

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Perceptions of Public Relations Practitioners

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Public perception of public relations practitioners was measured using a telephone survey with a source manipulation experiment interwoven into a standard opinion poll. The nationwide sample ($N = 593$) revealed that sources affiliated with the organization on whose behalf they speak are viewed more negatively than unaffiliated sources. In addition, public relations practitioners were judged no more critically than other affiliated sources. Finally, a multiitem measure of public relations in general demonstrated that perceptions of practitioners are stable across demographics.

Recent public opinion surveys and source credibility experiments have not painted a flattering picture of public relations. Both have labeled practitioners as spokespersons whom the public highly doubts and have ranked them behind almost every other information source imaginable, including pollsters, student activists, and funeral directors. Because of these findings, researchers have been quick to relegate practitioners to working in the wings, out of the public eye, and speaking through other company mouthpieces. These conclusions, however, have been tempered by claims of awkward research procedures, poor measurement of constructs, and research participant pools not accurately representing the overall U.S. population. This study attempts to speak to these methodological shortcomings by including in the research population members of all households in the contiguous United States and employing a hybrid telephone survey and experiment that allows for a spokesperson manipulation to more accurately gauge perceptions of public relations practitioners and their ability to serve as quality information sources. In addition, general perceptions are garnered using multiple items that can be bundled into scales.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Credibility is the cornerstone attribute that public relations practitioners must possess if they have any hopes of influencing an audience's perceptions or attitudes (Budd, 2000; Judd, 1989). From Hovland and Weiss' (1951) work during the middle of the last century to Priester and Petty's (1995) research as the millennium ended, scholars have established credibility and its counterpart, trustworthiness, as the key source and message attributes necessary in communicating persuasive messages. Without credibility, the annals of research would suggest that any hopes of effectively garnering support for an espoused position are slight if present at all (O'Keefe, 2002; Perloff, 1993).

The volumes of research labeling the importance of credibility has not been disregarded by the public relations industry especially considering the evidence that exists demonstrating the public's lack of faith in practitioners being fully forthright ("PR Deserves Its Low Credibility Marks," 1999). Perhaps the most revealing of the studies damning the industry is one conducted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) itself. In September 1998 PRSA, with the help from the Rockefeller Foundation, sponsored a telephone survey in which 1,000 respondents were asked to rate the credibility of sources of information in general on a 4-point scale anchored by 1 (*very credible*) and 4 (*[not at all credible]*; The National Credibility Index, 1999). Of the 44 information providers rated by each respondent, public relations specialist finished third from the bottom, just above famous entertainer and TV or radio talk show host but behind famous athlete, pollster, and student activist among others. Incidentally, Supreme Court justice and teacher finished first and second, respectively.

Research published 2 years later echoed the findings concerning negative public perception of practitioners. In this study, experimental methods were employed using teachers, whose demographics closely match those of the average newspaper reader, as research participants. These participants read one of two news stories with information presented attributed to either a public relations practitioner or a company spokesperson whose job title was not revealed (Callison, 2001). With all text in the articles held constant across message condition other than identification of the information source as either a public relations specialist or a more nondescript company spokesperson, analyses revealed that participants were much more critical of the public relations source and the organization employing the source than his or her unlabeled counterpart and accompanying organization. More precisely, the public relations source was perceived as less likely to be telling the truth, more dishonest, and less trustworthy. The author ultimately suggested that the negative perception of public relations practitioners was due, in part, to a perceived reporting bias (see Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978), in which audiences see information sources as limited by situational constraints (i.e., organization affiliation) from taking an unbiased stance on an issue.

No doubt, the public and public relations practitioners themselves understand that company spokesperson are, to some extent, paid advocates for an organization and as such are mandated to possess a reporting bias to some extent (Murphy, 2001). It would seem that none fault public relations practitioners for taking their employing organization's side in a discussion, but it should come as no surprise that spokespersons who are paid to present their employers in the best possible light are not always seen as stalwarts of honesty, which often leads to motives being questioned. In fact, Sallot (2002), using a mixed participant pool of students and mall shoppers, found that perceptions of motives were the key indicator of how people evaluate public relations and its practitioners. Through experimental manipulations, four brief news articles were created detailing a press conference held by a fictitious manufacturer of laser printers that had launched a recycling program. Manipulations centered on the motives of the organization involved with one manipulation employing a *selfish* backgrounder that explained the organization planned a recycling subsidiary and the program would ensure raw materials. Another backgrounder, labeled by the researchers as *altruistic*, stated that company executives personally supported conservation and that the company's sole objective with the program was to make a positive contribution to society. A *mixed* backgrounder explained that good corporate citizenship results in favorable publicity and profits while serving social interests. A final *control* backgrounder detailed no motive. The results suggested that motives were questioned and participants were critical of information and its source when a personal benefit to the organization seemed to be behind an activity and its accompanying communications. The author concluded, as could be expected, that to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, purely altruistic motives should be announced, and other motives, if present, concealed.

If audiences distrust public relations practitioners and their employers when possible company benefits are assumed to result from their communications (Durham 1997; Sallot, 2002), it would seem that the very nature of the public relations industry, which involves guarding organization reputation, is at the root of its credibility problems. How can a practitioner, whose job it is to position his or her company in the best possible light, do so when the very public he or she is trying to influence doubts his or her honesty any time that he or she speaks well of his or her employer? One remedy that has been suggested is filtering organizational positive information through third-party sources (Callison, 2001; Lamons, 2002; Murphy, 2001) eliminating any easy attribution of bias.

Research investigating the effects of organizational affiliation on public perception of spokespersons has indeed revealed that when it comes to communicating company positive news, any source is a good source as long as it is not viewed as working solely on behalf of the benefiting organization. In fact, experimental research employing sources of various organizational affiliation refuting negative claims has shown that sources identified as a company spokesperson are viewed,

by a student subject pool, as less credible than unaffiliated sources providing the same refutational information (Callison & Zillmann, 2002). Equally interesting, sources labeled as outside experts hired by the organization to investigate company-negative claims were viewed as equally credible as governmental agency experts investigating negative claims independently.

It would seem that affiliation must be clear and company ties must be absolute in order for the perceptions of bias to come into play and taint attitudes toward communications and communicators. Again, this points to public relations practitioners working in a no-win situation. Any organization-positive communication stemming from an organization itself, and especially from a public relations practitioner employed by the organization, would seem to be unquestionably perceived as lacking credibility. As it stands, public opinion polls have shown that the public rates practitioners poorly in credibility indexes, and experimental research has suggested that the use of the term *public relations* harms an information source. Experimental research also has suggested that espousing positive news calls motives into question, especially when the source is seen as employed by the organization that stands to gain the most from communicative efforts. Limitations in these studies, however, have to be taken into account before drawing conclusions about public relations. The PRSA's National Credibility Index used a single-item measure to gauge credibility, a construct that research has shown is multidimensional (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970; McCroskey, 1966), and the measure was taken free from any communicative context. No scenario was provided to allow respondents the opportunity to rate information sources in a real-life situation. The Callison (2001) study employed only two possible sources, a public relations specialist and a generic company spokesperson. If as stated previously company affiliation influences perceptions, no manipulation was made to test internal sources against external, presumably less biased, sources. The Sallot (2002) research varied potential motives behind an announcement, but the company spokesperson was always labeled as a public relations practitioner. With no variation in source occupation and affiliation performed, any conclusion about the effectiveness of public relations practitioners as opposed to other spokespersons is ungrounded. Finally, the Callison and Zillmann (2002) study manipulated the affiliation of the information sources employed, but it did not clearly label the internal source as a public relations practitioner. The public relations position of the company spokespersons used in the article may have been assumed, but, without direct testing of internal spokesperson titles, no data can be presented to bolster any claim that certain company sources are more credible than others (Durham, 1997).

This study attempts to address these limitations by employing a hybrid of both methodologies used in the previous research and by gathering data using a real-world context within which various sources—company affiliated and not, public relations labeled and not—communicate. In addition, this study employs a multidimensional scale to record perceptions of public relations practitioners. Last, it

should be noted that this study gauges perceptions held by a sample drawn from the overall general public and does not rely on subgroups to represent the typical information consumer.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Credibility of Affiliated Spokespersons Hypotheses

Past research has suggested that perceived bias influences audience perception of spokesperson credibility and trustworthiness (Eagly et al., 1978). In research focusing on the public relations industry, Sallot (2002) stated, "Audience knowledge of selfish ... motives on the part of ... advocates may ... lead to greater distrust of public relations" (p. 152). This claim has been supported partially in experimental investigations of practitioner credibility, but researchers have yet to distinguish how sources with clear ties are perceived in contrast to sources clearly not working on behalf of an organization. In fact, the previously described experiment (Callison & Zillmann, 2002) that pitted sources ranging in affiliation against each other blurred affiliation by employing one fictitious source who worked for an independent research firm that happened to have been hired by an accused organization. In this case, source motivation is not clear. Would a hired researcher be loyal to his or her craft or to the organization that had contracted his or her work? To further test how affiliation influences public perception, the following hypothesis directed the research:

H1a: A source directly affiliated with an organization will be viewed more negatively than a source not directly affiliated with an organization.

Because of affiliated sources being viewed more negatively, these sources should be less persuasive in their communicative efforts. To determine how messages attributed to company-affiliated sources are perceived in contrast to messages attributed to nonaffiliated sources, the following hypothesis directed the research:

H1b: Company-positive information stemming from a source directly affiliated with an accused organization will be less persuasive than the same information stemming from a source not directly affiliated with the organization.

Credibility of Internal Spokespersons Hypotheses

When facing crises that potentially could have a profound impact on an organization and its various communities, crisis management teams often include public relations officials, legal counselors, and members of top management (Lee, Jares, & Heath, 1999). Past research has suggested that attaching the words *public relations*

to a spokesperson ruins any chance of a positive audience reaction (Callison, 2001). Previously published research, however, has not investigated the influence of different internal organizational affiliations against one another. This research pits various company-affiliated sources against each other in an effort to determine if reporting bias and the resulting negative perceptions are attributed equally across all internal spokespersons. To determine if clearly labeled public relations practitioners are viewed more negatively than other internal, company-affiliated sources, the following hypothesis directed the research:

H2a: A clearly labeled public relations source will be viewed more negatively than a source not clearly labeled as a public relations source.

Again as in H1b, negatively viewed sources should also be less persuasive in their communicative efforts. To determine if public relations sources are less persuasive than other internal sources, the following hypothesis directed the research:

H2b: Company-positive information stemming from a public relations source will be less persuasive than the same information stemming from a source not clearly labeled as a public relations source.

Perception Scale Research Question

Data that result in claims that public relations is “a tainted term” (Holmes, 2003, p. 9) are often taken using single-item measures (National Credibility Index, 1999). Because subtle differences in perception are better measured using indexes composed of multiple components, the following research question guided the research:

RQ1: How will the general public indicate it perceives public relations practitioners on a multi-item scale and the individual items composing the scale?

Influence of Demographics on Perceptions Research Question

In addition, research has suggested that respondent demographics affect perceptions of credibility across all information sources (National Credibility Index, 1999). As public relations practitioners are asked to influence audiences ranging widely in demographic characteristics, the following research question guided the research:

RQ2: Do demographics such as gender, age, and level of education influence perceptions of public relations practitioner credibility as measured on a multi-item scale?

METHOD

Overview

U.S. households were contacted through a telephone survey center, and qualifying individuals were asked to respond to a series of questions concerning perceptions of public relations practitioners and other professionals who may speak for companies during times of crisis. In addition to a common set of questions that all respondents were asked, one of four spokesperson conditions was randomly assigned to respondents, and measures related to the condition were employed.

Respondents

English-speaking persons older than the age of 18 were eligible respondents. Trained interviewers called 4,712 random telephone numbers, reaching 2,125 eligible respondents and completing 593 interviews. The rate of eligible, answering households that responded to the survey was 27.9%. This cooperation rate seems to be in line with recent survey research and reflects the declining response rates resulting from increased use of answering machines, caller identification systems, and the increased magnitude of telephone solicitation (Massey, O'Connor, & Krotki, 1997).

Procedure

Trained student callers conducted the telephone survey from a 15-station telephone bank housed at a large southwestern university. Calls were made February 17 to 20, February 24 to 27, and March 3 to 5 nightly from 5:30 p.m. CDT to 9 p.m. CDT. States in the Eastern Time Zone were called from 5:30 p.m. CDT to 8 p.m. CDT, states in the Central Time Zone from 6 p.m. CDT to 9 p.m. CDT, states in the Mountain Time Zone from 6:30 p.m. CDT to 9 p.m. CDT, and states in the Pacific Time Zone from 7:30 p.m. CDT to 9 p.m. CDT. Callers recorded call disposition noting completed interviews, no answers, answering machines, refusals, language barrier, disconnects, fax numbers, and business numbers. Numbers that resulted in answering machines or no answers were called a maximum of seven times.

Callers introduced themselves to potential respondents by giving their name and university affiliation, providing a statement concerning the academic purpose of the call, and promising no attempt to sell goods or services. Callers then asked to speak to the person at least 18 years of age who experienced the most recent birthday. This method of selecting respondents has proven effective at ensuring broad representation because demographics are equally distributed across the calendar year (Salmon & Nichols, 1983).

Data Collection and Measures

A computer-assisted data entry system prompted callers through the questionnaire, and responses were entered directly into a computer data file hosted on a main server. The measures were designed to collect two types of data through a joining of experimental and survey methods. The questionnaire was composed of three parts: a section on respondent demographics; a section on attributes of public relations practitioners; and a section that required respondents to listen to and respond to a randomly assigned fictitious scenario involving either a company president, a lawyer, a public relations practitioner, or a newspaper journalist denying charges against a company. The demographics section always concluded the survey, but the sections on practitioner attributes and spokesperson perception were rotated between first and second positions. The reasoning behind this decision centered on an effort to keep responses to one section of the survey from systematically tainting responses to another. For example, if questions concerning the fictitious scenario always followed the practitioner attribute section, which asked questions about ethics and honesty, the possibility exists that respondents would be prompted by previous questions to respond in a biased manner to questions that follow.

In an attempt to overcome limitations of previous public relations perception surveys that did not require respondents to view practitioners in light of an actual communication situation, the study contained a section, as described previously, that varied spokespersons across a fixed condition. Following the rules of between-subject design, computer software randomly assigned one of four spokesperson conditions to respondents. In all cases, callers read a brief scenario to respondents with the spokesperson mentioned in the scenario varying between a company president, a lawyer representing the company, a public relations specialist working for the company, or a newspaper reporter responding to accusations. The text of the scenario was as follows: "A company named Chapman Enterprises has been accused of polluting a stream that flows through your town. (The president of Chapman, the public relations specialist for Chapman, a lawyer representing Chapman, or a reporter for the local newspaper) is interviewed on television and says that Chapman did not pollute the stream." The three questions that accompanied the scenario asked if the spokesperson was telling the truth, if the spokesperson was acting ethically, and if the respondent believed it would be safe to swim in the stream. Each question was accompanied by an 11-point scale anchored by 0 (*definitely no*) and 10 (*definitely yes*).

For the public relations practitioner perception section of the survey, eight statements borrowed from past credibility research (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970; Callison, 2001; McCroskey, 1966) were adapted for the telephone survey environment. On an 11-point scale anchored by 0 (*strongly disagree*) and 10 (*strongly agree*), callers gathered responses to the statements "PR practitioners are (intelli-

gent, trustworthy, uniformed, dishonest, credible sources of information, unethical, virtuous, and biased sources of information).”

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

Of the 593 survey respondents, 57.7% were women, and 42.3% were men. In addition, the mean respondent age was 42.7 years ($SD = 15.7$) and the modal age was 45 and the median 42. In terms of highest level of education achieved, 6.9% attended high school but did not graduate, 17.9% possessed a high school degree, 30.4% attended college but did not earn a degree, 30.5% graduated from college, and 14.3% held graduate degrees.

Credibility of Affiliated Spokespersons Hypotheses

H1a and H1b predicted that sources closely affiliated with an organization would be less credible than sources not directly employed by the organization. For data analysis, the company public relations practitioner, the company lawyer, and the company chief executive officer (CEO) were combined into a single “affiliated source” group; the local newspaper journalist served as the “unaffiliated source.” In addition, education level was collapsed into high school degree or less category and a college experience or more category, and age was collapsed using a median split in which all respondents 42 years and younger were grouped as were all respondents 43 years and older. These groupings allowed for a 2 (affiliation level) \times 2 (education level) \times 2 (age level) \times 2 (gender) full-factorial design. Demographics were included in analyses to help produce a more in-depth investigation of public perception of affiliation. Because initial statistical tests uncovered no main effects or interactions involving age level or gender, they were excluded from subsequent analyses. Both H1a and H1b were supported. Analyses revealed a main effect for level of affiliation on perceptions of the source telling the truth, $F(1, 589) = 10.06$, $p < .01$, and on perceptions of the source acting ethically, $F(1, 589) = 4.07$, $p < .05$. Overall, respondents rated affiliated sources as less likely to be telling the truth ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 2.78$) compared to unaffiliated sources ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 3.06$) and affiliated sources as less ethical ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 3.07$) than unaffiliated sources ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 3.15$).

Analyses also revealed significant interaction effects involving level of education and affiliation for both measures. Affiliated sources fared better in terms of perceptions of telling the truth with lower educated respondents ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 3.02$) than they did with higher educated respondents ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 2.69$). The finding reversed itself, however, on unaffiliated sources with lower educated respondents rat-

ing the spokesperson more negatively ($M=4.03$, $SD=3.18$) than did higher educated respondents ($M=5.01$, $SD=3.00$), $F(1, 589)=3.97$, $p<.05$. This interaction effect was consistent across the measure of ethical behavior. Lower educated respondents rated affiliated sources as more ethical ($M=4.02$, $SD=3.36$) than did higher educated respondents ($M=3.67$, $SD=2.96$), but nonaffiliated sources rated more positively with higher educated respondents ($M=5.33$, $SD=3.15$) than they did with lower educated respondents ($M=3.81$, $SD=3.57$), $F(1, 589)=6.79$, $p<.01$.

H1b predicted that information attributed to affiliated sources would be less persuasive than information attributed to sources not seen to be working directly for the organization. Although neither source type was able to achieve scores above a 3 on a 0 to 10 scale with a higher number indicating more faith placed in the spokesperson, affiliated sources were less persuasive ($M=1.68$, $SD=2.75$) than were unaffiliated sources ($M=2.58$, $SD=3.27$), $F(1, 589)=5.77$, $p<.05$, at convincing respondents that the stream a company has been accused of polluting was safe for swimming. Analyses revealed no significant interactions between education level and the measure of persuasiveness.

Credibility of Internal Spokespersons Hypotheses

H2a and H2b predicted that public relations practitioners would be less credible than other internal, affiliated sources. As outlined in the discussion of results relating to H1a and H1b, education level, age level, and gender were included in initial analysis. Mimicking the previous findings, initial statistical investigations revealed no simple main effects or interactions involving age level or gender, and the two factors were excluded from subsequent analyses.

Neither H2a nor H2b was supported. Respondents rated a company's public relations practitioner ($M=3.60$, $SD=2.71$), lawyer ($M=3.05$, $SD=2.73$), and president ($M=3.65$, $SD=2.87$) as equally unlikely to be telling the truth as compared to a local newspaper reporter, $M=4.79$, $SD=3.06$, $F(3, 585)=3.98$, $p<.01$ (post hoc tests conducted using Student-Newman-Keuls). Incidentally, analyses also revealed a significant interaction effect between job title and education level, $F(3, 585)=4.53$, $p<.01$. Respondents in the low-education group rated public relations practitioners and lawyers more favorably ($M=3.82$, $SD=2.93$; $M=4.00$, $SD=3.13$, respectively) than did their more educated counterparts ($M=3.53$, $SD=2.64$; $M=2.68$, $SD=2.47$, respectively). The other sources, a company president and a local newspaper reporter, fared better with higher educated respondents ($M=3.87$, $SD=2.84$; $M=5.01$, $SD=3.00$, respectively) than they did with the lower educated respondents ($M=2.94$, $SD=2.90$; $M=4.03$, $SD=3.12$, respectively).

On the question of acting ethically, respondents rated a company's public relations practitioner ($M=3.97$, $SD=3.15$), lawyer ($M=3.78$, $SD=3.21$), and president ($M=3.52$, $SD=2.80$) as equally ethical as a local newspaper reporter, $M=4.99$, $SD=3.29$, $F(3, 585)=2.15$, $p=.09$. Analyses did reveal, however, a significant interaction

effect between job title and education level on the ethical behavior measure, $F(3, 585) = 2.84, p < .05$. These findings mirrored those on the previous measure of “telling the truth.” Respondents in the low-education group rated public relations practitioners and lawyers more favorably ($M = 4.24, SD = 3.86; M = 4.35, SD = 3.24$, respectively) than did their more educated counterparts ($M = 3.89, SD = 2.91; M = 3.56, SD = 3.19$, respectively). In addition as earlier, company president and local newspaper reporter fared better with higher educated respondents ($M = 3.59, SD = 2.77; M = 5.33, SD = 3.15$, respectively) than they did with the lower educated respondents ($M = 3.30, SD = 2.95; M = 3.81, SD = 3.57$, respectively).

H2b predicted that information attributed to public relations sources would be less persuasive than information attributed to other source types. Data analyses revealed that the company’s public relations practitioner ($M = 1.87, SD = 3.07$), lawyer ($M = 1.60, SD = 2.52$), and president ($M = 1.61, SD = 2.69$) were equally unpersuasive in communicating the safety of swimming in the stream when compared to the local newspaper reporter ($M = 2.58, SD = 3.27$), $F(3, 585) = 2.64, p < .05$ (post hoc tests conducted using Student–Newman–Keuls). No significant interaction effects were revealed.

Perception Scale Research Question

The descriptive statistics associated with the eight individual items employed to measure public relations practitioner credibility are provided in Table 1. As can be seen in the Overall Mean column of the table, scores are grouped around the measure mean of 5. In fact, taking into account that a lower score is more positive on the measures of uninformed, dishonest, unethical, and biased, public relations practitioners scored better than the midpoint on all items other than virtuous and biased. Practitioners received the highest score on the intelligent measure and the lowest on the biased measure.

To group the single-item measures into a more complex multi-item scale, the eight individual ratings were subjected to a principal component analysis without rotation of components. With the ratings of uninformed, dishonest, unethical, and biased reverse coded, three factors emerged accounting for 65.0% of the variance (30.5%, 21.1%, and 13.4%, respectively).

The first factor, labeled *truthful*, showed high loadings on three traits, namely trustworthy (.79), credible (.73), and virtuous (.61). A correlation analysis revealed that the traits showed a high degree of interitem consistency ($\alpha = .74$) indicating that the items were measuring a similar, single trait. This warranted the construction of a composite measure of truthful by averaging the ratings across all items.

The second factor, labeled *moral*, showed high loadings on the three traits—reverse-coded dishonest (.57), reverse-coded unethical (.63), and reverse-coded biased (.541). Averaging the ratings on the three items created a composite measure of moral. Interitem consistency proved sufficient for this combination ($\alpha = .62$).

TABLE 1
Mean Responses to Individual Items Employed to Measure Practitioner Credibility

| Item | Gender | | Age | | Education Level | | Coll. Exp. and More (SD) |
|-------------|-------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Overall M (SD) | Male (SD) | Female (SD) | 42 and Under (SD) | 43 and Over (SD) | H.S. Grad. and Less (SD) | |
| Intelligent | 7.10 (2.56) | 6.91 ^a (2.08) | 7.25 ^b (2.37) | 7.22 ^a (2.09) | 7.08 ^a (2.32) | 7.02 ^a (2.71) | 7.13 ^a (2.09) |
| Trustworthy | 5.04 (2.51) | 4.81 ^a (2.31) | 5.20 ^b (2.63) | 5.06 ^a (2.42) | 4.98 ^a (2.56) | 5.04 ^a (2.82) | 5.03 ^a (2.40) |
| Uninformed* | 4.21 (2.95) | 4.38 ^a (2.85) | 4.08 ^a (3.03) | 4.10 ^a (3.00) | 4.34 ^a (2.94) | 4.56 ^a (3.14) | 4.13 ^a (2.89) |
| Dishonest* | 4.67 (2.59) | 4.74 ^a (2.48) | 4.62 ^a (2.66) | 4.67 ^a (2.55) | 4.68 ^a (2.63) | 4.80 ^a (2.75) | 4.63 ^a (2.53) |
| Credible | 5.29 (2.71) | 5.05 ^a (2.70) | 5.46 ^b (2.71) | 5.23 ^a (2.65) | 5.35 ^a (2.80) | 5.57 ^a (2.98) | 5.19 ^a (2.62) |
| Unethical* | 4.65 (2.61) | 4.69 ^a (2.48) | 4.61 ^a (2.70) | 4.65 ^a (2.54) | 4.65 ^a (2.67) | 4.76 ^a (2.94) | 4.61 ^a (2.49) |
| Virtuous | 4.75 (2.33) | 4.52 ^{a*} (2.23) | 4.91 ^{b*} (2.40) | 4.79 ^a (2.14) | 4.73 ^a (2.47) | 4.83 ^a (2.59) | 4.72 ^a (2.24) |
| Biased* | 6.77 (2.88) | 6.88 ^a (2.92) | 6.68 ^a (2.85) | 6.75 ^a (2.84) | 6.83 ^a (2.91) | 6.37 ^a (3.18) | 6.90 ^b (2.76) |
| Sample size | 593 | 251 | 342 | 288 | 280 | 147 | 446 |

Note. All comparisons are horizontal within demographic grouping. Means are compared using *t* tests. Means within demographic grouping not sharing a superscript are significantly different at $p < .10$; superscripts marked with an asterisk are significantly different at $p < .05$. Items marked with an asterisk denote an item reverse coded for factor analysis. All items were measured on an 11-point scale anchored by 0 (*strongly disagree*) and 10 (*strongly agree*). Items accompanied the following question: "Public relations practitioners are...."

The third factor, labeled *smart*, showed high loadings on intelligent (.50) and the reverse-coded uninformed (.68). Analysis revealed a low level of interitem consistency between the two items ($\alpha = .24$). Because of this low value, no composite score could be created for the third factor.

To answer the question of how the general public perceives public relations practitioners as indicated on a multi-item scale as posited in RQ1, simple means of the indexes were calculated. The overall mean score on the truthful measure was 5.02 ($SD = 2.05$), slightly above the scale midpoint. The overall mean score on the moral measure was 4.64 ($SD = 2.02$), slightly below the scale midpoint.

Influence of Demographics on Perceptions Research Question

The first research question allowed for the creation of a scale that could be employed to measure public perceptions of public relations practitioners. With a scale in place, the influence of demographic characteristics on views of public relations

could be examined. In fact, researchers surveying the general public concerning public relations in the past have stated that demographics such as age and education influence perceptions of credibility in sources (National Credibility Index, 1999). These researchers, however, did not statistically validate their claims.

Data analysis in this study revealed that perceptions of practitioners were fairly stable across demographics. The only significant difference within gender, age, or educational level groups appeared on the single-item measure of virtuous with men viewing public relations practitioners as less virtuous than women viewed them, $t(591) = 2.02, p < .05$. All means are provided in Table 1. Approaching significance was the difference between the genders on practitioners being intelligent, trustworthy, and the single-item measure of credible, $t(591) = 1.82, p = .07$; $t(591) = 1.86, p = .06$; and $t(591) = 1.80, p < .07$, respectively. In each case, men were more critical of practitioners than were women. In addition, the difference between low-educated respondents and high-educated respondents on perceptions of practitioner bias approached significance, $t(591) = 1.95, p = .052$, with those more highly educated seeing practitioners as more biased as compared to the less-educated counterparts. No differences approached significance across the individual measures between young and old.

Employing the composite scores created through factor analysis, it was revealed that men view practitioners as less truthful ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.95$) than women view them ($M = 5.19, SD = 2.11$), $t(591) = 2.32, p < .05$. There was no difference between the genders on perceptions of practitioners being moral with men indicating a mean score of 4.56 ($SD = 1.86$) and women indicating a mean score of 4.69 ($SD = 2.14$), $t(591) = 0.79, p = .43$.

Age had no impact on perceptions of practitioners being truthful. Those 42 years and younger rated practitioners with a mean score of 5.03 ($SD = 1.94$), whereas those older than 42 years gave practitioners a mean rating of 5.02 ($SD = 2.11$), $t(566) = 0.37, p = .97$. Likewise, age did not influence perceptions of practitioners being moral because the younger group's mean score was 4.64 ($SD = 1.95$) and the more senior's was 4.61 ($SD = 2.06$), $t(566) = 0.19, p = .85$.

Finally, high- and low-educated respondents viewed practitioners as equally truthful ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.95$; $M = 5.15, SD = 2.31$, respectively), $t(591) = .85, p = .39$. Likewise, the more educated did not attribute morality to practitioners any more than the less educated did ($M = 4.62, SD = 1.97$; $M = 4.69, SD = 2.17$, respectively), $t(591) = .37, p = .71$.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine how the general public views public relations practitioners. This in itself does not make this study noteworthy. Numerous research projects have been undertaken with that goal in mind. What does set this

study apart, however, is that it attempted to measure perceptions of public relations through a combination survey and experiment in which research participants not only could rate public relations practitioners in a communicative setting and a real-world context but in which they could also register their opinions using a multiple-item measure in an effort to gauge the complete construct of credibility. On this level, the study has shown that experiment and survey can be married and that composites provide richer data than single items. Most important, however, is the fact that a more complete understanding of perceptions of practitioners results from the study—and the news for the public relations industry is some good, some bad, and some ugly.

Sources directly affiliated with an organization on whose behalf they speak were, as predicted, more negatively perceived and less effective than an independent source. This finding mimics the findings of other credibility research (in particular Callison & Zillmann, 2002) but paints an even direr picture for public relations practitioners. Because ethically and practically a company spokesperson cannot disavow any connection to the company represented, it seems that any attempt to communicate on an organization's behalf from the organization's own pulpit is doomed. It should be noted, however, that damning all affiliated sources based on this research may not be founded. Company public relations practitioners, lawyers, and presidents do not represent the gamut of internal spokespersons. Operations managers, CEOs, technicians, and company scientists all could serve as spokespersons if properly trained and inclined (Budd, 2000; Callison, 2001; Campbell, 1999; Cohn, 2000; Durham, 1997; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Lerbinger, 1997; Reber, Cropp, & Cameron, 2001; Wisenblit, 1989), but no research exists validating their effectiveness. Callison and Zillmann (2002) suggested that a company being accused of negative actions would do best to hope for an independent agent to take its side in public discourse. This study supports that this method of crisis communication would be most effective. What has yet to be uncovered is how an organization should pass its time in a firestorm waiting for an avenger to appear on the doorstep.

In particular, data suggest that the affiliated sources employed in the study are viewed as less likely to be telling the truth and less ethical than their independent counterparts. The finding in terms of telling the truth seems explicable in light of the research suggesting that company motives are often doubted, and audiences often doubt organizational intentions (Sallot, 2002). The ethics finding, however, is more troubling. Not detailing all motivations could be viewed, probably wrongly so, as a part of a savvy media plan; however, there is no way to positively spin perceptions of unethical behavior.

Equally interesting is how level of education influenced perceptions of sources. College-educated respondents were more critical of affiliated sources and, on the other hand, more supportive of independent sources than their less-educated counterparts. It would seem that this educated public is especially wary of source affilia-

tion. The data do not offer an explanation for this effect or detail how the information should be used when planning communications, but assuming that a college-educated demographic serves as an important public, problems surrounding source affiliation may be even more pronounced than detailed here.

Finally, in terms of affiliation, sources viewed as married to the organization were less persuasive than the outside source at convincing the public that accusations against the organization were false. Past experimental research (Callison 2001; Callison & Zillmann, 2002) has not linked negative perceptions of a spokesperson to lack of persuasive ability. This study not only suggests that certain company spokespersons are saddled with a negative reputation but also suggests that their communications are not effective, providing even more convincing evidence that their use should be limited if possible.

It has been posited that a quality spokesperson can be selected from various personnel, including public relations practitioners, company lawyers, CEOs, and researchers (Budd, 2000; Callison, 2001; Campbell, 1999; Cohn, 2000; Durham, 1997; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Lerbinger, 1997; Reber et al., 2001; Wisenblit, 1989). This study was particularly interested in determining how public relations sources rated in comparison to other internal sources. The findings in this regard could be offered up in terms of good news and bad news. The good news is that public relations was rated no more negatively or less persuasive than other affiliated sources; the bad news is that all internal sources fared poorly in comparison to an independent source. Although it was not unexpected that the newspaper reporter source employed in the study would be seen most positively (see Budd, 2000; Lamons, 2002), it went against predictions that all those affiliated with the organization would rank so similarly, especially considering speculation that CEOs have taken a credibility hit due to recent corporate scandals (Dobrow, 2002) and the fact that lawyers seem to generally rate at the bottom of America's most trusted professionals ("Trust in Priests," 2002). The good news is that public relations practitioners are equally capable as other known company sources of representing an organization. Nonetheless, it is doubtful that public relations practitioners want to be thought of as "the information source that is no worse than whatever else you could push behind a microphone."

In parceling out how demographics influenced perceptions of internal sources, data revealed that better educated respondents were more critical of the public relations practitioner and company lawyer speaking on an organization's behalf than they were of the CEO or journalist. As before, this interaction effect reveals that the consumer group that may present the biggest obstacle in terms of communicating corporate news effectively is the highly educated demographic, one that is surely targeted in many communication campaigns.

The second component of this study centered on measuring overall public perception of public relations practitioners independent of the experimental setting. Specifically, the use of multiple items to measure credibility that could later be

combined into a composite index drove the research. On the single items, perceptions of public relations sources ranged around neutral to slightly positive. The only ratings that dipped into the negative tail of the scale were for biased and virtuous. The poor rating on biased comes as no surprise because research has suggested that audiences regularly question the motives behind organizational communications (Sallot, 2002) and that public relations practitioners are, in the end, employed to help an organization maintain a positive perception. The poor rating on virtuous, like the previous finding on organizational sources being unethical, presents more of a point of concern for the industry. Again, this study offers no remedy for these negative perceptions, but perhaps by outlining their existence along specific attributes, steps can be taken to correct misconceptions or improper actions by practitioners.

In gauging overall perceptions of practitioners, the fact that two composite measures of credibility could be created indicates that single item measures of credibility may be invalid. In particular, credible grouping with the measure for trustworthy and virtuous but not with intelligent, the reverse-coded dishonest, the reverse-coded unethical, the reverse-coded biased, and the reverse-coded uninformed demonstrates the complexity of the credibility construct. Any attempt to portray public perception of public relations practitioners must note that simply asking whether a source is credible or not does not reveal the subtle attributes that influence source effectiveness.

Finally, the comparison of perceptions across demographic groups revealed the consistency of the attitude toward public relations practitioners. Comparing respondents of different genders, respondents of different age groups, and respondents of different education levels, the only difference on the individual items that emerged was that men viewed practitioners as less virtuous than women viewed them. On the composite measures of truthful and moral, the only difference that surfaced was that males perceived practitioners as less truthful than did their female counterparts. Although these differences should not be overlooked, it should be noted that of the 30 comparisons made, only two demonstrated significant discrepancy between perceptions. This finding indicates that no one group, of those investigated, is any more critical of the profession than the others. However, the fact that education level seemed to play such an important role in measures taken during the experimental portion of the study suggests two conclusions: (a) attitudes taken using a real-world context differ from attitudes taken using simple recall and recount measures and (b) more research is needed into how different demographics react to organizational messages and their sources.

Ultimately, the results of the study seem to prompt questions concerning ethics in public relations practice. If affiliated sources including practitioners are viewed as lacking credibility, possessing bias, and devoid of virtue, then it would seem that filtering company-positive information through a source not blatantly attached to the organization would be most fruitful. However, assuming that unaffiliated sources

will not be standing in line to take up arms for a company with which they have no connection, should an organization make efforts to communicate through perceived outside sources, and more importantly, is it ethical to do so? The fact that collections of people assembled by organizations to represent them have become so pervasive signals how it would seem the public relations industry answers these questions.

These collections, known as front groups, are often created by public relations firms or the companies themselves and are composed of citizens and experts who seemingly have few ties to the organizations whose causes they support. Their existence allows corporations to take part in public discourse while remaining anonymous (Beder, 1998). In addition, the names of front groups are often carefully selected so as to disguise their interests and sponsors. For example, the group "Northeasterners for More Fish" was organized by a coalition of utilities and other companies accused by environmental groups of depleting fish populations (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003), and "Americans Against Unfair Gas Taxes" is the grassroots group maintained by the American Petroleum Institute in hopes of influencing legislation (Stauber & Rampton, 1995).

Considering the quote from a public relations firm executive stating, "Put your words in someone else's mouth . . . There will be times when the position you advocate, no matter how well framed and supported, will not be accepted by the public simply because you are who you are" (Beder, 1998, p. 21), it would seem that front groups represent a conventional tool viewed as eligible for use in modern communication practice. Despite the fact that the findings of our research suggest that front groups and speaking through seemingly unaffiliated mouthpieces would positively affect corporate communications in times of crisis, the use of these groups has been condemned as unethical by the PRSA on grounds of misrepresentation. Likewise, public relations texts deem the use of front groups as inappropriate for ethical reasons (see Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2001; Wilcox et al., 2003).

With the chief professional organization and educational materials decrying the use of front groups, then what is the public relations industry to do with the finding that speaking through affiliated sources leads to a lack of credibility and persuasive prowess? As stated previously, organizations may fare best by influencing outside experts to support organizational stances simply because the organization is in the right. Research has already established that governmental agencies and independent scientists can effectively deflect organizational blame in times of crisis when they possess evidence contrary to negative claims (Callison & Zillmann, 2002). Where this research fails is that it does not provide practitioners with any advice to follow when outside sources cannot be summoned. Future research should, therefore, focus on uncovering the persuasive abilities of internal sources other than those employed in this study (CEO, lawyer, and public relations practitioner) and should investigate the most effective means of communicating company positive news, be it through the various news media or through various message structures.

In conclusion, this study revealed the good (public relations perceptions are fairly stable across demographics), the bad (public relations practitioners are no better than other company sources), and the ugly (all company affiliated sources are negatively viewed) as they relate to public perception of the industry and those working within it. No doubt other good and bad can be found in the results. Overall, however, like other similar studies this one does not place practitioners in an overly positive light. In addition, like other similar studies, this one does little to offer solutions to the problem. Ultimately, the value in this study may lie in the fact that it confirms the findings of past experimental research in a much broader population, and it outlines the importance of multi-item measures in future surveys of practitioner credibility.

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