The role of research in PR practice: the other side of the story, from the developing world (Ghana)

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Abstract

Some leading public relations scholars in Western developed countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK, have observed that the use of research by public relations practitioners is generally not encouraging. This view is supported by research findings from a number of countries (see, for example, Grunig (1992), Tymson & Lazar (2006), Cutlip, Center & Broom (2006), Lindenmann (2003)). On the contrary, there is hardly any literature on the subject matter in developing countries, and particularly Africa. At best, what we have is undocumented anecdotal support of the notion that research hardly gets attention in public relation practice in developing countries.

This paper is a small step in the direction of addressing the imbalance in the literature relating to the use of research in public relations or otherwise in developing countries. In relation to the research-practice nexus, this paper seeks to answer two main questions: (1) what are the views of practitioners’ concerning the use of research in public relations practice? (2) Is public relations practice in public enterprises in Ghana informed by research?

Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire and the sample was drawn from a population consisting of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) that were featured in Ghana’s 2007 budget statement. The findings show that contrary to popular belief, public relations practice within the public/government sector in Ghana is informed by research and that practitioners report that their research activities are aimed at consensus.
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss findings relating to the role and application of research in public relations practice in Ghana. This is set in a discursive overview of the general role that research is supposed to play in the carrying out effective public relations programs. Many prominent public relations scholars and practitioners have emphasised the importance of research in public relations practice. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006), for example, suggest that without research practitioners are limited to making mere assertions that they know the situation. This state of affairs affects their ability to present and advocate concrete proposals supported by evidence and theory. Lindenmann (2003), in his contribution to the research discussion, argues that research is the key to any successful public relations, communication and/or marketing effort, not only in the business world but also in the non-profit and government sectors. Stacks (2002) also points out that research is fundamental to any public relations activity or campaign and therefore part of a practitioner’s job. In answering the question as to why research is important in public relations, he sums up the significance of research thus:

Without research, practitioners are left to “fly by the seats of their pants”; that is, they are reduced to taking, at best, educated guesses regarding the problem and potential intervention programs and thus run a greater risk of being unable to predict outcomes accurately. Without research, the practitioner cannot assess where a public relations program begins, how it evolves, or what the end product will be. Quite simply, without research you cannot demonstrate the efficacy of your program. (Stacks, 2002, p. 4)

Indeed, the fact that many models of public relations such as Marston’s RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) and Hendrix’s ROPE (Research, Objectives, Program, Evaluation) begin and end with research, is proof enough of the significance of research to public relations activity (Stacks, 2002). In spite of the importance of research as discussed above, our search for literature did not reveal any studies in the developing world, particularly Africa, that dealt with the place/role of research in public relations practice on the continent. In the particular case of Ghana, the only previous study that made some reference to the role of research in public relations was conducted by Gyan (1991) who noted that research has often times been ignored for want of time and resources. Gyan’s assertion was corroborated by the Executive Secretary of the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana in an interview in June 2006.

In line with concerns expressed about research, or the lack of it, in public relations practice and the lacunae in the literature regarding the developing world context, this paper focuses on how public relations practitioners working in public sector organisations in Ghana view the research function and its place in the public relations process. Specifically, the research-praxis focus of this
paper seeks to answer two main questions within the Ghanaian context: (1) What are the views of practitioners concerning the use of research in public relations practice? (2) Is public relations practice in public enterprises in Ghana informed by research? Ultimately, the contribution of this paper lies in the fact that it seeks to tell the other side of the research story in the public relations literature and by so doing takes a small but vital step towards bridging the gap in the literature. Also, it is a timely response to the call of Tymson and Lazar (2006) for this theme to constitute a major focus of future research in public relations.

Research in this paper is seen as covering the two public relations research traditions of environmental monitoring (scanning and identification of problems) and evaluation research. Although some scholars such as Dozier and Repper (1992) and Broom and Dozier (1990) differentiate between these two types of research, there is common agreement that the rationale for research in public relations is to reduce uncertainty in decision making (Cutlip et al., 2006; Xavier et al., 2004).

Literature review: the developed world context

Unlike the developing world situation, the literature search produced a number of studies carried out in Western developed countries. However, the evidence there also suggests that despite the abundance of claims and support for the centrality of research to public relations practice, there is proof that the actual and regular use of research in daily public relations activity is unimpressive, to say the least. As Tymson and Lazar (2006) note “public relations’ has met the growing need for formative and evaluative research with a patchy track record” (p. 119).

Several studies in different parts of the world have established the fact that the use of research is still not commonplace in public relations practice. In a review of studies on the role of research in public relations, Tymson and Lazar (2006) concluded that “A review of academic and industry studies worldwide shows growing recognition of the need for research and evaluation, but a disappointingly slow and low uptake by practitioners” (p. 119). In Australia, for example, Walker (1994), in an analysis of how research featured in award-winning public relations campaigns, found that over 15% of the campaigns did not mention research at all. This is not withstanding the fact that research was one of the main criteria for entry. While the percentage of campaign submissions that did not mention research is of some concern, even more worrying is the fact that the award judges let those submissions through despite research being an explicit criterion. Xavier, Patel, Johnston and Sambath (2004) also reported a similar situation, although in their case the percentage of campaigns had no research but was judged at award level was a mere 2.8% (n= 73).

At the international level, a study carried out by the IPRA in 1994 which examined both attitudes towards evaluation and implementation found a huge
discrepancy between what public relations practitioners thought about research and what they did in reality. For example, while in the USA as many as 75.9% of public relations practitioners agreed that evaluation was crucial, only 16% frequently undertook research aimed at evaluating their performances. The divergence between research rhetoric and empirical reality was even worse in Australia where 90% recognised evaluation as being essential yet only a paltry 14% actually undertook research aimed at evaluating performance. The situation was not much different among IPRA members in other international locations, where 89.8% accepted that evaluation was necessary but only 18.6% undertook evaluation research (IPRA, 1994). In a review of relatively recent studies carried out in the US and UK in 2000, Tymson and Lazar (2006) concluded that there has not been any noteworthy change in the use of research in public relations since 1994 (p. 123). These findings lend credence to the observation made by Grunig 25 years ago, that “Although considerable lip service is paid to program evaluation in public relations, the rhetorical line is much more enthusiastic than actual utilisation” (Grunig, 1983, p. 31).

Public/government sector public relations and the place of research

Garnett (1992) asserts that because government decisions and actions often affect more people and with greater consequences, communicating in government tends to be more important and often more difficult than communicating in business. It is not surprising therefore, that governments are increasing their expenditure on promotion and information management activities that fall within the purview of public relations (Ward, 2003). According to Cutlip et al. (2006) the overall goals for public relations programs in the government/public sector are: (1) informing constituents about the activities of a government/public agency, (2) ensuring active cooperation in government programs as well as compliance with regulatory programs, and (3) fostering citizens’ support for established policies and programs. These three goals, according to Cutlip et al. (2006), are premised on two fundamental reasons: namely that a democratic government must report its activities to the citizens, and that effective government administration requires active citizen participation and support.

Even though these goals do not explicitly mention research, it is safe to assume that some kind of research will be conducted to help gain understanding of how governments can work to foster citizens’ support. Also, it could be expected that after activities and programs have been carried out towards these ends, some form of evaluation research will be conducted to determine the success or otherwise of the public relations effort.

In Ghana, a policy document issued by the Information Services Department (ISD) of the Ministry of Information and National Orientation indicates that the broad objectives of public relations in the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) are to:
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- Create and maintain informed opinion about relevant subject matter or issues pertaining to the respective government agencies;
- Use publicity methods, where possible, to achieve the goals of agencies;
- Assist and advise on matters bearing on relations between an agency and its publics;
- Advise ministries on the public’s reaction to policies or activities of an agency.

With regard to the ISD itself, its remit is stated as follows:

- Create awareness of government policies, programs and activities
- Promote Ghana’s international marketing agenda
- Provide public relations support to government MDAs and Ghana’s missions abroad
- Get feedback from the public to government for policy reinforcement or redirection.

(Source: http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/republic/ministry.profile.php?)

Again, in this particular instance, while research is not mentioned specifically in the document, one can argue that inherent in these objectives, is an expectation that public relations would engage in some kind of research. Whether it is finding out the public’s reaction to government policies and activities or advising on matters concerning agencies and their relationships with their various publics, it can be surmised that there is an underlying anticipation of research since that is the only way by which these objectives can be achieved. It is clear then, that, at least in theory, research is supposed to feature in public relations activities in the public sector in Ghana. In Australia however, the need for government communication/public relations programs to be informed by research is explicit. The two main bodies that are in charge of government communication programs – the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications (MCGC) and the Government Communications Unit (GCU) – have a strict requirement that all communication campaigns must be based on comprehensive research (Xavier, et al., 2004).

An important issue with regard to government public relations is its goal. Some scholars such as McNair (1996) and Cutlip et al. (2006) have noted that more often than not, government public relations programs deal with one-way communication directed at constituents. They argue that information
management in the public/government sector is based more on the expediency of the organisation’s goals than on the principle of mutuality, where stakeholders’ concerns are taken into consideration. Indeed, McNair (1996) contends that much of public relations in government/public sector remain hidden from public view. He states his case strongly thus:

Aware that information and access to it is a power resource, governments have become enthusiastic custodians of a vast machinery for suppressing, censoring, and at times falsifying information which, it might be thought, the citizenry of a democratic state has a right to receive in a relatively unadulterated form. (McNair, 1996, p. 39)

In the specific case of Ghana, while there is a constant stream of information usually emanating from the Information Services Department (ISD) under the Ministry of Information, Laryea and Kwansah-Aidoo (2005) have still noted that government actions are usually not well explained to the general public. This observation notwithstanding, the objectives outlined earlier would seem to suggest, at least at a rhetorical level, that, there is willingness to share information and a latent hint of wanting to persuade. Indeed, the ISD document referred to emphasises the point that it is the duty of practitioners to present the Ministry’s policies to the public and seek to ensure that they are understood, and that, no matter the opposition, practitioners’ attitude must be one of firm support and helpful explanation of the ministerial line.

Data collection

A 22-item self-administered questionnaire was the main instrument for collecting data. Seventeen out of the 22 questions were close-ended, with the remainder being partially open-ended. The open-ended questions were actually only partially open because respondents were given options to choose from and only when they could not find an appropriate response did they choose the option of “Other; please specify”. The questionnaire was pre-tested and then refined after a few ambiguities were noted. Questions elicited information ranging from respondents’ demographic background, through opinions about the state or level of public relations research in their organisations, the nature and orientation of their public relations research, to the goal of research in their organisations. The sample was drawn from a population consisting of government MDAs that were featured in Ghana’s 2007 budget statement. Questionnaires were however distributed to only respondents in Accra. The concentration on Accra is justified on the grounds that being the national capital, all the government agencies and departments had their headquarters there.

The purposive sampling method was used to select the MDAs featured in the 2007 budget statement to represent public sector organisations. The Ministries, Departments and Agencies in the 2007 budget statement were chosen because they represent the core of organisations in Ghana that received government
subvention, and are also the single largest grouping under the Public Services Commission. The total number of MDAs located in Accra was 37, and all were given questionnaires to complete but only 30 returned them, giving a response rate of 81 percent. Of the 30 respondents who filled out the questionnaires 20 were males (67%) and 10 females (33%). With regard to positions occupied by respondents, 21 (70%) were substantive heads designated as Public Relations Officers (PROs), and nine (30%) were Assistants/ or Deputy PROs. In terms of duration of service, 17 (56.7%) had worked in their positions for 1–5 years; six (20%) for 6–10 years; four (13.3%) for 11–15 years; two (6.7%) for 16–20 years; while only one (3.3%) had served for over 21 years.

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) computer program. Some of the descriptive data have been summarised and presented in the form of graphs, tables, frequencies and percentages.

Findings

Due to constraints of space, only a few key findings have been selected for presentation and discussion in this paper.

Practitioners’ views about using research in public relations practice

In an IPRA Gold Paper No. 11 (1994), Tom Watson is cited as bemoaning the lack of research by practitioners in the U.K. The paper reports that the practitioners surveyed by Watson indicated, among others, that they used “intuition and professional judgement” in the evaluation of programs. To find out what the general perception of public relations research was amongst Ghanaian practitioners, a series of questions and propositions were put to respondents. To begin with, they were asked to indicate their views on the suggestion that public relations work does not require research. The response pattern showed that majority of respondents 28 (93.3%) indicated that public relations required research. One (1) 3.3% respondent said it did not require research, while there was also (1) 3.3% non response. Not surprisingly, therefore, all 30 respondents in the study also indicated their support for the proposition that research be made an integral part of public relations activity. Specifically, five (16.7%) respondents agreed with the idea that research be made an integral part of public relations, while 25 (83.3%) of them strongly agreed. Following on, respondents’ opinions were sought on the proposition that research is very involving and should therefore be used sparingly in public relations practice. The responses showed that majority 22 (73.3%) disagreed with the proposition; four (13.3%) agreed, while the remaining four (13.3%) indicated they ‘don’t know.’

Areas that engage practitioners’ research attention

One of the main concerns of the study was to find out the specific areas of public relations activity that engaged practitioners’ attention most. As the graph
in Figure 1 shows, media relations together with crises and issues management with mean values of 18.6% each are the areas that engage practitioners’ attention most when it comes to doing research. This is followed by public issues campaign and debates with a value of 12.9%; and internal communication and corporate-community relations follow up with 11.4 and 10% respectively. Following next with values less than 10% are speech writing and events management (8.6% each), consumer relations (7.0%), and investor relations (4.3%).

Figure 1: Areas that engage practitioners’ research attention most

Type of research carried out

Broom and Dozier (1990) distinguish between two types of research – environmental scanning or scanning research and evaluation research. They note that scanning is essentially for problem detection, exploration and description, while evaluation research is designed to determine how well a public relations program has worked. Lindenmann (2003) is of the view that an effective combination of the two is preferable. In this study therefore respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they utilised both environmental monitoring/scanning and evaluation research. The findings as shown in Table 1 reflect the variation in responses.
Table 1: Types of research practitioners engage in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% environmental Monitoring only</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% evaluation research only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% evaluation and 50% monitoring</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-80% evaluation and 20-40% monitoring</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-80% monitoring and 20-40% evaluation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A little over one-third (40%) of respondents indicated that their research involved ‘60-80% environmental monitoring and 20-40% evaluation’. This was followed by another one-third (33.3%) who cited ‘50% evaluation and 50% environmental monitoring’. Only four (13.3%) said their research is characterised by ‘60-80% evaluation and 20-40% environmental monitoring’. Three (10%) respondents use ‘evaluation research only’, while one respondent depended on ‘100% environmental monitoring only’.

Who does the research and at what phase of the public relations process

Two main issues of importance in the debate about the role of research in public relations are: (1) who actually conducts the research and their location within the organisation and (2) the stage of the public relations process at which research is carried out. In relation to the first, two-thirds of respondents 21(70%) said they used both in-house and consultancy research services. A quarter (23.3%) however relied solely on in-house resources for research, while one also solely depended on consultancy services, and yet another said ‘none of them’.

Regarding the second concern, a little more than half, 16 (53.3%) of respondents indicated that their research mostly took place at all three phases of the public relations process. About one-third, 11 (36.7%) said their research mostly took place at the planning phase, while two (6.7%) respondents mostly had theirs at the implementation phase, and the remainder (3.3%), indicated the evaluation phase.
Research methods mostly employed by respondents

Respondents were required to select as many as possible from the list of methods provided. Various combinations were chosen, but as Table 2 below shows, generally the predominant research method used by practitioners is ‘media content analysis’. This method was the one chosen most by respondents (24 out of 30 or 80%) followed by ‘news clippings/clip files’ which was selected by 21 (70%) respondents. The next are ‘interviews’, ‘field reports’ and ‘surveys’ with values of 60%, 53.3%, and 50% respectively in that order. The remaining all fall below 50%, with the least used method (experiments), chosen by only two (6.6%) respondents.

Table 2: Most commonly used research methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Activity</th>
<th>Frequency (n=30)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media content analyses</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News clippings/clip files</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News clippings/clip files</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field reports</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/expert contacts</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet and library searches</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents’ rating of the use of research in their daily work and reasons for rating

As Table 3 shows, as many as 50% of respondents indicated that they relied ‘very highly’ or ‘highly’ on research in their daily work. Forty-three per cent indicated moderate use of research, while almost 7% of respondents indicated low use of research.
Table 3: How respondents rate the use of research in their daily work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following on from respondents’ rating of their use of research, they were asked to agree or disagree to the statement: lack of sufficient budgetary allocation for research accounts for the low level of research in my organisation. The response pattern as indicated in Table 4 below shows an overwhelming support for the suggestion. Specifically, as many as 26 (86.7%) indicated support for the assertion with 15 (50%) strongly agreeing and 11 (36.7%) agreeing that insufficient budgetary allocation accounts for low research in the organisations. The remaining four (13.3%) was distributed as follows: 1 (3.3%) strongly disagreed, 2 (6.7%) disagreed, and yet another was a non response.

Table 4: Responses to the assertion that low budgetary allocation affects research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
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The goal of public relations and the role of research

According to Grunig (1992), the activities or behaviour of organisations are mostly influenced by the worldview or mindset they hold about what they do and the role that research plays in it. He argues that two main worldviews

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characterise public relations practice, namely the asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews. In the asymmetrical worldview, organisations attempt to change the behaviour of their publics without any attempt at changing their own behaviour. In the symmetrical worldview, organisations operate on the principle that they get what they want when they give up some of what they want. The goal of research in the asymmetrical view is to gain information that would be used to advance persuasive techniques while the goal of research in the symmetrical view is to gain information that would ultimately contribute to building mutual understanding.

Based on these assumptions, we sought to elicit respondents’ views on their organisations’ goal of research. Specifically, they were asked to choose the statement that best described the goal of research in their organisation. The options given were: (a) Our research aims at building mutual understanding between our organisation and our publics/stakeholders; (b) Our research aims at helping our stakeholders/publics to understand the organisation better and (c) Others; please specify. The findings show that slightly more than half of respondents (17, 56.5%) chose the first option, indicating that their goal of research was building mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics. A little over a quarter (8, 26.7%) chose the second option, noting that their goal was to help their publics to understand their organisations better. The rest of respondents, under a quarter (5, 16.7%) gave their own responses all of which had the central theme of “enhancing the reputation of the organisation”, which then became a third category of response.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings show that contrary to popular belief that research takes a backseat in the activities of public relations practitioners in Ghana, the core of practitioners in the public sector in Ghana are well aware of its importance and do accord it a place in their daily work. While the sample size is not big enough and the concentration on the public sector limits the extent to which findings can be generalised, the subsequent discussion about the role and place of research in public relations practice in Ghana is still instructive. This is especially so when viewed against the fact that the sample of respondents represent the core of public relations practitioners in the MDAs in Ghana. A number of points are worth noting in this regard.

First, the findings relating to practitioners’ view about using research in public relations practice are interesting. Over 93% of respondents agreed that public relations work requires research and therefore research should be made integral to public relations activity. One would expect, then, that at the very least the same percentage of respondents would disagree with the proposition that research is very exacting and should be used sparingly in public relations practice.
However, the responses showed the exact opposite: 13.3% (four respondents) agreed, while a similar percentage indicated that they 'don’t know.' Taken together, this means that at least a quarter of respondents are not entirely sure as to the necessity of carrying out regular research in public relations activity due to difficulties that they perceive. While this particular situation puts the earlier overwhelming support for making research an important part of public relations activity into question, it also at some level supports Grunig’s (1983) assertion about the rhetorical line being more enthusiastic than the actual utilisation. It also, in part supports Walker’s (1994) findings that practitioners value research but see it as “non-essential” (p. 150). In another vein, these contradictory findings also confirm Tymson and Lazar’s (2006) observation that cost and lack of knowledge in how to conduct research are inhibiting factors to the use of research in daily public relations planning and activity.

Another finding that bears comment is that dealing with the point at which research takes place. The fact that almost 43% of respondents indicated that their research effort takes place at the planning phase only, can be a bit worrisome when viewed against the background that public relations research should focus on the entire process as suggested by Lindenmann (2003). As Dozier (1990) notes, the planning phase of public relations involves problem detection, exploration and description, which is essentially only scanning research. We can therefore, as a matter of academic conjecture, cautiously reason that in the context of this study, organisations that limit their research to the planning phase of the public relations process only, are more inclined to practise the asymmetrical model of public relations. In Grunig’s models of public relations he explains that in asymmetrical public relations though practitioners/organisations carry out research, they nonetheless use it to develop messages that are most likely to persuade publics to behave as the organisation wants but not what or how a program implementation or impact has been. Indeed, the fact that Information Services Department expects practitioners to present the Ministry’s policies to the public and ensure that they are understood, irrespective of opposition, and maintain an attitude of firm support and helpful explanation of the ministerial line, is an indication of leanings toward the asymmetrical model.

The ranking of media content analysis as the most used research tool (with news clippings/clip files following closely behind as the second most used), is also worth commenting on. The two highly ranked tools taken together could be seen as an indication of the fact that most of their research is media/source-centred. While research into media can help understand how the media perceives an organisation and its offerings (Woods 2004) its focus needs to be moved away from clips counting to “the strategic impact of communication on organisational relationships” (Wood, 2004; Xavier et al., 2005, p. 9). In the case of clips counting, what it indicates is that the focus of the research is on finding out what happens after programs have been carried out. If research is to be used
to help understand and diagnose present problems and opportunities that may exist for an organisation, then it needs to utilise tools that will help capture such trends.

On another level the general findings relating to the most commonly used research tools, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups on one hand, and media content analysis, field reports and news clippings/flies on the other, is encouraging. This is because utilising this range of tools is indicative of a commitment to conduct both source-oriented and receiver-oriented research. While source-oriented techniques have their benefits (as have been noted already in the discussion on media research); it is the application of receiver-oriented measures that can build credibility and show the value of programs (Pinkleton & Austin, 1999).

Although the findings show a mixed orientation in terms of research tools and orientation towards source-oriented and receiver-oriented research, on some level the results can also be seen as providing subtle hints about possible leanings towards the asymmetrical and symmetrical models of public relations. This can be seen as laying the foundation for future research to investigate the extent to which research practices reflect the two worldviews (Austin, Pinkleton & Dixon, 2000) and the possible variations between and within government organisations. As public relations has moved from a technical to a management function (Stack, 2002), the role of research has become increasingly important and this is clearly illustrated by the positive views about research that respondents in this study have shown.

Given the relatively small number of respondents involved in this study we need to be cautious in the kind of conclusions that we draw and in making any suggestions. Nevertheless, we believe that this study provides a sound basis for delving further into the role of research in communications/public relations practice within the Ghanaian and even wider African context. In many ways, one can suggest that the results of this study are encouraging. Just like the study by Pinkleton and Austin (1999) in the USA, these findings show, to a very limited extent, that practitioners in Ghana do understand the significance of research in public relations activity. It is heartening to note that fifteen years after Gyan (1991) made the assertion that research hardly gets attention in Ghanaian public relations practice, the limited evidence shown here would seem to suggest that some progress has been made in the right direction. This, in our view, is worth documenting and celebrating as a veritable addition to the literature; one that tells the other side of the research in public relations story from a developing world context.
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References
