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Becoming "Quirky" Towards an Understanding of Practitioner and Blogger Relations in Public Relations

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The growing influence of consumer-generated media (CGM), including blogs, online forums, podcasts, and other social media tools, has changed the environment in which public relations practitioners conduct campaigns for their clients and connect with their stakeholders. Rather than working solely with journalists to reach publics—practitioners may now become part of "the quirky blogging community" to influence the online conversations about their clients. This shifting media environment raises questions about the future practice of public relations, in particular, the strategies practitioners use to work with new media representatives (i.e. bloggers) who are inexperienced in media relations. Results of this study show that practitioner-blogger relations can be tracked on a continuum between impersonal mass message distribution to personal relationship-building, based on blogger experience with communication professionals. Furthermore, blogger exposure to promotion influences practitioners' communication and negotiation strategies, including use of creative communication, creating win-win situations for bloggers, and emphasis on client interests in blogger relations.

INTRODUCTION

The growing influence of consumer-generated media (CGM), including blogs, Twitter, online forums, podcasts, and other social media tools, has changed the environment in which professional communicators conduct campaigns for their clients and connect with their stakeholders. Rather than working solely with journalists to reach publics—practitioners may now become "part of the quirky blogging community [to be] aware of how their organization or client is being discussed" (Porter, et. al, 2007, p. 94).

Blogs, podcasts, and other social media tools have significant effects on professional communication—particularly promotion. As bloggers cover a wide-variety of topics mainstream media tend to ignore, they raise issues of publicity and who now owns the power of promotion. Whereas practitioners traditionally have built relationships with media professionals, bloggers, who tend to be inexperienced in reporting and media relations, present new challenges to the promotion management. The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which practitioners navigate the new CGM environment, and in particular, build relationships with bloggers to engage communities relevant to client interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship has showed interest in consumer-generated media, particularly blogging. Recent studies have conceptualized blogs as a technological expansion of Habermas' concept of the public sphere, which is any public space where a group of individuals come together to discuss issues without imposition by sanctioned rulers (Habermas, 2004). Habermas argues that the public sphere involves "every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public" (p. 92) and through it, public opinion is formed (Habermas, 2004; Leitch & Neilson, 2001). A public sphere is any public space "available for debate between citizens" and can include anything from a town meeting to an Internet chat room (Leitch & Neilson, 2001).

The blogging community is often referred to as the blogosphere (Rubel, 2007; Reese, et. al, 2007; Craig, 2007), echoing Habermas' concept because:
1) the public sphere involves conversation in which private persons come together to form a public and
2) through it, public opinion is formed.

As this community of bloggers includes an array of participants who come together to form opinion that may influence company and product reputation, the defining point of interest becomes: How do practitioners create a legitimate place for company interests in this debate? According to Burkart (2007), the answer to this question is Habermas' theory of the communicative act, which "illuminate[s] the relation between public relations experts offering information and members of target groups who receive this information." (p. 250). The foundation of this relationship is mutual understanding.

According to Burkart (2007), public relations experts who seek to build mutual understanding with targeted groups do so by building around four principles:
1) Intelligibility, or the use of proper grammar,
2) Truth, or the agreement of the existence of a principle,
3) Trustworthiness, or honesty between partners, and
4) Legitimacy, or building off mutually-accepted values.

This consensus-oriented perspective yields a process in which public relations practitioners offer information to a target public (i.e. bloggers) and the recipients perceive this information based on a filter of truth (whether the figures and data are factual), the trustworthiness of the practitioners offering the information, and the legitimacy of their interests (or the "why" behind practitioners' attempts to get involved with the community) (Burkart, 2007). Inherently, the idea is that if communication flows smoothly through these filters (or, in other words, doubts on each level do not disturb the flow of communication) understanding is achieved, and the practitioners, through dialogue, become part of the community.

Conceptualizing blogging

Blogging is considered the act of maintaining online journals featuring insight, commentary, personal experience, news, or other types of information (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Blogs have a growing popularity—by the end of 2006, over one-fifth of the top 100 websites were blogs (Marken, 2006/2007) and a survey of executives at Fortune 100 companies revealed that emphasis on the skill sets associated with traditional media outlets is giving way to the influences of social media and blogging (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007). Through blogging, the argument has been made that it is no longer "they" the media and "us" the readers, but now, "we" the media (Perlmutter, 2008), and Rosen has argued that the internet has created a new public where "every reader can be a writer and people do not so much consume the news as they 'use' it in active search for what's going on, sometimes in collaboration with each other, or in support of the pros'" (Rosen, 2002, cited in Perlmutter, 2008). Indeed, blogging may be considered a new form of media participation, in which everyday individuals have a voice in the discussion that usually takes place in mainstream media including broadcast news and print media. Rubel (2005) has argued that there are now three spheres of influence: the Mediasphere, the Blogosphere, and the frequent conversations taking place between them.

Blogging represents a new area for influence through which an organization may garner attention for itself, its products and services, and the issues that relate to the organization. Blogging may be considered an emerging promotional tool (Porter, et. al, 2007) and recent surveys show that a majority of public relations firms (78%) maintain blogs on behalf of their clients (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007). For public relations and promotional perspectives, Kelleher and Miller (2006) have argued that blogs can be used to gather information about a public or as a media tool in which the organization seeks out bloggers in order to reach its target (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007). Research shows that blogs are used for relationship-building (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, Vorvoreanu, 2006), engaging publics and stimulating two-way conversations (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007, Marken, 2005), scanning public opinion (Cooley, 1999), and even improving image and reputation (Trammell, 2006; Cooley, 1999). Furthermore, professionals often use social media to reach younger audiences (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007).

Practitioners who employ blogs in campaigns hold greater expert power and prestige (Porter & Sallot, 2005), and generate valuable revenue for their clients (Porter, et. al, 2007). Blogs facilitate relationships between organizations and publics because they stimulate conversation (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Vorvoreanu, 2006), build credibility (Marken, 2006/2007), and "help humanize the firm" (Marken, 2007, p. 34).

Porter et. al (2007) argued that blog use within public relations begins as an alternative information source for research and issue identification and develops into professional-blogger interaction in which professionals engage in two-way communication with the blogging community and take an active part in shaping the way the client or organization is discussed. In other research, Porter and Sallot (2003) found that blog usage is determined by practitioner role—management uses blogs for two-way communication and targeting publics more than PR technicians.

These insights stand in need to be explored and evaluated in research. Researchers paint a black and white portrait of social media (and particularly, blog) usage in which practitioners provide information and yield innumerable benefits. Such a perspective is problematic, as other promotion and media relations experiences represent a complex relationship, rather than this simple equation of give and return. There is a need to evaluate the viability of such a linear connection and provide research-based insight to the emerging engagement of blogs by communication professionals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Current literature has provided primarily normative insight into blog engagement for promotional purposes—it has not uncovered the complex relationship between communicators and bloggers in the realm of promotion and publicity. The following research questions were developed to guide data collection.

> ***RQ 1: How do public relations agency professionals work with blogs to promote client interests?***
>
> ***RQ 2: What issues do practitioners encounter when going outside of traditional media to work with bloggers?***
>
> ***RQ 3: How do practitioners become part of blogging communities?***

METHOD

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with six public relations and marketing professionals working at three different agencies. In order to glean insights from a small number of respondents, the sample was a purposive sample—I recruited participants who worked with bloggers on a regular basis: public relations agency representatives. Professionals I recruited target bloggers for promotional purposes, and many of them were specialists in blogger relations at their agency. I also used a snowball technique for recruiting participants. Each interviewee held a management position, and four were senior vice-presidents. Of the interviewees, five were male, and one was female.

I also used my interviewing technique to glean the most insight from the limited number of participants, employing the responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) for my informant interviews. Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, and followed a loose structure based on an interview guide developed around the concepts in the literature—trust, relationship-building, and the communicative act. In this way, interviews were purposive conversations, and topics included practitioner activities in blog promotion, and their efforts to build trust and relationships with bloggers. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, with the participant permission.

For data analysis, I used a framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). I developed a coding list based on the concepts in the literature, including communicative ways to work within the blogosphere: practitioner efforts to build intelligibility, truth, trustworthiness, and legitimacy (Burkart, 2007). I then reviewed the transcripts, adding themes that were not represented in the literature. I then re-read each interview and coded transcripts accordingly. Finally, I reviewed the transcripts a third time, writing vignettes under each research question based on the coded interview data. In this way, I tried to stay with the research data in my analysis and interpretation, as prescribed by Wolcott (1994).

RESULTS

RQ 1: How do public relations agency professionals work with blogs to promote client interests?

Participants indicate they are only in the early phases of exploring the use of blogs, as Anne, an agency vice president with experience in broadcast and news reporting, explained. "It's all about learning about what's out there. The Internet is so vast…you feel like you're constantly learning." Another respondent said infancy of this learning stage is based on new relationships that can be built. "The channels are new, and you're working in a different way with mass media than you are with bloggers. With blogs, you're in the infancy stages of beginning to build those relationships."

The new media landscape is bigger than blogging, "though blogging is certainly a big part of it" said one respondent. The sentiment among participants is that it represents the future of the profession. "You don't have a choice," said another respondent. "Communities are talking about you and your products and services whether you like it or not. You're going to be 'Wiki-fied'…and you can sit back and…cede your control to the web or go the other route and engage the web community."

Charlie, a new media specialist, estimated that about 10%-15% of a campaign is spent online and in blogs, though getting coverage in traditional media is still the goal. "The Holy Grail is still a *Today Show* 'hit' for most brands," he said.

Uses of blogging

Practitioners use blogs for a variety of purposes, though one respondent rebuffed me for my word choice. "I would never say 'using blogs,'" he explained. "Some people are of the theory you approach a blog in the same way you would mass media, as a tool to get to something."

This insight revealed two different sides to working with blogs: communicating at them and working with them. On the one hand, some respondents mass-distribute press releases to bloggers without consideration of individual blogger interests. Other respondents approach blogs from an interpersonal perspective, building a two-way relationship. With a few exceptions, most respondents do both.

Still, blogs hold particular uses for respondents. Charlie explained that he works with bloggers in his campaigns to get product reviews, earn publicity, and increase awareness of a brand because getting coverage in a blog sparks conversation about a company. “Blogs provide people information to start a dialogue on what they’re covering…you want to get awareness that sparks dialogue, because that’s what blogs are useful for.”

Blog coverage also validates a company’s product or service. “Clients all want their marketing-speak reprinted in someone else’s tone because that person gives them authenticity,” a respondent said. In this way, blogs give an organization credibility. One practitioner explained that in his current work he created an online forum for cell-phone bloggers in a way that positioned the client as rebellious but innovative. Despite “positioning the company as something completely rogue…doing something that’s disruptive for the industry,” it gave the brand cultural relevance with technologically savvy consumers, he said.

Many professionals valued the “buzz” that blogs offer, pointing to a “multiplier effect” in which blog coverage leads to other media coverage. Common to participant responses was the potential to connect with publics on a personal level through blogging. Stan described the quality of attention blogs offer. “We’ve found that people trust each other much more than they trust the media, and so if they trust their peers more, then they’re going to turn to those kinds of sources.” Charlie added that blogging engages readers more than print media:

“If we get you in the top mommy blog, and 5,000 people link to it and write in, that probably is going to sell your product more than a little corner of the page in *Redbook Magazine*, because you’ve engaged people. The fact that they’re writing in and linking to you means that you’ve actually activated them.”

Many see the rise of blogging as a corollary to a decline in traditional media. Anne, a broadcast specialist, said the declining ratings of media mainstays like the CBS *Morning Show* has encouraged her to expand her use of blogs. “Everybody’s on the Internet, or on their Blackberries, and Googling everything else…more people are paying attention to what they read on the Internet.”

Blogs are also valuable for the hard numbers they provide for PR evaluation.

“When you get in a magazine, you have no idea what someone’s reaction is to your brand…the numbers don’t lie with blogs. With everything else you’re beholden to what the ratings are and the circulation, impression numbers, ad equivalency, and stuff like that. Blogs are more of a direct link with your customer.”

Respondents said blog hits provide concrete numbers that represent people who have actively sought out or read a company’s material, and can even be traced to sales.

RQ 2: What issues do practitioners encounter when going outside of traditional media to work with bloggers?

Professionals face problems when working with blogs on both the client-side and the blogger-side.

Client-centered issues
Clients express concern about issues of uncertainty and controlled, and the potential image damage that companies may see in the blogosphere. “There’s absolutely no control,” said one respondent. “You can put something up there, and anyone can post [anything they want], and there isn’t anything you can do about it.”

One respondent discussed the challenges of working within the confines of what the blogger thinks. “You have to let the blogger decide. You are not in control. They are. They decide if it’s relevant, and how should it be brought about to the community.” John, a blog specialist at his agency, said PR professionals who build relationships with bloggers can reduce uncertainty.

In addition to issues of uncertainty and lack of control, blogs also tend to represent lower impression numbers than traditional media, making blogs an even tougher sell for clients, participants indicated. As Stan explained, “When you get into these small numbers, it’s hard for a lot of people because the marketing industry is built on big numbers.”

Another respondent called it a “war of attrition,” saying, “the industry has been built up on fake numbers, circulation numbers and impression numbers, that don’t really give a clear indication to the impact that you’ve created.” He went on to explain that PR professionals have been “blowing smoke” for too many years. “We say everything’s important and so it’s hard for clients to believe PR people.”

To further complicate problems, respondents disagreed on the value of a blog “hit”—or a reference of coverage for a product or service. While one stated that “a hit is a hit,” others said no two hits are equal because context, tonality, and extent of coverage must be taken into consideration.

Proving the value of blogs to clients was not a big issue for every respondent. Gary, a vice president of media strategy, explained that clients are usually favorable to working with blogs, though it does represent a change in communication. “Working within the blogosphere is working within a human space…you can’t communicate with blogs effectively if your organization doesn’t have the constitution to really act in a human way. It all leads to a major sea change.”

For some clients, change starts with the way clients respond to criticism. Charlie pointed out that clients are often too quick to respond. “It’s like someone’s made fun of their child and now they want to respond and protect the brand.”

Public relations may also have to change, according to another interviewee. “PR people are used to being behind the scenes…and I think a lot of people are not comfortable of being that way.”

Blogger-specific issues
Bloggers, as a public, also represent significant issues for practitioners, particularly bloggers' unrefined approach to media. Many respondents said that bloggers simply do not know "the game." Agencies are used to working with journalists who expect the press releases and publicity needs of public relations professionals. Bloggers' inexperience with this "game" can cause frustration and miscommunication. "The difference is with traditional media, they know the game," Stan explained. "As soon as they get a phone, and a desk, and an email account, they know they're going to be pitched…bloggers are not there for that."

John said that he has gotten auto-responses from bloggers that read, "Sorry, I do this because I love writing, not because I want to be pitched." Offended bloggers may ridicule press releases and make a mockery of the company on their blogs. John said recognition of the difference between bloggers and journalists is vital:

"There's less of a standard. In the past you work with journalists who went to a very specific school, with a standard code of ethics…There are all these pre-conditions that make it a lot easier to go into any conversation and know what you're dealing with and what you need to be respectful of to get your point across. In the blogging environment, everyone has a different set of standards, different backgrounds, and that can make it a little bit more complicated, but it also puts the onus on PR people to get to know who they're talking to as a person."

RQ 3: How do practitioners become part of blogging communities?

The short answer to this research question is: they don't. For respondents, becoming part of the community means becoming a blogger, and few respondents consider that a viable option. Apart from being a major time investment, practitioners expressed concern about the ramifications of blogging. Stan, said very few PR professionals blog on "the front lines" for fear of "getting burned" by posting information that the company disagrees with. Charlie expressed a similar sentiment, "I don't blog. I don't know if my clients would like that to be honest."

One respondent had a different opinion about blogging for a company. Gary said he puts clients through a "blogger boot camp," educating them on how to build their own blogs and designate "ambassadors" that interact with blogging communities. Similarly, another respondent recruited technologically-savvy consumers to register for a company-sponsored blog community and found that "speaking in the language with the tools and being very aggressive for the community" was effective. He mused, "If you try to build your own community…odds are no one is going to come unless you build the community based on what people care about and are already talking about."

For other respondents, working with an established blog community, rather than trying create it or becoming part of it, is the norm. Interviews revealed three ways respondents work with blogs:

1) establish a personal connection,
2) use creativity, and
3) create a win-win for the company and blog.

Creating a personal connection
“It’s not just about cutting and pasting a press release and hoping people will start talking about you because chances are, people won’t care.” Charlie further explained:

“It’s not just this quick-fix that people think it is. With bloggers, you have to treat them as a long-lead publication. You should know their blog, know who they are, and go back to your client to develop content the blogger will find interesting. Don’t just try to push whatever the client says is their press release to them. I always try to strike up relations with bloggers before pitching them. So, I’ll be reading their blog, I’ll interact with them, and just comment as a human being, not as a publicist.”

Charlie was involved in a campaign in which he connected with a mommy-blogger. Rather than pitch the idea of promoting a product, Charlie discovered the blogger was a breast cancer survivor. He got to know her as a person rather than discuss how she could cover his client’s product. In the end, they coordinated a giveaway for the blog’s readers that increased the blogger’s readership and helped the client as well.

One practitioner said he starts off with the premise that “it’s a very human space,” and treats conversations in the same way he would with a friend. Another said he gets involved with the blogs that interest him personally and that he tries to “cultivate an agency filled with people with extremely niche interests and relationships with people in those spheres because the internet is blending the professional with the personal.”

Stan also stressed “making it personal” and said that he has seen companies invite bloggers in to meet with company executives in person, and Anne said that she tries to make personal contact with bloggers, rather than rely on e-mail alone.

Charlie went as far as to say that he approaches bloggers with an anti-corporate perspective. “I usually make fun of my industry [and] am irreverent about my job. I throw myself under the bus because I know they want to already. I usually introduce myself as a PR flak that has to do this.” Similarly, another respondent talked about a community ambassador position a client had created. The job description advised clients: “You have to be willing to be a black sheep at the company for what you’re about to do.”

Creative approaches
Creativity starts with the e-mail subject line. “They’re not going to open it if the subject line doesn’t catch their attention. You have to write like you’re writing for a newspaper…you need a great headline. It’s the same thing with blogs.”

Charlie uses humor to spark interest with bloggers and will even send funny material that has nothing to do with work.

"I think of my own life. What gets me out of doing my job? When people send me funny YouTube links, when people send me jokes, when people send me something that relates to what I'm interested in."

John said he likes to be unconventional. In a recent campaign, a competitor's product dropped dramatically in price, so he posted a quick message online that said "Sorry early adopters: The [Product] drops 200 bucks, salvage yours with free stuff here!" and used Google Adwords to ensure that it ranked at the top of Google searches for that product. Within hours, hundreds of blogs throughout the world were blogging about it and praising the client's initiative.

Finally, Anne talked about a recent campaign she managed for a soft drink manufacturer in which she positioned the soft drink as a presidential running mate with a popular comedy personality. She said it was the "in-your-face, creative concepts" that made the campaign a success.

Creating a win-win

"You need to think about what it means to them, not what it means to you," one respondent explained. "You've got to think about how you work with them in a win-win capacity." Respondents create a win-win by stressing the benefits of covering a client's product or service.

In his experience working with bloggers, Charlie assures bloggers that covering a product will increase web traffic, while staying personal. He also tries not to inundate bloggers press releases, but prefers giving them information that relates to them. John said that simply driving traffic to their site can go a long way because "you're sending an explicit message that you actually care about them, and that you're helping them achieve the Holy Grail, which is driving traffic for them."

Another part of the blogger "win" is benefiting the respective blog community. One vice president at a PR agency said he tries to contribute useful information to the community by commenting, adding to the exchange of dialogue, and serving as an information resource.

This entails relating to bloggers on their own terms. In a project for a chewing gum company, John found that the online, consumers were talking about the myth that chewing the gum with the wrapper made it last longer and taste better. Whereas the company had planned a campaign around a dodge ball tournament, targeting dodge ball bloggers, addressing the gum wrapper myth ended up being more effective.

Professionals also have to balance client interests when working with bloggers, which creates an interesting dilemma. "Our goal is to steer bloggers to where clients want to be without being detected," Charlie explained, "We still have to guide them a little bit. We want to get them there without them realizing that we're directing the sale. It's a subtle thing because you don't want to be exposed as 'that PR person.'"

John talked about this balance:

“Sometimes it looks a little self-serving to comment on a blog when you know you’re going to call them. So I’ll try to make an effort and think: I’m interested in talking to this guy down the line, reading what he’s got going on and commenting well in advance. It’s why I’m not really keen on people just working within communities that they don’t totally care about personally. PR agencies should have to work to help employees kind of find that balance.”

Building relationships
Respondents indicated that managing this balance is about building a relationship with the blogger based on transparency, credibility, sincerity, consistency, and trust.

Stan recognized that any time he writes something someone is going to wonder whether he is promoting a client, but he explained, “the more you disclose about yourself, the more upfront you are, and if you make a mistake every now and then that's a good thing, because people see that you're a human being.”

Charlie said he lets people know he’s working for the PR department and is a voice for the company. He discloses everything about himself, even sharing his Facebook page so bloggers can see who he is. “You need to be transparent,” he said. Another respondent also stressed the importance of transparency. “You can’t try to incite interest about a topic that relates to your client and not say you’re connected.” Instead, he said he is upfront with bloggers and tells them, “This is who I am, this is who I’m working with, and it seems like this product would be relevant.”

The standard for company-blogger relationships seems to be “don’t treat them like meat,” as one respondent put it. Many respondents discussed going beyond sending out press releases to give bloggers a voice in the organization. “Treat them like individuals that are valuable both from a communication perspective, but also an input perspective,” one respondent said.

Not every respondent eschewed the one-size fits all mass distribution approach. One respondent said she uses mass email blasts to blogs that fit the subject matter of her clients’ products and services, and only builds relationships with bloggers who take two or three of her pitches. Using this approach, she puts together large blogging lists separated by topic and industry. “I try to understand what blogs are out there. Entertainment blogs, political blogs, environmental blogs, news blogs—we have created our own master list in this department.”

CONCLUSION

This study shows that blogs are expanding and defining the ways practitioners work with media to reach publics and promote client interests. In particular, this study is consistent, in some aspects, with the principles proposed in the literature, including Habermas’ concepts of the public sphere and the communicative act. Respondents build understanding with bloggers by speaking with them on their terms, emphasizing bloggers' needs, and building trust through openness and honesty. However, in spite of the relevance of Habermas' communication concepts and the writing-heavy nature of blogging, a personal relational perspective may be more characteristic of the way PR professionals work with bloggers.

Instead of using blogging as a direct communicative outlet with publics, public relations practitioners seek to build relationships with bloggers via two-way communication. Two-way communication is recognized in public relations literature as the highest standard for the practice, as confirmed by Grunig's Excellence study (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995), and Porter, et. al (2007) noted this development towards two-way communication between practitioners and bloggers in their recent study. However, in their assessment, they explained that practitioner use of blogs follows a development process culminating in practitioners becoming part of the "quirky blog community" (p. 94) as they become "an active part of the conversation" (p. 94).

For the respondents in this study, this is clearly not the case, as they opt to build relationships with bloggers behind the scenes. At the beginning of our interview, one of the interviewees explained that at its core, PR is "the art of relationships—relationships with journalists so you can influence without completely being able to control what happens." With the emergence of blogging as a legitimate media source, this relational art needs revision to incorporate the intricacies of the online environment.

And yet, there is very little representation of this relational approach in the literature. Vorvoreanu (2006) argued that new media allow organizations to transcend traditional conversation with publics and build a relationship through experience and Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) analyzed blogging in the context of organization-public relationships, but very little research explores this relational/communication overlap.

Towards a framework for blogger relations

The current study is only one of a few studies that analyzes practitioner interactions with bloggers on a relationship scale. Most new media studies analyze new media and blogs under the heading of communication and, from the perspective of PR, their value to organizations (Vorvoreanu, 2006).

What is lacking is a relational or behavioral approach that takes into account the intricacies between practitioners and bloggers. This study may provide an introductory impression of such a framework. In particular, the interviews in this research reveal a progression of approaches to building relations and becoming part of the blogging community (a chart of this progression can be found in the Appendix). On one side of the continuum is the mass distribution of client messages and press releases. Underlying motivations for this approach appear to be:

1) sparking preliminary interest,
2) getting mass coverage, and
3) identifying bloggers with whom practitioners may want to pursue a relationship.

On the other side of the continuum is the personal relational approach, in which bloggers engage in a personal relationship with the blogger and balance blogger interests with corporate interests. In some cases, it appears practitioners using this approach slightly favor blogger interests over client interests, and may more readily be open with bloggers and even take an anti-corporate, black sheep position (as was the case for Charlie, who calls himself a "PR Flak," and the project that called for a blogging ambassador who would become the corporate "black sheep.")

Furthermore, it appears that the three approaches to engaging a blogger (using creativity, creating a win-win, and building relationships) also correlate with the progression of approaches, and have their own place on the continuum. That is as practitioners move from mass distribution of written communications to the personal/relational approach, they also move from emphasizing creativity, to creating a win-win, and finally, building relationships.

Obviously, this framework is under-developed, and needs future research for clarification and differentiation from other communication theories (i.e. Grunig's Excellence theory). However, immediate questions to pursue include: What drives the progression from mass distribution to personal connection in PR-Blogger relationships? Are client interests more prevalent earlier on the spectrum than later—that is, do client interests decrease in priority as practitioners favor the personal-relational approach? What role does blogger exposure to PR efforts affect practitioner approach? In other words, are practitioners forced to move up the continuum as bloggers become more experienced with "the game" between practitioners and media representatives? Finally, how does the success of a campaign relate to the approach on the continuum?

My first impressions based on this research lead me to assume that progression from the mass-distribution to the personal-relational approach is, indeed, affected by blogger exposure to public relations and experience with "the game," and that more personal involvement by the practitioner is necessitated by blogger experience. It also appears that short-term success, that is, a product mention that yields immediate but potentially unmemorable impressions, and long-term success, in which practitioners and bloggers engage in a relationship benefiting both parties long-term, can be tracked on the continuum.

Other related areas of interest for future research include the intricacies of on-line community building, negotiation in balancing blogger and client interests, and issues of public power and voice within an organization (as some respondents indicated that bloggers are sometimes given the opportunity to provide input on a product or service).

Implications for practice

This study also has implications for public relations practitioners seeking to work within blogging communities, and especially those transitioning from working with journalists. Overall, practitioners may find value in determining their approach to working with a particular blogger based on the mass distribution/personal relational continuum. Introductory communications with bloggers may emphasize a mass distribution approach and feature creative writing to catch bloggers' attention. As practitioners begin to build relationships with bloggers, their approach may reflect the behavioral and conversational standards discussed by participants in this research.

Other practical standards from this study include: limiting corporate-speak in blogger relations, emphasizing the blogger-win, and taking a personal interest in respective blogging communities.

In spite of the strength of perspectives that this study provides, it is not without its limitations, the greatest of which being the limited sample size and that many of the interviews came from respondents at the same public relations agency. Time and resources limited the sample used in this study, and in spite of using professionals in the same agency, the findings represent one configuration of practitioner-blogger relations that currently exists. This confirmation is a goal of qualitative research. Furthermore, the interviews yielded diverse and, at times, contradicting opinions, even among participants at the same agency. I believe such varying and even contradictory perspectives should temper concerns about the depth of perspectives from interviews within the same agency. Another limitation is this study's inability to be statistically generalizable—the relationship structure here may not apply in other settings. In spite of these limitations, this study's results provide a framework from which to develop future studies. For one, the practitioner-blogger relational continuum should be validated in quantitative research. Additionally, this study should be expanded to explore relationship differences between an organization and its public in the online space.

Overall, the growing influence of blogging as a media source represents issues that will prove to define and refine public relations new media strategy. Blogger-practitioner relations may be the "brave new world" for further conceptualizing interpersonal communication and relationship theories and practice.

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APPENDIX

Practitioner-Blogger Relational Continuum