

# The Public Relations Profession, Business Practices and Editors' Perceptions

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the perceptions of editors about two groups, how they “feel/think/believe” about public relations and the professional and how they “feel/think/believe” about business developers and business principles in general. At the same time, this paper ties in findings to the theoretical underpinnings of dynamic social impact theory, and suggests that each element in the theory is needed to impact the relationship of any two groups of people, and further suggests that if there are any limitations in one of the three elements, nothing in the relationship can change in the future.

## **Introduction**

How one perceives another makes all the difference in the relationship. The stigma of public relations practitioners as “spin masters” permeates, at times, the perceptual climate of the journalist and the public relations practitioner. Perception, described as mind-sets developed over time<sup>1</sup> can make a difference between getting positive coverage for a client and getting any at all. Previous scholarly research about perceptions of these two groups of professionals have been about news values<sup>2</sup>; about attitudes of media<sup>3</sup>; about influence and cooperation<sup>4</sup>; and news agenda<sup>5</sup>. More than two decades ago, research was not much different. Studies were taking place about performance expectations as measurement for news and public relations people<sup>6</sup>; the professionalism of public relations personnel and print journalists<sup>7</sup>; newspaper treatment of state government releases<sup>8</sup>; and the credibility of public

relations for journalists<sup>9</sup>.

At the bottom of these studies rests the concept of perception. If perception of a public or media relations representative for a company is negative, news coverage might end up on a sub-par level. Beliefs about trust and honesty of practitioners on the part of journalists are part of the perceptual climate. If editors can't trust the representative's information, then coverage could be affected. One cannot help but wonder what the perceptual problem between journalists (editors are included) and public relations specialists is really all about, and how best it could be improved. At the same time, often journalists are at odds with companies in general. Developers, for example, may sometimes be more willing to disclose great plans for malls or highways and less willing to explain, in detail, the overall costs to taxpayers in a region. Then, journalists try reporting the story without all the monetary details. The public complains to the local news venue, and editors/journalists complain to the developers. Needless to say, perceptions about each other are not the best. This study explores the perceptions of editors about two groups, how they "feel/think/believe" about public relations and the professional and how they "feel/think/believe" about business developers and business principles in general. At the same time, this paper ties in findings to the theoretical underpinnings of dynamic social impact theory, and suggests that each element in the theory is needed to impact the relationship of any two groups of people, and further suggests that if there are any limitations in one of the three elements, nothing in the relationship can change in the future.

## **Review of Literature**

The public relations directors or public information officers are the front line runners for a corporation, especially when there is a problem. The public has witnessed various businesses going awry in their communication ♦C Firestone/Bridgestone, Enron and WorldCom are just a few. When the public is screaming for fairness, the press is usually echoing the public. Communication is affected by perceptions, and during business crises, perceptions are negative. The front-line runners, more often public relations officers, are put in predicaments of being loyal to the company and being honest with the public. If the press perceives dishonesty with the public, coverage is going to reveal it. There is a felt communication climate between the groups that is both cloudy and dense, and in such a climate journalists become more dogged. Such determination perceived by public relations or business representatives might be perceived as harassing rather than a pursuit of the true story. In such a climate, resolving the communication barrier between the two groups becomes more inflexible. It is during these times of business crises that editors/ journalists are certainly less patient and understanding. If public relations representatives/practitioners are already misunderstood by a reporter covering a story, such as the Firestone/Bridgestone one, impediments in communication between the two parties may not ever get better. How does the press interpret the term, "public relations"?

*Public relations and the press*

One researcher, Julie K Henderson, categorized the way “public relations” is used in the popular press by analyzing 100 articles during the period of 1995-1996.<sup>10</sup> Basically, Henderson was looking at the connotative meaning of the term as it appeared in articles and whether the meaning applied was accurate. She also wanted to know who was using and misusing the term. Findings include 230 citations of the term, and only 5.2% were construed as correct; and 37% were categorized as identifiers, as in “the P.R. director for...” or “a public relations man” etc. Henderson concludes, “Public relations people are often confronted with misinformation or suspicion about their occupation. This study indicates the news media are not helping the situation.”<sup>11</sup> She also notes “Thus while reporters are using the term, they are not using it with any consistency of meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

In the Pincus et al. (1993) study, perceptions of California-based editors with regard to public relations were surveyed in 1993. Altogether, 166 editors were questioned about perceptions; findings suggest that editors have the least favorable perceptions of public relations, and sports editors have the best. Interestingly, at the time of this study, the researchers suggested that the intensity of the negative perceptions of public relations on the part of journalists may have been lessening. They also suggested, then, that because of the high percentage of “neutral” responses in their study there may have been a shifting in editors’ attitudes.<sup>13</sup>

Another dissertation, in 1999, focuses on personal interviews of editors, all of whom had been reporters, at 16 dailies in the state of South Carolina and their perceptions of public relations and public relations practitioners. The researcher found that at least three editors, whose perceptions were not negative, had had either experience or education in public relations. For the most part, however, findings indicated that overall perceptions were generally negative.<sup>14</sup>

### *What is perception?*

Perception, for Alison Anderson, is the basis for news selectivity,<sup>15</sup> which depends on many variables—publishers, editors, news format, reader pressures— and perceptions offered in the news media will differ over time and culture.

### *News as social interaction*

News organizations primarily revolve around tight time and space schedules. In Anderson’s discussion of the linkage among time, space and culture, she claims that news sources and the news media operate in specific cultural, spatial and temporal contexts; hence, she states that media representations are socially and culturally constructed.<sup>16</sup> News then is a product of social interactions between journalists and their sources [e.g. media relations writers, public relations practitioners or community]. News items are socially constructed realities, but then so are press releases, which are generated by people

operating in a public relations capacity.

### *Theoretical connection to perception*

All communication is the transmission of what Moscovici calls, social representations. Social representations are representations of something or someone. They are specific and are part of how we think. He suggests that the significance here is that these social representations become capable of influencing the behavior of the individual participant in a society.<sup>17</sup>

Dynamic Social Impact theory is connected to Moscovici's social representation theory in that we are influenced by what is around us, from the social world, which in turn affects our mental representations of the physical world social representations. DSI theory rests on the notion that people affect [influence] each other. "As social animals, we are drawn by the attractiveness of others and aroused by their mere presence, stimulated by their activity and embarrassed by their attention."<sup>18</sup> According to DSI theory, we should be more influenced by those closest, in proximity [space], than those who are not. Also, the more often we are in contact [time] with people, the more we will get to know about people [immediacy/importance - familiarity].

If we think in terms of groups of people who must interact on an on going basis, such as public relations representatives of large companies who are in contact often with reporters or editors, we can assume they bring with them social representations (images and concepts) about news and about journalists derived over time, which become perceptions of like images and like concepts. Cooperation then with editors over time, if contact is made often, may improve press relations in general for companies. Such improvement will depend on the perceptions of editors. DSI theory would suggest that time, space and immediacy (importance-familiarity) affect perceptions.

### *Business reporting in the press*

At moments of crises, mistakes are sometimes made. Data might be misinterpreted, time elements may get mixed up, quotes on the part of the company might be taken out of context or hastily given, and the concept or event that began the conflict becomes more and more distorted. When companies take on the press because of distortions, the perceptual climate between them worsens. The company representatives may try to hold things together, but company management sometimes takes further action that results in even more press, mostly negative.

One example of such a situation was when Procter and Gamble brought on an investigation of *The Wall Street Journal's* reporter, Alecia Swasy in 1991 after she wrote an article announcing the resignation of

the executive vice president, B. Jurgen Hintz, claiming in the article he resigned under pressure. Her source was unidentified and P&G wanted to know who had been talking to her. P&G demanded the police of Cincinnati subpoena telephone records to the reporter. *WSJ*'s attorneys demanded the telephone company cease releasing such records. The entire conflict went into yet more *WSJ* articles, one hitting the front page; consequently P&G issued a press release claiming they were not violating First Amendment law but rather focusing on criminal activities of individuals within their company. *WSJ*'s editorial was heated and negative toward P&G. Soon, *The New York Times* and the Society of Professional Journalists were brought into the fray. Things got far worse before they got better. The company representative worked to smooth out the feathers of the press while the company executives became more irate over time.<sup>19</sup>

### *Research questions*

This study attempts to answer the following research questions about the perception of public relations, the profession and the professional, and about business principles and practice:

1. What are editors perceptions of public/media relations and public/media relations representatives, in general?
2. What are editors perceptions of business principles and practices in general?
3. Do the same variables affect editors perceptions of both public relations and business principles/practices?
4. Does the age of editors and years experience in the newspaper field affect his/her perceptions of the public relations profession and professional?
5. Does having worked in either the public relations field or the business field, other than media, affect perceptions?
6. Does being in contact (telephone calls, faxes, email) with public relations professionals on a regular basis generate more positive perceptions?
7. Do face to face contacts or calls also generate more positive perceptions?

8. Do editors understand the concept of the public/media relations specialist's role in representing the company in as positive a way as possible?

### *The survey instrument*

Social and cultural relations depend a great deal on communication. The more often one group sees another, the more one group should get to know the other. The more positive the communication between groups, the better the relationship will be. (Both Toth (2000) and Botan (1993) noted the importance of interpersonal communication in building organizational and public relationships.<sup>20</sup>). Most of the communication between journalists (editors included) and public relations practitioners (who are representing various businesses) takes place when there is perceived news to be reported either because of a crisis or some serious occurrence within a company or notice of some event generated as a press release; hence, communication revolves around gathering facts for an article. Usually, deadlines are imminent, and time is of the essence. Clearly, journalists want facts and pertinent details for their news pieces, and they want them fast. Problems between the groups occur when speed is prohibited. Nevertheless, researchers have reported previous studies that support the assumption that editors/journalists and public relations practitioners have a similar understanding of what constitutes good news stories.<sup>21</sup>

Since "over time," in the definition of perception, means gaining of experience, the independent variables in the measurement of the public relations profession and professionals became those items that would focus on time elements, which included: Experience working in newspaper field

Age

Experience working in public relations field

Education about public relations

Years working as editor

Years in college

The part of the study that attempted to measure perceptions of editors regarding business principles and practices included these independent variables: Experience working in newspaper field

Age

Experience in the business field

Education about business

Years working as editor

Years in college

(Other independent variables which were included in the survey instrument included gender and years worked in an editorial capacity. These findings were not significant enough for discussion here).

## *Operationalizing DSI theory and perceptual elements on the survey instrument*

The survey instrument used in this study attempted to evaluate perceptions of editors based on the elements of dynamic social impact (DSI) theory, combined with elements of perceptions noted in the Bollinger (1999) study. In that study, uses of cognitive verbs in personal interviews of editors were drawn from elements of perception, i.e., how we form opinions of others.

Those cognitive verbs, “feel,” “think,” “trust,” “believe,” and “understand” were then made part of the survey’s statements.

At the same time, this researcher wanted to bring in perceptual elements based on DSI theory. In doing so, certain statements then had to identify DSI theory’s elements of time, space and immediacy.

These elements were operationalized for purpose of the survey instrument as follows:

*Time* ♦C contact time; frequency or regular basis; over years of time; age; years of experience.

*Space* ♦C having face to face contact closes space; being on the phone often reduces space; emails and faxes also serve to reduce space.

*Immediacy* ♦C being familiar enough to understand the practitioners motives and appreciation for news alerts/press releases; being familiar enough to give the practitioners importance; having had a course in public relations; being able to trust material received from practitioners and depend on accuracy of those materials.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample selection and response rate*

A mailing list of 834 managing editors in the United States at daily newspapers was secured from Editor & Publisher, from which every fifth listing was eliminated for a total of 659 first mailings between December 1 and December 30, 2000 (**Table 2**). The two-page questionnaire contained 29 statements

with a seven part Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree), which were included in the instrument. Statements were categorized with these topics in mind: perceptions of public relations values, profession and professionalism, beliefs and preferences and general negative perceptions. Questions 35-43 were used as the independent variables: years working on a newspaper (question 36), age (question 37), whether or not editors have worked in public relations or media relations (question 39), whether or not editors have worked for a corporation other than media (question 40), whether or not editors have owned a business or was part of a family owned business (question 41), whether or not editors have taken a business course (question 42), and whether or not editors had ever taken a course in public relations (question 43). Statements on the survey pertained also to years as an editor (question 35), gender (question 34) and years of college (question 38), but these were not cross tabulated with data (**Table 3**).

A pretest of 20 editors (not randomly selected) was conducted first for the survey instrument and tested for reliability. Results were positive ( $r=.95$ ). The second wave included mailings to 400; and 250 were surveyed in the third wave. Returns were tracked by city and state; otherwise, the surveys were anonymous. In all, 45 states were represented and widely dispersed. The states with the largest returns (more than 12) were from dailies in California (highest circulation 93,000), Massachusetts (highest circulation 400,000), Ohio (highest circulation 35,000), New York (highest circulation 500,000), Pennsylvania (highest circulation 160,000), Texas (highest circulation 200,000) and Virginia (190,000) (**Table 1**).

A net response of 237 yielded 36% final responses (**Table 2**). While Babbie (1995) and other scholars suggest that a 45-50% return rate is more acceptable, we suggest that there is significance because of the wide (geographical) dispersion of responses in this study.

### *Data Analyses*

Data were analyzed using SAS, and Chi square tests for equal proportions were conducted. The null hypothesis of no differences was rejected for all statements on the survey instrument ( $p=.0001$ ). Frequencies for each item were also calculated to provide descriptive analyses of the responses to each item. Cross tabulations were conducted to further analyze relationships between perceptions and independent variables. Also, median tests were conducted for a measure of central tendency to determine where the points in the distribution of the cases occur.<sup>22</sup> A univariate procedure was conducted on each question for all responses so that an examination of the distribution of cases on only one variable at a time could be made. In Babbie's terms, we can then look for measures of central tendency.<sup>23</sup> Bivariate analysis in the form of cross-tabulations was also conducted.

### *Breakdown of the public relations statements*

The first section of the survey instrument (Statements 1, 3, 4, 7 and 9) (**Table 3**) explored editors' perceptions of public/media relations practitioners as people who are responsible to get out positive news, accurate in their news releases, accessible to media and generally honest.

Statements 5, 10, 20, 22 and 23 explored editors' perceptions of the public relations profession and the professionalism of practitioners.

Statements 6, 11, 12, 16, 17 and 21 explored generally negative perceptions about public relations practitioners as non-journalists, manipulators, pitch-people and people who send editors too much material and produce poor quality.

Statements 2, 8, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19 were "preference" and "belief" statements about editors actual contact with people in public relations.

Section 2 explored editors' perceptions of business principles and practices (statements 24 through 29). (**See Table 4**)

Section 3 asked editors to think of material generally received from public relations specialists/practitioners and rank order the material as editors' own news values (craft value of news release; personal values/morals/tastes; manager-publisher/owner's preferences; and norms of newspaper).

Section 4 included demographic and biographic statements such as gender, age, years as editor, years of college, years working for a newspaper, work in public/media relations, work in a corporation other than media; whether family ever owned a business and if the editor had ever taken a public relations course.

## **Findings**

Of the 237 responses received, 163 were male and 64 were female; 10 no response as to gender (A t-test procedure disclosed no noticeable differences in responses except on statement 15; Std. Def. F-2.007; M=1.549; p<.009). 31 reported less than four years of college, 157 respondents reported at least four years of college, and 47 reported 5+ years of college; 2 no response. Editors ranged in age from 21 to 60+; the majority 148, were between ages 40-60+. Most (135) had been working in the newspaper business between 11 and 21+ years. 90% reported themselves as managing editors; 7%

reported themselves as City Editors; 3% were left blank.

A collapse of the scale from a seven part Likert (strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) to three part Likert (agree, neutral and disagree) and cross tabulations permitted easier comparisons between the dependent and independent variables. Hence, frequencies yielded were useful in answering the research statements.

*Addressing the research questions*

### **Research Question 1.**

#### **What are editors' perceptions of public/media relations and public/media relations representatives, in general?**

As indicated in **Table 3** above, there was strong agreement in statements under Preferences and Beliefs (80.9% agreed that they were in contact with practitioners on a regular basis; 70.1% stated they like receiving press releases, etc; 79.8% stated they have journalists rewrite press releases [which is indication that they use press releases]). In those statements about the Profession and Professionalism, 79% stated that public relations/media relations specialists help reporters obtain useful information, but note that only 20.1% stated the professionalism of public relations/media relations is equivocal to the professionalism of the journalist and only 35.7% stated that public/media relations people understand news values.

In the section of statements, which was designed to be specifically negative, each one of the six statements scored high in agreement, especially number 11 (score 95.3%) *I pretty well know when a media/public relations specialist is pitching a news story*. Interestingly, another question (No. 6) about news values, i.e., *Public/Media relations personnel do not generally understand journalism in terms of newspapers' news values, deadlines, etc.* scored 50.2% agreement. Statement No. 22, in the Profession and Professionalism category of statements, was more or less the same, *In general, public/media relations people understand news values when generating information to media*, yet, it scored only a 35.7% agreement. The question we could then ask is, if editors know that public relations people can "pitch" a story, then why wouldn't public relations people also be cognizant of news values?

### **Research Question 2.**

#### **What are editors' perceptions of business principles and practices?**

In the statements specifically about business principles and practices on the survey instrument (**Table 4**), there was high agreement in three of the statements: (No. 24. *Businesses impact community*

*development favorably.- 76%); (No. 25 Businesses end up creating additional tax dollars (88.3%); (No, 26 Businesses increase employment in a community 92.5%); (No. 29 Businesses attract other businesses to a community (86.9%). Statements 27 and 28 however received the most negative responses: (27 Businesses fully develop the real estate projects they begin received 24.7% agreement and 44.2% neutral; 28 Businesses are always environmentally conscious received only 1.3% agreement and 15.9% neutral responses ).*

### **Research Question 3.**

**Do the same variables affect editors' perceptions of both public relations and business principles/practices?**

To answer this question, we looked at variables of age and education specifically in business or public relations. Cross-tabulations were completed looking at the same variables for both sets of statements. For example, would age and having had a course in public relations, and age and having had a course in business have similar results?

Age = Statement No.37

Ever Taken a course in public relations = Statement No.39

Ever taken a course in business = Statement No.42

When cross-tabulated with statements:

No. 22, *In general, public/media relations people help reporters obtain useful information*, 82 of 228 (or 35%) answered favorably to No. 22 (and 64 out of 83 (78%) were between ages 41-61+); No. 24, *Businesses impact community development favorably*, 167 of 217 (76%) answered favorably to No. 24 (and 129 of 167 (77%) were between ages 41-61+). So age did not produce similar results (35% v. 76% agreement).(**Table 5**). Additionally, in order to fully answer the research question, cross-tabulations with age were also conducted using Question 39, *Have you ever taken a course in public relations?* And Question 42, *Have you ever taken a course in business?* Only 18 out of 83 (22%) who answered favorably to statement 22 had taken a course in public relations; 98 out of 169 (57%) who answered favorably to statement 24 had taken a course in business. (**Table 5**).

Clearly, taking a course did not produce similar results. It seems that editors were in general more sympathetic to business than to public relations, and that taking a public relations course had no effect on their opinions.

### **Research Question 4.**

**Does the age of editors and years experience in the newspaper field affect his/her perceptions of the public relations profession and professional?**

We looked at the independent variable of age (No. 37) on the survey instrument again here as well as years of experience in the newspaper field (No. 36) and conducted cross-tabulations as follows:

Statement No. 23, *In general, public/media relations people facilitate news gathering processes for the media* disclosed that 88 out of 113 who responded favorably to the question were between ages 41-61+. Altogether, though, there were 148 reported in ages 41-61+. Slightly more than half of the older editors (88/148 or 59%) in this survey then understand the job of public relations. (**Table 6**).

Statement No. 10, *I believe the professionalism of public/media relations specialists is equivocal to the professionalism of the journalist*, found that 36/148 (24%) who responded favorably were between 41-61+ years. (An ANOVA revealed significant differences,  $Pr > F.026$ ; 3.022 mean). As to years working in the newspaper field, in answer to this same statement, 37 of 135 (27%) who responded favorably had 11-21+ years experience. (**Table 6**).

Perhaps age and years in the newspaper field do affect perceptions; the perceptions are, however, in this study apparently negative as to the professionalism of public relations. Yet, older editors seem to concur with experienced editors that public/media relations people facilitate in newsgathering.

### **Research Question 5.**

**Does having worked in either the public relations-field or the business-field, other than the media-field, affect perceptions?**

178 responded "no," to the question, *Have you ever worked in public relations?* Of the 54 who answered "Yes," cross-tabulations revealed that of those who answered "yes," 45 answered in agreement to statement 10, *I believe that the professionalism of public relations is equivocal to the professionalism of the journalist*, but only 12 agreed, who had worked in public relations.

In answer to statement 23, *In general, public/media relations people facilitate news gathering processes for the media*, out of the 54 of those who said they had worked in public relations, 23 responded in agreement. (An ANOVA revealed significance at  $Pr > F.0451$ , 4.11 mean). The results were much higher when cross-tabulated with statement 20, *Public/Media relations specialists help reporters obtain useful information*. 43 agreed who had worked in public relations. (An ANOVA revealed significance at  $Pr > F.0009$ , 5.07 mean). (**Table 7**).

So having worked in the public relations field did produce rather opposing perceptions. In other words, public relations people help reporters gather useful information but do not facilitate the process, at least to editors who had worked in the public relations field.

About whether those people who had taken a business course (Question 42) responded more positively toward two specific statements about business, No. 24 and 27, cross tabulations results disclose the following:

Statement 24, *Businesses impact community development favorably*: (a) 138 responded favorably and 98 had taken a business course; Statement 25, *Businesses end up creating additional tax dollars*, 139 reported they had taken a business course and 121 responded favorably; Statement 26, *Businesses increase employment in a community*, 125 responded favorably, while 138 reported they had taken a business course; Statement 27, *Businesses fully develop the real estate projects they begin*, 28 responded favorably out of 140 who reported they had taken a business course; Statement 28, *Businesses are always environmentally conscious*, while 137 responded they had taken a business course, only one responded positively to the question; Statement 29, *Businesses attract other businesses to a community*, 118 responded favorably , and 139 reported they had taken a business course. **(Table 8)**

Having had a business course does impact perceptions except about the practice of fully developing projects and about businesses being environmentally conscious.

Research questions 6, 7 and 8 were developed with dynamic social impact theoretical elements of time, space and immediacy (familiarity- importance) in mind. The three combined, according to Latan♦♦, would improve overall outcome in a relationship. Clearly, in the results that follow, the most difficult element has to do with space. It seems that editors want to hear from public/media relations people, but editors don't want these people to get too close.

### **Research Question 6.**

**Does being in contact (telephone calls, faxes, email) with public relations professionals on a regular basis impact perception?**

This first question pertains to the element of time and familiarity-immediacy

Statement 8, *I am in contact (telephone calls, faxes, email) with public/media relations people on a regular basis*, revealed that 186 responded yes out of 227 (42%); Statement 9, *I trust the accuracy of the material I get from public/media relations specialists*, revealed 84 favorable responses out of 228 (36%); Statement 7, *People who work in Public/Media Relations generally are honest*, revealed 100 favorable responses out of 228 (43%). **(Table 9)**. Here we have discernment about accuracy and honesty. Perception about the latter is more favorable than perception about the former.

The next two research questions were developed with immediacy - familiarity and space in mind. In other words, even if space between people on the telephone consists of hundreds of miles, frequency of conversations would permit more familiarity between the parties and thereby enhance immediacy of any message. Face-to-face conversations, of course, would permit an even more familiar relationship. Low responses of agreement came in from two statements that indicate editors want as little voice communication as possible.

#### **Research question 7.**

##### **Does face to face contact also generate more positive perceptions?**

Statement 18, *I prefer phone calls sometimes* generated 43 who answered yes out of 228 (17%). (An ANOVA disclosed significance at  $P > F.002$ , 2.69 mean); and Statement 19, *I prefer face-to-face or telephone calls*, generated 28 favorable responses out of 228 (12%). (An ANOVA disclosed significance at  $P > F.009$ , 2.69 mean) (**Table 10**).

This next, and last, question was developed based on research that supports the idea that editors believe public/media relations specialists might be spin-masters but that editors have the basic understanding that people who work in public relations are supposed to produce positive images and materials about the company. The response indicates that while editors may understand the concept of public relations, they don't agree with the work of public relations.

#### **Research question 8.**

##### **Do editors understand the concept of the public/media relations specialist's role in representing the company in as positive a way as possible?**

Statement 1, *I feel that public/media relations people have a responsibility to get out positive news at all times*, revealed only 63 out of 225 (27%) agreed with this statement.

To further answer the question, results from certain statements were cross-tabulated with editors who had had a course in public relations. (In DSI theory, having had a course would mean more familiarity with public relations and the job of public relations and therefore more immediacy would be given/acknowledged).

Statements 1, 3, 4, 7 and 9 that pertain to values of public relations and practitioners yielded lower frequencies by those who had had a course in public relations than by those who had never taken a course. That is to say, that having had at least a college course in public relations does not appear to impact the responses to the question. The average in agreement was 14.17% with statements 1, 3, 4, 7

and 9 when cross tabulated with having had a course in public relations. Most (108-110) of the respondents disclosed they had taken a public relations course but more disagreed with the statements 1, 3, 4, 7 and 9 who had not had a course (**Table 11**).

Note that statement 7 about the honesty of public/media relations specialists yielded more agreement (45%) than disagreement, but when cross-tabulated with having had a course in public relations, the percentage dropped dramatically (20%). (**Table 11**).

Then, cross-tabulations were conducted using the variable "had worked in public relations." Responses were under frequencies of 10% by those who had worked in public relations; while responses by those who had never worked in public relations yielded over 10% (except statement 7). Even statement 1, *I feel that public/media relations people have a responsibility to get out positive news at all times*, when cross-tabulated with having worked in public relations, yielded more agreement by those who had never worked in public relations (25% vs. 30%). In answer to the statement No. 3, *Public/media relations personnel are quite accurate in their news releases*, again when cross-tabulated with having worked in public relations, analysis disclosed that there were more editors who agreed who had never worked in public relations. Average in agreement with statements 1, 3, 4, 7 and 9 when cross tabulated with having had worked in public relations was 14/53 or 26%; average in agreement with those who had never worked in public relations was 61/76 or 80%. Clearly, previous public relations experience is not a factor in these perceptions (**Table 12**).

### *Summary of findings: Rank Ordering of News Values*

Responses to statements 30-33 (Section 3, Table 3) were too uneven. Of the 237 responses, some chose not to answer any at all; some chose to answer only one or two of the categories. This part of the survey then was discarded.

### *Median tests*

To further look at reliability of findings, a test of medians was conducted, which revealed that statements about values (1, 3, 4, 7 and 9) and profession and professionalism (5, 10, 20, 22, 23) produced average medians of 3.8 and 3.2 respectively and average means of 3.60 and 3.76 respectively. Average variance is 1.881. In both sets, two statements are above the median, three just below. In statements 6, 11, 12, 16, 17 and 21, which are the negative perception statements about professionals, the median is 5.3, which is almost parallel to the average mean of 5.110. Three responses fall just above and just below the median. Again, there is only slight variance (1.959).

## *Discussion of data regarding public relations*

It is apparent that there are some issues where editors think alike. For example, about values in public relations-responsibility to get out positive news at all times, accuracy in news releases, accessibility to media at all times, honesty of public relations people and accuracy of the material from specialists-editors overwhelmingly did not agree with the statements. The highest frequency was in statement 11, (**Table 3**), about public relations specialists pitching news stories. Agreement was at 95%. Agreement was at 77% for statement 12 (**Table 3**) about public relations specialists trying to manipulate the reporter covering the story.

Of note, is the fact that statement 12 was among the statements about the professionals themselves, i.e., public/media relations professionals, included statements with “not” or were negative in connotation, that personnel *do not generally understand journalism*, or in terms of being aware when specialists are trying to *pitch a news story*, or the notion that *quantity or quality* of material bothers the editor, or the idea that the prime function of the specialist is *to get free publicity from the paper*. These statements produced the most agreement with a ratio of 4 to 1. The more years of experience the editors had (11-21+ years), the higher was agreement (80%). However, only 60% of older editors (41+ years) agreed.

Interestingly, when responses of editors were cross tabulated regarding perceptions of the profession and professionalism of public/media relations with years working in newspaper field and then with ages, there was, in each case, close agreement. Statement 10, *I believe the professionalism of public/media relations specialists equivocal to the professionalism of journalism*, yielded corresponding agreement when crossed with years working in newspaper field. (**Table 6**). This means that older experienced editors still don't perceive public relations professionalism as equal with that of a journalist.

Statement 20, *Public/media relations specialists help reporters obtain useful information*, likewise brought a yield of 80% agreement when crossed with having worked in public relations. Statement 22, *In general, public/media relations people understand news values when generating information to media*, yielded low agreement when crossed with having had a public relations course (22%) but when crossed with ages 40-61+ yielded 78% agreement (Table 5). Statement 5, *Public/Media Relations personnel are specialists with mostly journalistic background*, also proved similar in responses yielding close to 10% agreement when crossed with years in field and when crossed with ages 41+. This was telling because it means that experienced and older editors don't perceive public relations specialists as having experience or training in journalism.

Lastly, the statement that was grouped in this same category also yielded similar results: Statement 23, *In general, public/media relations people facilitate news gathering processes for the media*, yielded close agreement when crossed with ages 41+ (38%) and when crossed with 11 21+ years (33%) in the field (**Table 5**).

## *Discussion of Findings* ♦ *C Business*

Again, cross tabulations were conducted for comparison with the independent variables (statements 36, 40, 41, and 42: (36) Years working for newspaper; (40) Have you ever worked for a corporation other than media in capacity? (41) Have you or your immediate family owned a business? (42) Have you ever taken a business course?

Table 7 is perhaps the most revealing. We cannot see a clear escalation in the responses of agreement as the years worked in the newspaper field increases; on statement No. 28 *Businesses are always environmentally conscious*, there is an only 1.36% agreement for those editors who have worked in the field 21+ years.

Education, on the other hand clearly impacts most of the business statements: 169 editors said yes to question number 42, "Have you ever taken a business course?" More than 44% percent agreed with the statement (number 24) about businesses impacting community development favorably; 88.16% agreed with the statement (number 25) about businesses creating additional tax dollars; 55.31% agreed with the statement (number 26) about businesses increasing employment in a community; and 51.98% agreed with the statement (number 29) about businesses attracting other businesses to a community. Two statements were, however, not received favorably.

Statement 27 about businesses fully developing the real estate projects they begin received only a 12.23% agreement; and Statement 28 about businesses being always environmentally conscious received only 1% agreement from editors who had answered yes to taking a business course.

The downside is that business practices and principles produce negative perceptions when it comes to business development and consciousness about the environment.

## *Final Comments and Recommendations*

The survey said much about the perceptions of editors regarding public relations and business. There is a clear division line between how editors, for example, perceive the concept of public relations, the profession, and how they perceive those who work in public relations, the professionals. They responded more or less positively to the former and negatively to the latter. Further, they do not consider the professionalism of public relations at all equivocal to that of journalism. Nor do they think of public relations specialists as having journalistic backgrounds. What's more, age and experience do not for the most part matter.

With regard to the business portion of the survey, what was surprising were the perceptions of those editors who had had a background in business, either by working for a corporation or by being involved in a business themselves and their responses about perceptions that businesses do not necessarily impact community development favorably, nor end up creating additional tax dollars nor fully develop the real estate projects they begin, which were mostly negative, were also surprising. On the other hand, another surprise was in response to the statements when education was factored in. There is high agreement on these very same statements. The question about businesses attracting other businesses to the community received a high agreement rate except when cross tabulated with the question (41) about having owned a business or having been involved in a family business. Those people who either had owned a business or had been involved in a family business were least likely to agree.

The findings as they relate to DSI theory were surprising for this researcher. Latan $\diamond\diamond$  argues that there are three elements needed to create an impact  $\diamond$ C time, space and immediacy. What he means is that frequency of time, closeness and being more immediate to someone (i.e., more familiar) will create impact. We can clearly relate this to any relationship, whether social, business or personal. What was surprising in this study is the fact that editors replied that they want to receive materials from public/media relations people and that they don't mind phone calls, occasionally. Yet, those who responded to this study, made it clear that what they don't want is face-to-face contact. They want the material public relations/media relations specialists send to them; in fact on the survey, there was agreement that the quantity of material did not bother them. But if there is never any kind of face-to-face contact, or very frequent voice calls, how then can a public/media relations specialist ever get through to that third element, immediacy/importance? Apparently, he or she cannot. Eventually, over much time, via press conferences, numerous phone calls, the specialist will be able to slowly build a relationship of sorts with editors. That slowness is because of the impersonal attitude it seems that these editors in this survey have about personal contact.

Dynamic social impact theory opens new doors for the way we think of specialists trying to impact media contacts. Frequency of contact will help in getting an editor to become familiar with the public relations representative; through regular email or snail mail correspondence, the space of the non-familiar will close up or shrink somewhat. However, the third element, immediacy, according to Latan $\diamond\diamond$ , must also be met in order to create an impact. Immediacy is the element most needed by the public relations specialist because more attention will be given a company when there is a sense that contact by the specialist is "important." If the doors to frequent phone calls and face-to-face conversations are closed, so will be "immediacy."

Of course, the survey instrument needs further testing. The sample studied amounted to only a 36 percent return, and this researcher would have preferred a higher return. Based on the smaller Bollinger (2000) study, there were some similar responses, but for the most part, this larger sample disclosed a wider division in the perception of the profession of public relations and the professional who works in public relations. Also, another study should follow just questioning editors about business perceptions alone and extend the business questions based on DSI theory.

One similarity is clear when comparing it to past literature. There is consistency in the perception on the part of editors that public relations specialists do not have journalistic skills, nor is the profession considered equivocal to that of journalists. Public relations specialists need to work on assuring journalists that they do indeed know (have backgrounds in) journalism and that they understand news values. Editors, on the other hand, need to be more enlightened about the practice of public relations and business practices. There is consistency in the findings that indicate editors view public relations specialists/practitioners and business developers negatively even while they claim to understand public relations as a profession and general business principles.

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