

Strategic Communication and Sales Collaboration:

Examining how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness

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Dr. Paul K. Bates MTS, DPT, FCPA, FCMA, CMC

Abstract

Professional selling has a long history and is constantly evolving. Political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors contribute to a turbulent world in which public relations and sales must adapt, evolve and operate while contributing to the growth and success of the business. This development demonstrates that collaboration between strategic communications and sales can enhance a company's effectiveness. In this exploratory case study, critical features of the Excellence Theory, relationship theories, and mixed-motive communication were analyzed to investigate how and to what extent communication excellence is related to sales effectiveness. Based on in-depth interviews with 13 sales professionals, it becomes clear that when public relations functions at a level of excellence, it can lead to excellent sales performance. This case study can contribute to the pedagogy and practice of public relations and professional sales to positively influence operations and strategy within a company and improve organizational effectiveness due to strategic communication and sales collaboration.

Keywords: professional selling, sales, public relations, Excellence Theory, relationships, mixed-motive communication

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Introduction

Theories about sales and the sales profession have a long history and continue to evolve (Borg & Young, 2014; Iannarino, 2016). The sales profession has evolved dramatically throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries (Batchelor, 2009). Bacal and Brooks (2009) state that "the world of selling in the 21st century is very different from that of the last century" (p. xi).

Professional selling is undergoing significant and accelerated change due to market turbulence, an increasing number of stakeholders to manage, and enlightened awareness of the importance of cross-functional collaboration that contributes to sales success (Hartman et al., 2018; Mangus et al., 2020; Plouffe et al., 2016, as cited in Peesker et al., 2022).

Bacal and Brooks (2009) explain that there are many factors for this change, including international competition, technology, the shrinking global economy, increased price pressure, commoditization of products and services, and rapidly accelerating communication as the most critical factors. In addition, "customers are increasingly circumventing reps; they're using publicly available information to diagnose their own needs and turning to sophisticated procurement departments and third-party purchasing consultants to help them extract the best possible deals from suppliers" (Adamson et al., 2017, p. 29). Adamson et al. (2017) state that this trend will only accelerate and that for sales, "this isn't just another long, hot summer; it's wholesale climate change" (p. 29). Bacal and Brooks (2009) explain that these factors combine to make sales an even more challenging profession than ever before.

As a result, a reconceptualization of sales is needed (Borg & Young, 2014). This reconceptualization of sales should adopt a relational perspective that views the sales process as a multitude of relationships and their interconnectedness. Tencer and Cardoso (2010)

highlight this relational perspective, stating, "The purpose of sales is to develop customer relations; deliver the force behind "closing sales"; provide important market feedback, and directly impact the top-line (and middle-line) gross margins" (p. 48). With this in mind, sales has evolved into what many scholars define as "consultative selling" (Batchelor, 2009; Canadian Professional Sales Association [CPSA], 2017; Graziano & Flanagan, 2005; Liu & Leech, 2001; Newell et al., 2011; Rackham & DeVincentis, 1998; Smith, 1991).

Consultative selling is a relationship-based sales process. It is an active process of diagnosing stakeholder goals and challenges, collaboratively prioritizing stakeholder needs, and developing tailored solutions to meet those needs. This "evolutionary shift" (Batchelor, 2009) in the sales environment marks the recognition of the cultivation and maintenance of relationships necessary for modern sales performance and ultimately for overall organizational effectiveness. In this vein, Janssen (2022) states that "the lesser-studied, and scarcely understood domain of sales and professional selling has become increasingly important to organizations ranging from technology companies, charities, consulting firms, and service businesses" (p. 4).

Public relations is defined and focused on facilitating two-way symmetrical communication to cultivate and sustain relationships to achieve stakeholder and organizational goals (Grunig, 2006). In addition, Scott (2015) states that "now, great PR includes programs to reach buyers directly" (p. 11). From this perspective, public relations is the link between a company, its customer base, and potential customers (Davis, 2021). Accordingly, effective public relations can significantly impact existing and potential customers, resulting in increased sales, a competitive advantage, and ultimately improved profitability (Davis, 2021). Ultimately, companies that are skilled at and regularly use

excellent public relations can have an advantage over competitors who are not proficient in public relations (Davis, 2021; Grunig, 2006).

From this perspective, this case study examined public relations using the instrumental and normative principles of the Excellence Theory (De Bussy, 2013). This case study identified and analyzed strategic communication and collaboration in sales by examining how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness.

Research Problem

This case study examined strategic communication and collaboration in sales by analyzing how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness via an exploratory, multi-case approach (Yin, 2018). The results of this research were examined using the positive and normative principles of public relations identified in the Excellence Study (Grunig et al., 2006).

"The true purpose of a business, Peter Drucker said, is to create and keep customers" (as cited in Markey, 2020, p. 43). Furthermore, "sales and customer growth consistently rank as the most important priority amongst the top global business leaders" (Janssen, 2021, p.3). Interestingly, Cespedes and Weinfurter (2016) note that "for decades, Sales and Academia remained worlds apart and the business world did fine. But Sales is changing, Academia is out of touch, and this is bad for business and the academy" (p. 1). Cespedes and Weinfurter (2016) state that "better dialogue between Sales and Academia is timely, and society can benefit" (p. 1). In their study, Cespedes and Weinfurter (2016) point out that jobs in sales are associated with the highest career lifetime value. Given the amount spent on sales in our economy, this is also a critical productivity issue.

In addition, Bates (2007) discusses the importance of sales leadership in organizations, stating, "the introduction of sales leadership is very important and is a significant challenge in many, if not most, modern and large sales organizations" (p. 326). The importance of strategic communication and sales in pedagogy and practice is critical.

This case study examined how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness. Excellence Theory, the mixed-motive model of public relations, and relationship theories are used in this case study. These theories were compared to determine the position and influence of public relations in sales and how and to what extent convergences or divergences between public relations and sales contribute to organizational effectiveness. The results of this multi-case study support the identification of best practices for public relations professionals to improve sales performance and, conversely, to promote organizational effectiveness.

With academic and professional attention focused on the role of public relations in dominant coalitions and the return on investment (ROI) of the practice (Grunig, 2013), this case is essential to public relations and the broader business community because it contains empirical research linking public relations excellence to sales. As Grunig (2013) discusses, "public relations could not hold a position in strategic management without a way to measure its effectiveness" (p. 157). By matching public relations excellence with salesforce effectiveness, one can demonstrate the viability of public relations to strengthen its role among dominant coalitions. Undoubtedly, public relations is essential to any company's success (Davis, 2021), and this case study seeks to strengthen that position through the affiliation of communication excellence and its contribution to salesforce effectiveness.

Research Questions

To understand how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness, this case study focused on three research questions:

RQ1: How and to what degree do sales professionals practice excellence?

This question aimed to understand the convergence or divergence between sales and the Excellence Theory at a definitional level. This question sought to determine the respondents' knowledge and understanding of strategic communication to determine consistencies, similarities, or differences in examining how and to what extent communication excellence is related to sales effectiveness.

This question focused explicitly on the definitional understanding of public relations, its structure within the organization, its involvement in strategic decision-making, and senior management's empowerment of the function. These are salient characteristics of excellent public relations (Sriramesh et al., 2013), which can be compared to the field of sales and professional selling.

RQ2: How and to what extent is strategic communications aligned with sales to contribute to organizational effectiveness?

This question sought to build on the salient features discussed in the first research question by directly addressing the use, integration, and general principles of public relations concerning stakeholder relations, particularly in a sales context. This question examined how and to what extent public relations are operationalized at a strategic level regarding sales. These questions shed light on the convergence or divergence from the Excellence Theory and the extent of its impact on the effectiveness of the salesforce.

RQ3: How and to what extent does strategic communication affect sales operations, outcomes, and measures?

From a sales professional perspective, this question sought to identify the purpose and outcome of strategic communication and collaboration in sales. Specifically, the question addressed the contribution of public relations to sales operations, results, measures, its value to the organization in monetary and return-on-investment terms, and whether that value is measured. Finally, this question sought to identify any qualitative or quantitative outcomes that result from strategic communication and collaboration in sales, or the lack thereof.

Since ethics is considered the tenth generic principle of excellence in public relations (Bowen, 2004), this question examined strategic communications and sales ethics to determine how and to what extent public relations influences sales ethics and the resulting operations, outcomes, and measures of the function.

Literature Review

Public Relations

Public relations faces the challenge of differentiating itself from other functions such as marketing, advertising, and organizational communication (Smith, 2012). As a result, scholars and practitioners must define and identify the value of this practice (Smith, 2012). This case study is based on the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) definition of public relations developed by Flynn et al. (2008), which defines public relations as "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its various publics through the use of communication to achieve mutual understanding, accomplish organizational goals, and serve the public interest" (CPRS Public Relations Definition, para.1).

As Wilcox et al. (2011) point out, "public relations is concerned with building relationships and generating goodwill for the organization" (p. 15) with a focus on the strategic management of relationships, the use of strategic communication to fulfill that function, and the objective of achieving organizational goals while serving the public interest. Bruning and Hatfield (2002) state that the relationship management function of public relations and its activities and outcomes contribute to revenue streams and overall organizational effectiveness. Wilcox et al. (2011) bridge the gap between public relations and sales, noting that "public relations support sales" (p. 15); however, they expand on the relationship-centric nature of public relations by stating that "but additionally deals with a broad array of publics beyond customers" (p. 15). These public relations issues are relevant and can be applied to sales education and practice.

Public Relations Excellence

Beginning in 1985 and continuing over 15 years, James Grunig, David Dozier, William Ehling, Larissa Grunig, Fred Repper, and Jon White (Grunig, 2006) conducted qualitative and quantitative research to analyze the value of public relations to an organization and the structure and integration of public relations in an organization that contribute most to organizational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). This study addressed two primary research questions, "(1) What value does public relations have for an organization? And (2) How should public relations be organized to contribute most to organizational effectiveness?" (Grunig & Grunig, 1998, p. 57). The resulting research and analysis established Excellence Theory, a general theory of public relations that describes the value of this function and its ability to enhance organizational effectiveness through best practices and theoretical and empirical public relations benchmarks (De Bussy, 2013).

Excellence theory states that excellent public relations identify strategic publics, communicate effectively with them, and build stable, open, and trusting relationships, with the quality of the relationships linked to organizational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). For an organization to be effective, it must behave to solve problems and meet stakeholder and management goals (Grunig, 2006). Excellence theory states that organizations that follow the general principles of excellent public relations are more effective in achieving their goals (De Bussy, 2013). The theory is further normative in that it makes statements about how public relations should be practiced and positioned as a standard of best practice (De Bussy, 2013). This research focuses on the positioning and value to the dominant coalition, the mixed-motive model of communication, relationship building and maintenance, return on investment (ROI), and ethics as principles of excellence.

Dominant Coalition

The dominant coalition consists of individuals within an organization who have the power to influence the structure, define the mission, and set the course of the organization (Sriramesh et al., 2013). According to Excellence Theory, the relationship of public relations to an organization's dominant coalition is a defining characteristic of excellence. When public relations is strengthened by access to critical organizational decision-makers, known as the dominant coalition, this core principle of excellence is fulfilled (Grunig, 2006). Bowen (2009) explains that "membership of public relations in the dominant coalition is strongly correlated with organizational effectiveness" (p. 281) and emphasizes that "public relations can add the greatest value in an organization when it provides an independent viewpoint in counseling the dominant coalition or in strategic planning and decision making" (p. 283).

At the structural level of an organization, the dominant coalition does not necessarily consist of individuals in formal positions of power. Instead, the dominant coalition is an

informal coalition with internal and external members, without requiring members to occupy a particular level in the organizational hierarchy (Grunig, 2006). Today's public relations has evolved to exert influence at the highest levels of management (Wilcox et al., 2011). "In a changing environment, and faced with the variety of pressures, executives increasingly see public relations not as simply publicity and one-way communication, but rather as a complex and dynamic process of negotiation and compromise with a number of key publics" (Wilcox et al., 2011, p. 88). Accordingly, positioning public relations among the dominant coalition is critical to excellent performance and salesforce effectiveness.

Mixed-Motive Model of Communications

The practice of two-way symmetrical communication is one of the critical characteristics of excellent public relations cited in Excellence Theory (Sriramesh et al., 2013). Wilcox et al. (2011) state that "public relations should foster open, two-way communication and mutual understanding" (p. 8). Grunig's (2001) research argues that the use of two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical communication models in combination would almost always increase the contribution of public relations to organizational effectiveness.

Symmetrical communication, according to Grunig (2001), is practiced when "practitioners use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both their organizations and publics" (as cited in Bowen 2005, p. 198). Hackman and Johnson (2013) note that excellent experts provide accurate information to the public they treat as partners. These experts engage in a dialog aimed at mutual benefit rather than a monolog that serves the organization's interests at the expense of outsiders.

This idea of combining two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models of communication was cross-examined with game theory by Murphy (1991). Murphy states, "like public relations, the theory of games focuses on the mediation of conflict, the establishment of equilibrium among conflicting parties, the functions of power and domination, and questions of fairness and ethics" (1991, p. 116). From this research, the mixed-motive model of communication was coined. Sriramesh et al. (2013) explain that the mixed-motive model of communication refers to "the phenomenon of the public relations people being motivated by both their loyalty to and by the publics affected by the behavior of the organization that employs them" (p. 121).

In practice, the mixed-motive model aims to achieve mutual understanding between oneself and the strategic public, rather than just propagating the organization's rhetoric (Sriramesh et al., 2013). The mixed-motive model aims to achieve mutual understanding and satisfy the organization's interests while trying to help the strategic public satisfy its interests and thus end up in the "win-win zone" (Grunig, 2001, 2006; Sriramesh et al., 2013).

Organizational Listening

Expanding on symmetry, Macnamara (2018) discusses the theory and practice of "organizational listening." Macnamara (2018) explains that one disciplinary area where 'organizational listening' might be expected is public relations. Public relations, which theoretically promotes dialogue, engagement, and relationships with organizations, their stakeholders, and their publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014, as cited in Macnamara, 2018), should fulfill the function of organizational listening. Macnamara (2018) states that "organizational listening requires a culture that is open to listening, as well as policies, structures, systems, processes, technologies, resources, and capabilities to collect, analyze, and make sense of large amounts

of unstructured and structured data" (pp. 18-19). This process influences strategy and outcomes within an organization.

Extending symmetry and listening to sales theory and practice, Iannarino (2016) states that "the most effective communication is a dialogue: you ask pertinent, thoughtful questions and listen carefully to the answers to gain real understanding" (p. 98). "Salespeople often believe that communication is about pushing their ideas; one-way communications. They operate as if communication flows only in one direction - from them to their prospects or existing clients - and that it's all about selling" (Iannarino, 2016, p. 96).

To the detriment of companies and salespeople, Pink (2013) notes that "asymmetric information causes all kinds of headaches" (p. 47). Ultimately, "when sellers and buyers are evenly matched, pushing for win-lose rarely leads to a win for anyone - and often ends in lose-lose" (Pink, 2013, p. 194). Communication in public relations and sales involves listening and must be symmetrical to function at an excellent level.

Stacks and Watson (2007) summarize that "a symmetrical model represents a balanced flow of communication in which all parties communicate as equals and seek to maintain a relationship based on mutual understanding and needs" (Stacks & Watson, 2007 p. 67). "Good communication stems from good listening; it is an extension of caring and facilitates sales" (Iannarino, 2016, p. 96). Simply put, "Seek first to understand and then to be understood" (Stephen Covey, as cited in Iannarino, 2016, p. 96).

Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning, sometimes called environmental monitoring, is the public relations function of gathering information (Dozier, 1986). Dozier (1986) explains that environmental scanning "is the gathering of information about publics, about reactions of

publics toward the organization, and about public opinion toward issues important to the organization" (p. 4). Dozier (1986) states that practitioners use environmental scanning to learn "what's going on out there" to participate in management decision-making.

Businesses in the 21st century face fierce domestic and international competition, product development, changing lifestyle trends, social and political issues, and environmental problems that require organizations to navigate a turbulent, complex, and threatening world (Lauzen, 1995). "Arguably, organizational survival rests on the ability of organizations to monitor, interpret, and respond to the myriad issues that both threaten and enhance survival and growth" (Lauzen, 1995, p. 187). Public relations contributes to organizational improvement and survival by monitoring the environment and acting as a communication facilitators between the organization and its public (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Dozier & Broom, 1993, as cited in Lauzen, 1995).

Caponi (2020) alludes to scanning the environment in organizations to support sales by stating, "across your organization, it is now vital to have an always-on radar for what your customers are saying about you, what your competitors are saying about you, what analysts and bloggers are saying about you, and what current and former employees are saying about you" (p. 81).

Environmental scanning allows public relations professionals to proactively guide their organizations around potential problems rather than acting in a reactionary role after making strategic mistakes (Dozier, 1986). Environmental scanning is a component of two-way symmetrical public relations in which "organizations cooperate and adapt to interpenetrating publics that affect the organization's survival and growth" (Dozier, 1986, p. 7).

Relationships

Many public relations practitioners and scholars believe that the fundamental goal of public relations is to build relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Relationships are the direct result of public relations management practice (Flynn, 2006). Bruning and Hatfield (2002) place relationships at the heart of public relations. Borg and Young (2014) extend the centrality of relationships to sales, noting that the centrality of effective relationships has shaped the paradigm of business practice as the focus of academic research for both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) relationships in recent decades.

Borg and Young (2014) highlight that in a relationship-centered perspective of selling, the process is complex and needs to be approached in a fundamentally different way and linked to relationship optimization tasks for organizational survival. This perspective is also supported by Arhip and Arhip's (2012) statement that public relations is usually the only function capable of evaluating all ongoing stakeholder relationships to ensure that strategic communications are coherent and consistent with the strategic business plan and stakeholders.

Hon and Grunig (1999) believe that successful public relations programs lead to good relationships with strategic publics and make organizations more effective by enabling them to achieve their goals. Hon and Grunig (1999) state that public relations helps organizations make money by cultivating relationships with important publics like donors, consumers, shareholders, and legislators. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) state that the relationships between an organization and its key publics determine which customers stay or leave. Determining these customers is a significant factor for organizations and ultimately affects the revenue generated (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998).

Extending relationships to sales theory and practice, Iannarino (2016) states that "people buy from people they know, like, and trust" (p. 13). In many industries, where

products can be duplicated rapidly, differentiation in the marketplace must be achieved in other ways. According to Bates (2004), this other means is relationship building.

Bates (2004) reinforces this idea by stating that selling through relationships requires a continuous focus on the customer's evolving needs through empathy and adopting the customer's point of view. In the relationship cycle of selling, salespeople must work to build relationships. In turn, your customers will give you more business if you demonstrate over time that you are responsive and genuinely committed to them (Bates, 2004). Building, maintaining, and growing relationships from a sales perspective requires less emphasis on administrative tasks and more focus on the customer and the activities that build the relationship to the point where the customer does more business with you (Bates, 2004). Truly professional salespeople have learned to develop and use the relationship-building process and then sell through the relationship that is built (Bates, 2004).

Comer et al. (1999) studied business-to-business sales relationships and company performance and identified trust as the fundamental characteristic of a successful long-term buyer-seller relationship. Sellers and companies that build trusting relationships are more likely to succeed than those that do not (Comer et al., 1999). The 2022 *Edelman Trust Barometer* underscores this connection by stating, "distrust is now society's default emotion." The 2022 *Edelman Trust Barometer* indicates that

nearly 6 in 10 say their default tendency is to distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy. Another 64% say it is now to a point where people are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about issues they disagree on.

When distrust is the default – we lack the ability to debate or collaborate.

Adamson (2021) discusses *Sensemaking for Sales*, stating that “the aim is to support customers regardless of the outcome” (p. 4). Adamson (2021) continues to identify trust in the seller as a critical dimension of sensemaking, noting that the likelihood of closing a sale

drops precipitously the moment objectivity is lost, and customer skepticism creeps in. As such, “the best sales reps emphasize simplicity over comprehensiveness. They employ a variation of the Socratic method, avoiding telling customers what to think and focusing instead on helping them create a framework within which to make their own decisions” (Adamson, 2021, p. 5). Sensemaking improves sales success, and teams that employ it report greater stakeholder alignment and less unexpected disagreement (Adamson, 2021).

The body of knowledge linked to public relations, relationships, the critical element of trust, and sales success and the interplay between them has been used to further explore the relationship cultivation by public relations and the influence of these relationships on salesforce performance within an organization. In both public relations and sales research literature, linking the centrality of relationships and trust therein established compelling evidence in the exploration of this case.

Return on Investment (ROI)

Robinson (2006) notes that a cardinal rule of stakeholder communication is that no expenditure should be made without a way to measure its effectiveness. Kim (2001) discusses the rising cost of public relations, noting that “interest in the cost of public relations has increased in step with budget increases” (p. 3). Macnamara (2014) reports that measurement and evaluation should be the focus of critical public relations research interested in who is influenced by public relations and how. Public relations and corporate communications professionals must learn to speak the language of management - numbers, percentages, charts, and graphs-and express the results of their work in these terms; measurement is one of the keys to the boardroom door for public relations and corporate communications (Macnamara, 2011).

Grunig (2013) states that "public relations could not hold a position in strategic management without a way to measure its effectiveness" (p. 157). Grunig (2006) believes that public relations can demonstrate a return on investment (ROI) for their practice because of the intangible value that relationships provide. Grunig (2006) states that public relations adds value when it enables organizations to identify stakeholder categories and use symmetrical communication to develop relationships with strategic publics with a positive financial outcome or return on investment (ROI). Grunig (2006) states that in his interviews with CEOs and senior public relations executives, he documented numerous examples of good public relations increasing revenue. Grunig (2006) elaborates that these examples provide compelling evidence of the return on investment of good relationships built through the practice of strategic public relations.

One such measure is the return on investment, expressed as ROI. Conventionally, "return on investment (ROI) is a performance measure used to evaluate the efficiency or profitability of an investment or compare the efficiency of a number of different investments" (Fernando, 2022, p. 1). Return on investment (ROI) is defined in the management and marketing literature as a measure of financial effectiveness that deals with the returns on capital employed in (profit-making) business activities (Best, 2009; Drury, 2007; Moutinho & Southern, 2010, as cited in Watson & Zerfass, 2011). "ROI tries to directly measure the amount of return on a particular investment relative to the investment's cost (Fernando, 2022, p. 1). To calculate ROI, the benefit (or return) of an investment is divided by the cost of the investment. The result is expressed as a percentage or ratio. ROI is a popular ratio because of its versatility and simplicity. If the ROI of an investment is net positive, it is likely worthwhile (Fernando, 2022).

The Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research defines ROI as "an outcome variable that equates profit from investment" but does not attempt to classify 'a

public relations ROI' except as a "dependent variable" (Stacks, 2006, p. 24, as cited in Watson & Zerfass, 2011). The Institute of Public Relations & Communications Directors Forum (2004) defines ROI as "a ratio of how much profit or cost saving is realized from an activity, as against its actual cost, which is often expressed as a percentage (profit/investment)" (p. 15).

"As James E. Grunig, editor of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*, explains, the major purpose of public relations is to save money for the organization by building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission" (Wilcox et al., 2011, p. 15). Public relations activities generate sales leads, pave the way for sales calls, provide low-cost sales literature, and help sell smaller products for which large advertising budgets are not available (Wilcox et al., 2011).

The best companies integrate public relations into their overall business strategy (Wilcox et al., 2011). To work at this level and support the effectiveness of the salesforce, public relations professionals must have strong business acumen in how their industry operates and functions (Ragas, 2019). "Public relations professionals will continue to improve measurement techniques for showing management how their activities actually contribute to the bottom line" (Wilcox et al., 2011, p. 79).

Macnamara (2014) expands on this concept, noting that public relations professionals are under pressure from clients and employers to evaluate their work in terms of return on investment. Hon and Grunig (1999) note that public relations helps organizations make money by cultivating relationships with key audiences such as donors, consumers, shareholders, and legislators. Hon and Grunig (1999) believe that successful public relations programs lead to good relationships with strategic publics and make organizations more effective by enabling them to achieve their goals. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) state that

the relationships between an organization and its key audiences determine whether consumers stay or leave. The determination of these customers is a significant factor for organizations that affect the revenue generated (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). In this respect, Grunig (2006) believes that public relations can demonstrate an ROI for its function based on the intangible value that relationships provide. Borg and Young (2014) state that a company's relationships are its most important asset and that a company's survival depends on its ability to manage complex relationships.

Kim and Cha (2013) state that public relations is an effective strategy that ultimately contributes to the company's return on investment. In addition, "top communicators and their CEOs tended to agree that two-way communication programs can lead to long-term gains that are critical to the organization" (Grunig & Dozier, 2003, p. 467).

Finally, "Excellence Study research (Grunig et al., 2002) noted that organizations that used two-way communication to build relationships with publics held a more long-term view than did those who did not, but expected a return on their investment in the long run" (Bowen 2009, pp. 286-287). Concerning the ROI of public relations and its impact on sales performance, Kotler (1994) states that research shows that attracting new customers can cost a company as much as five times the cost of retaining existing customers (as cited in Bruning & Hatfield, 2002).

When public relations is associated with mutually beneficial long-term relationships (customer retention) and the successful cultivation of new relationships (customer acquisition), the positive impact of public relations on sales performance and ROI can be strongly supported.

Ethics

Jaksa and Pritchard (1994) define ethics as "ethics is concerned with how we should live our lives. It focuses on questions about what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, caring or uncaring, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible, and the like" (as cited in Bowen, 2004, p. 68).

If the role of public relations in strategic management is to bring the voice of the public into the decision-making process of the organization, public relations should ultimately improve the ethics and social responsibility of the organization (Grunig, 2006).

Because consultative selling is defined as a sales process that is relationship-based and an active process of diagnosing stakeholders' goals and challenges, collaborating to prioritize their needs, and developing solutions to meet those needs (Batchelor, 2009), it is essential to address ethics within the public relations and sales process to assess the intent and outcomes of the communications.

Regarding the intent and outcomes of communication, Ferrell et al. (2007) state that sales activities can trigger ethical issues and define sales activities as all efforts that serve to develop a buyer-seller relationship. Ferrell et al. (2007) cite overly aggressive sales presentations, deceptive sales tactics, and omission of product information as examples of sales activities that trigger ethical problems.

Unfortunately, there are countless examples of sales and unethical practices. In 2016, Wells Fargo agreed to pay a \$185 million fine and repay \$5 million in fees that were improperly charged to customers. This settlement results from bank employees allegedly opening more than two million bank and credit card accounts without customer consent. Beyond the financial penalties, Wells Fargo has fired at least 5,300 employees for "inappropriate sales" conduct (Zoltners et al., 2016). Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf

apologized to a congressional committee, saying, "I accept full responsibility for all unethical sales practices" (Zoltners et al., 2016).

Purdue Pharma recently agreed to an \$8 billion settlement with the Department of Justice related to the sale of OxyContin (Mann, 2020). The Justice Department announced a global settlement of civil and criminal investigations related to Purdue Pharma's aggressive sales of highly addictive opioid medications, including OxyContin. These practices continued for decades, generating billions of dollars in profits even as overdose deaths skyrocketed.

These are just two of countless high-profile sales scandals that made the press. Against this backdrop, "today's public relations practitioners are faced with myriad ethical dilemmas and legal issues" (Wilcox et al., 2011, p. 182).

Therefore, this definition and exploration of ethics are linked to the theory of two-way symmetrical communication and the mixed-motive communication model, as communication can be used to manipulate or persuade the public to accept the perspective of the dominant coalition (Grunig, 2006). Communicators may exploit the public, rather than cooperate and negotiate to create win-win relationships and outcomes (Grunig, 2006). In this sense, Grunig (2001) describes the symmetrical model of communication as inherently ethical, and Bowen and Gallicano (2013) cite ethical responsibility as an inherent feature of symmetry within excellence theory.

Scholars (Bowen, 2000; Bowen & Heath, 2003; Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Wright, 1985) have asserted that upper-level public relations professionals should serve as ethical advisors to their managers and decision-makers (as cited in Bowen, 2008, p. 271). "Helping an organization be accountable for its behavior should be seen as one of the primary contributions of effective public relations" (Bowen, 2008, p. 272). The CEO should seek ethical advice from public relations to connect with the values, beliefs, and views of diverse publics (Bowen, 2008, p. 273). As boundary spanners, public relations managers are in an

ideal position to know and understand the values and beliefs of the publics surrounding an organization (Bowen, 2008).

The 2008 Maple Leaf Foods listeriosis food contamination case is an excellent example of public relations and ethical advice. As one of the worst food contamination cases in Canadian history, resulting in twenty deaths and thousands of illnesses, this crisis could have spelled the end of Maple Leaf Foods if not for an ethical crisis response strategy.

Greenberg and Elliott (2009) describe that "in the face of the worst outbreak of listeriosis in the world, and the biggest crisis ever to confront Maple Leaf Foods, CEO Michael McCain demonstrated in his public statements and promises on behalf of his company a proper regard for the process of correction" (p. 195). Greenberg and Elliott (2009) describe that CEO Michael McCain unflinchingly took responsibility for the outbreak, sincerely apologized to his customers, and committed to making things right. McCain's public apology was based on the principle of accountability, regardless of the financial impact, and illustrated how communication could generate broad support even after a mistake with tragic consequences (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009).

The study of ethics in public relations also extends to ethics in sales. Research on the ethics of personal selling and sales management dates back over 25 years (Ferrell et al., 2007). McClaren (2000) states that research on sales and sales management ethics continues to grow in scope and importance, and Hunt and Vitell (2006) further state that research on sales ethics has continued and expanded as practitioners and researchers seek to better understand the variables that impact ethical decisions in sales. Both public relations and sales are boundary-spanning roles. Both roles act as a critical interface between a seller and buyer (Capon & Senn, 2021; Leichty & Springston, 1994, 1996; Peesker et al., 2022; White & Dozier, 1992). Boundary-spanning positions are inherently stressful and are characterized by

ambiguity and role conflict, work overload, and customer and ethical demands (Capon & Senn, 2021).

This research is vital to shed light on this case because McClaren (2000) states that when salespeople include "ethics" as a component of relationship quality, their behaviors and expertise lead to higher quality relationships between buyers and sellers. In addition, sellers who are aware of their company's code of ethics perceive that their company holds higher ethical values and therefore exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment (Valentine & Barnett, 2003).

Based on the function of public relations providing an important framework and foundation for ethics and ethical decision-making (Grunig, 2006), this case examined the ethical contributions of public relations to a company and the public it affects, as well as any connections to sales and selling operations and outcomes. Since Graziano and Flanagan (2005) define consultative selling as a non-manipulative process, the synergy between symmetrical communication as inherently ethical (Grunig, 2001) provided a compelling rationale that was used in this case to develop further insight, discussion, and reflection on the case of public relations and its effect on ethical and effective salesforce performance.

Methodology

This exploratory, multiple-case study (Yin, 2018) examined The Excellence Theory and its general principles, including the mixed-motive model of public relations and relationship management theories and the extent to which they influence salesforce effectiveness. Yin (2018) considers multi-case studies better than single-case studies because the analytical benefit of two or more cases is substantial and leads to more compelling evidence and an overall more robust case study.

Qualitative research data were collected via in-depth interviews to obtain detailed explanations of critical events and insights, personal views, perceptions, attitudes, and meanings (Yin, 2018).

Because this research involves human participants, approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) was required. Research involving human participants is based on a fundamental moral obligation to promote human well-being, knowledge, and understanding and investigate cultural dynamics. McMaster University shares this commitment to promoting responsible research (McMaster Research Ethics Board, 2022). This research study was reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board in January 2022 and received an ethics certificate for including human participants in the research.

All interview participants were recruited via convenience sampling from the principal investigator's professional network. The email and LinkedIn contact information of 61 sales professionals served as the sample for contact. All interview requests were sent directly to candidates by the researcher. One week after the initial invitation to participate in this study, follow-up contact was made.

Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted to establish the composition of this multiple-case study. The interviews were conducted in January 2022. Participation in this research study was completely voluntary, and participants could withdraw their consent to participate or be included in the results at any time before March 15, 2022. All interviews were conducted as one-on-one conversations between the primary researcher and the participant. These interviews were 45 to 60 minutes long and yielded nearly 10 hours of interview data. They resembled a guided conversation rather than a rigorous interview to create a friendly, non-threatening environment (Stacks, 2017; Yin, 2018).

All interviews were conducted virtually via the university-approved Zoom videoconferencing platform. All participants provided informed consent at the beginning and end of the interview.

To assess strategic communication and collaboration in sales and explore how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness, 16 interview questions were asked (see Appendix). When necessary, clarification and expansion questions were added to the research questions to minimize assumptions and bias. Interviews concluded with an open-ended question asking for additional relevant information.

Interviews were audio- and video-recorded to provide a more accurate rendition of the interview (Yin, 2018). The interviews were later transcribed using secure transcription software to facilitate the extraction and analysis of emergent themes.

According to Yin (2018), a key feature of case study research is triangulation among multiple sources of evidence or data. Since no single source has an advantage over all others, a good case study relies on as many sources as possible (Yin, 2018). To support this characteristic and improve the accuracy and support of the findings or conclusions, multiple sources were used in this case. These sources included a review of relevant literature and multiple in-depth interviews (Yin, 2018).

The data analysis process presents the challenge of considering all of the evidence collected, exploring plausible competing interpretations, addressing the most critical aspects of the case study, and demonstrating a familiarity with the prevailing thinking and literature on the topic (Yin, 2018).

One of the most desirable techniques is pattern matching logic to compare empirically-based patterns. When predicted patterns and empirical patterns appear to be

similar, the results strengthen the internal validity of the case study (Yin, 2018). If a match is found and the patterns agree, the case study statements can be confirmed, and internal validity is strengthened (Yin 2018).

Explanation building has also been used as a technique to analyze the collected data further. In studies with multiple cases, one goal of explanation building is to find a general explanation that fits each case, even if each case differs in detail (Yin, 2018). The analytic strategy involves looking for patterns, findings, or concepts that seem promising.

Finally, due to multiple cases within the study, cross-case synthesis was used to analyze the data further. This method aims to maintain the integrity of the entire case and expand the analysis to compare or synthesize any within-case patterns across cases (Yin, 2018). Once within-case patterns are developed, the analysis continues to examine if there appears to be a repetitive relationship between the case studies (Yin, 2018).

Research Questions

RQ1: How and to what degree do sales professionals practice excellence?

RQ2: How and to what extent is strategic communications aligned with sales to contribute to organizational effectiveness?

RQ3: How and to what extent does strategic communication affect sales operations, outcomes, and measures?

Participants

Participants included 13 experts in the field of sales. The experts were professional sales managers, sales consultants and coaches, keynote speakers, and published authors. All participants had more than 15 years of sales experience. Demographic inclusion or exclusion

criteria were not used in this study. All participants gave verbal consent for their personal information to be used in the research report, which was submitted and defended exclusively to the Master of Communications Management (MCM) Program, Department of Communication Studies and Media Arts, Faculty of Humanities, at McMaster University. If further dissemination or presentation of the study is sought, additional consent from participants for public use is required.

Anthony Iannarino, President and Chief Sales Officer, Keynote Speaker and Workshop Leader

Anthony Iannarino is a highly respected international speaker, best-selling author, entrepreneur, and sales leader specializing in complex business-to-business (B2B) sales. He is also the founder and managing partner of two family-owned businesses in the staffing industry and led both companies in strategic planning and revenue growth. Anthony is best known for his work at The Sales Blog, which has earned him a reputation as a leading thought leader in sales strategy. He is also the creator of Level 4 Value Creation™ and Building Consensus, methodologies that help sales organizations achieve transformative, breakthrough results (LinkedIn, Anthony Iannarino, 2022).

Bill Eckstrom, Founder & CEO of EcSell Institute, Author, Keynote Speaker

Bill began his management career in 2000 with a medical device company and rose to the position of US Director of Sales in just three years. In 2004, Bill accepted a senior VP of Business Development position for a publicly-traded healthcare company. By 2008, the company's stock price had doubled, and new sales revenue had increased by 280%. That same year he founded the EcSell Institute; EcSell is a membership community for senior sales executives and their sales management teams. The EcSell Institute turns ordinary sales managers into extraordinary sales coaches by helping them apply the EcSell formula for sales coaching excellence (LinkedIn, Bill Eckstrom, 2022).

Bob Hubbard, National Account Executive

Bob Hubbard is a graduate of Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana, with a degree in professional trade and industrial technology specializing in graphic arts education. Bob began his career in the printing industry as a production engineer with Keller Crescent Company in 1977, later moving into technical services and gaining experience dealing with customers, maintaining personal relationships, and providing internal support to multiple departments. Bob then joined CCL Industries as a national account executive. He spent the next 16 years working in strategic sales, achieving tremendous sales success throughout North America (B. Hubbard, personal communication, January 7, 2022).

Chris Champagne, Sales Transformation Specialist, Coach, Sense Maker, Strategic Partner

Chris Champagne is a Certified Sales Leader (CSL) who is consistently recognized for his core values of trust, integrity, humility and professionalism. Chris Champagne is said to have an exceptional talent for evaluating, distilling and tailoring individual and company-wide sales development programs to transform sales. Chris leverages his rich and deep sales experience along with his exclusive partnerships in Canada with top sales leaders including Anthony Iannarino, B2B Sales Coach & Consultancy and The EcSell Institute to help sales managers become high performing sales coaches. Chris is also a presenter for the Canadian Professional Sales Association (LinkedIn, Chris Champagne, 2022).

Gary Fly, President and CEO of The Brooks Group

In his role as CEO of The Brooks Group, Gary Fly applies his astute business acumen and energetic management style as he continues the success and legacy that William T. Brooks and his sons Jeb and Will have built over the company's 40+ years of existence. Gary previously held senior management positions, including SVP of Operations for Waffle House, where he managed more than 2,000 employees and more than 100 locations in the

southeastern United States. In addition, Gary built a successful consulting practice specializing in revenue growth for companies with revenues between \$15 million and \$50 million (The Brooks Group, Gar Fly, 2022).

Geoff Reiner, Advisor, Entrepreneur, Investor

Geoff is a dedicated sales and entrepreneurship consultant with a passion for people. He has direct experience in healthcare, energy, financial services, retail, manufacturing, and the non-profit sector. Over the past eight years, he has advised numerous small and medium-sized businesses, providing them with his sales, strategy, and execution expertise. Most recently, his sales experience in the energy sector has directly resulted in over \$100 million in new business. Geoff Reiner regularly helps clients double or triple their company and achieve financial sustainability (Wentworth Strategy Group, Geoff Reiner, 2022).

John Wilson, Founder, CEO Global Network

John Wilson is the active owner, president and chief executive officer of CEO Global Network. John is an experienced entrepreneur, business owner and executive. He has a proven track record of building nine-figure companies and is one of the preeminent CEO mentors in the world. With thirty-five years of experience building shareholder value at companies such as W.R. Grace Inc, Ultramar Canada Ltd. and TEC (The Executive Committee) Canada Ltd, John has proven his ability to build and lead successful companies in both Canada and the United States (CEO Global Network, John Wilson, 2022).

Lisa Leitch, President & Sales Strategist at Teneo Results

Lisa lives by the mantra: "Be strategic. Be proactive. Be bold." and has been teaching and coaching sales leaders and their teams to do the same for more than fifteen years. As President of Teneo Results, she founded the company in 2003 and trained thousands of salespeople in more than 250 companies across North America. Lisa recognizes that competition in sales is constantly changing and that sales teams must evolve with the times.

Using practical and effective tools, she helps salespeople improve their skills, set goals, and win significant new sales opportunities through focused business conversations with customers that drive results (Teneo Results, Lisa Leitch, 2022).

Michelle Cain, Partner at Cain Sales Solutions

Michelle Cain is the founder and president of Cain Sales Solutions. With over 30 years of sales experience, including 15 years as a sales trainer and consultant, she is a valued resource for leaders focused on building world-class sales organizations. She has extensive experience working with corporate leadership and sales teams to implement a consultative sales approach. This includes all the elements today's sales professionals need to manage their territory more effectively and win more business from existing customers (M. Cain, personal communication, January 10, 2022).

Michelle Sartor, Vice President of Sales

Michelle Sartor is an experienced Vice President of Sales for School, Post-Secondary, Career, Trade and Westhall. Michelle is known for developing employees to their full potential and leading high-performing sales teams. Michelle is a graduate of Thames Valley University, London, England (LinkedIn, Michelle Sartor, 2022).

Mike Champagne, Global Sales Account Manager

Mike is a dynamic and decisive leader with excellent planning and problem-solving skills. Mike has been in customer service and sales since 1986. Mike has received many awards for his sales growth. Mike has served as Global Sales Account Manager for technology companies such as Ciena and Curtiss Wright and has consistently met and exceeded quarterly revenue projections (M. Champagne, personal communication, January 26, 2022).

Sandro Verrelli, President & CEO of the Canadian Professional Sales Association

Sandro Verrelli is President and CEO of the Canadian Professional Sales Association (CPSA), the national trade association that helps sales professionals develop skills and resources that transform careers and benefit members from coast to coast. Sandro has more than 30 years of experience in sales leadership and operations roles. Throughout his career, he has optimized business and growth performance in various Canadian and international companies (LinkedIn, Sandro Verrelli, 2022).

Tibor Shanto, Chief Prospecting Officer

Tibor Shanto is a recognized speaker, author and sought-after trainer. Tibor is the co-author of *Shift! Harness The Trigger Events That Turn Prospects Into Customers*. His article "How to shorten your Sales Cycle?" was voted first place by readers of Top Ten Sales Articles. Tibor is a director and contributor to the Sales Bloggers Union, and his work has appeared in numerous publications and leading sales websites. A 20-year veteran of the information, content management and financial sectors, Tibor has developed an insider's perspective on how information can be used to shorten sales cycles, increase close rates and drive double-digit growth. Tibor has been called a brilliant sales tactician and shows companies how to execute their strategy by leveraging the right information to find the perfect combination of the right tactics and the right timing (LinkedIn, Tibor Shanto, 2022).

Results

In a series of 13 in-depth interviews with sales subject matter experts, participants shared their understanding, interests, and synergy with the organizational function of public relations and how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness.

RQ1: How and to what degree do sales professionals practice excellence?

To understand how and to what degree sales professionals practice excellence, critical characteristics of excellence have been identified and asked. These vital characteristics include the definition of public relations, the value of the function, the organizational structure of public relations, and its involvement in and empowerment from a strategic decision making and executive management perspective.

Definition

Five participants defined public relations as a function of messaging, branding, reputation, and internal and external communications. Three participants sublimated public relations as marketing. M. Champagne expressed the consensus as "Public relations is communication with key internal and external stakeholders. Public relations is the interface between key stakeholders and serves to develop a relationship with those publics" (personal communication, January 26, 2022).

Five interviewees stated that public relations should support sales and that the two functions, sales, and public relations, are not dissimilar. T. Shanto explained, "if we think about public relations, it's not just the image that we're trying to portray to potential customers and potential partners, but also, what we're trying to communicate internally" (personal communication, January 21, 2022). T. Shanto gave an example of effective public relations that integrates the company, its sales force, and the messages conveyed to external stakeholders (T. Shanto, personal communication, January 21, 2022). In summary, S. Verrelli summarized the consensus by stating,

Public relations is the function of developing a conversation with your community, your target audience, and understanding your audience to deliver a relevant message in formats that can resonate, that can be digested and adopted. I think public relations

is a skill and science as much as it is an art. Not a whole lot different than sales.

Public Relations is another way of moving people; Which is the essence of selling, moving people (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Value

All participants placed great emphasis on the organization's public relations. Some of the expressions used to describe the importance of public relations were: incredible, crucial, essential, enormous, significant, invaluable.

B. Eckstrom stated that the value of public relations lies in its ability to "create a synergistic effect between sales and marketing" (personal communication, January 19, 2022).

C. Champagne expanded on this idea by stating that "good communication [via public relations] enables the next step" (personal communication, January 5, 2022). A. Iannarino elaborated that public relations have tremendous value when they act as "sense makers" (personal communication, January 27, 2022). A. Iannarino stated,

Sales have evolved over the last year and certainly through the last 20 years. We live in an environment of constant accelerating, disruptive change [...] it's tough to make decisions about your future when the future is happening faster than we can process it [...] to move forward in an environment like this requires a paradigm change. It requires that their [sales and public relations people] preconceptions, false assumptions, and outdated assumptions are removed, and they get the clarity to understand you've got certainty of negative consequences unless you do something different [...] that something different is "sense-making" [...] I must help you make sense of your world, your decisions and the future of your company (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

A. Iannarino stated that public relations must serve as sense-makers (personal communication, January 27, 2022). "I think they have an obligation to answer why to change,

and I think they have an obligation to explain the paradigm shift that needs to happen." To support this position and its importance to strategic communicators and sales reps, A.

Iannarino cited HubSpot, Inc. (2021), *Buyers Speak Out: How Sales Needs to Evolve*. In this study, respondents were asked about their "preferred content channels in the buyer's journey." 29% of respondents said they would "connect with the business' sales reps" to "learn more," and 43% of respondents said they would "connect with the business' sales reps" when they were "ready to buy." A. Iannarino stated that 71% of respondents would not contact the company's sales representatives to "learn more," and 57% would not contact the company's sales representatives if they were "ready to buy" (An, 2020, cited in A. Iannarino, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

A. Iannarino further stated,

Why do they say no? Because salespeople are using a legacy approach that doesn't deal with consensus, it doesn't deal with the fact that there are a glut of competitors and alternatives, it doesn't take into account that there's the internet now, that anything that you would show the client on your first date slides is on your website already [...] you're looking at an increasingly irrelevant and non-credible sales force that isn't prepared to create value and PR should help create some of that content for the sales force so that they can have a relevant conversation [...] we could have a lot of help from Public Relations to explain the changes and to build tools to help them make the [sales] paradigm shift (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Structure

All interviewees positioned public relations as a marketing function or a role within the organization reporting to marketing. Although J. Wilson discussed public relations defaulting to marketing, he elaborated that it should be an independent function, especially for larger organizations.

It often fits into a marketing area; however, you need to have someone in the organization that is the eyes and ears, which should come from a PR standpoint. But ultimately, you've got to have somebody on the senior executive team that owns it. It deserves a separate champion. I think it's such an important role it should report right to the top (J. Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2022).

T. Shanto summarized the consensus by saying, "it generally defaults into marketing [...], but I'm not sure that we've achieved the optimal status yet" (personal communication, January 21, 2022).

Interviewees emphasized the paradigm shift in sales and public relations. They talked about the evolving organizational structure with a PR champion that puts the voice of key stakeholders at the center of everything the company does. S. Verrelli noted this in real-time, stating, "up until literally hours ago, it was very much a conventional approach" (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Seven respondents stated that the dependent variable is the company's market capitalization. The size of the company would determine the formal public relations structure. J. Wilson said, "Public relations is always important, but the bigger you get, the more important" (personal communication, January 14, 2022). G. Reiner summarized the findings of these respondents and stated,

large organizations would typically have structured PR with minimal engagement with sales [...] medium organizations would normally have semi-structured PR, usually as a function of Marketing, with some attention with sales [...] small organization typically would not have any formal PR, however, there may be lots of engagement with sales as the PR person/Sales person is often the same individual or on the same team (personal communication, January 4, 2022)

Strategic Decision Making

Interviewees were asked, to what degree is public relations involved in strategic decision making? Three respondents stated that public relations should have a high degree of involvement in strategic decision-making. S. Verrelli stated, “We recognize that public relations is paramount. It is critical to our success” (personal communication, January 6, 2022). J. Wilson articulated these results further, stating,

Very involved. They’ve got to be involved. How are we going to achieve an outstanding brand right? Well, public relations is a key part of that [...] the champion for PR has got to be at the table of strategic planning [...] you've got to have that mindset in the room when you're talking strategy, how are we going to 10x this company? Well, you don't have a chance if you don't have a good public persona [...] I think is critical (personal communication, January 14, 2022).

C. Champagne linked the involvement of public relations directly to sales, stating,

Public Relations is involved in the early-stage research, early-stage dialogues, helping the sales people understand specific audiences to enable the sales person and the organization to be more effective [...] when sales and public relations synergize at a strategic decision-making level, sensemaking is the result, to great effect for the organization (personal communication, January 5, 2022).

Six respondents stated that the role of public relations in strategic decision-making is inverse or reactive to strategic decisions made by executive management. G. Fly summarized this finding, stating, “so, I actually kind of see a little bit conversely, I see that the strategic direction drives the public relations activities” (personal communication, January 24, 2022). Additionally, A. Iannarino stated

I get to see that it's a reaction to the senior leadership's goals. I don't believe that they're being brought to the table until they've been given a direction. So, what I get to see in big companies is that they generally respond to what the senior executive leadership team wants, and it comes from them to public relations, which is what you would expect (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Two respondents cited that public relations is only involved in strategic decision-making during issues management or crisis communication. M. Sartor explained that “usually what happens is PR comes in where we’ve got something significant to say, high stakes communication [...] in these situations communication is more tightly managed” (personal communication, January 27, 2022). G. Reiner held the same position stating,

public relations was very much involved during a large recall. Public relations played a considerable role in managing risk and implementing a risk management strategy. I think, generally speaking, public relations play a lesser role in strategic decision making and strategy (personal communication, January 4, 2022).

Finally, two respondents acknowledged the paradigm shift in public relations. B. Eckstrom stated,

I would say very little. Let me rephrase that; it is going to play a more significant role than it does today, meaning that public relations, when it's woven into a fully integrated plan, it has its place. We've never fully integrated these things until recently (personal communication, January 19, 2022).

M. Champagne elaborated,

They [public relations] should be part of it because public relations communicate with different groups and figure out what customers are thinking about, for example. So, anyone, that has input into a company's product or service and understands what their

customers are thinking about [...] they have to be involved (personal communication, January 26, 2022).

Empowerment

In the discussion of how and to what degree public relations is empowered by the executive management of the organization, the majority of the respondents stated that executive management empowers public relations. Seven respondents held the view that public relations is empowered by executive management. As CEO of the Canadian Professional Sales Association (CPSA), S. Verrelli stated

I believe in it. I understand and appreciate how core it is to our success. To the point where I'm reallocating other resources to make sure that we're not under indexed when it comes to leadership and the ability to execute what we need to in terms of great PR [...] I would say this, leaders can't pretend to be the experts, we can't pretend, and we also can't make any compromise. Leadership needs to support it and invest in it and continue to develop it (S. Verrelli, personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Five participants elaborated that the dependent variable for executive empowerment is the leadership team members and the organizational culture they create. G. Reiner discussed this variable, stating, "I think a good executive team can empower strong PR implementation" (personal communication, January 4, 2022). T. Shanto had the same perception, "I think it depends [...] because it comes down to the leadership, right? So, if you have a strong leader who believes in empowering, the Lee Iacocca or Steve Jobs of the world, then PR is very much empowered" (personal communication, January 21, 2022). J. Wilson discussed the paradigm shift, stating,

I think it's growing; I think enlightened companies and enlightened management put a high importance on it. I don't know that everybody's there [...] I think there's a lot of people that run businesses who are not enlightened and they need to learn (personal communication, January 14, 2022).

One participant connected empowerment by executive management to sales operations in the organization. M. Cain stated,

Are they [public relations] doing anything within their organization to help fill the funnel of the salespeople? Are there any initiatives to support the salespeople? So, when salespeople are knocking on prospect's doors, net new business or existing, are they going to be firefighting and reactionary, or will they be welcomed? If public relations are empowered, the company image and value sync with the messaging (personal communication, January 10, 2022).

RQ2: How and to what extent is strategic communications aligned with sales to contribute to organizational effectiveness?

Two-way symmetrical communication

Participants were unanimous in their definition and implementation of two-way symmetric communication. The agreement focused on a superior form of communication that includes transparency, stakeholder engagement, problem-solving, internal and external collaboration, active listening, effective feedback mechanisms, and mutual benefit. A. Iannarino described "that the symmetry comes when the conversation is valuable to both parties as it pertains to solving a problem or helping them produce better results" (personal communication, January 27, 2022). C. Champagne added,

If there isn't two-way symmetrical communication in terms of the future of business as a salesperson, you're toast because today's client demands it [...] it is less about me selling something [...] it's more about me helping you solve a problem [...] I think, it is the future of how business is conducted, that it's a two-way conversation [...] actually, it is that genuinely consultative approach. It is what differentiates the top performers! And in fact, I think the gap is getting wider between transactional sellers and having a more symmetrical conversation (personal communication, January 5, 2022).

L. Leitch furthermore discussed the consultative selling approach, stating “symmetrical would be, aligned and synergized. I would define it as; consultative selling” (personal communication, January 18, 2022). S. Verrelli elaborated that two-way symmetrical communication is “agnostic to outcomes” (personal communication, January 6, 2022). Additional themes emerged in the discussion of two-way symmetrical communications. These themes included “synchronicity.” T. Shanto explained,

I would describe it like this, where we're talking directly to each other at the same time. I talk about voicemail and email being asymmetrical means of selling because we're still moving the process forward, but we don't have to be in the same space at the same time. So, I would describe it as the same space at the same time (personal communication, January 21, 2022).

A. Iannarino also described symmetry with “synchronicity” or “synchronous communication,” stating,

Synchronous communication [...] and in I think right now, because of the tools and the technology that we have, we've now relied so heavily on asynchronous communication that it's doing a couple of things. One, it's underserving the sales force

because they're literally trying to have a conversation with someone where that person isn't there at the same time [...] So, I'm going to say it's [asynchronous communication] an inferior type of conversation and communication because you're not both in the same place at the same time. Number two, the conversation in sales is the only vehicle you have to create value for your prospective client that would cause them to prefer you, and that would cause them to take your advice and your recommendations. That isn't easily done over asynchronous communication [...] we do the best work when we are both in the same place at the same time. But I do think that the synchronous part of the communication is the part that matters. And if you don't have synchronous communication, it's very, very difficult to have a sales conversation about real change (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

When participants elaborated on how much their organization uses symmetrical communication, all participants shared examples of good public relations and two-way symmetrical communication contributing to organizational effectiveness. Four participants shared examples of two-way symmetrical communication directly involved in enhancing the sales process and outcomes. Two participants discussed two-way communications' ability to strengthen internal and external communication to stimulant organizational effectiveness.

If CEOs, if leaders, have the discipline to have those types of conversations, there will be no turnover. People will not leave because the relationships will be so deep. Have the same conversations with your customers, have it with your significant stakeholders (J. Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2022)

Finally, two respondents cited two-way communication as essential to crisis communication and crisis management.

Public relations involvement in sales operations

Transitioning to public relations precise involvement in sales operations of the organization, nine respondents cited little to no direct involvement from public relations to sales. Typically, public relations involvement in sales operations is reactionary to an issue or crisis. T. Shanto explained, “so, if you looked at indicators, one of the indicators is that they care when it's gone wrong as opposed to caring in advance to make it go right” (personal communication, January 21, 2022). G. Reiner discussed the Maple Leaf Foods food listeriosis contamination case from 2008, stating,

Good PR can generate sales. I would go back to the example of Maple Leaf Foods and the CEO [...], and that individual made a mistake, acknowledged a mistake [...], but through positive PR, I would argue won clients, so that positive PR story would have generated some sales and sales increase (personal communication, January 4, 2022).

S. Verrelli had similar sentiment; however, he elaborated on the evolution of public relations in today's sales environment,

So right now, the sales organization knows that from a public relations perspective, the dependency there is essentially to make sure we don't do anything to kind of fumble the ball when it comes to a brand and reputation perspective [...] so that's more passive kind of [...] less than proactive. But I think as we think about CPSA 2.0, the next version of our professional association, it will be very much an active role versus passive (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

With little to no current involvement in sales operations cited, these respondents discussed the paradigm shift or evolution of public relations and sales and the opportunity for synergy to stimulate organizational success. “I would argue that if you [public relations] were to talk

to the sales force and have a conversation with what they're hearing from their clients, the messages would get far better (A. Iannarino, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

“Everything is viewed through a lens of driving leads to sales. Public relations could operate as a way to fill the funnel or open opportunities for sales” (B. Eckstrom, personal communication, January 19, 2022). G. Fly linked public relations and sales, stating,

it's very heavily involved in the sales process. As I mentioned, about 95 percent of our leads come from the inbound activity where somebody googles us [...] and a lot of that stuff is based on our SEO effectiveness, our ability to have good content out there, and whatnot. And I think a large part of that is actually PR related (personal communication, January 24, 2022).

J. Wilson elaborated on public relations and salesforce collaboration stating, “but in terms of public relations, [...] it's not just the hard sell, it's the soft sell. And you know, there's a lot of value in that; that's brand, that's enhancing the brand” (personal communication, January 14, 2022). M. Cain expanded on this notion, stating,

every little key driver of the organization helps make the sales person's job easier [...] when they show up to sell, whether it's an existing relationship or a net-new [...] where is that individual at in already being familiar with the value the company, the product, the people. PR has to contribute to their company and that relationship. So, if there's no PR at all, you're in an uphill battle [...] your sales cycle is going to be longer, you're going to be more faced with price objections, it is going to be harder selling against the competition (personal communication, January 10, 2022).

The caveat that emerged in the synergy between sales and public relations cited by the majority of the participants is, again, organizational size. “I don't think at all. I think there's a

massive gap. I guess the variable would be the size of business; small, medium, or large” (C. Champagne, personal communication, January 5, 2022).

Characteristics of a successful sales relationship

All interviewees cited similar characteristics of successful sales relationships. These characteristics included trust, transparency, partner-oriented, mutual-success, active listening, effective communication, technical knowledge, business acumen, respect, honesty, ethics. All interviewees cited “trust.” A. Iannarino elaborated,

But I think it's the relationship of, I have good counsel for you and I can help you make a good decision and we can work together to solve all the problems that we have in producing those results because we're both looking at it from the same side of the table [...] and if you can get that kind of a relationship where you have that kind of trust, you know, then things generally go very fast (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

J. Wilson said,

And you know, every sales role is leadership because you're trying to lead, you're trying to inspire other people to come to you and trust you [...] when trust is in the room, magic happens. And if trust isn't in the room, nothing happens (J. Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2022).

Additionally,

You know, emotional intelligence and ethics would be another part of that [...] can they [public relations and sales] conduct themselves ethically and honestly [...] because you can have the smarts and the ability to learn, you can have a high EQ.

However, you still are not ethical and honest in how you navigate (M. Cain, personal communication, January 10, 2022).

Public relations and organizational objectives

In the discussion of public relations utilization within the organization to achieve stakeholder and organizational objectives, participants described public relations as a corporate function to build relationships and trust with a broad range of internal and external stakeholders, not limited to customers.

Interviewees described public relations as working to create and cultivate the above characteristics of successful sales relationships and extended the function's responsibilities to branding, reputation, corporate culture, corporate values, and the personality or appearance of the company. S. Verrelli summed up this idea by saying, "so I think public relations gives us an opportunity to be open, to be available, to signal the organization's personality in a more human way" (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Most participants also spoke about public relations' ability to conduct research and write messages to prepare the organization internally and externally with individualized and effective messages for each stakeholder group. This public relations function made strategic planning, implementation, and adoption more effective. G. Reiner stated, "the implementation and adoption happen more effectively. So, engaging that stakeholder group is critical in building a strategic plan. It lessens the load on the implementation side of things, which is very positive" (personal communication, January 4, 2022).

Two participants pointed out that public relations is able to "fix" things and only engage in problem and crisis management.

Finally, two participants discussed the role of public relations in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy as a factor in enhancing salesforce effectiveness. M. Sartor explained,

I feel that they should work together [...]it builds culture, and it gives people beliefs about the place they work and the world they live in. You know, what kind of organizations are we? Are we are caring, sharing, giving organization? I think some of those messages people internalize over time. They come from PR and really excellent communication. So, it's almost like you're designing the organization's personality, your brand and you're constantly transmitting that, internally and externally [...] it's a feeling, you're trying to evoke some visual feeling [...] because that's what's going to spark passion and engagement. And that's going to be what drives the results (M. Sartor, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

RQ3: How and to what extent does strategic communication affect sales operations, outcomes, and measures?

Public relations contribution to sales effectiveness

In discussing the contribution of public relations to salesforce effectiveness, respondents cited stakeholder research; internal and external integration and alignment; building, maintaining, and enhancing brand and reputation; public relations as a champion of trust, transparency, CSR, and community relations; and sensemaking and soft selling as critical contributions of the public relations function to sales.

Respondents said that public relations is in an advantageous position to equip salespeople with research, information, messages, and critical questions to strengthen sales. C. Champagne explained that they're scanning the trends that are happening within that particular industry and that they're giving data points to arm the salesperson so they can have an intelligent conversation about the customer in their world (personal communication, January 5, 2022). M. Champagne elaborated;

sales and account management is all about understanding everything that's going on in the market with our customers and trends and things like that [...] so Public Relations has some understanding of that or some input [...] it's very valuable to successful sales and account management because they're going to have data. And as an account manager, you really have to have a grasp of everything. So, anyone that has data relevant to, like I said, customer, trends, whatever it is, you need to have that. So public relations would have input and their insight is very valuable.” (, personal communication, January 26, 2022)

Ultimately, M. Sartor said, “Good public relations, it’s going to grease all the wheels and help everything, just keep moving along nicely” (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Return on Investment

All interviewees were aligned. The results indicate a tremendous return on investment in public relations, but it is hard to quantify as an integrated function. J. Wilson explained,

Well, I mean, you get a tremendous return on it. You know, do you want to have bad public relations...? It is a strategy to grow a financially strong business. You can't get there without it. You've got to have strong public relations, whoever your public is [...] But there is a high return on investment in good public relations (personal communication, January 14, 2022)

C. Champagne elaborated, however,

I don't know what you would be pointing at to say; what’s the interaction between financial results and public relations [...] it's part of the process, a critical part of the

process. But the ability to recognize that public relations has a financial outcome; Hard to quantify! (personal communication, January 5, 2022).

M. Sartor extended that,

I wish there were more hard data, kind of proof points on its benefit. But it's definitely more of a feeling than a hard measurement. I've never been in a company where I've seen any kind of hard return on investment, measurement of communication, or PR (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Most respondents sublimated any return on investment to marketing spend and marketing measurement. B. Eckstrom identified that “I think marketing plans, overall, encompass effective PR [...] I don't know if there's a way to break it apart, to break it out (personal communication, January 19, 2022). G. Fly built on this notion stating,

I view everything through a sales lens, and we know where our leads and our sales come from. We can attribute actual dollars in sales [...] we also know what we're spending, right, we know what a cost per acquired client is [...] what we talk about is, how do we effectively manage cost per acquired client in terms of our marketing spend around it? So, PR is part of our marketing bucket [...], so we measure our ROI against those numbers (personal communication, January 24, 2022).

Measurement

All respondents see value in the measurement. A. Iannarino stated, “I think you have to try to measure everything [...] you have to try to see what impact something like that has, especially if you're spending money on it (personal communication, January 27, 2022). B. Eckstrom stated, “if you could, it'd be great, but nobody's been able to do it for me [...] I see value in measuring anything, if I can [...] I just don't see a way to measure it, but I would

love to be able to” (personal communication, January 19, 2022). B. Hubbard stated, “if it's not measured, how do you know that Public Relations is beneficial” (personal communication, January 7, 2022). G. Reiner stated, “if you're not measuring it, there's really no point in doing it.” Lastly, M. Champagne stated, “how are you going to make something effective unless you're measuring it, observing it, and actively working to improve it?” (personal communication, January 26, 2022)

Financial performance

All respondents provided examples of public relations contributing to the organization's financial performance. The examples included public relations as environmental scanners collecting insight and data on key stakeholder groups to stimulate financial performance, public speaking engagements, crafting sound messaging, risk mitigation, branding and reputation management, crisis communications and, corporate social responsibility, and philanthropic efforts of public relations contributing to financial performance. A. Iannarino described the public relations, and salesforce collaboration, stating

public relations and marketing together could do a lot to help pave the way for salespeople to have better conversations and better tools for those conversations. If they would think, what's changed in my client's world that's causing them to have these problems, and how do I explain it to them and do the sense-making necessary to get them through the uncertainty to make better decisions for their business, instead of getting mired down in the status quo. So that's what I would suggest if you wanted to see a greater connection between what they do and the financial results, you'd have to give them something to do that would actually move the needle for clients (personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Many interviewees cited public relations contribution to financial performance as an outcome of crisis communication. M. Cain discussed client retention in the face of a crisis,

Client retention [...] even when there is a crisis [...] in their ability to communicate calm. Think of Maple Leaf Foods or a car manufacturer when there's been a recall on an item [...] but their ability to lower the panic, create calm, and create a sense of we're still viable, and we're solving this problem [...] so, managing the escalation and keeping it more on an even keel (M. Cain, personal communication, January 10, 2022).

S. Verrelli gave a specific example in this context, stating,

Long story short, we took what could have been a PR disaster [...] into something that they helped us, not only communicate clearly with transparency, with ferocious regularity, it was a discipline that was multiple times a day. We had updates. Different mediums. But it also turned into an opportunity for us to demonstrate total responsibility [...], but I think the reason why we didn't fumble the ball and turned it into a positive for the organization that reflected well on us after the smoke cleared and things got better was in fact, we didn't compromise our principles. And that was largely through the coaching and support from our PR folks (personal communication, January 6, 2022).

Ethics

All respondents expressed the view that an ethical approach to sales is critical. Summed up by A. Iannarino, “In my business, this is very simple; The truth at any price, even the price of the deal. That's it” (personal communication, January 27, 2022). A. Iannarino explained that “sometimes it costs us deals to tell the truth. But it's the only way to

operate. So, if you don't have an ethical-oriented approach, you know you're not going to do very well (personal communication, January 27, 2022). L. Leitch explained, “if you want a long-term consultative, professional relationship or partnership, you've got to have ethics” (L. Leitch, personal communication, January 18, 2022). G. Fly discussed this concept in detail, stating

So, businesses now have a myriad of headwinds coming at them, none of them by themselves would be huge, necessarily, but you load all that on top of the fatigue of the last two years and you have this general malaise, right? Well, those impact sales dramatically [...] salespeople are wired to please. But, right now, they're being forced to have conversations around, I don't know when that's going to come in because the supply chain is mixed up, I don't know what your solution is, etc. And so, what I see happening is that this is a time to build real trust with a client by being candid and honest [...] But I think that right now the ethics of it is critical [...] it's needed that sellers show real interest in the client and their success, and they come from a place of kind of truth and knowledge (personal communication, January 24, 2022).

G. Reiner explained the centrality of ethics in sales by citing examples of sales operating absent of ethics. He shared,

So, I think that ethics can play a very key role in the sales process. The flip side of it is, you know, if you look at some of the pharmaceutical companies or some of the financial services companies, you know, an example would be predatory lending in the financial services industry (G. Reiner, personal communication, January 4, 2022).

Despite the unanimous position of ethics criticality to sales, M. Cain elaborated, “Ethics is an under-discussed topic among salespeople” (personal communication, January

10, 2022). Accordingly, the results indicated that two participants organizations have formal codes of ethics, and only one of the two participants cited that their formal code of ethics is actively acknowledged, communicated, and measured against in the organization. The remaining participants stated that ethics are driven by leadership and the culture and values they instill and exemplify in the organization.

Nine interviewees cited a synergistic effect in the dialogue of how and to what degree public relations could affect sales ethics. J. Wilson articulated, “I think they go hand in hand. I don't know how you could do one without the other, in terms of supporting strong ethics” (J. Wilson, personal communication, January 14, 2022). B. Hubbard exclaimed, “I think they can affect it 100%. I think Public Relations can make or break a salesperson. Sales are the front line, the boots on the ground [...] PR needs to have a foot on the front line to support ethics” (personal communication, January 7, 2022).

S. Verrelli elaborated,

Public relations could certainly underscore the importance of it in the understanding, not only with the customers or the members we serve, but internally, in the organization. I think our PR partners in particular can help us again, not just from a brand equity perspective or brand reputation, but just how does this line up with the personality, and the culture of the organization (S. Verrelli, personal communication, January 6, 2022).

This position is extended by A. Iannarino, who stated,

“What the public relations group or marketing group says about you [the organization] has to be felt from the salesforce [...] which means if they say it, then you have to adopt it. So, I think that's a link between public relations and marketing

and sales managers is to help salespeople have the right beliefs, behaviors, and identity [...] and I find that identity is probably the most powerful force on Earth (A. Iannarino, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Lastly, G. Reiner stated, “I think that public relations and sales should carry equal weight in how the ethics of the organization or the culture of the organization is articulated” (personal communication, January 4, 2022).

In contrast, a minority of respondents cited more of a reactionary role of how and to what degree public relations could affect sales ethics. B. Eckstrom discoursed that,

I don't know if it should, I don't think that would be a goal of public relations to affect sales ethics. I see PR coming in is after the fact. I think of Wells Fargo and the sales and ethical issues they had. I don't see PR holding it on the front end. I see organizations use it on the back end. But by that point, shame on them (personal communication, January 19, 2022).

L. Leitch held similar sentiment, articulating that public relations involvement in sales ethics comes from “if you've had a challenging situation and it's not handled properly, it's going to erode your reputation and could erode sales as a result (personal communication, January 18, 2022).

Discussion

This capstone examined strategic communication and collaboration in sales by investigating how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness. This final thesis examined how and to what extent sales professionals and their organizations practice excellence, how strategic communication is aligned with the salesforce

to contribute to organizational effectiveness, and its impact on sales operations, results, and measures.

Strategic communication and sales collaboration undoubtedly enhances salesforce effectiveness and organizational success when aligned and executed against critical tenets of Excellence.

RQ1: How and to what degree do sales professionals practice excellence?

The Excellence Project established principles that can form the basis for strategic public relations (Sriramesh et al., 2013). The Excellence Project analyzed the value, structure, and integration of public relations to make the most significant contribution to organizational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). Based on best practices and the theoretical and empirical benchmarks established for excellent public relations (De Bussy, 2013), the definition and operationalization of public relations should be independent of other organizational communication functions.

Definition

Sales experts were divided on the definition of public relations as a function independent of marketing. However, interviewees agreed that the purpose and outcomes of public relations are independent of marketing and included messaging, branding, company persona, and internal and external communications. In contrast, marketing is limited to external communications.

In the interviews, interviewees explained the definition of public relations as directly interacting with and supporting salespeople. Public relations has the ability, and some would say the duty, to serve as an integration function between the company, its salesforce, and communications with key internal and external stakeholder groups. This notion is consistent

with Sriramesh et al. (2013), who found that companies that excel at public relations integrate all communications functions into this department. This integration helps companies communicate with a unified voice, improving the company's direction and success.

At the level of defining public relations, respondents agreed with academia and practice. Public relations face the challenge of differentiating itself from other communication functions and consequently must identify the value of the practice (Smith, 2012). Participants shared the view that public relations extends to various internal and external stakeholders and attributed value to this factor. Since public relations is defined as the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its various publics (Flynn et al., 2008), this finding is consistent with the definition and body of knowledge in the domain of public relations.

Structure

From an organizational structure or chart perspective, participants agreed with common themes in pedagogy and practice. All participants indicated that public relations is usually subordinate to marketing or operates as a marketing function. This classification is not uncommon (Sriramesh et al., 2013).

Interestingly, participants are highly aware that the subordination of public relations affects organizational decision-making due to external factors that influence the organization (Sriramesh et al., 2013). This suggests that salespeople also recognize that public relations should be independently structured to have the greatest impact, as suggested by Sriramesh et al. (2013). Independent public relations departments improve communication effectiveness by providing stakeholder input to align company activities with stakeholder expectations (Sriramesh et al., 2013).

In addition, the public relations leader should report to and be integrated with senior management to significantly influence the effectiveness of the salesforce and the

organization. A senior communications manager should lead excellent public relations departments. "For public relations to contribute to organizational effectiveness, it is critical that managers who have the knowledge and experience in strategic communication management lead the department" (Sriramesh et al., 2013, p. 111).

Sales professionals have recognized the paradigm shift in strategic communications and sales. They have identified the optimal public relations structure consistent with excellence, involving strategic communications as a stand-alone function led by a senior communications manager.

An interesting consideration about the structure of public relations was made by the majority of respondents. Most respondents indicated that an organization's market capitalization is the dependent variable that determines its formal structure. Market capitalization is the number of shares outstanding of a company multiplied by the current price of a single share (Boyte-White, 2022).

The results suggest that mega-cap and large-cap companies valued at \$10 billion to \$200 billion or more (Seth, 2021) have a formal public relations department independent of marketing and has little to no interaction with sales. Mid-cap, small-cap, and micro-cap companies with revenues of \$50 million to \$300 million have a semi-structured public relations department that typically operates as a marketing function with some interaction with sales. Finally, nano-cap companies under \$50 million (Seth, 2021) have no formal public relations department and operate solely as a marketing department. In companies of this size, there is a high degree of collaboration between the strategic communications and sales functions because the teams are smaller. In some cases, the same person may be responsible for both operations.

Scholars point out that "the importance of organizational size and its potential influence on the organizational level structure is one of the most recurring themes in the

organizational management literature (e.g., Child, 1972; Pugh & Hickson, 1997; Pugh, 1973; Robbins, 1990; Stanford, 2007)" (Moss et al., 2017, p. 3). Child (1972) examined the correlation between organizational size, increased specialization, and greater structural differentiation. This Capstone did not consider or examine market capitalization in the context of strategic communication and sales collaboration; however, it is highlighted as an emerging theme as a consideration for future research.

Value

Although the definitional understanding of public relations was inconsistent and the structure was typically assigned to marketing, there was agreement on the value of the function. Sales professionals acknowledged the immense importance of public relations, identifying internal and external communications, brand personality, and relationships with stakeholders beyond buyers as points of differentiation and value. From the salespeople's perspective, the value of public relations lies in its ability to contribute to revenue streams. Bruning and Hatfield (2002) find that public relations relationship management contributes directly to revenue streams and overall company efficiency, further supporting the findings of this study.

Sales professionals note that public relations increase sales efficiency by synergizing with internal and external stakeholders. Using strategic communications, salespeople can move through the phases of traditional sales much more quickly and effectively. These phases include 1.) Awareness, 2.) Discovery, 3. Evaluation, 4.) Intent, 5.) Purchase, 6.) Loyalty.

The sales literature supports this synergistic effect, as Peesker et al. (2022) indicate that the ability to collaborate is now considered a central component of salespeople's skills. An interdependence between public relations and sales enables salespeople to obtain the resources necessary to drive and close a sale. Ultimately, "Salespeople must leverage both

customer and technical knowledge, collaborating with internal experts and, at times, external partners who must deliver part of the solution in this new interconnected sales ecosystem (Bohm, Eggert, Terho, Ulaga, & Haas, 2020; Peesker, Ryals, Rich, & Davis, 2021)" (Peesker et al., 2022, p. 18).

Additional value is created when public relations serves as a “sense maker” for sales. Given the complexity and constant change of today's political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, and environmental conditions, public relations should help the organization and its public understand the world and incorporate their knowledge and experience into strategic decision-making. Sales professionals believe that public relations must take on a sensemaking role in today's organization. Sensemaking is congruent with Peesker et al.'s (2022) research, which highlights that "the ability to acquire, assimilate, evaluate, and apply data, especially customer data, are now key to enabling sales performance" (p. 22). In this regard, participants are in line with academia and practice.

Public relations should support sales while extending stakeholder relationships beyond customers (Wilcox et al., 2011). Sensemaking is an extension of symmetry, organizational listening, and environmental scanning that influences strategy and outcomes within an organization. The value of public relations essentially comes from, in sales language, "sensemaking." While sensemaking is synonymous with environmental scanning, organizational listening, and symmetrical communication, the value of public relations practitioners lies in their ability to be proactive and adapt strategic communication to promote organizational survival and growth (Dozier, 1986).

Empowerment

As can be seen from the results, all respondents believe that public relations should be included in strategic decision-making and empowered by management. However, not all organizations today excel at this level. Only three respondents indicated that public relations

is currently involved in the early stages of strategic decision-making. Instead, nearly half of the respondents indicated reverse involvement, where management makes the decisions and public relations implements those decisions with little to no participation in their formulation. In these cases, public relations is only involved in strategic decision-making when managing a problem or crisis.

The paradigm shift, however, is evident in the fact that public relations should be involved in strategic decision-making. All interviewees affirmed the view that in the context of pervasive and rapid change, leaders increasingly rely on public relations as a complex and dynamic process of negotiation and compromise with many key publics (Wilcox et al., 2011), highlighting the importance of public relations' position to that of the dominant coalition as essential for sales effectiveness.

The majority of respondents indicated that public relations are empowered by management. However, they added the caveat that management empowerment depends on the members of the leadership team and the organizational culture they create. When public relations are empowered through access to organizational decision-makers, public relations operate at an excellent level (Grunig, 2006). This involvement and empowerment are closely related to organizational effectiveness (Bowen, 2009). Sales professionals highlight Bowen's (2009) findings that public relations adds the most value when it takes an independent viewpoint in strategic planning and decision-making and would apply this to salesforce effectiveness.

The findings are consistent with academic knowledge that direct involvement in management deliberations or a reporting line to senior management would benefit from the stakeholder information that public relations managers bring to organizational decision-making (Sriramesh et al., 2013). This unity or alignment improves relationships between internal and external entities and the organization.

Salient to this theme is A. Iannarino, (personal communication, January 27, 2022) reference to Andrew S. Grove (1996) statement from *Only the paranoid survive: How to exploit the crisis points that challenge every company and career*; "People in the trenches are usually in touch with pending changes early. Salespeople understand shifting customer demand before management does" (p. 97). This idea should be extended to public relations. The result of strategic collaboration between communications and sales will undoubtedly increase the effectiveness of the salesforce and the company.

RQ2: How and to what extent is strategic communications aligned with sales to contribute to organizational effectiveness?

Symmetry

There was consensus in defining and implementing two-way symmetrical communication. In public relations scholarship, symmetric communication is defined by practitioners' propensity to disclose accurate information and engage in dialog aimed at mutual understanding and benefit (Hackman & Johnson 2013). From the sales practitioners' perspective, two-way symmetric communication is superior to any other form of communication.

Two-way symmetrical communication was cited as a factor that distinguishes the best salespeople. Participants stated that this gap is widening in the current sales environment. Participants cited transparency, internal and external stakeholder engagement, problem-solving, active listening, an effective feedback mechanism, mutual understanding and benefit, and awareness as principles of symmetry consistent with public relations knowledge and practice.

"In the modern sales environment, the role of the salesperson has shifted to a more consultative role" (Peesker, 2022, p. 23). Relationships and symmetry are critical to

consultative selling. All participants gave examples of good public relations and two-way symmetrical communication contributing to the effectiveness of the business. Some participants emphasized that two-way symmetrical communication is directly involved in and improves the sales process and outcomes. In addition, many participants referred to consultative selling when defining two-way symmetrical communication.

Since public relations facilitate two-way symmetrical communication to cultivate and maintain relationships to achieve stakeholder and organizational goals (Gurnig, 2006), there is undoubtedly a synergistic effect when public relations and sales work together, resulting in efficient and improved salesforce effectiveness.

Public relations can help sales build, maintain, and improve relationships with the customer base to increase their effectiveness. Public relations can connect the company and its current and future customers (Davis, 2021). Through this collaboration, public relations can significantly impact customer relationships, resulting in increased sales, competitive advantage, and improved profitability (Davis, 2021). The practice of two-way symmetrical communication is a defining characteristic of excellent public relations (Sriramesh et al., 2013). Therefore, the extent to which excellent communication is consistent with salesforce effectiveness is significant.

A few respondents mentioned the topic of crisis communication and crisis management in the discussion of two-way symmetrical communication in the sales context. This study did not address crisis communication in the sales context.

An interesting emergent theme was the link between symmetry and synchronicity. Several respondents cited communicating in the same place simultaneously as a characteristic of symmetry and referred to it as synchronicity. Triggered by technology and the Covid-19 pandemic, many salespeople are forced to use "asynchronous" or "asymmetrical" means of

communication. This study did not examine communication mediums and their impact on symmetry or salesforce effectiveness.

Finally, with public relations' ability to listen and scan the environment, sales professionals discussed the value of public relations' involvement in sales and business strategy. Because public relations has information on a variety of stakeholders, including current and potential customers, the process of organizational listening and scanning the environment will influence strategy and outcomes within an organization (Macnamara 2018). To this end, Lauzen (1995) argues that organizational survival and advancement rests on this capability.

Involvement in Sales

Sales professionals state that there is little to no direct collaboration between public relations and sales in the past and in the present. It is usually a reactionary or tactical involvement, generally involving a problem or crisis or limited to a public relations project or campaign. However, given the discussion of the paradigm shift in public relations and sales, and the recognition of the value of excellent public relations, salespeople are aware of and have an appetite for increased collaboration.

Public relations scholarship recognizes this need for improved cross-functional collaboration and public relations operating at a strategic rather than tactical level (Sriramesh et al., 2013). Public relations at the tactical level is critical to the organization. However, if a company wants to leverage the value of public relations and collaboration with salespeople, public relations must be done at a strategic level. This requires a senior communications manager who has the training, professionalism, and knowledge to act strategically and support the sales force, moving away from a reactionary or purely tactical role.

Prominent themes that align with public relations involvement in sales resulting in enhanced effectiveness of the functions included branding, reputation, and cultivating and

communicating the company's personality. When these elements are executed by public relations at an excellent level, the sales cycle is improved. Sales experts refer to these elements as active (as opposed to passive) operationalization of public relations in "soft selling."

Market capitalization was again highlighted as a variable to consider when asking about excellent public relations engagement in sales.

Relationships

The fundamental goal of public relations is to build relationships (Flynn, 2006; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Excellent public relations work to identify strategic publics, communicate effectively, and build trusting relationships, with the quality of relationships directly linked to organizational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1998).

Relationship orientation is also critical to the effectiveness of salespeople. Sales must operate connected to tasks of relationship optimization for organization survival (Borg & Young, 2014).

The findings support the notion that sales force effectiveness, like excellent public relations, depends on creating, maintaining, and improving relationships. The results of sales professionals' descriptions of successful sales relationships exemplify the scholarship and practice of public relations.

Sales professionals highlight trust as the most critical component of successful relationships because salespeople who build trusting relationships increase their likelihood of success (Comer et al., 1999). This finding is consistent with sales research. Peesker et al. (2022) found "that to be effective, salespeople need to establish rapport and build trust for customers to be willing to share their business challenges" (p. 23).

Trust is essential to sales and organizational effectiveness in light of the 2022 *Edelman Trust Barometer*. Beyond trust, public relations scholars and sales professionals

emphasize transparency, partner orientation, mutual success, active listening, effective communication, technical knowledge, business acumen, respect, honesty, and ethics as critical characteristics of successful relationships.

Given that the core competency of public relations is relationships, and the effectiveness of sales depends on stakeholder relationships, it is undeniable that cross-functional collaboration between strategic communications and sales moves the business forward.

"Sensemaking" is a critical component of strategic communications and sales collaboration. Sensemaking supports customers regardless of the outcome (Adamson, 2021). Excellent public relations engage in a dialog that seeks mutual benefit rather than a monolog that serves the organization's interests at the expense of outsiders (Grunig, 2001, 2006; Hackman & Johnson 2013; Sriramesh et al., 2013).

Trust in the salesperson is a critical dimension of sensemaking. These findings demonstrate the high degree of effectiveness associated with knowledge of public relations, relationships, the critical element of trust, and sales success and their interplay that contributes to salesforce effectiveness. There is compelling evidence in both the public relations and sales research literature of the centrality of relationships and trust therein.

The majority of participants spoke about public relations' ability to conduct research and write messages to prepare the company internally and externally with individualized and effective messages for various stakeholders.

Finally, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy were mentioned as topics related to strategic communications, sales effectiveness, and relationship outcomes. If public relations can establish the company as a good corporate citizen, salesforce effectiveness will improve.

RQ3: How and to what extent does strategic communication affect sales operations, outcomes, and measures?

Measurement and ROI

The results of this research are consistent with the existing literature on measuring public relations and ROI. Public relations can positively affect sales professionals' operations, results, and actions; however, it is difficult to quantify. All sales professionals spoke of the immense benefits of excellent public relations but pointed to the difficulty of quantification. Instead, public relations functions as an integrated function that promotes cross-functional collaboration and makes all operations more efficient and better.

From the perspective of sales professionals, any quantitative measurement of public relations was subordinate to sales and marketing spending and measurement. Measurement tools included qualified leads, number of comments, clicks and shares, customer acquisition costs, net promoter score, time spent on website, monthly recurring revenue, conversation rate, and return on investment (Y. E. C., 2017).

In discussing the use of ROI to capture and quantify the value of public relations, the findings and literature agree. There should be no expenditure without a way to measure its effectiveness, and this is true for public relations as well (Robinson, 2006). Certainly, public relations can demonstrate a return on investment (ROI) based on the intangible value that relationships provide, but it is difficult to determine an exact monetary value or measurement of the return on investment (ROI) of public relations (Grunig, 2006). Watson (2005) states that few public relations programs can be measured because it is difficult to assign a realistic and credible financial value to the results achieved. As a result, the term PR ROI is used very broadly.

Consistent with Grunig's (2006) study, all sales professionals cited examples of public relations personnel or strategies that positively contributed to the company's financial

performance. These examples generally involved crisis communications and issues management. Nonetheless, there is a high degree of recognition of the role of public relations in going beyond the reactionary aspect when it comes to sales operations, results and measures, and the financial performance of the company.

In summary, today, in both the public and private sectors, accountability, and therefore measurability, are fundamental management principles. Management is interested in solutions to business problems, not communication problems. If public relations is to make a real contribution to organizational effectiveness, it must become an expert in the use of communication to help remove barriers to organizational success and provide credible evidence of results and return on investment (ROI) to management, shareholders, and other key stakeholders (Macnamara, 2011; Steyn 2007).

Ethics

In terms of strategic communication and collaboration among salespeople, the results of this research show that ethics is essential in public relations and sales. Since ethics is considered the tenth generic principle of excellent public relations (Bowen, 2004), public relations departments should act as ethical advisors to management and advocate for social responsibility that benefits both society and the company (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). Ultimately, the role of public relations in strategic management has been highlighted by the fact that it brings the voice of the public into the corporate decision-making process, and from this understanding, public relations should improve corporate ethics and social responsibility (Grunig, 2006).

Sales professionals agree and claim that being even a little dishonest is not a true success (Reichard, 2014). "Ethics needs to be the highest priority in selling, to protect the company's reputation; attracting and keeping customers comes second; and profit comes third" (Reichard, 2014, p. 7).

Both public relations and sales function as important interfaces between sellers and buyers. Both functions are inherently stressful and characterized by ambiguity and role conflict, work overload, and customer and ethical demands. When you include public relations and sales collaboration in the realm of "ethics," the quality of stakeholder relationships is improved (McClaren, 2000) and the extent to which communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness is profound.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several recommendations can be made to support public relations and sales practice and pedagogy to improve salesforce effectiveness and organizational success entirely.

First, sales professionals and companies should understand, embrace, and implement cross-functional collaboration with public relations as described in Excellence Theory. This would require that companies define and structure public relations independently of marketing or any other communications function and seek its involvement in strategic decision-making. Ultimately, management must recognize and empower excellent public relations to improve the effectiveness of the salesforce.

Second, sales professionals and companies must understand and incorporate the value of two-way symmetrical communications and its mechanisms of listening, scanning the environment, and relationship management. Companies need to leverage public relations as a champion of symmetry because of the unanimous recognition of its value and positive impact on sales operations, relationships, stakeholders, and business goals as a core public relations competency.

Third, public relations should serve as an opportunity opener for salespeople. The results illustrate the tremendous value of public relations in "soft-selling" and "sensemaking"

among both internal and external stakeholders, including salespeople and their existing and potential customers. All participants gave examples of public relations contributing to the company's financial performance. However, measurement and ROI are difficult when there is no direct collaboration. Companies should establish a direct link between public relations and sales to strengthen public relations as input for ROI and promote greater sales effectiveness.

Fourth, as the 10th generic principle of excellent public relations, Bowen (2004) suggested that public relations should be involved as an ethical advisor to the company; this should include the salesforce. Only two of the companies surveyed reported having a formal code of ethics. Only one of the two formal codes was actively used in the organization. All other respondents indicated that ethics were inherent in professional selling and that the corporate culture and values espoused by management determined ethics. Public relations as an ethical advisory for the company and its salespeople could improve the company's reputation with internal and external stakeholders through a high level of ethics, which in turn leads to greater salesforce effectiveness and company success.

Finally, this research has demonstrated the need for academia to address professional selling. The theory and practice of professional selling are largely absent from academic programs, despite the fact that this core competency is becoming increasingly important to businesses and leaders.

For decades, sales and academia were separate and the organizations subsisted, but in light of this research, it is evident that sales is changing and academia is inexperienced, to the detriment of both business and academia (Cespedes & Weinfurter 2016). The theory and practice of public relations is appropriate to include and improve sales and vice versa. This can only serve to enhance both professions and help organizations survive and thrive. Strategic communications and sales collaboration is critical in both pedagogy and practice.

Limitations

The case study conducted is not without limitations. Among the limitations of this study is the limited sample of 13 in-depth interviews. In addition, the procurement of this sample contributed to deficiencies in the results. The sample was a convenience sample limited to individuals from the principal investigator's professional network.

Limitations to the data collected stem from the fact that all data collected were qualitative. In addition, all data were based on the responses of interview participants, which leaves room for issues related to poor recall or misrepresentation. Consequently, the results are limited, and the data cannot be generalized.

In addition, the lead author of the study is a public relations academic and a sales practitioner. Given this involvement in the topics studied, every effort was made to identify, address, and avoid bias; however, the possibility of bias still exists in the analysis, reporting, and interpretation of the data.

Another limitation was the limited time frame for conducting the study. This study was conducted for academic purposes and was constrained by a timeline for the submission of the thesis.

This thesis provides an exciting foundation for strategic communication and sales collaboration despite these limitations.

Conclusion

“The true purpose of a business, Peter Drucker said, is to create and keep customers” (as cited in Markey, 2020 p. 43).

The purpose of this study was to explore the collaboration between strategic communication and sales and how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with

salesforce effectiveness in order to expand the theories and practices of public relations and sales.

This research supports the pedagogy and practice of public relations and sales with the opportunity for both sales and public relations to assist in management engagement and strategic decision making and contribute positively to organizational effectiveness.

Professional sales is undergoing significant and accelerated change, necessitating a reconceptualization of sales. Moreover, professional sales and customer growth are top priorities for global business leaders (Janssen, 2021). Sales reconceptualization is characterized by a relationship-based approach, defined as consultative or "sensemaking."

Excellent public relations, characterized by two-way symmetrical communication and its mechanisms of organizational listening, environmental scanning, and relationship management, is in an ideal position to support sales. Because public relations focuses on building, maintaining, and enhancing relationships and can shape brand and reputation, it is evident that organizational effectiveness can be enhanced through strategic communications and collaboration with sales.

From the responses of the 13 in-depth interviews, it is clear that public relations can support sales and sales can support public relations.

There continues to be a sublimation of the public relations function to marketing, a conventional operation of public relations in a reactionary role, typically in a crisis, and a lack of public relations involvement in strategic decision making. However, there is recognition that the future of business requires excellent public relations to survive and thrive in the face of political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, and environmental factors. The findings of this research are consistent with public relations theories and provide an opportunity to improve business effectiveness.

Future Research

Considering the empirical results of this case study and the limitations, the potential for future research is evident.

Future research has great potential to replicate this case study with a larger, more representative sample to improve the quality and validity of this research and support the conclusions. A larger, more representative sample could strengthen the links between communication excellence and its alignment with salesforce effectiveness.

In addition, there is an opportunity to provide quantitative data to support the findings of this case study. A future study could triangulate the level of excellence with financial metrics to further understand how and to what extent a link can be established between a company's practice of excellent public relations and its influence on sales. Additionally, where the finding concluded that no measurement method for the ROI of public relations exists, yet all participants see an incredible value for this, future research could examine methods and measures of the ROI of public relations.

Other quantitative indications that emerged for inclusion in future research include the costs associated with acquiring and retaining a customer and the Net Present Value (NPV) for the duration of the relationship.

In addition, based on emerging themes, there are further opportunities for future research related to public relations and sales collaboration based on selling in a business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C) context.

Company size relative to company market capitalization is also a topic for future research. This research should examine the operations, value, and ROI of public relations concerning the company's market capitalization, structure, and industry.

Finally, public relations and its perceived involvement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate philanthropy and its influence on sales effectiveness are topics for future study.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Introduction

My name is Kyle Steward. I am pursuing a Master's degree in Communication Management at McMaster University. It is in this context that I would like to interview you to complete a case study research assignment. I would like to ask you several questions to help me determine how and to what extent communication excellence aligns with salesforce effectiveness.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary and you are free to end this interview at any time. Information will be shared only with your consent to do so. Alternatively, all information will be presented as aggregate findings. Individual quotes will be anonymized as Participant A, B, C, etc.

With your permission, I would like to record our interview, as it will allow me to listen more attentively to our discussion.

Following our interview, I will transcribe our discussion. Once my research study has been completed, both the audio files and transcripts will be securely erased. Are these conditions acceptable to you? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

RQ1: How and to what degree do sales professionals practice excellence?

Q1: How do you define public relations?

Q2: What value does public relations have for your organization?

Q3: How is public relations structured in your organization?

Q4: To what degree is public relations involved in strategic decision making?

Q5: How and to what degree is public relations empowered by executive management?

RQ2: How and to what extent is strategic communications aligned with sales to contribute to organizational effectiveness?

Q6: How do you define two-way symmetrical communication?

Q7: To what extent does your organization use symmetrical communication with its stakeholders? Can you provide an example?

Q8: How and to what extent is public relations involved in the sales operations of the organization?

Q9: What are the fundamental characteristics of successful sales relationships?

Q10: How and to what extent do you utilize public relations to achieve stakeholder and organizational objectives?

RQ3: How and to what extent does strategic communication affect sales operations, outcomes, and measures?

Q11: In your opinion, what key characteristics of public relations will contribute most to sales effectiveness? How and why?

Q12: What does financial return on investment (ROI) mean to you in regards to public relations?

Q13: What is the monetary value of public relations for the organization? Is this value measured, if so, how? If not, do you see value in measuring public relations?

Q14: Can you provide an example of when public relations contributed to the financial performance of your organization (retained revenue, increased revenue, reduced cost, avoided cost, etc.)?

Q15: How and to what extent is ethics involved in sales? Does your organization have a code of ethics?

Q16: How and to what degree could public relations effect sales ethics?

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to speak to me today, and for participating in this case study research. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to add anything else that comes to mind. Likewise, may I contact you if I have any follow-up questions regarding our discussion?