newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. All journalists were telephoned a minimum of five times or until the journalist completed the interview or outright refused to be interviewed. Telephone messages were left on the answering machines or with assistants for all journalists not answering their telephones. While only seven journalists refused to be interviewed, 25 other journalists were not interviewed for a variety of reasons centering on the inability of researchers to personally contact the journalist and journalists migrating to new jobs. Prior to being contacted by the researchers, all journalists on the call list were sent a preliminary email by a SWA PR executive informing them of the study. Once contacted, journalists were guaranteed anonymity and directed through the audit questionnaire. The interview process required 20 to 30 minutes for completion. The final response rate was calculated at 44.1 %.

In 2006, the survey procedure was transformed from a telephone survey to a Web survey. The initial 2004 audit was conducted through personal interviews involving researchers who may have been viewed as having close ties to SWA personnel. Because one criticism of personal interview research centers on the fact that it is assumed respondents may be hesitant to speak poorly on topics thought to be dear to researchers (Fowler, 1993), the 2006 audit was designed to ensure that more candid perceptions of SWA PR were garnered. To this end, the 2006 audit employed Internet survey methodology where respondents could be promised confidentiality. For the 2006 survey, the SWA PR department provided the researchers with the names and contact information for 53 key journalists who routinely cover SWA. Twenty-eight of those were common to the 2004 list, the remainder we added after establishing themselves as of particular interest to the airlines. On May 19, each of the 53 journalists received an explanatory email from an SWA PR official stating that he/she would be contacted by a researcher who would extend an invitation to participate in a media audit. The potential respondents were assured that their participation and perceptions would be confidential and that the researcher would at no time link any individual comments provided to any one journalist. On May 24, a researcher contacted via email each journalist previously invited to participate in the audit. Each respondent was provided

a link to the questionnaire and a password granting access. By June 8, 15 journalists had responded. A second reminder was distributed on June 9. On June 29, a SWA PR official distributed a third and final request for participation. By July 17, a total of 25 respondents had completed the survey (5 respondents also participated in the 2004 study), and data collection was halted. The final response rate was calculated at 47.2 %.

For the 2008 media audit, 67 key journalists who routinely cover SWA were invited to participate in an Internet survey. Fifteen of those were common to the 2004 and 2006 list; four were common to only the 2006 list. The remainder we added after establishing themselves as of particular interest to the airlines. SWA PR officials provided the names of all journalists and their contact information. On April 22, each of the 67 journalists received an explanatory email from an SWA PR official stating that he/she would be contacted by a researcher who would extend an invitation to participate in a media audit. The potential respondents were assured that their participation and perceptions would be confidential and that the researcher would at no time link any individual comments provided to any one journalist. On April 23, a researcher contacted via email each journalist previously invited to participate in the audit. Each respondent was provided a link to the questionnaire and a password granting access. By April 23, 13 journalists had responded. A second reminder email was distributed on April 29. By May 20, a total of 22 respondents had completed the survey, and data collection was halted. Three respondents were repeat participants from the 2004 and 2006 audits; two were repeaters from the 2006 audit only. The final response rate was calculated at 32.8%.

Measures

The overall goal of the audit was to gauge media professionals' opinions concerning the SWA PR and its activities. In general, journalists were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses they perceived in SWA PR and particularly to provide recommendations to increase the value of the public relations activities of the airlines. More specifically, the audit focused on providing insights in the following areas:

- Whether journalists consider SWA PR to be effective
- Whether journalists consider SWA PR to be a valuable resource
- SWA PR strengths
- Accessibility of SWA PR staffers
- Responsiveness of SWA PR
- Journalist perceptions of SWA PR "personality"
- Usefulness of various SWA PR materials distributed to media
- Quality of various SWA PR materials distributed to media
- Preferred means of receiving SWA PR materials
- Perceptions of quantity of materials distributed by SWA PR
- Perceptions of SWA PR compared to other airlines

As the study was conducted initially via a telephone survey and later an Internet survey, the formatting of items to measure the key constructs was not held steady. Instead, the

instrument and items evolved over time to meet the demands of the particular methodology. Likewise, while the intent of the audit was somewhat static across the three instances of data collection, items used to measure the key constructs were added or deleted as suggested by previous efforts. The individual questions used to collect data in each iteration of the instrument will be detailed in the Results section.

Results

Data analysis overview

Because certain constructs were measured differently depending on the audit, results are reported per year. Likewise, data analysis did not involve tracking data in trends via time series analyses. SWA PR did not disclose any concrete changes in their approach from year to year. As such, any assumption that year of audit would influence results is purely speculative and not robust enough to demand trending the data. All hypotheses and research questions, then, were examined by year and reported as such.

Hypotheses

H₁ predicted journalists perceive SWA PR as an excellent public relations department in comparison to other airlines' public relations departments. H₁ was supported. For each year of the audit, one item was included to gauge perceptions of SWA PR as compared to the public relations departments of other airlines as a means of establishing relative perceptions of excellence. Journalists were asked: "On a scale of "0" to "10" with "0" being *much worse* and "10" being *much better*, how would you rate the public relations department of Southwest Airlines compared to the public relations departments of other airlines?" For 2004, the average response was 8.14 with a range of "7" to "10." In 2006, the average was 8.48 with a range of "5" to "10." In the last year of the audit, 2008, the mean remained elevated but decreased to a 7.90 due in part to a wider range of responses (answers provided ranged from "0" to "10"). It should be noted, however, that in 2008 only 1 respondent out of 20 scored SWA PR less than the scale's midpoint, and the most common response (mode) was "10." Ultimately, these perceptions gathered in a scale that asked participants to consider SWA PR in comparison to public relations departments at other airlines suggest that SWA PR is, in fact, well regarded.

H_{2a} predicted that journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as responsive. H_{2a} was supported. In 2004, 25 of the 26 respondents answered in the affirmative to the question "Do you consider Southwest Airlines Public Relations to be a valuable source of information?" The other respondent answered "sometimes—I don't deal with them frequently." When asked to explain why they saw SWA PR as a valuable information source, 11 of the 23 journalists mentioned fast response time (question included no prompts). One respondent comment representative of others said: "They respond very fast, and we are always on deadline and in a hurry. So they get back with me really quick, and that's like A-number-one most important with me." Also, assuming that perceptions of SWA PR's strongest attributes are related to judgments of effectiveness, 2004 respondents answers to the question "What are the strengths of Southwest Airlines Public Relations?" were considered. Of the 23 journalists who answered the question, 14 mentioned responsiveness as a strength of SWA PR. Statements such as "You get the information you need; SWA responds" and "Responds to things very fast on deadline" are typical. As a more direct measure, journalists in 2004 were asked specifically "On a scale of "0" to "10" with 10 being *very responsive* and 0 being *not responsive*

at all, how would you rate SWA's responsiveness?" Of those that answered the question, 91% responded with a score of 10.

In 2006, all 25 journalists responded "yes" to the question "Do you consider Southwest Airlines Public Relations to be a valuable source of information?" As in 2004 when asked to qualify their affirmative response, the majority, without any prompt, attributed their positive perception of SWA PR to the department's responsiveness. In fact, 15 of the 25 journalists mentioned responsiveness with the following answer typical of those listed: "They always respond immediately, with in-depth responses and explanations that elaborate on the issue I'm reporting on." Likewise 15 of 22 listed "responsiveness" when outlining SWA PR strengths with a typical answer being "On any story, their response time is almost always fabulous." When asked to rate SWA PR responsiveness directly ("On a scale of "0" to "10" with 10 being *very responsive* and 0 being *not responsive at all*, how would you rate SWA's responsiveness?"), the most common response was a 10 with 16 of the 23 journalists indicating a score of 8 or higher.

On the 2008 audit, journalists again outlined answers that would seem to tie responsiveness directly to perceptions of effectiveness. Where in 2004 and 2006 no respondent disagreed that SWA PR was a valuable source of information, three among the 22 journalists participating in the 2008 audit answered in the negative. In further evidence of the link between responsiveness and perceived effectiveness, two of the three dissenters indicated the reason for their reaction was based upon SWA PR personnel not responding quickly enough in recent attempts to gather information. Of those agreeing that SWA PR was effective, 13 of the 15 journalists listed fast response times among the reasons for their positive perceptions. One journalist wrote "Staff is always responsive, returning calls in a timely manner and providing accurate information," a response similar to those of other journalists. Responsiveness also appeared predominately in comments about SWA PR's strengths. Of the 20 journalist who listed a strength for SWA PR, 13 indicated quick response times. The comment that SWA PR "knows how important it is to communicate with the media, so the staff is accessible and responsive" reveals impressions similar to those uncovered in the two previous audits. Finally, on the direct measure where participants were asked to rate SWA PR on responsiveness, 11 of the 21 journalists responding marked a "10" on a scale of "0" to "10" with 10 being *very responsive* and 0 being *not responsive at all*. In fact the only two scores below the scale mean on the question were provided by journalists who had previously indicated that they did not see SWA PR as effective, again establishing the relationship between perceived effectiveness and response time.

In a final test of H_{2a}, data across the three audits was collapsed into a single data set so as to allow a sufficient sample size for a correlation analysis. Focusing on scores on the responsiveness item and the excellence item employed in testing H₁, analyses revealed that perceptions of responsiveness co-vary with perceptions of SWA PR's excellence in comparison to other airlines' public relations departments ($r = .70, p < .001$).

H_{2b} predicted that journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as accessible. H_{2b} was supported. In 2004, journalists who rated SWA PR as effective also overwhelmingly agreed that SWA PR was accessible. Using a scale of "0" to "10" with 10 being *very accessible* and 0 being *not accessible at all*, SWA PR's accessibility received a mean rating of 8.23. In fact, only one respondent rated accessibility lower than the scale's midpoint. In 2006, the responses were even more positive with journalists' mean rating of SWA PR's accessibility as a 9.30. For 2006 where all journalists in the audit labeled SWA PR as effective, no responses were below the accessibility scale midpoint and all but five of the 23 journalists answering the question indicated scores of "9" or "10." For 2008, the overall average

response on the accessibility scale was 8.33. Of those respondents who had agreed on previous items that SWA PR was effective, scores on accessibility ranged from "6" to "10" with an average score of 9.00; for the three people who had indicated SWA PR was not effective, the individual scores on accessibility were "1, " "3, " and "9" with an average response of 3.25. Again, the variations in the 2008 scores based upon judgments of effectiveness lend support to perceptions of accessibility being tied to opinions of PR effectiveness. Finally, after collapsing data across the three audits, analyses revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = .72, p < .001$) between perceptions of accessibility and perceptions of SWA PR's excellence in comparison to other airlines' public relations departments.

H_{2c} predicted that journalists who perceive SWA PR as effective will perceive SWA PR's media relations as providing quality communications. H_{2c} was supported. In 2004 when asked to explain why they judged SWA PR as a valuable source of information, 17 of the 23 journalists providing an unprompted answer stated that SWA PR provides quality information. An example of a typical response is: "They're informative; they usually know the subject matter without a lot of difficulty. They understand that I'm writing for a newspaper and I need information." For a more direct measure of quality, journalists were asked to respond to the item: On a scale of "0" to "10" with 10 being *possessing much quality* and 0 being *possessing no quality at all*, how would you rate the quality of the materials distributed by Southwest Airlines?" Of the 25 journalists answering the question, all rated the materials as a "5" or better with the average score being 8.12.

The 2006 respondents also frequently listed SWA PR's tendency to provide quality information among the reasons the department is seen as valuable. On an item that asked journalists to list reasons that SWA PR was a valuable source of information, 12 of the 25 respondents mentioned quality of information or knowledge of staffers. Typical of the responses, one journalist detailed: "Company spokespeople provide accurate information on the company and, in some instances, on industry-wide situations." On the direct measure asking journalists to rate the quality of material distributed by SWA PR, the average mark was 7.52 with responses ranging from "4" to "10" with 21 of the 23 participants scoring the department a "6" or higher on a "0" to "10" scale with 10 being *possessing much quality* and 0 being *possessing no quality at all*.

Finally, eight of the 15 respondents in the 2008 audit who saw SWA PR as a valuable information source listed quality of information when asked to detail their opinions. One journalist stated "They almost always answer my questions with all the information I need and usually with little corporate spin." Of the three respondents who indicated that they did not see SWA PR as a valuable information source two cited lack of responsiveness, but one stated that information provided is not always "worthwhile." In response to the item asking journalists to rank the quality of SWA PR material quality, those who judged SWA PR as a valuable source of information provided answers that averaged 8.05 and ranged from "5" to "10." The three journalists who stated that they did not perceive SWA PR as valuable had an average response of 5.00 and a range of "1" to "7."

In final testing of H_{2c}, a correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between perceptions of SWA PR material quality and perceptions of SWA PR's excellence in comparison to other airlines' public relations departments. A significant positive correlation ($r = .62, p < .001$) suggests that as positive perceptions of quality in collateral materials increase so does too then positive perceptions of SWA PR in relation to other airlines' public relations departments.

H_{2d} predicted journalists who perceive SWA PR as professional will perceive SWA PR's media relations as effective. H_{2d} was supported. The construct of professionalism was measured by investigating ratings on five items that were included only in the 2008 audit. The five items asked journalists to employ a "0" to "10" scale where 0 was labeled as *Not at all* and 10 was labeled *Very much so*. The five items were presented as "Southwest Airlines Public Relations Department:" 1) is easy to reach; 2) gets you what you need; 3) is professional; 4) is polite; and 5) is helpful. All items were subjected to principal component factor analysis, and only one factor with an Eigenvalue greater than 1.0 emerged accounting for 90.79% of the variance. The factor demonstrated high loadings on *easy to reach* (.98), *gets you what you need* (.95), *is professional* (.98), *is polite* (.87), and *is helpful* (.98). The ratings showed a high degree of inter-item consistency ($\alpha = .97$), which warranted the construction of a composite measure, labeled *Professionalism*, by averaging the ratings across the five items.

When comparing scores on professionalism to scores obtained on the item asking if journalist perceived SWA PR as a valuable source of information, it became evident that the two co-vary. In fact, among those who agreed that SWA PR was a valuable source of information, the average score on the professionalism item was 8.97 with a range of 4.80 to 10.00. For those three journalists who disagreed that SWA PR was a valuable source of information, the average professional score was 4.27 with a range of 0.20 to 8.40. Additionally, analysis conducted to determine the relationship between perceptions of SWA PR professionalism and perceptions of SWA PR's excellence in comparison to other airlines' PR departments revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = .86, p < .001$), suggesting that as positive perceptions of professionalism increase so does positive perceptions of SWA PR in relation to other airlines' PR departments.

Research questions

RQ₁ asked about the format in which journalists want to receive information from SWA PR. In all audits, the journalists were given the opportunity to indicate not only what method of delivery they most preferred but also what methods they found acceptable. As can be seen in Table 1, the most preferred means of news release distribution is through including the release copy as the body of an email. In terms of what journalists saw as acceptable, distribution through email attachments, via Newswire and through a website download all garnered some support. Perhaps as an indication of shifting technology in public relations, the trend of distribution by fax machine, which was acceptable by the majority in 2004, acceptable by little more than a quarter in 2006 and finally shunned completely in 2008, seems to suggest that practitioners have completely left behind a communication tool that was once the activity center of most public relations offices.

RQ₂ asked what role SWA PR online communication efforts play in their media relations efforts and whether journalists are utilizing these online channels. Because SWA PR has cycled through several efforts at online channels and these have all been refined and evolved year to year, the decision was made to investigate only 2008 audit responses. By looking only at the current offerings, the data should paint a clearer picture of how SWA PR, in what it sees as its best effort, is meeting the online expectations of journalists. Of those answering the question, 85% had visited www.swamedia.com, SWA's dedicated media website. The site was rated an average of 7.71 (range "4" to "10") on an item that asked respondents to evaluate the site on a "0" (poor) to "10" (excellent) scale. On an open-ended item that asked the reason journalists visited the media website, the most common answer was news releases, followed by company statistics (revenue, employee numbers, aircraft numbers, and financial data). Mentioned less frequently

was photographs/images and contact information. A final item asked what pages on the media website were most helpful. Of those responding, 58.8% listed fact sheets as most helpful; followed by speeches, the photo gallery and a section labeled “What’s New” (all garnered 11.8% each). PR practitioner contact information was seen as most helpful by 5.9%, and no one indicated the video gallery was most helpful. Questions concerning perceptions of SWA’s blog (www.blogsouthwest.com) were also included on the 2008 audit. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that they were aware of the blog, and those that were rated it a 5.21 (range of "3" to "8") on an item that asked about the blog’s usefulness on a "0" (not at all useful) to "10" (very useful) scale. Additionally, 78.57% of all respondents said they visited the blog less than once a week. Finally, an item was included in the audit to determine how many journalists subscribed to the SWA RSS feed. No journalists indicated subscribing to the feed.

Discussion

One component of Excellence Theory posits that two-way symmetrical communication as initially outlined by Grunig and Hunt (1984) is key to achieving public relations success (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006), defined as building mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and key constituent publics. Working from the assumption that two-way symmetrical communication is critical to excellent public relations practice, then the antecedents of quality two-way communication are the fundamental building blocks of successful public relations efforts. Taking into consideration the findings of researchers focused on uncovering the components of dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), the study outlined here attempted to establish and test the link between the effectiveness and these antecedents—specifically practitioner responsiveness, practitioner accessibility, practitioner dedication to information quality, and practitioner professionalism.

For a company to put under the microscope in an in-depth investigation of how public relations practices influence perceptions of excellence, it is difficult to image a more suitable organization than Southwest Airlines. *PR Week* has ranked SWA’s corporate communications department as the top communication department in the nation (2000), and the department has won numerous other awards and recognitions (Southwest Airlines, 2008; 2009; Southwest Airlines Media, 2009c). In an effort to establish SWA PR’s excellence among the journalists participating in the present study, survey participants were asked directly to rate SWA PR in relation to other airlines’ PR departments. For all three years of the audit, journalists rated the SWA PR department as better than its counterparts at other airlines. With this as a starting point, investigations were warranted into what exactly it is that SWA PR does that garners it such favor.

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) state that creating an environment in which communication can freely take place is key to establishing meaningful interaction with key publics. As such, responding to requests for communication opportunities would seemingly rank as crucial in excellent public relations. Lending support to this argument, the SWA media audits uncovered responsiveness as the most often mentioned strength of the SWA PR department. The majority of respondents in every year of the survey ranked SWA PR highly in terms of responsiveness. Perhaps more importantly though, when offered a question that merely asked to detail SWA PR’s key strength with no prompts, the staff’s quick response to media inquiries was listed again and again. Taking into consideration that the few journalists who did not see SWA PR as effective singled out episodes where they received no response from staffers, it becomes even

clearer that judgments of effectiveness may be linked more strongly to responsiveness than any other single factor. For practitioners in general, this finding implies being quick to answer questions and concerns may trump other considerations. SWA PR details on its media website that there is always a practitioner “on call” who can answer questions and the department respects media deadlines and the fact they cannot be postponed due to lack of organizational response (Southwest Airlines, 2009a). In this case, SWA PR not only provided a dialogic loop that practitioners could utilize, it actually followed through on the promise of dialogue and responded to media requests in a timely manner, reinforcing similar findings from the research on online dialogic communication (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2006) that stresses the point that providing opportunities for two-way communication are meaningless if organizations do not take advantage of those opportunities.

Closely related to responsiveness and also detailed as important by the journalist respondents was accessibility. While evaluations of responsiveness may be most tied to how quickly an answer to a question materializes, accessibility stems from being available to participate in a communication effort, regardless of whether a quality response results from that communication or not. SWA PR received high marks on the accessibility scale in all three audits, and the fact that practitioners were available to answer questions appeared commonly in response to the item asking about SWA PR strengths. Again, the few people who evaluated SWA PR as ineffective were also most likely to rate the department as inaccessible. Establishing the relationship between accessibility and responsiveness, the very participants who evaluated SWA PR poorly in terms of responsiveness did the same on the accessibility measure. As responsiveness and accessibility correlated positively with effectiveness, the data establishes the importance of both. Clearly, a practitioner that is not accessible cannot be responsive. From this perspective, it seems an even stronger case is made concerning the importance of a practitioner being able to quickly provide information to journalists.

Undoubtedly, journalists want more than merely accessible and responsive practitioners. If the reason behind the contact is request for information, it can be assumed journalists would prefer high quality collateral materials carrying the information sought. Respondents in all three audits rated SWA practitioners as providing quality information and judged materials distributed by the PR department as possessing high quality. Respondents detailed that information provided by practitioners was accurate and appropriately presented so as to make it easily placed in media content. In particular, respondents suggested that SWA practitioners seemed to have a sense of what type of information a journalist would need to perform his/her job duties. The high, positive correlation of evaluations of information quality and perceptions of SWA PR effectiveness suggests that judgments of the two are related and intertwined. The revelation that journalists appreciate accurate and appropriate information, however, seems less than earth-shattering.

Finally, in investigation of the possible antecedents to perceptions of excellent public relations, the study revealed that practitioner professionalism closely relates to perceptions of PR effectiveness. Overwhelmingly, those journalists who judged SWA PR as effective also judged SWA practitioners as professional. In fact, professionalism correlated more highly with effectiveness than did responsiveness, accessibility or information quality. It should be noted though that judgments of how easy practitioners were to contact and the quality of the information they provide were included in the composite measure of professionalism. As this study made no effort nor had the statistical power to unequivocally parse how each individual component contributed to perceptions of professionalism, perhaps the most robust recommendation that can result from this portion of the study is again that being available for

quality communication is critical. More succinctly, journalist judgments of professionalism in practitioners may stem from how readily reachable they are and how good the content is they provide.

In more direct testing of commonly provided content, the media audit provided an opportunity to determine in what format journalists prefer to receive the most fundamental of public relations collateral materials, the news release. Across all three time periods, journalist most preferred news releases distributed in the body of email messages. When asked not what they preferred but what they found as acceptable, again distribution via the body of an email prevailed but through email attachments and through PR Newswire did not trail by much. Perhaps most surprising was that by 2008 no journalist saw distribution by fax machine as acceptable and only half judged downloading a release from the SWA website as viable. Despite the fact that including news release copy in the body of an email strips out formatting and might be seen as rendering the presentation lacking aesthetics, the finding that email attachments are not the preferred means of distribution might be traceable to fears of attachments carry viruses as has been determined in previous research on media relations (Callison, 2003). Ultimately, regardless of the reasons, it seems that news release dissemination through email is clearly preferred.

Finally, the present study asked respondents to indicate their use and evaluation of online media resources. Previous research has identified the value of online channels in facilitating application of dialogic principles, specifically citing availability, accessible, and providing up-to-date information. Specifically, the 2008 audit presented questions about a media-focused SWA PR website, SWA's blog, and the company's RSS feed. On the media relations website, journalists reported it as a commonly visited and valuable tool. The journalists also indicated that they most often were searching for news releases and company statistics when visiting the site. Despite similar levels of awareness between the online newsroom and the company blog, journalists indicated they saw the blog as less useful and visited it infrequently. Launched with the blog, the company's RSS feed received even less support with not a single respondent subscribing to the feed. The overall indication, then, from analyses of data gathered in regards to online efforts seems to be that online newsrooms fill the primary needs of journalists as long as they serve as repositories of valuable information.

Conclusion

As a primer in how public relations can be practiced successfully to contribute to organizational effectiveness, Excellence Theory provides guidance as to how practitioners can help organizations achieve their goals. While the entire breadth of the recommendations forwarded by the theory are beyond the focus of the present study, the media audit conducted here provided an opportunity to investigate a small component of the theory as it deals with public relations at the programmatic level, in this case, an in-depth analysis of an organization's media relations efforts. That two-way symmetrical communication leads to mutually beneficial practitioner-journalist relationships is an idea that has received little criticism since it was first introduced 25 years ago. What exactly leads to successful communication relationships, however, continues to raise the curiosity of researchers and practitioners alike.

In this attempt to uncover what an organization can do to be judged as an effective partner in the public relations-media relationship, the Southwest Airlines public relations department served as the point of focus. SWA PR has consistently been viewed as a model of excellent public relations, and the journalists participating in the audits presented here did

nothing to refute that positive perception. What the journalists did do, however, was paint a clear picture that responsiveness, accessibility, quality of information provided, and professionalism are closely tied to evaluations of public relations effectiveness. Most commonly occurring was the idea that SWA PR receives much of its praise simply because it creates a communication environment where journalists feel that a practitioner will readily respond to informational requests; i.e., a dialogic feedback loop is not only present, but it is actively utilized. SWA PR doesn't simply pay lip service to two-way symmetrical communication to facilitate dialogue; it walks the walk, or rather in this case, talks the talk.

This study may offer nothing more simple or concrete than the recommendation that public relations professionals in any industry should make every effort to be not only available to answer questions but prepared to provide those answers quickly. Other conclusions that journalists prefer news releases distributed through email attachments and that dedicated online pressrooms are more valued than blogs or RSS feeds can and should inform practice. But no particular technology may equal the benefits that can be gained by ensuring that knowledgeable practitioners simply answer the telephone when journalists call.

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Table 1. Preferred and Accepted Means of News Release Distribution by Year

Means of News Release Distribution	2004		2006		2008	
	Preferred	Acceptable	Preferred	Acceptable	Preferred	Acceptable
Via PR Newswire	3.8%	100.0%	0.0%	65.2%	0.0%	75.0%
Faxed hard copy	7.7%	69.5%	0.0%	26.1%	0.0%	0.0%
In body of email	76.9%	100.0%	73.9%	95.7%	85.0%	100.0%
Attachment to email	7.7%	78.2%	26.1%	87.0%	10.0%	95.0%
SWA website download	3.8%	82.6%	0.0%	56.5%	5.0%	50.0%