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INVESTIGATING THE TRUE RETURN ON INVESTMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS USING THE RELQUAL SCALE

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INVESTIGATING THE TRUE RETURN ON INVESTMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS USING THE RELQUAL SCALE

By

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ABSTRACT

INVESTIGATING THE TRUE RETURN ON INVESTMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS USING THE RELQUAL SCALE

By

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Using a web-based survey, this descriptive study examined the responses of U.S.-based principals managing public relations agencies ranging from one-person firms to multi-national corporations. Participants answered questions that examined variables adapted from the Relationship Quality Scale as well as public relations, customer service, marketing, and other business-related literature.

Because of the little scholarship conducted regarding client relationship management within public relations agencies, this descriptive study identified the variables which agency principals find most important when evaluating their client relationships. The study also investigated the methods currently used by agency principals to evaluate their client relationships and the perceived effectiveness of those methods. Finally, responses were examined to identify differences that exist between the relationship evaluation practices of

large public relations agencies and those working in smaller agencies.

The review of literature offers a comprehensive annotated bibliography of scholarship and professional references available to date. The identification of key constructs found in client-agency relationships in public relations agencies provides an important foundation for the theoretical development of this area of study. And, the findings of this study provide a baseline from which future researchers may develop scholarship designed to create or enhance public relations client relationship evaluation methods. Recommendations for future research are offered.

DEDICATION

Beyond the sky there is more sky; beyond one person there are others as well.

- Chinese Proverb

This work is proudly dedicated to my family.

Without them, achieving this dream would not have been possible, and I am eternally grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the time and effort of countless individuals who guided me throughout this journey. Dr. Lucinda Davenport, Dr. Teresa Mastin, Dr. Richard Cole and Mr. Robert Kolt are to be commended for their patience and valuable input throughout the preparation of this piece. Finally, thank you to the countless public relations agency leaders who, over the years, have supported this effort to create meaningful research in an important area of study.

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INTRODUCTION

Many industries across the United States are facing tough economic times, forcing businesses to evaluate policies and procedures. Particularly in service companies such as public relations agencies, it is imperative that all business partnerships are effective. And, as Solomon (2003) and Maister (1993) note, it is important to not only maintain, but also improve current customer relationships in an effort to increase an organization's bottom line both in good and more difficult financial times.

A review of literature identifies several traits that are commonly found in positive, general industry-client relationships, provided, for the most part, by a host of seasoned professionals offering advice gathered from their years of experience. However, little scientific research by public relations scholars has been completed to study specifically client-agency relationships in order to better understand the feelings and attitudes of members of agency leadership, and how those attitudes affect their affiliations with their clients.

By increasing the number of academic studies, public relations professionals might gain a better understanding of their client relationships, leading to more effective business partnerships. Thus, the objective of this descriptive research study is to examine, through the use of the Relationship Quality scale and contingency theory, public relations agency principals' responses to questions regarding their client relationships. The web-based survey instrument incorporated variables found in the Relationship Quality Scale, a 14-item scale developed to test business-to-business relationships, as well as those used in previous organization-public relationship studies and additional variables proposed by customer service, sales, marketing, business, and consumer behavior scholars. The combination of each of these elements allowed the researcher to more fully examine this relationship utilizing descriptive research, extending public relations research into an area not yet explored scientifically.

As Lee (2008) noted, maintaining good relationships with current clients is critical, particularly in an economic downturn. And, Garcia (2008) reminded professionals that although long-term client partnerships take work, they offer benefits to both sides through

expansion and growth of business. Ken Luce, head of the client relationship program at Weber Shandwick, was quoted regarding the importance of client retention and client service in agencies, stating both are "…important during tough economic times because organic growth is necessary" (Lee, 2008). This descriptive study provides an important examination of this valued investment—the client-agency relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the popular literature often commented on the importance of client-agency relationship management in obtaining and maintaining public relations work, the dyad is often taken for granted and overlooked when researchers devise studies (Carrington, 1992; Johnson, 2005). Some articles outlined common mistakes to avoid in relationship management, such as lack of availability and knowledge within an area (Miller, 1985). Others stressed the essential elements necessary for a successful relationship, such as creativity, service quality and open communication (Ritchie, et al., 1990) (Drobis and Tysse, 1997). Carrington (1992) reminded professionals to constantly review the status of relationships, while Johnson highlighted the creation of a "Chief Quality Officer" at Edelman, a top, global public relations agency (Johnson, 2005).

In a 2005 *PRWeek* article, a public relations professional recounted that upon the dismissal of their client contact (Director of Public Relations), they discovered serious relationship problems between the agency and the client organization (Johnson, 2005). Although they had worked together for many years, the

Director of Public Relations, rarely involved in the day-to-day dealings with the agency, always completed the agency evaluations—delivering positive reports each time. Thus, his input shielded the agency from obtaining accurate feedback.

In response to this discovery, the agency took steps to improve the relationship, evaluating problems and creating solutions that have led to positive outcomes for the team. While a resolution has been reached in this scenario, one cannot help but wonder how many situations like this occur every day.

Recent articles have focused on the tough financial times many businesses are weathering, offering tips for building success through relationship building and other methods (Cobb, 2008). Lee (2009) wrote of the necessity to small agencies of delivering superior client service, while Iacono (2009) reminded readers that "…defending an account is something that now needs to happen on a daily basis. Agencies can no longer wait…to justify the quality of their work and contribution to their clients' business" (9). Cody (2008), Dietrich (2008), Lee (2008), and Maul (2009) each covered the operation of agencies in the recession and offered suggestions to sustain business in tough times.

Lewis (2007), Orsbom (2008), Parekh (2009), Dodge (2007), and Kourtis (2008) suggested that each agency's new business pitching process should be carefully examined to ensure that the clients sought had the potential to develop into long-term partnerships with the agency. Kourtis (2008) recommended that agencies actively seek the clients they want, versus waiting for official Requests for Proposal. Among his seven tips offered, Kourtis listed truth, passion and respect as things agencies should look for in potential clients (9).

Many authors addressed the day-to-day maintenance of relationships once clients have signed contracts. In *PR News,* Edwards (2008) offered a tip sheet for maintaining a healthy client-agency relationship. Items discussed included responsiveness of account teams, honesty, creativity, expertise, flexibility and accountability. Rogers (2007) wrote of the breakdown of trust within a relationship due to billing issues among agencies and clients. Bush (2006) warned agencies to avoid complacency in order to retain long-term clients. Hood (2006) offered that, while agencies play an important role in the quality of the relationship, clients must also assume responsibility for the quality of the partnership.

Orsbom (2008) suggested that to develop a long-term relationship with a client, agencies should place client service and cross-office teamwork in large, multi-office agencies as a top priority (7). Nolan (2007) and Teller (2006) recommended that agencies maintain accountability, creativity, and strong work products in order to foster successful agency-client relationships. Nolan (2007) also stressed the importance of open, frequent communication (7). In addition, the Public Relations Society of America offered a seminar (2009) over the Internet, designed to address common concerns facing public relations practitioners today regarding agencies and their relationships with clients, including accountability and billing/invoicing and other financial practices.

Academic studies have reviewed the relationships found between organizations and their stakeholder audiences, but the study of public relations agencies and their relationships with clients has been neglected thus far. Recognizing this, it is necessary to not only review the organization-public relationship literature, but also examine relevant literature in related disciplines, including marketing, general business, interpersonal communication, and consumer behavior, searching for related variables and constructs not yet applied in public relations scholarly work.

Public Relations Scholarship

Using a variety of both qualitative and quantitative methods, public relations scholars in recent years have identified and examined several relationship dimensions that are important to obtaining and maintaining successful relationships in public relations. By studying the dimensions offered and comparing those added and deducted throughout the course of study, researchers may identify key variables that can be applied to additional research in the discipline. A list of public relations scholars and the relationship dimensions they studied can be found in

Table 1.

Table 1
Relationship Dimensions Identified in Public Relations Research

Scholar	Relationship Dimension
Bourland, P. (1993)	Knowing Each Other's Business Consistent Communication Flow Finances Chemistry
Chia, J. (2005)	Trust Commitment Satisfaction Control Mutuality or Power
Grunig, J., and Y. Huang (2000)	Control Mutuality Trust Relational Satisfaction Relational Commitment
Jo, S. (2003)	Trust Commitment Satisfaction Control Mutuality Face and Favor Personal Network
Ledingham & Bruning (1998)	Trust Openness Involvement (*2 Dimensions*) - *Investment* - Commitment
Childers Hon & Grunig (1999)	Control Mutuality Trust Satisfaction Commitment

Conducting a content analysis, Bourland (1993) identified four dimensions of relationships between clients and agencies in disagreement, commonly found in journal articles throughout 1980 to 1989. Examining articles found in *Public Relations Journal*, Bourland surmised that articles discussing client-agency conflicts focused on four key variables: 1.) Knowing each other's business; 2.) Consistent communication flow; 3.) Finances; and 4.) Chemistry. Using this information, it was recommended that agency leadership focus on these areas in order to avoid conflict with their clients. Chia (2005) studied agencies and their clients in Australia, examining variables such as "Trust," "Commitment," "Satisfaction," and "Control Mutuality or Power." While the results of the study could not be applied to a larger population, the presence of each of these variables in the study of agency-client relationships confirmed that those variables, often found in the study of organization-public relationships, were important to the participants in the study of agency-client relationships in public relations agencies. A list of these variable definitions can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Definitions of Common Relationship Dimensions Used in Multiple Public Relations Studies

Relationship Dimension	**Definition**
Trust	Existing when one party has confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity(Morgan & Hunt,1994).
Commitment	The extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote(Hon and Grunig, 1999).
Satisfaction	The distribution of rewards is equitable and the relational rewards outweigh costs (as cited in Jo, 2003).
Control Mutuality	The degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another (Hon and Grunig, 1999).

In an effort to better define relationship processes, Broom, et al. (1997) identified three stages of relationship formation: 1.) Relationship Concepts; 2.) Antecedents to Relationships; and 3.) Consequences of Relationships. This framework was used to direct the future research of public relations professionals studying organization-public relationships in the industry. Further, Childers Hon and Grunig (1999) created a 52-item questionnaire using 9-point scales adapted from interpersonal communication and psychology to examine the attitudes of publics toward five international organizations (e.g. Red Cross, National Rifle Association, General Electric, Social Security Administration, and Microsoft Corporation). Relationship dimensions studied included "Control Mutuality," "Trust," "Satisfaction," "Commitment," and "Type of Relationship." Expanding upon this model, Jo (2003) added the dimensions of "Personal Network" and "Face and Favor," variables necessary when examining South Korean relationships, to study the relationship between the managers of Samsung Electronics and local retailers throughout South Korea.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) examined the dimensions of "Trust," "Openness," and "Involvement," while studying telephone consumers in three states, while Grunig, et al. (2000) offered "Control Mutuality," "Trust," "Relational Satisfaction," and "Relational Commitment," as important factors to relationship quality in Ledingham and Bruning's (2000) *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations.*

Business, Marketing, and Consumer Behavior Scholarship

Studying relationship dimensions within industries such as healthcare, import/export businesses, public service organizations, sales, apparel, Chinese retail chains, and non-profit organizations, scholars identified several variables important to the further study of relationships. A complete list of scholars and dimensions identified can be found in Table 3.

Creating studies using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers identified a variety of relationship dimensions, often in an attempt to discover causal relationships between the variables in order to better distinguish antecedents and consequences of relationships. Of the twelve studies examined, trust was studied on nine occasions, while service quality was measured in four studies (see Table 3). Researchers sought to examine commitment in five of the studies, while loyalty was often included in various "broken-down" dimensions (Lages, et al. 2005; Pick, 1992; Wilson, 1995).

Table 3
Relationship Dimensions Identified in Business, Marketing, & Consumer Behavior Research

Scholar	**Relationship Dimension**
Chaston and Baker (1998)	Personal Attributes Expertise/Competence Regular Communication/Openness Personal Sharing Partnership Availability Consistency Trust Commitment Listening Skills
Crosby, et al. (1990)	Sales Effectiveness Similarity Service Domain Expertise Relational Selling Behavior Anticipate Future Interaction
Gounaris, S. P. (2005)	Antecedents of Trust & Commitment - *Perceived Quality of Service* - *Customer Bonding Technique Used by the Supplier* Behavioral Intention
Huntley, J. K. (2006)	Trust Commitment
Jost, et al. (2005)	Reconciliation of Objectives Continuity of Staff Engagement Team-Building Trust
Lages, et al. (2005)	Amount of Information Sharing Communication Quality Long-Term Orientation Satisfaction with Relationship
Leisen and Hyman (2004)	Antecedents to Trust - *Repeated Interactions* - *Customer Satisfaction* - *Incentive for Opportunistic Behavior*

Table 3 (cont'd)

Scholar	**Relationship Dimension**
Pick, P. J. (1992)	Trust Competence Discretion Over the Long-Term
Saiki and DeLong (2006)	Homophily Heterophily
Sternquist and Chen (2006)	Trust (*3 Dimensions*) - *Credibility Trust* - *Benevolence Trust* - *Opportunism*
Wilson, D. T. (1995)	Commitment Trust Cooperation Mutual Goals Interdependence/Power Imbalance Performance Satisfaction Comparison of the Alternatives Adaptation Non-Retrievable Investment Shared Technology Summate Constructs Structural Bonds Social Bonds
Wood, J. T. (1995)	Investment Commitment Trust Comfort with Relational Dialectics

Using the Relationship Quality Scale to Examine Public Relations Agency-Client Relationships

In an effort to examine import/export business in the United Kingdom, Lages, et al. (2005) developed and tested the Relationship Quality scale. The scale examined four relationship variables: (1) amount of information sharing in the relationship; (2) communication quality of the relationship; (3) long-term relationship orientation; and (4) satisfaction with the relationship. A list of these variable definitions can be found in Table 4.

Table 4
Definitions of RELQUAL Scale Relationship Dimensions

Relationship Dimension	**Definition**
Amount of Information Sharing	The extent to which the exporter openly shares information that may be useful to the relationship.
Communication Quality of The Relationship	The extent to which there is a permanent interaction between the members of both sides of the dyad in charge of strategy.
Long-Term Relationship Orientation	The perception of mutual dependence of outcomes in such a way that joint relationship outcomes are expected to profit from the relationship in the long run.
Satisfaction with the Relationship	A positive emotional state resulting from the assessment of the exporter's working relationship with the importer.

The research team developed a multi-item scale, creating several statements within each of these variables in an effort to evaluate them among top export managers. Because of the scales' focus in a business-to-business context, it is ideally suited to also be applied within the context of other service businesses, particularly public relations agencies. The researchers recommended the scale be applied in other business-to-business contexts in an effort to not only strengthen business relationships, but to also strengthen the scale itself.

Applying Contingency Theory to the Examination of Public Relations Agency-Client Relationships

Given the number of variables that previous scholarship has studied as elements necessary for positive client relationship management, it is necessary to also choose a theory that addresses several internal and external factors. Thus, this study applied contingency theory in order to gauge responses regarding variables gathered from several sources. Developed by Wiio and Goldhaber (1993), contingency theory recognized that communication processes are affected by several internal and external factors, or contingencies. The theory seeks to identify which factors are necessary for certain outcomes, and seeks to answer questions such as, "do different types of organizations have different communication needs?" In the context of this study, contingency theory was employed to identify which variables public relations principals deem necessary for successful client-agency relationships, as well as guide the researcher in the discovery of any differences that exist among agencies structured in varying ways.

Contingency Theory Scholarship in Other Disciplines

Scholars throughout the world have used contingency theory to examine complex topics that require researchers to take into account the contextual variables necessary to more accurately depict phenomena in their respective disciplines. Applied in subjects ranging from accounting to information technology, contingency theory offers a flexibility that allows researchers to supplement the constructs offered by previous scholars with additional variables in an effort to gain a better understanding of the research subject.

In the study of accounting, Cadez and Guilding (2008) used contingency theory to add the variables of company size and strategy to the examination of strategic management accounting. Chen (2008) applied the theory to examine capital budgeting methods, leading to the recommendation of further study in the area regarding the project's variables and accounting firm satisfaction.

Hendry, Stevenson, and Pozzetti (2008) used contingency theory to evaluate the results of 18 in-depth interviews conducted with capital goods manufacturers in Europe. Use of the theory enabled the research team to study several variables and report those most important to the relationship examined. In the study of supply chain management, Buttermann, Germain, and Iyer (2007) examined variables that led to the identification of "fit" within an organization. Using cluster analysis, the researchers reported six archetypes among participants. They wrote, "…Multiple regression and related methods are limited to understanding specific relationships and interactions among a small number of variables" (2). Their use of contingency theory enabled the team to examine several variables in order to better understand the relationship between the participants' organization and structure.

Meznar and Johnson (2005) examined the relationship between an organization's business-government relations (BGR) strategy, BGR structure, and BGR performance. Because previous scholarship had not combined each of these variables, the team used contingency theory to develop the exploratory study which suggested further research of the interactions of each of these variables.

Examining the field of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) in the information technology field, Morton and Hu (2008) used contingency theory to expand upon previous scholarship by adding variables found throughout literature in an effort to more precisely reflect the environment studied. In doing so, the researchers provided a valuable tool for management teams to consider when selecting and implementing ERP systems. Sousa and Voss (2008) provided an overview of the use of contingency theory in the study of operations management, reporting the maturation of the use of the theory in the field and its importance in the examination of contextual factors.

Contingency Theory Scholarship in Public Relations

In their notable textbook Managing Public Relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest that while some industries are suited to the "all or none" theories of management, the study of public relations must often employ theories that allow for the inclusion of many occurrences. Because one approach is not appropriate for all conditions, theories such as contingency theory must be used to more accurately study the nature of organizations and the environments in which they operate (43). A closer examination of previous scholarship applying contingency theory provides a clearer picture of the versatility of the theory and its applicability to many industries and research initiatives.

Cameron and colleagues have perhaps advanced the study of contingency theory most vigorously in public relations scholarship. Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook (1997) wrote that, "The practice of public relations is too complex, too fluid, and impinged by far too many variables for the academy to force it into the four boxes known as the four models of public relations" (32). They proposed a continuum, ranging from "pure advocacy" to "pure accommodation," from which researchers may devise and analyze public relations practice more accurately, thus giving birth to the phrase, "It Depends," which often is used when discussing contingency theory.

Building upon that study, Shin, Cameron, and Cropp (2006) sought parsimony within the theory by analyzing 86 contingent variables among public relations practitioners in the United States. Using a web-based survey, their study was designed to more fully understand how the contingent variables are combined in public relations practice in dealing with external publics. The study confirmed the validity of each of the 86 variables, but the researchers recommended further examination into the combination of variables used in daily practice.

Advancing the study of crisis communication using contingency theory, Cho and Cameron (2006) examined the crisis strategies used during a fast-moving scandal which featured public nudity on cellular phones. The study added the web community as a variable to include in future crisis communication studies. In addition, Shin, Cheng, Jin, and Cameron (2005) conducted a content analysis of news coverage of four major United States crises, analyzing 337 news articles. They found that organizations often move on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation over time. In addition, the contextual variables may also move along the same continuum.

Also using content analysis to analyze a crisis situation within the Air Force Academy, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) examined image repair strategies through the use of contingency theory. The researchers found that preparation often assists in the dissemination of information and its accurate coverage and bolstering is an effective image repair strategy.

Zhang, Qiu, and Cameron (2004) used contingency theory to examine conflict resolution approaches by the United States and China during an April 2001 military incident on Chinese soil. The team suggested that accommodation may be possible in times of international conflict, even when other factors play a role. Also using a case study approach, Mitrook, Parish and Seltzer (2008) examined the Orlando Magic's public campaign to build a new arena. The researchers found that the Orlando Magic moved along the continuum from pure advocacy to accommodation throughout the course of the campaign.

Scholars have also applied contingency theory to the study of corporate communications and management. Hwang and Cameron (2009) used contingency theory to study the stance of organizations during communications with their publics and found that the perceived leadership of an organization as well as the organization's stance on an issue may be a predictor in the view of the public toward that organization. Murphy (2000) noted the importance of the application of contingency theory when studying uncertainty in public relations scholarship. Reber (2001) studied the historically volatile relationship between public relations practitioners and lawyers, finding that members of each group view the other's position more accurately. In addition, he wrote that each group's approach to crisis communication provides a rich area for future study.

Andrews (2008) used contingency theory to examine the levels of perceived environmental uncertainty among management in 48 United Kingdom government service departments. He found that organizational, managerial, and strategic factors all affect perceived environmental uncertainty. He also reported that uncertainty about the political environment is often linked with better performance throughout the service department.

Choi and Cameron (2005) examined the stances of multi-national corporations and their agencies when creating or maintaining a presence in the Korean market. The study found that fear plays a role in the stance of the organization, with many organizations favoring pure accommodation on the continuum that ranges from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. The study also suggested that future international public relations initiatives include research of the local culture to ensure messages and strategies are on-point.

In their review of the development of contingency theory in public relations scholarship, Cameron, Pang, and Jin (2008) call for use of the theory in future studies in order to increase its systematic testing in various contexts. They recommend more scale development and further focus on the stance of organizations as a key concept to the theory, particularly in the study of crisis communications (146-147). In doing so, they believe a more accurate and complete theory may be developed, providing an effective tool for future scholars in the complex study of public relations phenomena.

Research Questions

Based upon the findings of the review of literature, the following research questions will be used to further explore client-agency relationships in public relations agencies.

RQ 1: What variables are most important to public relations agency principals when evaluating their relationships with their clients?

In an effort to build an area of study, one must first begin by identifying the proper variables. Prior scholarship and conjecture located in both academic and professional journals provided a number of proposed variables that may be used to study relationships. However, because of the little scholarship conducted within public relations agencies, this study will first seek to identify the variables which agency principals find most important when evaluating their client relationships. This first step will provide an important foundation for the future of this area of study.

RQ 2: What methods do public relations agencies use to evaluate their client relationships?

The second research question is necessary to investigate the methods currently used by agency principals to evaluate their client relationships. Findings of this inquiry will help to provide a baseline from which future researchers may develop scholarship designed to create or enhance public relations client relationship evaluation methods.

RQ 3: Do public relations agency principals view their current client relationship evaluation methods as effective?

The third research question allows agency principals to evaluate their current client relationship evaluation methods. This question enables the researcher to not only identify the current methods used, but invites respondents to evaluate those methods. By providing insight into their day-to-day practices, members of agency leadership will offer valuable information that may be used to better understand the practice of relationship evaluation in agencies today.

> RQ 4: What differences exist among the responses of large public relations agencies and the responses of small public relations agencies when asked about their client relationships?

The final research question is essential to better understand any differences that exist between the relationship evaluation practices of large public relations agencies and those working in smaller agencies. This question is necessary in the development of this research area, particularly in the accurate identification of agency practices and potential respondents in potential scholarship. The results will help scholars to properly select a population for future studies, identifying any gaps that exist between large and small public relations agencies' responses and among the responses of those that lead the organizations.

To investigate the questions, the researcher conducted an electronic survey of all public relations agency principals in the United States. A detailed outline of the methodology is below as well as the subsequent results and discussion. Recommendations for future research are offered with the conclusions of the study.

METHOD

Unit of Analysis

The researcher conducted an electronic survey of agency principals managing public relations agencies located in the United States. Agencies were identified using the 2008 O'Dwyer's Directory of Public Relations Firms. Principals and key practitioners for each firm listed in the directory received an e-mail message inviting them to follow the web link to complete the questionnaire. After a maximum of four contacts from the researcher, the study closed in late June 2009, allowing approximately six weeks from pre-electronic message notification to the final questionnaire link mailing. Because the organization of public relations agencies varies greatly from one-person firms to multi-national corporations and the directory does not specify each agency's organization, it was necessary to invite all firms to participate in the study. In this way, all organizations with contact information listed in the directory were invited to participate, ensuring the greatest coverage of all types of agencies.

To create the list of potential participants, the researcher created a list of all agency principals' e-mail addresses listed in the 2008 O'Dwyer's Directory of Public Relations Firms. The participant list included 558 potential participants.

Instrument

As outlined in Dillman (2007), participants are familiar with the practice of survey data collection, ranging from customer response cards featured on the tables at local restaurants to census collection in the United States. Electronic survey method was chosen for its cost-effectiveness in reaching participants nationwide, as well as the ease with which participants may return responses. Participants were asked to complete a web-based survey containing 11 questions ranging from fill-in-the-blank to multiple choice. (See Appendix A.) Questions were focused upon the variables outlined in the review of literature. The researcher provided a blank space at the end of the survey to gather open-ended comments from the participants, and all answers were kept anonymous. The survey and all communication materials were designed to closely follow the recommendations of Dillman's Tailored Survey Design (2007). In exchange for their time, the researcher agreed to share the results of the survey with each participant, upon his or her request.

Before beginning the survey, participants were asked to read a disclaimer following university informed consent procedures. If participants completed the questionnaire and returned it, they voluntarily gave their consent to participate. The informed consent reminded participants that they will not be identified individually - only in the aggregate. In addition, all procedures and instruments for the research study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Michigan State University. Finally, the approved instrument was tested among an expert panel of six public relations agency principals located in all regions of the United States. The researcher identified errors and corrected the questionnaire as needed, given the results provided by the panel of pre-test participants.

Data Collection

During the survey period, each participant received up to four pieces of communication from the researcher, beginning with a pre-electronic message announcing the study. (See Appendix B.) The follow-up e-mail message included an explanation of the study and a link to the questionnaire. A third communication reiterated the importance of the study and urged participants to complete the survey. Finally, a final e-mail message was sent to participants, reminding them to complete the questionnaire via link contained within the message and thanking them for their timely responses. This multi-contact strategy was formulated using Dillman's (2007) recommendations for survey implementation.

Using the data collected from the survey, all responses were entered in the program "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" (SPSS). Ten percent of the responses were re-keyed a second time, and the results were compared to ensure data entry was accurate. While this did not occur, the researcher was prepared to check a larger portion of the content entered if more than 2% of responses had not matched. In the instance of error, the original questionnaires would have been consulted to ensure accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of Respondents

During the six-week data collection period, 43 agency principals completed the electronic survey, recording an 8% response rate. Of respondents, 27 reported that they worked in a public relations agency, 13 worked in an integrated marketing communications firm, while one participant entered "digital practice for PR network," when asked to best describe his or her agency. Participants were not required to answer each survey question, respecting their rights as a volunteer participant. This resulted in a few participants skipping over various questions throughout the survey, with some questions collecting less than 43 responses. In contrast, some questions allowed participants to choose as many options as they would like. This resulted in far more selections than respondents.

The agency principals were asked to answer a few background questions, including the number of years worked in the public relations industry, the numbers of years worked at their current agency, and their firm's annual billings. The minimum number of years worked in the public relations industry totaled four years and the maximum was 40 years, while the mean was 21.95 years, and the median number of years worked in the industry was 23. When asked how long they had worked at their current agencies, respondents reported a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 35 years, while the mean was 13.03 years. The median number of years worked at their current agencies totaled 12.5.

In terms of billings, a factor this study used to determine size of agency, participants reported average annual billings from $360,000 to more than $5.1 million. Participants were evenly distributed among the options provided: 1.) 13 participants reported $1.51 million to $2.99 million; 2.) 10 participants reported $5.1 million or more; 3.) seven participants reported up to $750,000; 4.) six participants reported $3 million to $5 million; and 5.) four participants reported $751,000 to $1.5 million.

Survey Questions and Responses

Each question included on the survey is featured below, highlighted in bold. Participant responses follow, as well as a discussion and analysis of the findings.

In what ways do you currently evaluate your relationships with your clients? (Please check all that apply.)

When asked how they currently evaluate their client relationships, 35 participants, or 81%, reported "Lunch/Dinner Meetings," while six participants chose the "Other" category and provided written responses. One participant used "regular monitoring by senior staff and contact with the client," while another wrote, "tone of discussions, regular interaction."

In your opinion, which of the following are effective relationship evaluation methods? (Please check all that apply.)

When asked which evaluation methods are most effective, 33 participants, or 76%, reported "Lunch/Dinner Meetings," while five participants selected "Other" and provided additional comments. In their comments, many reported regular client meetings as important to relationship assessment, while one participant wrote:

> "Face-to-face client meetings in which we seek direct and uncensored responses to questions about our performance, our level of service and the attitude of client teams toward the client work and clients themselves."

A complete list of participant responses regarding current evaluation methods as well as those they found effective can be found in Table 5 that follows.

Table 5
Responses of Public Relations Agency Principals When Asked to Report Current Relationship Evaluation Methods and Those They Find Most Effective

	Methods Currently Used	Effective Relationship Evaluation Methods
Lunch/Dinner Meetings	35	33
Designated Employee Who Monitors Client Relationships	16	16
Surveys to the Clients	16	23
Internal Check-Lists Used by Agency Staff	14	13
Seminars/Conferences/Retreats With Clients	10	12
Other	6	5
Internal Surveys Completed By Agency Staff	5	11
I do not currently evaluate my client relationships.	2	2

Which of the following factors most affects your decision to pursue a potential client/respond to a Request for Proposal? (Choose one.)

Ten agency principals (23% of respondents) reported that a potential client's brand most affects his or her decision to pursue a potential client/respond to a

Request for Proposal, pursuing clients that build the prestige of the agency's client roster, extends an area of knowledge the agency excels within, or builds an area of expertise the agency seeks to enter. One participant entered "all of the above" as important to the decision-making process, indicating that several factors play a role in the decision to pursue a client. One respondent noted, "excitement over the project and proper 'fit'" as especially important to the decision, while another wrote, "While revenue is certainly a consideration, if the client is a good match based on needs and agency skills [that] is really the primary consideration." Finally, one agency principal reported that the client's product or service is a main factor when deciding to pursue a potential client. "Is it interesting, relevant? Life is too short! We want to do great things with great solutions being developed out there."

While the value of a potential client's brand on an agency's roster was chosen most frequently, one cannot ignore that financial variables were chosen second and third. Only able to choose one response, eight respondents noted that they most often pursue potential clients to increase his or her agency's bottom line, while seven respondents reported that a potential client's budget affects their decision to pursue that client.

Table 6 that follows illustrates the results.

Table 6
Responses of Public Relations Agency Principals When Asked What Factor Most Affects His or Her Decision to Pursue a Potential Client/Respond to a Request for Proposal

Potential Client's Brand	10
To Increase Your Agency's "Bottom Line"	8
Potential Client's Budget	7
To Increase Specialization in Potential Client's Industry	7
Other	6
Familiarity with Potential Client	3

Rank from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most important and 10 being the least important, the following variables in order of importance in maintaining your client relationships.

When asked to rank traits most important in the maintenance of their client relationships, 79% of participants reported that trust was most important. Agency principals also reported that quality of service (73%), effectiveness (63%), sharing/openness/comfort (57%), relational commitment (52%), availability/accessibility (51%), relational satisfaction

(49%), and reliability (49%) were important in the maintenance of client relationships.

Two traits received far fewer responses: continuity of staff (28%) and equal level of control (17%). Although respondents ranked continuity of staff at the eighth position on a 10-point scale, when asked about the variable individually, 74% reported that they enjoy "continuity of staff." While continuity of staff saves the agency time and money in terms of dedicated staff training resources and client transitions, perhaps the trait is important to the maintenance of client relationships - just not as important as the other variables offered.

Of particular note is the last-place rating that "Equal Level of Control" earned on the 10-point scale. This provides an interesting view of the control mutuality variable that has been used to study organization-public relationships in the past. Perhaps this suggests that, while the distribution of power plays a role in client relationships, it may be a less significant factor than that of an organization-public relationship.

When entering into a working relationship, an agency and its client often prepare a detailed verbal or written contract, outlining the key terms of the partnership. This act - the definition of roles and responsibilities to maintain accountability - could explain the participants' view of power within the relationship. Or, as one respondent noted, "We do good work together. I'm not concerned with who leads whom."

Future scholarship should focus upon this area to ensure that the use of Hon and Grunig's "control mutuality" variable should be included in public relations agency-client relationship research. While the variable was found to a play a key role in organization-public relationships, the factor may assume a lesser role in the relationship of agencies and their clients. When additional research has been completed to confirm the key constructs within agency-client relationships, studies completed by Chia (2005), for example, could be repeated to include the correct variables.

Thinking of their relationships in the aggregate, respondents were asked to rate the following relationship variables on a 5-point scale, with 1 meaning no trace of the variable and 5 meaning complete presence of the variable. "Trust," "Continuity of Staff," "Openness," "Reliability," and "Availability" were measured.

Forty agency principals reported that their client relationships had "complete trust," while 74% reported high "continuity of staff." Eighty-eight percent of participants reported "complete openness" when rating their level of communication among client relationships.

As service providers and professional consultants, those working in public relations agencies are driven by timelines, budgets, and recommendations created by the clients and account teams. Because of this dynamic, this study invited participants to rate the reliability of their clients as well as their client's availability - both factors that play a role in the successful completion of agency work. Thirty-five participants rated the reliability of their clients as a "3" on a 5-point scale, while 72% reported client availability in the middle of the scale.

On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all satisfied and 5 being completely satisfied, rate your satisfaction with your client relationships. For this question, think of your relationships in the aggregate.

When asked to rate their satisfaction with their client relationships, 31 agency principals reported satisfaction, while five respondents reported "complete satisfaction." This question allowed participants to think of their relationships in the aggregate, averaging the good client relationships with the less effective ones. An intriguing future study of this question may ask each agency principal to rate his or her satisfaction with each of the agency's clients. Perhaps this individualistic approach would produce a more vivid, detailed examination of client-agency relationships in public relations agencies.

For this question, think of your relationship with your client that holds the highest annual billings. What is your opinion concerning the following statements? (Please rate each item.)

Participants were asked to respond to a series of statements adapted from the Relationship Quality Scale developed by Lages, et al (2005). The multi-item scale examined four relationship variables: (1) amount of information sharing in the relationship; (2) communication quality of the relationship; (3) long-term relationship orientation; and (4) satisfaction with the relationship. Participant responses are reported in Table 7 that follows.

Table 7
RELQUAL Statement Responses of Public Relations Agency Principals

	5 Strongly Agree	4	3	2	1 Strongly Disagree
This client frequently discussed strategic issues with us.	24	11	2	3	1
This client openly shared confidential information with us.	19	20	1	1	0
This client rarely talked with us about its business strategy.	5	3	2	5	26
Both the agency and client had continuous interaction during implementation of the campaign.	25	12	3	1	0
The campaign's goals and objectives were communicated clearly to involved and concerned parties.	21	14	4	1	1
Both the agency and client team members openly communicated while implementing the strategy.	28	9	3	1	0
There was extensive formal and informal communication during implementation.	25	13	2	1	0
We believe that over the long run, our relationship with the client will be profitable.	30	8	2	0	1
Maintaining a long-term relationship with this client is important to us.	33	8	0	0	0
We focus on long-term goals in this relationship.	27	9	3	1	0
We are willing to make sacrifices to help this client from time to time.	30	9	0	0	1
Our association with this client has been a highly successful one.	27	11	1	0	1
This client leaves a lot to be desired from an overall performance standpoint.	0	1	5	13	22
Overall, the results of our relationship with the client were far short of expectations.	0	2	2	7	29

The use of the Relationship Quality Scale allowed the study to confirm that the variables of "satisfaction with the relationship" and "long-term relationship orientation" or "commitment" are integral variables in the study of agency-client relationships in public relations agencies. In addition, the variables of "communication quality of the relationship" and "amount of information sharing" are also integral to this study - both variables that have been omitted in prior scholarship due to the application of the few variables previously studied in organization-public relationship research. It seems that in an effort to seek parsimony, researchers have overlooked the inclusion of important relationship variables that agency leaders find important to client-relationship management. This study, through its broad view of client-agency relationships and inclusion of relationship variables found throughout multiple disciplines, has expanded this research area to more accurately examine this important relationship in public relations.

Research Questions and Discussion

Each of the four research questions posed is featured below, along with discussion and findings for each. Research questions two and three have been combined in this section to provide a more vivid analysis of the participants' responses.

RQ 1: What variables are most important to public relations agency principals when evaluating their relationships with their clients?

Combining variables from several disciplines and various scholarly works throughout the public relations industry enabled the researcher to more fully examine the complex client-agency relationship in public relations agencies. As previously stated, agency principals noted that trust was most important in the maintenance of their client relationships, with forty participants reporting that their client relationships featured "complete trust."

Respondents rated "sharing/openness/comfort" as fourth on a 10-point scale, at 57%. In contrast, when asked to rate the openness of their relationships individually on a 5-point scale, eighty-eight percent of participants reported "complete openness" when rating their client relationships. This illustrates that while openness is often present in client relationships and principals view the trait as important to the relationship's success, trust, quality of service (73%), and effectiveness (63%) are perceived to have more importance to the maintenance of client relationships.

While relational commitment (52%), availability/ accessibility (51%), relational satisfaction (49%), and reliability (49%) were also found to be important in the maintenance of client relationships, two traits received far fewer responses: continuity of staff (28%) and equal level of control (17%).

Although 28% of respondents rated continuity of staff at the eighth position on a 10-point scale, when asked about the variable individually, 74% reported that they have "continuity of staff." The variable's high rating when studied individually underlines the fact that agency time and financial resources, including training and transition time, as well as client satisfaction with a continuous team are both crucial to the agency's success. "Continuity of staff's" relatively low rating when ranked among other variables further emphasizes the importance of the other variables studied.

A notable finding is the last-place rating that "Equal Level of Control" earned on the 10-point scale. A variable found in the study of organization-public relationships, "Equal level of control" or "control mutuality" has been used by Chia (2005), Grunig and Huang

(2000), Jo (2003), and Childers Hon and Grunig (1999) in past scholarship. Participants' responses suggest that, while the distribution of power plays a role in client relationships, it may be a less significant factor than that of an organization-public relationship. Future scholarship should focus upon this area to ensure that Hon and Grunig's "control mutuality" variable is a key construct in the study of public relations agency-client relationships. Completing strong, theoretically sound research is important to the growth of the public relations industry and this area of research inquiry. Focus upon the accurate identification of key constructs will provide a resolute foundation for future scholarship.

Similarly, "effectiveness," a variable derived from business-to-business and service scholarship received a ranking of third on the 10-point scale. As noted in professional journals and academic research, accountability has become increasingly important for public relations agencies. Effectiveness, in particular, becomes even more important in tough economic times (Lee, 2008) (Edwards, 2008). Their responses show that agency leaders are focused on providing effective solutions for their clients, leading to increased growth for both parties and enhanced relationship status.

In addition, the Relationship Quality Scale offered the variables "communication quality of the relationship," and "amount of information sharing," which were both viewed as important to the maintenance of client relationships by agency principals. Perhaps the parsimony sought in past studies does not serve the examination of public relations agency-client relationships well. As this study revealed, effectiveness and quality of service are among those variables most important to agency principals when dealing with clients. By expanding the variables examined in future agency-client relationship research, scholars may better understand the importance of these overlooked variables in the study of client-relationship management.

RQ 2: What methods do public relations agencies use to evaluate their client relationships?

AND

RQ 3: Do public relations agency principals view their current client relationship evaluation methods as effective?

Agency principals were first asked to report what methods their agencies use to evaluate their client relationships. In addition, they were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the methods. Their responses are below.

The figure illustrates that lunch/dinner meetings are the most common method used to evaluate client relationships. However, while 35 leaders reported using this method, two less participants reported that this method was effective. Similarly, one participant reported that internal agency staff check-lists were used, but not effective.

Table 8
Responses of Public Relations Agency Principals When Asked to Report Current Relationship Evaluation Methods and Those They Find Most Effective

	Methods Currently Used	Effective Relationship Evaluation Methods
Lunch/Dinner Meetings	35	33
Designated Employee Who Monitors Client Relationships	16	16
Surveys to the Clients	16	23
Internal Check-Lists Used by Agency Staff	14	13
Seminars/Conferences/Retreats With Clients	10	12
Other	6	5
Internal Surveys Completed By Agency Staff	5	11
I do not currently evaluate my client relationships.	2	2

The chart also illustrates that several participants assumed that the methods would be effective, but they do not currently employ them within their agencies. One participant reported, "We just do not have the staff to regularly survey our client relationships." Another noted, "We would love to spend more time with our clients at conferences and seminars. When we do attend, we see the value it brings." The responses were logged by smaller agencies, while the larger agencies employed a designated staff member or team to monitor client relationships.

Six participants provided written responses, noting the use of "regular monitoring by senior staff and contact with the client," and "tone of discussions, regular interaction" as methods employed in the evaluation of client relationships. Lee (2009) wrote of the importance of agency leadership involvement, "…the role of the agency and the client becomes more of a partnership when senior-level staff members work closely with corporate communicators on a regular basis" (6).

Public relations agencies would benefit from a study of agency leadership involvement on client accounts and its effects on client satisfaction. Scholarship in this area would not only benefit agency managers, but also provide teacher-scholars with valuable tools for preparing future public relations professionals. Future scholarship devoted to the development of public relations client relationship evaluation methods would not only provide a valuable service for agency managers worldwide, but also provide the academic community with a closer examination of the key variables necessary to fully evaluate client relationships.

RQ 4: What differences exist among the responses of large public relations agencies and the responses of small public relations agencies when asked about their client relationships?

The distribution of participants working in large and small firms nationwide provided a balanced data set. As noted above, participants were asked to report their annual billings, and respondents reported average billings ranging from $360,000 to more than $5.1 million. Despite the size or type of organization, respondents reported similar responses in regards to agency-client relationships. One notable difference is that large agencies often featured a staff member (or team) that is solely dedicated to evaluating and maintaining client relationships. In smaller agencies, the resources available to some of them did not allow such a position or department.

One respondent noted, "We do the best we can with what we've got. We really try to stay on top of our relationships, but day-to-day work can push evaluation to the back burner."

Reviewing the results reported when asked to respond to the Relationship Quality scale statements, a few participants rated their relationship as poor on a couple of factors such as quality of communication and profitability of client relationship. Respondents were asked to choose their largest client in terms of highest annual billings and only think of that client when responding to the statements. Given the relative strength of agreement with all of the other statements, it could be posited that the responses were affected by a poor campaign or recent initiative that was ineffective.

Another explanation may be that, given the economic climate, agencies are continuing work with clients with whom they may have previously severed ties. One participant noted, "Clients are hurting, and we are hurting. It's a tough time out here now, and we try to keep our relationships strong to weather the storm." The respondent continued, "Have we kept a difficult client just because of the economic situation? Sure. But, we hope that through open communication and quality work, we can build a stronger partnership."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As one participant noted, "this is a very interesting approach," because of the incorporation of many variables not yet studied and the broad approach to the examination of client-agency relationships in public relations agencies. While the use of web-based surveys are commonplace to reach respondents today, the use of this method was important to gather responses from U.S.-based public relations agency principals regarding their client-agency relationships in an economical way. The survey incorporated variables found in the Relationship Quality Scale, a 14-item scale developed to test business-to-business relationships, as well as those used in previous organization-public relationship studies and additional variables proposed by customer service, sales, marketing, business, and consumer behavior scholars. The combination of each of these elements along with the flexibility of contingency theory allowed the researcher to more fully examine this relationship, extending public relations research into an area not yet explored scientifically.

Because of the little scholarship conducted regarding client relationship management within public relations agencies, this descriptive study identified the variables that agency principals find most important when evaluating their client relationships. The study also investigated the methods currently used by agency principals to evaluate their client relationships and the perceived effectiveness of those methods. Finally, responses were examined to identify differences that exist between the relationship evaluation practices of large public relations agencies and those working in smaller agencies.

The review of literature offered a comprehensive annotated bibliography of scholarship and professional references available to date. The identification of key constructs found in client-agency relationships in public relations agencies provides an important foundation for the theoretical development of this area of study. And, the findings of this study provide a baseline from which future researchers may develop scholarship designed to create or enhance public relations client relationship evaluation methods.

Implications for Public Relations Agencies

Applying variables proposed in previous public relations research as well as those offered in the

Relationship Quality Scale, agencies should incorporate the following elements into their client-relationship evaluation methods:

- Satisfaction
- Commitment (Long-Term Relationship Orientation)
- Trust
- Communication Quality of the Relationship
- Amount of Information Sharing
- Control Mutuality (Distribution of Power within Relationship)

Although each of these variables may be examined using multi-item scales, they offer a broad view of the relationship at any given time. Agencies will benefit from incorporating all of these variables into their evaluation methods, receiving a more accurate, detailed illustration of the relationship.

Respondents reported that among the most effective methods for evaluating their client relationships were lunch/dinner meetings and surveys to the clients. Other methods included internal checklists and surveys completed by agency staff to monitor client relationships. Some agencies reported assigning a designated employee to monitor client relationships. Although agencies differ in size, structure and billings, respondents agreed - do something.

It is important to note, however, that clients must feel that they may report accurate results - free from repercussion. Accurate responses - no matter how negative - will help the agency improve the relationship. Steps must be taken to ensure clients feel comfortable with the chosen method and the administration of the evaluation.

Taking the proactive approach to client-relationship management can build a client's trust and satisfaction with the relationship - two key variables examined in this study. By illustrating the dedication of an agency to building strong partnerships, clients will appreciate the increased information sharing and quality of communication, thus building upon their desire to stick with the agency long-term.

Agency leaders may use the results gathered from their clients in a variety of ways. They may choose to develop an annual seminar for staff members, keeping them informed on the most current client-relationship evaluation methods. They may choose to meet individually with each client to address, first-hand, each client's evaluation responses. They may use the clients' collective responses to create a formalized evaluation plan. Others may choose to hold an open, frank discussion among the agency's account team and the client.

Regardless of the path chosen, the most important thing is to act. Whether it's showing appreciation for the client's participation in the evaluation or a sweeping overhaul of agency practices, agency leaders' actions show a proactive interest in bettering the experiences of clients and agency staff alike. Further, any adjustments made to alleviate problems reinforce the commitment of the agency to provide superior service. And, in tough economic times, it's that commitment and dedication to current clients that often keep agencies afloat. Finally, the regular evaluation of client relationships provides valuable data for agencies, allowing agency leadership to track responses over time. The data provides a unique, periodic glimpse into the client experience, providing a platform from which an agency's most valuable investment may candidly speak.

Limitations of the Study

While the response rate (8%) was very low, participants who responded provided valuable information that extended our understanding of client-relationship management in public relations agencies. Lages, et al. (2005) received an 8% response rate when developing the Relationship Quality Scale. However, the research team was able to contact non-responders and conduct personal interviews to gain additional information. The method chosen for this study did not allow the use of follow-up interviews, as all participants were anonymous and no record was kept of those that participated. Only comments that were submitted via the web-based survey instrument or via e-mail directly to the author were available for additional insight into participant responses. The author recommends amending the method used in future studies in order to avoid such a limitation.

In addition, today's public relations professional is constantly connected through the use of computers, personal data assistants and other information technology tools. While the survey was designed to be easily read on a computer screen, the readability of the survey was not tested on the screen of a handheld telephone. Perhaps participants were unable to complete the survey based upon constraints of the technology with which they accessed the survey link. Consideration of this occurrence must be given to future studies.

Finally, Dillman (2007) recommends the use of multiple contacts through varying methods in order to improve response. Although he notes that "researchers have not yet identified protocols that consistently produce high response rates for web surveys," he confirms that shifting from one mode to another, for example from web survey to mail survey, is "likely to improve response rates beyond what can be achieved with any individual mode" (494). Because of cost constraints, a nationwide mail survey was impossible to conduct at this time. However, future scholars may consider the use of mixed-mode survey when conducting research in this area.

Recommendations for Future Research

Agencies are eager to sustain and increase growth even in the tough economic climate. Authors have provided anecdotal information and case studies to help agency leaders operate in the tight financial marketplace, but scholarship in this area is much needed to support their conjecture. An important first step in examining any phenomena is the identification of its key constructs. By expanding the scope with which client-agency relationships in public relations agencies is studied, this study provides an important foundation for future research in this area.

Examining this phenomena, perhaps through the application of symmetry theory (Severin and Tankard, 2001), scholars and management team members alike can gain an insight into this complex business relationship. Longitudinal studies examining relationship evaluation methods and their perceived effectiveness would also provide valuable information regarding long-term trends and the evolution of relationships over time. Further, co-orientation analysis could provide useful information in the search for more successful partnerships. Echoing the need for such an examination, one participant noted, "You need to correlate from what clients will tell you. Their sense of the relationship with agencies is actually more important than the other way around."

Increasing the number of practitioners who participate in future studies of public relations agency-client relationships would enable scholars to quantitatively identify key trends and variables necessary to maintain successful relationships. Enlisting the assistance of various public relations agency management associations would increase the number of viable contacts, thus increasing the potential participant pool. In addition, requesting a letter of support or introduction at the beginning of future studies could help bolster support for the study and encourage practitioners to participate. In doing so, a mutually beneficial relationship will occur, given that the strength of the studies will increase, and the findings of the scholarship will serve to strengthen the day-to-day practice of the participants.

Final Thoughts

As the literature illustrates, the relationships that public relations practitioners and members of the business community develop with their stakeholder audiences are key to the success of the organizations that they represent, and, in response, academic research has aptly studied those relationships. However, arguably just as important as any stakeholder relationship is the relationship that is forged between a public relations practitioner and his or her client.

In this time of limited company resources, it is necessary for public relations practitioners to build their relationship management skills, and become "relationship managers," in order to provide the best possible service to their clients, while minding their agency's and clients' bottom lines (Likely, 2005). This provides an opportunity for a rich partnership between academicians and professionals, creating relevant, applicable research that is structurally sound.

As noted by Rosenberg (2000) and Shoemaker, Tankard, and Lasorsa (2003), developing social science theory requires that researchers prepare a systematic analysis of problems in order to fully understand the phenomena and the context within which it operates. By expanding the view of events within the public relations industry, scholars may apply variables and theories offered in related disciplines in an effort to more fully examine occurrences within the public relations industry. By doing so, scientific discoveries are shared by multiple disciplines, encouraging the dissemination of new knowledge in many industries.

Today, it is rare to find a company or organization, regardless of industry, that is not intently scrutinizing its position in the marketplace and the relationships it holds with each of its key stakeholders. It is for these reasons that public relations scholars must build strong academic studies that seek to provide valuable information that organizations may use to bolster their business.

Much as various disciplines have researched relationships within their industries, it is imperative that public relations agencies examine those elements that are most necessary for successful public relations activity. By better understanding the key elements of the discipline, such as client-relationship management, practitioners may strengthen communication with existing clients and apply the research in order to obtain and develop new relationships with potential clients. In the end, practitioners will benefit from the results of the study, providing practical research they can apply daily. Academicians will foster positive relationships with industry professionals—bettering their understanding of professionals' research needs and strengthening the professionals' perceptions of academic research. Teacher-scholars will also benefit from additional scholarship that will assist them in the education of tomorrow's professionals. And, finally, the public relations discipline will benefit from strong, theoretical additions to its body of knowledge, increasing the ability of public relations scholars to analyze and predict behavior throughout the industry.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INSTRUMENT

Examining Public Relations Agency-Client Relationships

Informed Consent
This survey is part of an important dissertation research project being conducted at Michigan State University. The project concerns the experience of more than 1,900 public relations agency leaders in developing, maintaining, and evaluating client relationships. It's only with the generous help of people like you that this research can be successful. You will be asked to spend about 10 minutes answering 11 questions.

Your cooperation is voluntary, and you are free to choose not to participate in this study. You may also refuse to answer certain questions or may discontinue the survey at any time. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your responses and identity will be kept anonymous. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact the lead investigator, Kelly Everling, APR, 309 CAS Building, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 48824-1212, (517) 432-4777, everling@msu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Lucinda Davenport, director of the Media and Information Studies Ph.D. program at Michigan State University, (517) 355-6574, ludavenp@msu.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email: irb@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Thank you very much for your cooperation and participation.

By completing this survey you indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

1. What one word best describes your agency?

_____ Public Relations Agency
_____ Advertising Agency
_____ Integrated Marketing Communications Agency
_____ Other—Please Specify ______________________________

2. In what ways do you currently evaluate your relationships with your clients? (Check all that apply.)

_____ I do not currently evaluate my client relationships.
_____ Internal Check-Lists Used By Agency Staff
_____ Surveys to the Clients
_____ Internal Surveys Completed By Agency Staff
_____ Seminars/Conferences/Retreats With Clients
_____ Lunch/Dinner Meetings
_____ Designated Employee Who Monitors Client Relationships
_____ Other—Please Specify ______________________________

3. In your opinion, which of the following are effective relationship evaluation methods? (Check all that apply.)

_____ I do not currently evaluate my client relationships.
_____ Internal Check-Lists Used By Agency Staff
_____ Surveys to the Clients
_____ Internal Surveys Completed By Agency Staff
_____ Seminars/Conferences/Retreats With Clients
_____ Lunch/Dinner Meetings
_____ Designated Employee Who Monitors Client Relationships
_____ Other—Please Specify ______________________________

4. Which of the following factors most affects your decision to pursue a potential client/respond to a Request for Proposal? (Choose one.)

_____ Potential Client's Budget
_____ Potential Client's Stock Performance
_____ Potential Client's Brand
_____ Familiarity with Potential Client's Staff
_____ To Increase Specialization in Potential Client's Industry
_____ To Increase Your Agency's "Bottom Line"
_____ Other—Please Specify ______________________________

5. Rank from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most important and 10 being the least important, the following variables in order of importance in maintaining your relationships with your clients.

_____ Equal Level of Control
_____ Trust
_____ Relational Commitment
_____ Relational Satisfaction
_____ Effectiveness
_____ Quality of Service
_____ Continuity of Staff
_____ Sharing/Openness/Comfort
_____ Reliability
_____ Availability/Accessibility

6. For this question, think of your relationships in the aggregate. On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you rate the following elements of your relationships?

Complete Trust	5	4	3	2	1	No Trust At All
Complete Continuity of Staff	5	4	3	2	1	No Continuity of Staff
Complete Openness	5	4	3	2	1	Not At All Open
Client Always Reliable	5	4	3	2	1	Client Not At All Reliable
Client Always Available	5	4	3	2	1	Client Not At All Available

7. On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being completely satisfied and 5 being not at all satisfied, rate your satisfaction with your client relationships. For this question, think of your relationships in the aggregate.

Completely Satisfied 5 4 3 2 1 Not At All Satisfied

8. For this question, think of your relationship with your client that holds the highest annual billings. What is your opinion concerning the following statements? (Please rate each item.)

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
This client frequently discussed strategic issues with us.	1	2	3	4	5
This client openly shared confidential information with us.	1	2	3	4	5
This client rarely talked with us about its business strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
Both the agency and client had continuous interaction during implementation of the campaign.	1	2	3	4	5
The campaign's goals and objectives were communicated clearly to involved and concerned parties.	1	2	3	4	5
Both agency and client team members openly communicated while implementing the strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
There was extensive formal and informal communication during implementation.	1	2	3	4	5
We believe that over the long run, our relationship with the client will be profitable.	1	2	3	4	5
Maintaining a long-term relationship with this client is important to us.	1	2	3	4	5
We focus on long-term goals in this relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
We are willing to make sacrifices to help this client from time to time.	1	2	3	4	5
Our association with this client has been a highly successful one.	1	2	3	4	5
This client leaves a lot to be desired from an overall performance standpoint.	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, the results of our relationship with the client were far short of expectations.	1	2	3	4	5

9. How many years have you worked in the Public Relations industry?

_______________ years

10. How many years have you worked at your current agency?

_______________ years

11. What are your firm's annual billings? (This information will only be used to analyze responses among similarly sized firms.)

_____ Up to $750,000
_____ $751,000 to $1.5 million
_____ $1.51 million to $2.99 million
_____ $3 million to $5 million
_____ $5.1 million or More

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about this survey or the topic, please do so in the space provided below. Thank you for your participation!

APPENDIX B

COMMUNICATION PIECES

Pre-Notification E-mail Message

A few days from now you will receive an e-mail request to fill out a brief questionnaire for an important dissertation research project being conducted at Michigan State University.

The project concerns the experience of public relations agency leaders in developing, maintaining, and evaluating client relationships.

I am writing in advance because I have found many people like to know ahead of time that they will be contacted. The study is an important one that will help agency leaders worldwide better understand public relations agency-client relationships.

Thank you for your time and consideration. It's only with the generous help of people like you that this research can be successful.

Sincerely,

Kelly B. Everling, APR
Instructor and Principal Investigator
Department of Advertising, Public Relations, and Retailing
Michigan State University

P.S. I will be happy to share the results of the study with you as a way of saying thanks.

Introduction and Instructions/Questionnaire Link Mailing

I am writing to ask for your help in an important dissertation research project examining your experience in developing, maintaining, and evaluating client relationships.

I ask that you complete the brief questionnaire found by following the link below:

<INSERT LINK HERE>

Results from the survey will be shared with you (upon request), and they may be used to better understand client relationship management in public relations agencies.

Your answers are anonymous, and this survey is voluntary. However, you can help me very much by taking a few minutes to share your experiences and opinions. If for some reason you prefer not to respond, please let me know by replying to this message, indicating that you wish your name to be removed from the participant list.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, I would be happy to talk with you. My direct phone number is (765) 425-4400, or you can e-mail me at everling@msu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Lucinda Davenport by phone (517) 355-6574 or e-mail ludavenp@msu.edu.

Thank you very much for helping with this important study.

Sincerely,

Kelly B. Everling, APR
Instructor and Principal Investigator
Department of Advertising, Public Relations, and Retailing
Michigan State University

P.S. If by some chance I made a mistake and you are not a member of your agency's leadership, please pass this survey on to a senior-level colleague in your agency. Many thanks.

Thank You/Reminder Mailing

Recently, a link to a questionnaire seeking your opinions about public relations client-agency relationships was e-mailed to you.

If you have already completed the questionnaire, please accept my sincere thanks. If not, please do so today by following the link below:

<INSERT LINK HERE>

I am especially grateful for your help because it is only by asking people like you to share your experiences that I can understand client relationship management in public relations agencies. If by some chance I made a mistake and you are not a member of your agency's leadership, please pass this survey on to a senior-level colleague in your agency. Many thanks.

The study is drawing to a close. I hope that you will complete the questionnaire soon. I appreciate your willingness to consider this request as I conclude this study. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Kelly B. Everling, APR
Instructor and Principal Investigator
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P.S. If you have any questions, please call me at (765) 425-4400, or you can e-mail me at everling@msu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Lucinda Davenport by phone (517) 355-6574 or e-mail ludavenp@msu.edu.

Final Mailing

I am writing to ask for your help in an important dissertation research project examining your experience in developing, maintaining, and evaluating client relationships. Please consider spending about 10 minutes to complete the brief questionnaire found by following the link below:

<INSERT LINK HERE>

Results from the survey will be shared with you (upon request), and they may be used to better understand client relationship management in public relations agencies.

If you have already completed the questionnaire, please accept my sincere thanks. If not, please do so today. The study is drawing to a close, and this is the last contact that I will make. I hope that you will complete the questionnaire soon. I appreciate your willingness to consider this request as I conclude this study. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

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