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BledCom 2016

Emotional engagement strategies in PR firms: senior level perspectives of professional relationships (working paper)

Abstract

Introduction and purpose of study

Much of the PR literature tends to focus on engagement in building relationships between organisations and publics or stakeholders. However, less is known about everyday interpersonal engagement, especially in regard to the professional context of the PR consulting firm (Sissons, 2015). This paper asks what it means to engage with clients and journalists, from the perspectives of managing directors and owners of London-based public relations agencies. What are the "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983) that govern these relationships and importantly, how and when are emotional/relational strategies passed on to PR executives and PR teams?

Literature review

Engagement is an elusive concept. It has been referred to as an "ideograph" which is something that is "concrete, vague, and evanescent all at the same time" (Taylor and Kent, 2014, p. 385). Nevertheless the concept of engagement is widespread and used in various contexts to refer to the building of social capital through interactions between groups. Five types of engagement have been identified in public relations: social media, employee, CSR, civic and dialogic (Taylor and Kent, 2014). Engagement using dialogue is considered to be the most ethical approach since many types of engagement are of a one-way nature, whereas dialogue, it is argued, is relational and engages the emotions through "underlying principles" including mutuality and empathy (Taylor and Kent, 2014, p. 387).

This paper reports on a study approached from a socio-cultural perspective that aims to explore the emotional dimension of professional relationships in public relations consulting firms. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of public relations emotional/relational work, drawing on the sociology of emotion (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Scheff, 1994; Clark, 1997; Burkitt, 2015; Flam and Kleres, 2015) and emotion in organisations (e.g. Fineman, 2010; Bloch, 2012; Gabriel and Ulus, 2015).

Methodology

The methodology adopted is social phenomenology which is concerned with analysing the meaning structures of everyday life (Aspers, 2009). Few scholars have published empirical approaches in social phenomenology; however, Yeomans (2013) developed an approach to explore how junior and middle-level PR executives experience, practise and understand their professional relationships.

Data gathered in Spring/Summer 2016 adopted a social phenomenological approach which is concerned with analysing the meaning structures of everyday interactions (Aspers, 2009) drawing on the subjective experiences and perceptions of an homogenous sample. Eight in-depth semi-structured interviews of up to 1.5 hours in length were conducted with a sample of participants comprising directors, partners or owners of PR firms identified for this study as “emotional experts” (Kleres, 2015) who set the emotional tone of their enterprises. Five participants worked in London and 3 were based in northern cities, and comprised 6 women and 2 men with a median age of 40.

Interviews were complemented by observational data drawn from 4 London agencies and the researcher’s self-reflexive account based on diary notes. As adopted in a previous study (Yeomans, 2013), key themes were re-constructed as an anonymised ‘account of practice’ and sent to all participants as part of a member checking/validation process (Creswell, 2007). This descriptive account of practice provided the basis of further feedback/dialogue with participants, as well as theorising.

From a preliminary thematic analysis several themes were identified which typified an emotional ‘logic of practice’ of managing relationships within the PR firm (Voronov and Vince, 2012). The key relationships that participants struggled to balance concerned their employees and clients. While on the one hand, participants sought to recruit employees with a positive attitude (at entry level, personal attributes were strongly emphasised over skills), well-suited employees brought with them high expectations of the workplace; valuing enjoyment, hard work and job satisfaction but also work-life balance. Some participants attributed such expectations to the values of the ‘millennial generation’; experiencing the demands of younger employees as often challenging. Interestingly, some participants’ expressed concern *for their own* work-life balance and especially the need to consider their caring responsibilities away from the workplace. A shared requirement for work-life balance, together with the issue of good PR staff being in short supply, especially in London, meant that participants sometimes went to great lengths to get the ‘right fit’ with clients and to manage clients’ expectations of what the PR/Communications firm could deliver. Fewer but better (i.e. easier to manage) clients was a prevailing theme for the MDs of small PR firms, thereby reducing emotional risk to client relationships, and a means of retaining good staff. Several participants related their previous experience of working for agencies with high staff turnovers and dissatisfied clients; a situation they strove to avoid in running their own businesses.

While participants typically had fairly remote personal relationships with journalists, these relationships were still important for account teams to build and foster, while an increasing emotional investment was encouraged with bloggers as their status grew as influencers in some markets. The growth of technology, however, meant that some account executives tended to "hide" behind emails rather than engage with journalists face to face or over the phone. When questioned about how they felt about being leaders in the PR industry, there was a strong ambivalence towards a wider leadership role and only one participant perceived herself as a leader and mentor within the industry. The main focus, for most participants, was on running a successful business, servicing their clients and maintaining a happy workforce. Finally, for two participants, being a senior PR woman meant that maintaining authority and respect was sometimes a struggle with male staff, male colleagues and male clients. Strategies for dealing with relationship issues could mean exploiting the status of male colleagues; while four out of the six women were involved, to varying degrees, in formal women's networks to enable them to gain support and share ideas.

This study will contribute to public relations knowledge in at least two possible ways. First it will offer insights into senior level emotional/relational strategies within the PR firm and thus how a specific aspect of "PRP culture" is produced and re-produced (Hodges and Edwards, 2014); second, the study can be viewed from the perspective of new institutional theory (PR consulting as an institution), contributing an emotional dimension to the notion of "institutional logics" – field-level practices: theories, frames and narratives (Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehmeier, 2013, p. 189).

Keywords: emotional engagement strategies, PR firms, professional relationships

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