

Executive Summary

Thinking Big/Staying Small:

This report is the culmination of our four-year study about the ways that small organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit, conduct their communications functions. Although most businesses in the United States are small, with 90 percent having fewer than 20 employees, until this study no one had measured their methods of communications and their public relations practices. This is critical because of the growing importance of the small organizations in the economy of the United States and other nations. The outcome of our study is a body of findings that stretches beyond the original three questions we posited in our research proposal. While we report baseline data, we also provide analysis to build on the theoretical work by other scholars. Ultimately, we felt that the most important contribution we could make was in finding a way to describe how small organizations look at and think about communications, especially since communications professionals increasingly find themselves working with these small organizations. One of our goals, therefore, was to provide information that would help these professionals understand the way their prospective clients think and talk about public relations.

Overall study design & research protocol

In our Sept. 20, 2000, letter of agreement with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation, we said we would answer the following three research questions:

- a. At what point in an organization's growth does it need a formal communications function and/or the assistance of a communications professional as opposed to a loose set of communications vehicles or policies defined by non-communicators?
- b. What communications functions can be outsourced at various stages in an organization's development?
- c. Are the communications skill requirements in smaller organizations different for start-ups, nonprofits or different industries?

Because our study was intended to establish a foundation, we elected to concentrate initially on a limited geographic area by looking at businesses, associations, government agencies and nonprofits in and around Austin, Texas. In addition to purely practical considerations (two of the researchers live and work in Austin), we felt Austin presented the perfect laboratory for our purposes. Entrepreneurial activity flourishes in the Austin region, creating a fertile environment for innovation and small business and nonprofit organization growth. Not only is Austin the state

capital and home to more than 400 nonprofits and trade associations, but it also has government agencies at all levels of jurisdiction: federal, state, county, city and district.

Although our project, with a budget one-thirtieth the size, cannot hope to replicate the *Excellence* study for the IABC more than a decade ago (Grunig, 1992 and Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995), we used definitions developed in that landmark study, wherever possible, so that our findings would be useful when viewed in light of that project. To that end, we divided the universe of small organizations into four groups:

- for-profit enterprises
- nonprofits
- trade associations
- government agencies.

Our research protocol was conducted in several steps and applied multiple research designs, applying both quantitative and qualitative techniques including focus groups, survey research, focused interviews and Q-methodology.

Focus Groups: From a series of five focus groups, we were able to learn how to talk to small organizations about communications and public relations and the best language and definitions to use. For instance, we found that their concepts of what constitutes "public relations" are much broader and more sophisticated than simply "media relations." We had assumed, incorrectly as it turned out, that because they probably had little professional training in public relations, small business owner-operators would see public relations in its most publicly visible terms: that is, in terms of news releases and news coverage. Such was not the case. Although they didn't always use the same jargon, it soon became apparent to us that their ideas about the breadth of activities under the umbrella term of "public relations" would rival that of some of the most sophisticated academics in the field. We saw this same pattern among the nonprofits that participated in our study.

Surveys: The next step in our study was collection of quantitative data using survey research. From a series of mail surveys, augmented by a truncated on-line version, we were able to measure with some precision the incidents and frequencies of certain communications activities, as well as the training and uses small organizations make of contract professionals.

We were guided in our final design and selection of questions by three things. First, we wrote questions to directly address the issues we outlined in our research proposal and agreement with the IABC. Second, we wanted, to the extent possible, to collect data that could be read in

conjunction with the *Excellence* study. Finally, because so little has been developed in this area, we felt this formative project should concentrate on establishing a basic frame of reference as to how the small organization communicates and how these respondents approach the public relations function. For purposes of data analysis, we combined the results of identical questions from surveys in the two modes of administration (mail and on-line). Two-thirds of all respondents were for-profit enterprises and 82 percent had 20 or fewer employees. Indeed, half the respondents had five or fewer employees. The mean number of employees for the sample was 12. This skew, with most of the businesses falling in the smallest size categories, is generally consistent with that reported for for-profits by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Depth Interviews & Q-methodology: We also conducted in-depth interviews with small business owners and public relations experts but did not find that these interviews were giving us information that either illuminated or expanded that which we already had collected. Instead of continuing the interviews, we substituted a different data collection method, Q-methodology, to assess the points of view of small business owners toward public relations. This methodology “provides researchers a systematic and rigorously quantitative means for examining human subjectivity” (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 7). Subjects are given a set of statements, usually 40 or so, and asked to arrange, or sort, them using a predetermined pattern that approximates a flattened normal curve. Because the technique requires subjects to make subtle distinctions by sorting statements into a forced distribution, this research tool helps subjects articulate their subjective understanding about, or feelings toward, the concept under study.

Diagnostic Tool: Finally, we wanted to find a way to make the *Excellence* principles more practical and accessible for small and large organizations alike. The owner or manager of an organization, regardless of size, who is interested in measuring his or her performance against these generic principles of *Excellence*, would be hard pressed to do so. That is because the principles often are couched in academic language that can be difficult to interpret and apply. To improve the usefulness of the principles, we converted them into a 10-question diagnostic "test" and administered it in a second on-line survey to members of the IABC. The result was a diagnostic tool that can be used by organizations to benchmark their communications performance. We used statistical analysis of these scores to determine what factors, including size, might be predictors of *Excellence*.

How small is a “small” organization?

An important question facing us at the beginning of this project was, “Just what constitutes a ‘small’ organization?” Conceptually, we knew that we were looking for organizations in which the chief executive directly performed most, if not all, of the functions that might, in a larger organization, be performed by a management team. These functions include human resources, budgeting and accounting, risk management, market research, product development, communications, statutory compliance and strategic planning, to name a few. Usually this can be accomplished by measuring the size of the organization’s workforce.

Although many government agencies and researchers define a small organization as one with 100 or fewer employees, we felt this criterion too large for purposes of our study. Instead, we elected to concentrate chiefly on micro-organizations, those with 19 or fewer employees. This definition encompasses four out of five employers in the nation. We reasoned that this criterion would be large enough to capture businesses and organizations with identifiable communications needs, but not so large as to include those with extensive management structures such as those surveyed in the *Excellence* study. We believe this cutoff identifies a functional difference between those organizations in the *Excellence* study and those we studied, whether they are associations, government agencies or nonprofits. In this paradigm, the much-talked-about value of assuring that the communications function has a “place at the table,” is replaced with one where the communications function is at least a regular entry on the PDA of the chief executive of the small organization.

What the literature tells us

While the small organization sector faces concerns that are distinct from those in larger organizations, our review of books, journals, periodicals and Internet sources found that little has been published about the communications functions, efforts and needs of the small organization. What has been published often falls into one of three types of information:

- Generic advice about communications tactics.
- Proactive advice relating to particular types of organizations, such as small public libraries and museums.
- Reactive advice relating to particular types of publics, such as activist groups.

Small organizations can learn basic tactical skills, such as how to write a news release, use public relations to supplement marketing efforts or even do simple research, by accessing dozens of on-line sources, reading any of a number of advice columns or buying publicity kits and how-to books. Proactive advice often focuses on specific types of organizations and what they can do to improve visibility. Much of what is readily available to the small business also can

be easily accessed on-line. In connection with this study we identified and reviewed 29 on-line resources for small businesses, many of which offer free information or advice. Many more resources exist. The Web sites we reviewed provide useful guidance to those wanting to learn how to develop marketing plans, write effective news releases, stage press conferences, promote and advertise products and services and handle customer service. However, a close review shows that most of them stop short of providing the framework for strategic communications management practices and offer only rudimentary technical solutions to complex organizational communications issues. It was clear from our review that the body of literature about public relations for the small organization, both printed and electronic, with only a few exceptions is long on advice and short on empirical evidence and theory.

Findings

Although some of our findings have previously been reported (Evatt, Ruiz & Triplett, 2002; Evatt, Triplett & Ruiz, 2003; and Lee & Evatt, 2003, 2005) this is the first complete reporting of findings over the full scope of our study. Rather than simply report each of our five studies separately, this report draws data from across our separate inquiries to help us answer each of seven research questions. This list of questions incorporates but expands on the three questions that were anticipated in our original study design.

A. How do small organizations think about communications and public relations?

Since small organizations, whether they are for-profit, nonprofit, associations or government agencies, differ from their large counterparts, a natural question is whether or not they also differ in the way they view public relations. We tried to answer this question in each of our three major data gathering efforts: focus groups, Q-study and survey. What these data indicate is that the top management of small operations generally share a view that is both holistic and integrated, yet seem to have distinct perspectives when it comes to the way they integrate relationships into their operations. This is especially noticeable when you talk to the smallest types of organizations. Public relations and communications are rarely thought of or talked about as a separate function apart from the mission of the organization. Rather, these functions are often integral and indistinguishable from business functions.

One of the longest and most animated discussions in almost every focus group we held centered on how best to define the term public relations. While we had expected that these small organizations would likely mirror the large corporate and business-world terminology about

public relations, we were surprised to find that their definitions were often closer to those of academicians than their counterparts who run large operations. They viewed public relations as holistic and inclusive of all communications functions. More often than not they used the terms “public relations” and “communications” interchangeably. It became clear to us early on in this project that to speak to these organizations about public relations in a limited or narrow way would be a mistake.

These differences, which first emerged during our focus groups, were also evident from our survey results. This research suggests that small organizations think of public relations as much more than just media relations. They see the function as both proactive and reactive. Even though they include public relations in such business functions as branding, ultimately they see it as much more, encompassing a sense of the organization as a social citizen.

Multiple worldviews about public relations and communications surfaced again when we collected a third type of data using Q-methodology. From these data we found that the small organization appears to emphasize relationship building over publicity-seeking activities. For them, public relations is integral to the overall business plan. As we stated when first reporting these findings elsewhere, “This integrated view of public relations within the context of the small business would be the envy of many public relations practitioners who find themselves struggling inside large corporate structures just to demonstrate the value of their function” (Evatt, Triplett & Ruiz, 2003, p. 99). These data suggest that there are three distinct perspectives among small organizations about the value of relationship building in the organization: as an objective in and of itself, as a strategic function or as a purely tactical undertaking.

From several methods of data collection and analysis, we concluded that while those responsible for communications in small organizations, like their colleagues in larger organizations, approach public relations from a variety of perspectives, the key ingredient for the small organization is found in the concept of “relationships.” These findings strongly suggest that individuals offering services to small organizations, especially public relations consulting, would do well to eschew the “how to” instruction for mundane communications production activities and instead concentrate on the “how to” of relationship development and maintenance.

B. How do small organizations practice public relations and communications day-to-day and how do they define their publics?

In addition to trying to understand what small organizations think about public relations and the meaning of communications to their organization’s operations, we collected data to better

understand what they actually do, their activities and communications practices. As part of this effort we also sought to understand how they define and identify their publics.

Those who took part in the focus group for owners and CEOs of micro-organizations tended to be expansive in what they included in their list of public relations activities. They mentioned activities such as publicity and promotion through news articles and feature stories, crisis communications, customer relationships (which one referred to as “buyer empathy”), personal contact (meeting and greeting), branding, relationship management, Web sites and word of mouth networking.

Participants in the focus group for nonprofits and trade associations demonstrated a strong command of the traditional techniques and tactics of public relations. While these participants said they found some technology useful, particularly e-mail, greater emphasis was on personal contacts and old-fashioned “face time.” The key to “getting the message out” often was a matter of strategic partnerships. They recognized that so much competition for the attention of the public by so many community groups made differentiation of their message or vision especially important so that the public accurately perceives who and what they are. Building partnerships was particularly important for those in small nonprofit groups and trade associations.

Although an interesting picture emerged from the focus groups about small organization practices of public relations, we also wanted to collect specific information and attempt to quantify some of the activities they mentioned. For that reason we included questions on both the mail and the on-line surveys to get a better understanding of the practices of small organizations. After giving respondents a list of common practices we asked them to pick from a list the statement that best described the way they handled the particular activity:

- (1) We now perform this activity or function using in-house staff.
- (2) We now outsource this function or activity.
- (3) We don't do this and don't plan to.
- (4) We might do this someday and if we did, we would outsource.
- (5) We might do this someday and if we did, we would do it in-house.

For-profit organizations were less likely than their nonprofit counterparts to perform the functions we studied. A majority did, however, say that they currently write and disseminate news releases, plan communications strategies, write such things as feature stories, advice columns or speeches, plan and conduct special events, design and place advertisements, create or maintain a Web site and write/design booklets, brochures and the like. They were least likely to publish newsletters, lobby government or conduct campaigns. A majority of nonprofits reported doing all of these things, usually in significantly higher numbers than for-profits. These data

suggest that the range of potential activities for for-profits is much more dynamic and subject to change, while the communications activities of other organizations (nonprofits, government and associations) are more stable, at least for those items that were the subject of this inquiry.

For all the promise of technology, small organizations see their personal touch as their strength, and believe that a too-heavy reliance on technology can spoil that advantage. While small organizations seem to recognize the need for technology they warn against the potential for its getting in the way of client relations.

Although small organizations employ a variety of communications tools and practices in their day-to-day communications, their strategies tend to focus heavily on the use of personal and direct forms of communications, as opposed to mass media or large gatherings, to communicate messages. Small business organizations seem to have their eye on the bottom line by using communications in internal and strategic management directed often at publics that expand business or improve visibility. We were once again impressed by not only the very personal nature of the communications in these small organizations, but by their tendency to focus more on relationship building than publicity seeking.

C. What are the communications skill levels of small organizations and when, how and why do they outsource?

One of the key components of the letter of agreement that launched our research initiative was the need to understand the skill levels of small organizations and their need for and use of outside expertise. We looked at the level of competency small organizations believe they already have to perform certain public relations and communications activities. We also looked at when and why they might choose to hire outside experts to help with some of these functions. Although we drew some insights from our qualitative data in the form of focus group comments, to address this question we relied most heavily on our survey.

The most compelling finding from the focus group work was that small organizations are practicing public relations based more on instinct and personal feelings than on formal training. Although small budgets tended to limit the ability to contract with outside help, those who attended the focus group for small nonprofits mentioned several motivations that might prompt the need to hire consultants or outside help, as follows:

- When there is insufficient time to do what needs to be done on a project vital to an organization's future (such as fundraising).
- When it would be more efficient to hire an expert than to become proficient at the task yourself.
- When you need an objective or dispassionate perspective.

- When you need a fresh look.
- When you detect nagging problems that persist without clear solutions.
- When you need to improve visibility.
- When you don't have time to endure a learning curve and the situation needs you to have someone on board quickly who can hit the ground running.
- When the task is limited or time specific rather than ongoing or a permanent part of operations.

One other finding from our focus group discussions bears mention as well. For the sake of consistency we tried to give our respondents common frames of reference when they talked about outsourcing. We tried to steer the discussion toward those activities they actually paid another organization to perform for them. We found, however, that for the smallest of organizations, this often was an inappropriate distinction. It is common for small businesses to barter their services with each other so that the “outsourcing” might take the form of in-kind exchange of value. A similar issue came out in conversations with the nonprofits and associations who often drew on the expertise of members and volunteers to perform specialized communications functions on behalf of the organization. When practitioners try to market communications services to small organizations, therefore, it is important to keep these frames of reference clearly in mind.

In our survey questionnaire we identified 15 core skills that an organization would likely need to use in executing and supervising a public relations program. The skills selected for study are the type that are taught as a core curriculum in many university public relations education programs and, as such, can be assumed to be relevant across a broad spectrum of organizations. Respondents expressed the greatest confidence in their abilities to manage a crisis, put on a special event, give speeches and write. They expressed the lowest level of perceived competence in the areas that have a political or public policy overtone, such as lobbying or negotiating with activist groups. The other skills tend to nest in the mid, or modest, range of reported competence. Most of the skills that we measured revealed no differences between reported competencies of for-profits and nonprofits. There are five exceptions, however. For-profits reported a higher level of comfort in their ability to manage a crisis and communicate with employees, while nonprofits expressed more confidence in their ability to get press coverage, to lobby and to negotiate with activist groups.

We also asked subjects which of these tasks they would likely outsource. One of the more interesting results from our analysis of these data is, on first blush, counterintuitive. On pure instinct, one would think that the smaller the organization, the more it would seek outside help. Data suggest otherwise. In many cases the organizations most likely to outsource are those that

fall in the mid-range size (11 to 20 employees). Examples of outsourced work include research and specialized writing, such as feature stories. This finding is in line with our research that indicates that organizations begin to change in their processes and procedures when they reach about 20 employees in size. Perhaps the answer to these findings is that micro-organizations are so small that they can't foresee the need for some specialized kinds of activities. Once an organization reaches between 11 and 20 employees, it begins to feel the need to do more. However, at this stage the organization is still too small to do everything in-house. For these organizations, outsourcing is a viable solution. Once an organization exceeds 20 employees -- when it coincidentally also is more likely to have a staff communicator -- it apparently is willing to keep more functions in-house. This could explain why, for certain functions, organizations in the 11-to 20-size category are the ones most likely to show an interest in outsourcing.

Not surprisingly, the level of perceived competence increases as the organizations grow in size. The more confident an organization is in its ability to perform a function, logic would suggest, the less likely it would be to spend money to outsource it. Respondents said they are most likely to outsource those functions that require specialized training -- such as Web site creation and public opinion research -- and less likely to ask for outside help for tasks involving writing and developing publications. Often small organizations preferred to hire communications specialists, rather than generalists, since they did not want to devote the time it would take to educate a communications generalist on the special language and needs of their field. This suggests another area of importance for communication professionals who seek small organizations as clients, since generalists are less attractive than specialists to these small organizations.

D. How formal do communications operations of small organizations need to be and when do they begin to take on formality?

It was clear that our focus group participants had given a great deal of thought to the need for communications formality, both external and internal. While no one in the group for CEOs of small businesses talked about formal communications plans, the concepts were never far from their minds and often they said that "communications" is the foundation for a successful business.

Our survey data suggests that, in practice, the smaller the organization is the more likely it is to have its internal and external communications functions rest on the shoulders of the CEO or other ultimate decision-maker (such as owner, president or chair). The change seems come when the organization has grown to about 20 employees. Up to that point, three out of four organizations assign communications duties to the CEO. After an organization reaches 20

employees, the numbers begin to shift. By the time an organization has more than 50 employees, it is twice as likely to have someone other than the CEO or owner designated as the primary communicator.

There is a second way to look at when, in the growth of an organization, a formal communications function emerges in the life cycle of an organization. That way is to consider perception: do organizations themselves sense an increase in complexity as they grow in size? To measure perceptions on a variety of topics, respondents were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale how well a series of statements described them. One of the statements said: "Our business/organization communications gets more formal and structured as we get bigger." The larger organizations were more likely to see themselves in this statement. This suggests that the emergence of formal communications did indeed occur with growth but, of course, was only detected by those who had actually traveled that road.

Our on-line survey that served as a diagnostic test of *Excellence* also sheds some light on the need for growth in communications as an organization grows. Since these data were collected from organizations at all size levels, these findings have a general, rather than only a small organization, application. When we categorized the sum of the *Excellence* mean score into three levels of *Excellence* (low, medium and high), the results suggest an optimum ratio of communicators to staff. Those organizations that reported the highest *Excellence* sum scores had an average of 12 communication employees per 100 employees.

Growth naturally seems to breed formality, which in turn requires the greater levels of training and expertise that a professional practitioner brings to the organization. A distinction among some small organizations that is important to consider, however, is a tendency to want to remain small and, thereby, to resist the very formality that comes with growth.

E. Who does the communicating and how prepared are they to do it?

One of the important issues in this research was to identify the individuals within the organization with the primary responsibility for communications. Because the *Excellence* study dealt with large organizations, those researchers collected separate responses from the primary communicator and from the CEO of organizations. We, however, made the distinction between the primary communicator and CEO only in our focus groups. It quickly became apparent to us that for small organizations, often the primary communicator and the CEO are one in the same. Our survey research confirmed this assumption and also provided information about the training of those individuals.

The group of entrepreneurs in our focus groups took a very personal approach to their communications. They did not differentiate between themselves and their company or business. The more formal structures one would expect from a larger organization were generally missing in these tiny operations. It was clear from these discussions that sometimes the organization becomes associated with its leadership in a personal way so that, in the eyes of the public, that person becomes the public face of the organization. In essence, the organization and the individual are one.

The dialogue among for-profit micro-enterprises in the focus groups demonstrated a clear coalescence of person and product: their image of their company was quite personal, and most had difficulty separating their personality, ethics and style from their businesses. While it may be a signature of excellence in the large organization to separate advertising from public relations, this type of demarcation makes no sense when the CEO is also the marketing manager and the public relations chief. For micro-business CEOs and chief communicators alike, the key ingredient of public relations is personal contact through phone calls, meetings, e-mails and the like.

Government agency representatives said that even though agency mission statements don't always reflect public relations as a goal, it often takes 80- to-95 percent of their time. To further understand and better quantify what we learned in the focus groups, we included several questions on our mail and on-line surveys to identify the person who serves as the organization's primary communicator, that person's training and education, and that person's responsibilities. About one in four respondents spent the majority (50 percent or more) of their time each month in a communications activity.

We also collected demographic data to help us better describe who in the organization has primary responsibility for communications functions. Unlike large organizations that often have one or more individuals whose job is devoted exclusively to communications, our focus groups told us that the owner or CEO of a small business often takes on this function as one of many daily duties. These data indicate that 72.5 percent of the top decision-makers in respondent organizations are also the primary communicator. Only 3.4 percent have a full-time professional in communications, and all of these work for nonprofit organizations. The primary communicators for those organizations that responded to the survey were predominately male (57.6 percent) and Caucasian (82 percent). They also tended to be well educated, with almost half (46.7 percent) reporting at least some graduate school. Only 29 percent, however, had taken at least one college level course in public relations or communications and only 21 percent had

attended at least one career development or training seminar in public relations, communications or a related field in the previous two years.

The bottom line is that small organizations understand and appreciate the benefits of public relations even though they may not have formal training or education in the field. Often they learn skills and techniques on the job. They also see public relations as an extension of themselves. The small organizations participating in the study displayed a genuine curiosity about the world of public relations. While they didn't always use textbook terminology for their activities, it was clear that they well understood many of the principles of good public relations. Indeed, some even said that effective public relations creates problems by further stressing the limited resources and capabilities of these very small organizations because often it resulted in growth, additional contacts and expectations about services.

F. How do small organizations view the media and manage media in a crisis?

As part of our research we tried to determine how small organizations view the media and manage media in crisis situations. As we reported earlier, small operators generally do not put the media very high on their list of importance when it comes to public relations. The findings were among the most surprising in our study because we had assumed that small organizations would likely equate media and press work with public relations. Instead, media relations generally plays only a small role in the communications strategies employed by many small organizations.

In the focus groups, participants talked freely about a variety of communications activities, but only one or two used the idea of fostering strong relationships with the media interchangeably with their ideas of what constitutes public relations. For the types of organizations we studied (businesses, nonprofits, government agencies and trade associations), the focus groups indicated that relationships with media, while perceived to be a part of the job, were more often reactive rather than proactive, often drawing on instinct rather than formal planning in a crisis. Most focus group participants said they felt media relations involved reacting to calls from media interested in "controversy." One participant noted that it was worthwhile to build long-term media relationships so that if something negative happened, the agency has some "social capital" built up. Some focus group participants seemed to be concerned that media attention could be detrimental to their operations.

Interestingly, the primary communicators for small and micro-businesses said they felt that if handled properly even negative media attention could be turned into a positive effect. This group also sees opportunity for a higher company profile in negative media, and those who

expressed an opinion seemed more eager to get the information out as quickly as possible to undo the damage (unlike the CEO group, which was more cautious about releasing negative news). There was ambiguity among the CEOs on whether they would voluntarily release negative information. When they talked about what would happen if they were confronted with negative information, most of the micro-business CEOs said they would try to handle the problem internally before going public and releasing negative news. These CEOs tended to give great weight to the importance of personal involvement and social responsibility, saying that if confronted with a crisis they would personally intervene to solve it. While none of the participants in the focus group for nonprofits and trade associations had faced crises, they all seemed conscious of their vulnerability and expressed concern about how their organization might find itself pulled into negative publicity.

The more formal structures and written crisis communications plans one expects to see in a sophisticated public relations organization were generally not found in these tiny operations. None of the focus group participants said they had a crisis plan, and most acknowledged that they would probably be unprepared for a crisis. In spite of the absence of a plan, the respondents hit on many of the core principles that should be applied in a crisis: readiness and rapid response, honesty, concern for the public welfare and speaking with a single voice.

An understanding of what makes news (news values) is especially important when the organization is trying to generate coverage. Although some in the focus groups reported negative experiences with media relations, most understood the importance of developing long-term relationships, and all seemed to exude a confidence about their ability to do just that. Access and strategic placement of information emerged in the focus groups as two keys in good media relations.

Our survey indicated that a majority of respondents (62 percent) said they currently write releases and/or hold news conferences, but our data do not permit us to measure the frequency (weekly, monthly, etc.) with which they perform such media-related activities. When asked to rate their organization's skill level on a ten-point scale, respondents reported only a modest ability to get their organization's name into the media and to understand what journalists would consider newsworthy (news values). They felt less able in their ability to "keep bad publicity out of the media." The level of comfort with each of these tasks improves as an organization matures. Younger organizations (five years or fewer) consistently reported a significantly lower level of perceived competence than who had been in operation for more than 20 years. In spite of this, only about 18 percent said they would prefer to outsource tasks such as writing and disseminating news releases and holding news conferences.

G. Can the *Excellence* principles and other public relations theories be applied to small organizations, or are new definitions needed?

Much of what we did to answer the other questions that form the basis of this study was descriptive in nature. We, however, wanted to take these data one step further by identifying and testing ways of measuring and understanding the public relations practices of small organizations within the broader intellectual context of theory and prediction. Given our developing understanding of the communications activities performed by small organizations and the way they think about public relations, the next logical question was, "How do these activities and perceptions fit into the generally accepted normative models or ideals of public relations?" We looked at four models of public relations practice and ten generic principles of *Excellence*.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) first posited the four models of public relations practice 20 years ago. Although other scholars have since suggested additions to, or changes in, the four models of practice, they generally remain recognized in the literature as being a useful framework through which to discuss the ways that public relations is practiced. We also compared *Excellence* theories developed in the landmark study for the International Association of Business Communicators (Grunig, 1992).

Our data collection relating to the four models of practice did not produce useful results, likely because of the way in which we trimmed the questionnaire for sake of parsimony. A factor analysis produced a two-factor solution with the variables grouping generally under "communications" and "research" instead of under the expected four models of practice. Although it is likely that these findings are the result of a too-spare definition of the variables, the possibility that the generic practice models simply do not apply to small organizations could not be ruled out.

Although not one of our research questions *per se*, the backdrop for this inquiry is the set of characteristics that Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) concluded constitute communications *Excellence* in organizations. As we said earlier, the original *Excellence* study had a high concentration of larger organizations. About half of the respondents were corporations with a mean number of employees of more than 14,000. The rest of the sample was made up of government agencies, trade associations and nonprofit organizations. Not only was the sample for that study skewed to larger organizations, but the language in the questionnaires betrayed a similar prejudice. For instance, the principles talk in terms of a "dominant coalition," or core management team. One of the principles of *Excellence* is for the public relations "department" to be headed by a manager rather than a technician. Clearly, many of the precepts that constitute the

Excellence scale are based on certain unspoken assumptions. The principles assume that the organization is large and complex enough to have departments and that the primary communicator is someone other than the CEO.

For purposes of parsimony and ease of administration in our initial mail and on-line surveys we phrased a question around each of these ten generic principles. We first looked at the ten variables individually. For the small organizations, the principles that most often applied related to the practice of symmetrical communications, both internally and externally; to diversity; and to the inclusion of the primary communicator as part of the management team. Not surprisingly, given the comments from our focus groups, the principles that were least applicable to these respondents were the principles requiring a separate department for public relations; professional training for the primary communicator; and a bright-line distinction between marketing and public relations.

Although these variables are interesting when viewed individually, it is also instructive for analytical purposes to view them in the aggregate. We produced a single sum score (ranging from "0" to "10") for each respondent by aggregating responses for the 10 principles. These data suggest that small organization respondents tend to measure their performance as falling within the upper middle of the range, neither extremely high nor extremely low. Overall these data seem to confirm that even for the small organizations that answered our survey many of the generic principles of *Excellence* could be applied. It is important, however, to take care in the way the queries are posed since some of the language of the generic principles, when they talk about departments and dominant coalitions, can be nonsensical to the small organization.

Since analysis of our initial survey using the simplified 10-question scale was highly suggestive, we used it as the basis to refine a diagnostic tool that we envision as useful for organizations of all sizes that want to benchmark their level of *Excellence* across time or by industry. In our simplified test, the organization is the unit of measurement rather than the individual or the department of communications. To test our premise about the ability to quantify *Excellence* in the parsimonious way, we teamed with another scholar and mounted a second on-line survey, this time for members of the IABC only (Lee & Evatt, 2003, 2005). As with the analysis of our initial survey, we looked at variables that might be seen as predictors of *Excellence*. These data further validated earlier findings about the positive relationship of *Excellence* to variables such as pressure by activist groups, number of years of operation and number of persons in the public relations department.

Because our focus groups and survey data confirmed that the very smallest organizations are unlikely to have significant numbers of personnel devoted to public relations, we developed a

new and more useful variable: ratio of public relations practitioners to overall size of workforce. We found a significant correlation between the sum of *Excellence* scores for our respondents and this ratio. We feel this approach is ultimately more useful when measuring *Excellence* across organizations of widely disparate size and does not exclude those on the lowest end of the continuum. This suggests that while *Excellence* can be achieved in the smallest of organizations, as they grow in size and complexity they can only maintain *Excellence* by incorporating a commensurate growth in communications staff.

Summary

Our study has plowed new ground by focusing on a largely ignored sector in communication research: the small organization. One of the most important findings that emerged from our study is the central role played by the chief executive of the small organization. The success of the organization's public relations often rests in the communications skills and perseverance of that single individual. Another theme that emerged over and over again in our inquiry was that the key component of public relations for the small organization often is the role of building relationships rather than getting publicity.

We also found that small organizations are practicing public relations based more on instinct and personal feeling than on formal training. Managing a communications function is just one of many duties of the person in charge of the small organization, and often that person has only a modest amount of training in communications and public relations. Clearly, those who run the small organization are forced to be generalists rather than specialists; they are required to do many things well, which means integrating decisions, practice and policy organically. This application of the personal to the communications function is in keeping with observations by those who have studied other aspects of the management practices of small organizations.

One of the contributions of our work has been to devise a way to pose and analyze core data that could serve as a foundation to track and understand the practices of public relations in organizations of all sizes. This is particularly true for the *Excellence* diagnostic tool. Our tool, with a potential perfect score of 100, converts complex normative theory to an easily understood and administered test that can be used to benchmark performance.