

A MODEL OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PROCESSES FOR PERSUASION: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS IN THE INTERNET ERA

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Abstract

Public relations has gained popularity through the Internet where the general public receives news and information. Moreover, public relations has a strong potential to persuade the public to form attitude toward a brand. The paper intends to study the processes of persuasion in public relations and to come up with a model depicting the processes of public relations in persuading the target audience to accept the messages and creating relationships between the company and the stakeholders. The study will also discuss how public relations is changed in the era of the Internet and has a significant impact on integrated marketing communications as a whole.

Key words: public relations, persuasion, relationships, Internet, social media

Topic groups: marketing and consumer behavior, social science and business

INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) has remained one of the most mysterious communication mix elements for the business communities, as it is often utilized by the government agencies or not for profit organizations. When the integrated marketing communications concept started in the 1990's, PR has been applied for business. As PR focuses on soft sell and below-the-line strategies i.e. no need for corporations to pay the agency fee, it gains popularity over advertising as the efficient communications tool for business.

PUBLIC RELATIONS DEFINITION

We can trace the developments of the communication tools which also gradually adapt itself for the business community through its definition. Denny Grisworld, defined PR as "the management function that evaluate public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of actions to earn public understand and acceptance (Simon, 1980 p.8). The definition is very broad and can be applied for both public and private sectors. It emphasizes on PR's role as a long-term management function which requires planning, organizing, leading and controlling. The main point is to change public attitudes by evaluating and knowing what the public perceives and then planning and implementing policies and procedures to change the public attitudes. The main outcomes are public understanding and acceptance.

The emphasis on PR as a management tool can also be witnessed in James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984, p.6)'s definition that "public relations is management of communication between an organization and its publics" This broad definition can be applied to any communication circumstances where the audiences are mass public and the organization has an intention to

communicate with them in a systematic way. The relationships between the source, an organization and the receivers, the publics, are clearly stated.

Hunt and Grunig (1994) further analyzed the public relations and came up with four characteristics: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communications. The analysis incorporated both one-way and two-way communications found in the PR of an organization.

1. Press agency/publicity. This is a one-way asymmetric communication in which the organization wants to communicate to the public for the purpose of propaganda. In this case, the organization does not normally need to know the needs of the public and it does not need to provide completely truthful information.
2. Public Information. It is another kind of one-way symmetric communication in which the organization disseminates information to the public with truthful information and concerns about the fairness in the information the receivers get.
3. Two-way asymmetric communication. The organization can decide to have a two-way communication with the public while the flow of communication can be stronger from the organization to the public because the former needs to persuade the public of certain issues e.g. When you drink, don't drive, smoking is hazardous to health, etc.
4. Two-way symmetric communication. The organization can conduct a two-way symmetric communication by gathering necessary information about public attitudes, assessing and understanding what the public needs. This allows the information to flow from the receivers to the sender before the organization changes the public's attitude. The objective of two-way symmetric communication is to create mutual understanding by enhancing relationships between the two parties allowing participation from the receivers.

Clarke Claywood (1997, p. XI) proposed the definition of public relations as " the profitable integration of an organization's new and continuing relationship with stakeholders including customers by managing all communications contacts with the organization that create and protect the brand and reputation of the organization". It focuses on the new and existing relationships between the organization and stakeholders including customers. This shows that PR can function as a communication tool that links between the organization and its customers. The benefits for the brands and the organization are indicated in this definition.

The Claywood's definition is consonant with Thomas Harris (1998)'s one. Harris proposed that PR can build brand equity through the outside-in approach where the company understands the needs of their customers through closer relationships between the two parties.

RELATIONSHIPS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Smith (2009) envisioned a new perspective of PR that serves the needs of an organization to persuade its customers and focuses on creating relationships which will be productive and beneficial to both the organizations and the publics.

From several definitions of PR, it can be witnessed that PR has turned from one-way to a two-way communication enabling the organization to assess the needs of the public audience and understand them much better.

In terms of the amount of information flow, it is obvious that the flow of information can be considered as two-way if the senders decide to study and get more information from their audience before it starts a plan to communicate with them. Through this well-planned

communication approach, public relations is considered a strategic management tool which aims to communicate with the public audience and create long-term relationship with them.

From the two-way symmetric communication perspective, the objective of mutual understanding has paved ways for PR to include the information about its public audience instead of sending the information directly without any assessment. Though this approach might take more time for the senders to communicate with its receivers, the communication between the two parties is expected to yield understanding between each other even more.

In integrated marketing communications, the relationship between the target audience and its sender is often a long-term result of a well-planned communication program. Marketers rely on databases to understand the need of audiences much better. PR has moved toward the Internet where relationships can be built through PR activities in on-line and social media websites e.g. facebook, twitter, myface, youtube, etc. (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

METHODS

This study intends to explore the conceptual framework of public relations' persuasion processes to understand how the new media, such as the Internet and social network, change the ways marketers and stakeholders utilize public relations to create and enhance relationships among one another. We will first explore the changes in communication environment and the effects on PR before coming up with a model.

Analysis of changes in communication environment and the effects on public relations

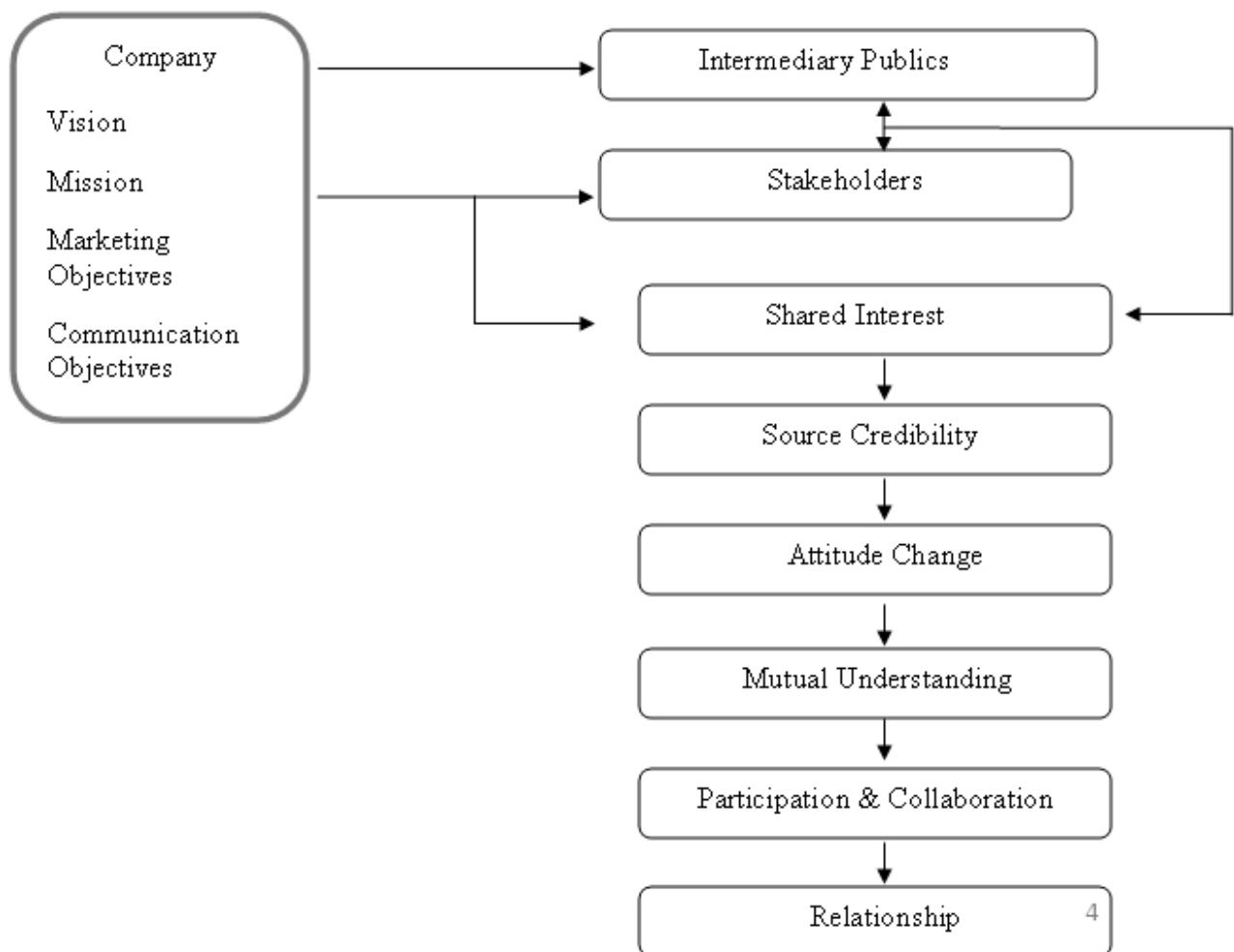
Public relations has evolved throughout the past decades. The media which are the main channel for public relations to communicate with the stakeholders do not function appropriately as communication specialists and marketers expect. There are certain reasons which can be analyzed by components in the communication process model.

1. Changes of Sender's roles in public relations. As two-way symmetric communication becomes popular, senders have a minor role in controlling the messages. They are expected to be more participative and collaborate with the audience. This is very different from the senders of PR in the old days when the objective was propaganda.
2. One to one communication with the target audience. Marketing managers find it very wasteful to use mass media to reach the target customers while the customers are getting smaller in groups. Moreover, marketers also find that advertising cannot reach their target market as effective as before, because they design products or service for specific groups of customers. Thus, communicating through advertising to a larger group of audience does not yield the results they expect. PR through mass media cannot differentiate itself from advertising in both the amount of budget spent and the effectiveness the marketers expect.
3. The demassification of the mass media. The mass media's environment is changing. As the target market is getting smaller, they now focus on some specific groups instead of general ones. This is the same trend as the target customers of most manufacturers. Thus, magazines can survive much better than newspapers which have broader audiences, while cable television and radio which have more specific groups of audience have more competitive advantage than over-the-air broadcast television. The Internet is the winner of all as it is a two-way communication medium. Its message can be designed to be very specific for smaller groups of audiences. Therefore, PR must adjust itself to this demassified media environment.

4. Reduction of Dependence on mass media. Throughout the past decades, Marketers using PR have depended on whether the message will be accepted to be published or broadcast, and, in most cases, they cannot specify timing. What marketers only know is the mass media have large groups of audiences and some of whom may be their target groups. This has led to the failing attempt for the marketers to use PR to reach the right groups of audiences especially in a cluttered mass media environment. With Internet and social media, marketers can reduce their dependence on mass media.
5. Brevity of message. As a result of overloaded information in the society, people prefer short messages that they can comprehend easily and suitable to their own lifestyle and preference. Senders cannot generalize the message with jargons and content which are not specifically appropriate to the receivers. It is likely that the public audience turn away from such type of message. Moreover, the mass media are also likely to reject messages which are not suitable to their target audience. Thus, apart from the preference of short messages by the target audience, the mass media are also forcing the senders to send only short messages to avoid rejection from their audience. This trend happens in the social media such as twitter which limit the words to 140 spaces. Youtube and myface also implicitly limit the content.

A Model of Public Relations Processes for Persuasion

Figure 1: A Model of Public Relations Processes for Persuasion



In the Internet, PR must adapt itself to the changing macroenvironment. Since public relations is an integrated marketing communication element, it requires strategic management planning. The PR campaign is generally a long-term, result-oriented plan and all the planned actions must be coordinated well with the directions of an organization (Bowker, 2004). A review of vision and mission of the organization and how it coordinates with the actions of the campaign should be explored from the beginning.

However, most organizations do not pay attention to the strategic management process that is linked directly with the PR department, leaving the PR managers to plan the campaign without considering the organization as a whole. Even though the organization has less control on the message, the PR department should be able to organize the direction of the PR campaign so it is consonant with the organization's mission.

Apart from the directions of the overall organization, PR managers also integrate their PR plans with the marketing plan and consider the marketing objectives of the organization. Since public relations has capabilities of brand building, PR managers always keep in mind that all the PR activities can affect brand equity one way or another.

One element in the marketing plan that affects public relations is the marketing communications. As integrated marketing communication tactics require marketers to consider all the integrated marketing communication elements together and make certain that all the elements integrate well, marketers would consider whether the IMC plan should include PR activities and how well the overall plan would be with PR as one of its communication mix elements.

This is what Harris (1998) mentioned when he called for the inclusion of public relations in marketing as he termed "Marketing Public Relations" or (MPR). The advantages of public relations are tremendous since it can save the organizations' advertising expenses and it can hit the target groups more directly with high power of persuasion. Public relations gradually can enhance other communication mix elements especially through the Internet and the social media.

In terms of persuasion, what the organization prepares to communicate with the public can result in source credibility, which is very important in changing the attitude of the audience. Source credibility in public relations generally means the credibility of the organization or companies that try to communicate with the public. Generally, source credibility can be the result of several factors including expertise and trustworthy. (O'Keefe, 2002). Both are normally interrelated. Source that is found to be an expertise is also trustworthy by the receivers too.

The magnitude of effects from source credibility is also a result of at least two factors i.e. personal relevance (Johnson & Scieleppe, 1969; Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981; Rhine & Severance, 1970) and the timing of source identification (Greenberg & Miller, 1966; Greenberg & Tannenbaum, 1961; Husek, 1965; Mills & Harvey, 1972; Sternthal, Dholakia & Leavitt, 1978; Ward & McGinnies, 1974). The first factor is personal relevance. The receiver judges whether the source is talking about something that is personally relevant to what the receiver wants to listen to. This is related to what the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) indicated that the central route of persuasion which uses a rational approach, and the receiver evaluates whether the persuasive messages are personally relevant to his or her needs.

In social media, the Internet open doors to the websites that the receivers can choose the cyber-communities that are most suitable to their needs. Thus, the Internet naturally offers

the environment that the traditional media have no capability of doing so. The traditional media which are mostly one-way do not allow their audience to choose the content and contribute to the content as much as the Internet. When the source offers the environments or websites that the receivers feel they are personally relevant to the needs, the engagement or participation between the two parties increase, which would lead to more cooperation and good relationships.

The second factor is the timing of source identification. Researchers found whether the persuasive messages identify the source at the beginning or at the end has influenced on source credibility. If the source is introduced from the beginning, the messages will be well received by the audience and the source credibility is high in such circumstance. If the source identity is not announced until the message is presented, the source credibility appears to be lower.

The persuasion of PR messages in the social media or the Internet generally take advantages of the timing of source identification as the source is generally known by the audience from the beginning, even those who speak on the source's side. The source credibility of the PR messages is higher as the receivers know what they expect to get.

On the receiver's perspective, one of the most distinguished features of public relations is the word "public" which PR is trying to address. John Dewey (1927) defined public as a group of people with a shared interest and the organization intends to do something about it. With a particular interest in certain topic, the public tends to follow the topic very closely. The groups within the public can also be called stakeholders (Smith, 2009). When an organization has a relationship with the public, it is a relationship based on mutual understanding and participation. The relationship between the public and the organization has been studied by several researchers in the past such as Esman (1972), Evan (1976), Grunig & Hunt (1984), etc.

There are various ways to categorize the publics e.g. internal versus external; primary, secondary, marginal; current versus future; etc. However, this study categorizes the publics according to the relationship they have with the organization. First, the relationship is divided into direct and indirect involvement with the organization. The direct involvement can be further divided into vertical and horizontal relationships. The vertical relationship can be divided further into upward or downward.

1. The upward vertical relationship. The groups that the organization has the upward vertical relationship are normally those that supply the raw materials, labor or capital for the organization. They include suppliers, financial institutions, stockholders and investors, employees,
2. The downward vertical relationship. This group receives the output of the organization. They are customers and distributors.
3. The horizontal relationship. Some groups of the public are surrounding the organization. Even though they may not contact the organization directly, the issues or the existence of the organization can affect the well-being of these groups. They include the community, trade and professional organization, government, competitors, accreditation or quality assurance agencies.

The indirect involvement includes the "intermediary" public. This group of people who are in-between the organization and the group who are directly involved with the organization function as a group who relay the messages that the organization has. In the today's environment, they can function to relay the message back to the organization. The

intermediary public is also termed "networked public" or "intercessory publics" (Smith, 2009). In general, the intermediary public includes the media, the social network and the opinion leaders.

The flow of information in the intermediary publics can go through several steps. Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet (1948) proposed the two-step flow of communication theory stating that the information from the mass media does not necessarily pass directly to the receivers but it can influence the opinion leaders who will then pass on the message and influence the receivers. This communication theory was also supported by the diffusion of innovation by Rogers (1995) whereby the adoption of new products or ideas can be influenced by the ones who adopted them earlier.

The characteristics of the communication between the intermediary public is in the form of a network. That is why the term "networked publics" exist. The most common communication means between the intermediary public that forms a network is word of mouth (WOM). Word of mouth exists as the most common form of communication between individuals who have a shared interest in a particular issue. Word of Mouth is defined as the personal communication that involves endorsing products or service without commercial benefit (Hongcharu & Eiamkanchanalai, 2006). WOM is now facilitated by the Internet allowing the words to spread more quickly and anonymously.

The persuasive effects of WOM is strong as it is regarded that the messages in the WOM without commercial benefits are neutral and gain more credibility. Part of the strength in magnitude of effects can be explained by the personal relevance and timing of the source identification which was elaborated earlier.

FINDINGS

As the model of PR processes for Persuasion is developed, we can come up with the processes of persuasion of PR which consist of the following factors between the sender and receiver in public relations which lead us to the end results of public relations---the relationships between the senders and the receivers. These factors are as follows:

1. Shared interest. The sender of the PR messages must realize there are people who are affected by the organization or the public and have an issue of concern with the organization. This is in the beginning where the organization must review its mission and business objectives so it can send the message with clear directions of the organization. At the same time, the receivers know they have a concerned issue with the organization and there are usually groups of people who have the same concern. These people can communicate among one another in a network or they might hear the story about the organization somewhere or through the mass media. Shared interest brings about the communication between the organization and its audience and among people in the public.
2. Source Credibility. On the sender's side, credibility is an issue where the receivers seek. Source credibility is a result of perceived expertise and trustworthiness by the receivers. Personal relevance and timing of source identification are the factors that strengthen the magnitude of source credibility.
3. Attitude Change. When receivers get the persuasive messages, they are likely to follow one of the two routes, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The first route to persuasion is the central route which uses the rational approach, depending on motivation and ability. The receivers must have motivation to process the messages including personal

relevance, issue involvement, need for cognition, etc. plus the ability to process including comprehensibility, issue familiarity, distraction, etc. If the receivers follow the central route to persuasion, the attitude change is likely to be enduring. In persuasion, even though the receivers are not persuaded by the central route, they still can be persuaded through the peripheral route using the emotional approach. The peripheral route includes the effects from source characteristics, peripheral cues such as music, executional impacts, light, sound, etc. All these peripheral elements can lead to temporary attitude change.

4. Mutual understanding. The sender and receiver are likely to have more mutual understanding of each other as the need for cognition has been fulfilled and the issues of common interest have been addressed.
5. Participation and Collaboration. When the two parties have mutual understanding, it is possible to strengthen the ties by engaging in common activities. PR messages are generally followed by some collaborative actions for both parties such as sports, causes, events, rallies, etc. In the social media, the receivers can participate through on-line activities such as expressing their opinions, rating, voting, purchasing, etc. The activities of the receivers benefit other intermediary public members, creating and strengthening relationship.
6. Relationship. As the name of the public relations suggests, PR intends to create relationships. This is the reason this study uses relationships as criteria to classify types of publics. However, the long term perspective of relationships makes it very difficult for marketers to assess a PR campaign, especially for brand loyalty. Public relations utilizes a strategic management approach which tries to create and sustain long term relationships with some groups of the publics and it is these relationships that strengthen brand equity for the organization in the long run. Moreover, it also contributes to shared interests that both parties intend to have from the beginning.

DISCUSSION

The persuasion process of public relations especially in the Internet and social media has completely changed the way we perceive and utilize public relations in several aspects. From the public to an individual. The communication between the organization and groups of the publics or stakeholders has become more and more individual by the Internet. Instead of communicating to large groups of audiences, the organizations are now able to communicate with the individuals who receive the message all at once. The Internet has opened the opportunities to address each person individually even though the message is emailed or sent to several people at the same time. Automobile manufacturers can recall damaged cars without making it known to some other groups who need not know the incident. Emailing or sending short messages to each affected individual is more discreet. The messages can be personalized and well received, increasing customer intimacy.

1. From one-way to two-way. Public relations which utilizes mass media and is only capable of one-way communications is turning to be more interactive after most of PR messages are transmitted in the websites (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). The interactivity completely changes the PR industry. Through social media, intermediary publics can follow the news and PR messages from the organizations or their opinion leaders directly and can respond to those messages almost instantaneously. The anonymity of the Internet helps senders and intermediary publics gain more self-confident in expressing their unbiased opinions toward any issue.
2. From direct to indirect. The Internet has also allowed the organizations to connect with people who are not initially the groups the organizations view as related to them such as employees, stockholders, customers, suppliers, etc. They are people who do

not have any direct contact with the company or may be far away from the issues of the organizations. However, as communications technologies evolve, it is possible now for the new groups of intermediary publics to know about the issues surrounding the organizations that might affect their life. They may be the one who spread the news about the company. For instance, the company may suffer from an oil spill in northern Atlantic. The people all around the world including those in Australia and New Zealand can get the news and watch how the company handles the oil spill far away from their homes. The intermediary publics may decide to praise or criticize the company in a blog or after the news in websites such as cnn.com or bbc.com, etc. In short, the participation and relationships of the organizations are easily executed by the intermediary publics and they can spread the news through word of mouth and the Internet much easier than before.

3. From inactivity to involvement. Public relations' objectives generally do not require the publics to have any behavioral responses to the PR messages. As witnessed in the PR definition, the objectives of PR are mainly to create understanding and acceptance. Therefore, the stakeholders or groups of audiences of public relations do not have any activity after receiving the messages and the evaluation is mainly focus on changing public attitudes. However, the sender of the message normally anticipates some behavioral changes after the receivers are persuaded. However, the evaluation of PR does not typically cover to the extent beyond attitude change. With the changes in new communication technologies, the publics can immediately respond to the public relations campaign instantaneously and anonymously and they are likely to express their opinion interactively in the Internet, leading to activities beyond attitude change such as rating, voting, engaging in the activities that the organization proposes from forwarding the messages to purchasing the products. Public relations can encourage the publics to involve in the activities the organizations propose more effectively.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Public Relations in the age of the Internet has changed dramatically and the marketers must realize this new developments as they can now reach the opinion leaders in a very subtle ways. This study has depicted the important trend in integrated marketing communications as public relations gradually targets for specific groups of stakeholders and reach them individually through the Internet. The target audience of public relations is no longer large mass public as most people understand. Moreover, the interactivity of the Internet helps enhance the relationships of the organization and its stakeholders.

This study attempted to understand the persuasion in public relations processes. Therefore, a model of public relations processes for persuasion is created outlining the steps where the company can affect the targeted intermediary publics or the stakeholders it selects. The factors which have led to the relationships between both the sender and the receivers include shared interest, source credibility, attitude change, mutual understanding, participation and collaboration and relationship eventually.

Marketers should explore the shared interest of the sender and receivers to see whether there is anything common that can lay a good foundation to build a strong relationship. For example, in the recent famous PR campaign in Thailand, a cosmetic firm utilized a former actress who is blind to promote its lipsticks. The actress received approximately 30,000 US dollars while the company donated about 30 US cents per each lipstick to the organization that helps the blind. The company found a common interest with the mass public to help

the blind and connected with its target audience. We can find the similar campaigns in several organizations e.g. Microsoft, Ben and Jerry, etc.

In the case of the cosmetic company in Thailand, the company selected the source who is credible because she is blind to communicate on behalf of the company. At the same the company also benefited from the cause because it actually helped raise the donation to the blind organization. This led to the attitude change of the intermediary publics and the stakeholders. Even those who never had a chance to buy the products such as men, also felt positive about what the company had done. This is the power of public relations that can affect the public attitude including those who are not a direct customer. The mutual understanding between the sender and receiver happen because the PR processes are able to change the attitude or persuade the receivers to understand what the company is trying to communicate. Therefore, we can expect to see more participation or collaboration between the sender and the receivers. Participation and collaboration can be in several forms and they are not limited to purchase activities. Several companies decide to form a club for customers and non-customers to participate in corporate social responsibility projects such as helping the poor, cleaning the streets, building schools, and shelters, etc. All these activities involve the company and the stakeholders to work together (collaboration) to reach a goal and they create a strong relationship between the two parties.

The relationships between the organization and the intermediary publics or stakeholders created by PR can be fostered and strengthened by other communication mix elements such as sales promotion, direct marketing, events, personal selling. Marketers can design an integrated marketing communication program so the intermediary publics talk about the brand in the social media and let them persuade the potential customers to receive samples and try the brand. Then the salespersons approach the target customers to explain more about the brands and persuade him or her to buy. Moreover, the company can spread the news about the events through social media and when the publics go to the event, the company can collect participant's information in a database and contact them in the future.

PR functions as a means for the organizations to kindle the fire of relationships and sustain them throughout the life of the brands or the organizations, while other communication mix elements will do the rest. The persuasion processes of public relations have also changed the ways marketers manage the PR campaign as public relations adapts itself to the new media that allow its messages to reach more specific audiences than ever before.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though this study is trying to explore the public relations processes for persuasion and come up with the model to explain the factors that are necessary to create the relationship between the organization and the stakeholders, future studies can test the model empirically especially in the context of the companies that actually engage in corporate social responsibility projects. However, in the long run, the researchers should study the actual buying behaviors that are resulted by the persuasion in public relations campaign. The study would shed some light so we understand the effects of public relations processes which can result in persuasion and eventually purchase behaviors especially for stakeholders who are not customers. A longitudinal study on the sustainability of the relationships between the company and its stakeholders through the PR processes is also an interesting topic.

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