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To cite this article: Albert Anani-Bossman (2022) An Exploration of the Models of Public Relations: A Study of the Financial Services Sector of Ghana, *Communicatio*, 48:3, 88-111, DOI: [10.1080/02500167.2022.2091629](https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2022.2091629)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2022.2091629>



Published online: 19 Aug 2022.



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# An Exploration of the Models of Public Relations: A Study of the Financial Services Sector of Ghana

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## Abstract

The current study explores models of public relations (PR) that inform PR practice in Ghana. The paucity of knowledge and understanding about PR practice in Ghana means that Ghana, and Africa in general, cannot fully contribute to the development of global theory of PR practice. The research was conducted by means of a literature review of PR models and empirical verification through face-to-face-interviews. Qualitative methodology was used to gather data from twenty-two communication practitioners from the financial services sector in Ghana. The results demonstrate that PR in Ghana is dominated by the two-way asymmetrical model and the personal influence model. The study provides insight into the models that inform PR practice in Ghana and demonstrates the need for PR scholars and practitioners in Ghana, and Africa in particular, to work together to develop models that reflect the nature of PR practice on the continent.

**Keywords:** public relation models; Ghana; communication; public relations; financial service sector; culture

## Introduction

Public relations (PR) models have been studied extensively since James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) published the four models of PR. The models, particularly the two-way symmetrical models, have been regarded as the most dominant theories in the field of PR (Laskin 2009). The onset of globalisation further increased the debate, as scholars attempted to develop a global theory of PR practice (see, among others, Edwards and Hodges 2011; Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier 2002; Verčič, Grunig, and Grunig 1996; Verčič, Zerfass, and Wiesenberg 2015).

A critical review of the body of knowledge on PR models shows a clear western-centric view (L'Etang 2008; Culbertson and Chen 1996). Despite the attempts to globalise PR practice, models developed have always tended to suit the areas where these models were developed, leaving out developing economies such as Africa (Mersham, Skinner, and Rensburg 2011). In spite of the tremendous growth of PR in Africa, very little information exists regarding the practice of PR in terms of purpose (models) and activities (practice) (Holtzhausen, Petersen, and Tindall 2003; Kiambi and Nadler 2012; Mersham, Skinner, and Rensburg 2011; Thompson 2018; Wu and Baah-Boakye 2009). Botan (1992) opines that PR multinationals operating in non-western countries mostly use ethnocentric models that tend to inhibit understanding of the local environment.

PR in Ghana has witnessed tremendous growth since the country's return to democratic rule in 1992 after years of political instability. However, there is a paucity of knowledge and understanding of PR practice and the models that influence the practice. There have been attempts by some Ghanaian PR scholars to address this over the years (see Wu and Baah-Boakye 2008; Wu and Baah-Boakye 2009; Thompspon 2018; Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani 2020), but this has proven to be limited in scope. A review of the available published works, including theses from the databases of universities in Ghana that offer PR courses, demonstrates a focus on PR from a broader perspective, with a rather limited focus on the models. In other words, none of the studies from Ghana reviewed have a focus similar to that of the current study. The gap in the literature thus limits not only Ghana's efforts to contribute to the global PR landscape, but also the African continent's "responsibility toward the global PR society as well as other developing countries" (Van Heerden and Rensburg 2005, 69).

This article therefore attempts to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on the subject by exploring the models that influence PR practice in Ghana. It does so through reporting on a qualitative cross-sectional study carried out among PR practitioners in the financial services sector. First, the literature on the topic is reviewed, including the development of PR in Ghana, models of PR generally, and models in Africa. The article then discusses the methodology, analyses the findings in relation to the research question, and discusses the implications for the body of knowledge in Africa. This article is derived from a PhD thesis titled "Developing a Framework for Public Relations Practice: A Study of the Financial Services Sector in Ghana" (Anani-Bossman 2019).

## Public Relations Development in Ghana

According to Blankson (2009) and Amoakohene (2015), the formal practice of PR in Ghana started with the British colonial administration. The colonial government set up the Information Services Department (ISD) to serve as a source of information for the administration (Blankson 2009, 186). After Ghana gained independence, President Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, employed several Ghanaians (these were mainly journalists) to perform PR services for the government. The recruitment of journalists, however, created problems, as PR became synonymous with journalism. PR was not valued as a profession in its own right, as practitioners had varied backgrounds (Amoakohene 2015). The development of PR in Ghana did not occur as expected, as a period of turmoil and subsequent inactivity between 1966 and 1992 stunted its growth. (This was a period marked by military dictatorship and civilian rule.)

The return to democratic rule in 1992 and the subsequent liberalisation of the media landscape, especially broadcast media, reignited PR activities in Ghana. PR practice in Ghana has since grown exponentially, driven by globalisation and the advancement of technology. Ghana currently has a well-established and active association (the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana) with over 1 500 registered members ([www.iprghana.com](http://www.iprghana.com)). PR education is also on the ascendancy, as institutions of higher education are setting up PR programmes to produce practitioners for the industry (Thompson 2018, 478).

## Models of Public Relations

PR models provide the means by which the fundamental ideas that guide the practice and how they relate to each other can be identified (Lattimore et al. 2012, 62). The PR models—and the excellence theory as a whole—have been the most dominant and discussed theories in the history of modern PR. Excellence theory is regarded as the theoretical perspective with the most theory-building publications in PR. Scholars thus argue that it is virtually impossible to talk about PR models without talking about the symmetrical models (Laskin 2009, 37).

A pivotal moment in the history of PR scholarship and development was the identification of the four models of PR by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The models were based on two main dimensions: the nature (one way vs. two way) and purpose (asymmetrical vs. symmetrical) of communication (Gürel and Kavak 2010, 44). The *press agentry model*, which is the first and most basic model, is based on seeking positive publicity while hiding negative information from the public. Information is disseminated to the public regardless of its authenticity or accuracy. Understanding and truth are not important. It is premised on propaganda, as truth is not consequential. The *public information model* is the second model and focuses on the dissemination of accurate and truthful information. However, this is also one way and does not require feedback. A typical example is a public education campaign for behavioural change in relation to environmental health. The third model, the *two-way asymmetrical model*, is

premised on scientific persuasion, whereby the organisation attempts to develop relationships with publics by listening to their needs and/or concerns. Feedback is used to develop strategies that are then used to change the attitude of the publics rather than the organisation. Persuasion still favours the organisation instead of mutual understanding. The final model is the *two-way symmetrical model*. It is based on mutual interaction in order to build true relationships. Here, publics and the organisation are able to shape each other's behaviour by negotiating mutually acceptable terms during conflict situations. Advocates of two-way symmetry describe it as the ideal form of PR practice and an example of excellence.

Current PR scholarship places the four models under two continua: the craft continuum and the professional continuum (Heath and Coombs 2006, 474). The craft continuum is premised on one-way communication and is reflected in the press agency and the public information models. The professional continuum, on the other hand, is founded on two-way communication and reflected in the two-way asymmetrical and the two-way symmetrical models (Roberts-Bowman 2016). Literature on the models in different countries finds that practitioners mostly use craft models, but also hope to eventually use professional models (Kiambi and Nadler 2012; Kim and Hon 1998).

The presence of the models is evident from decades of studies in different cultures. Despite the popularity of the models, not all PR scholars view them positively. The attempt to portray the two-way symmetrical model as the best model for PR practice (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier 2002) in particular has attracted criticism. Some scholars (Edwards and Hodges 2011; Leitch and Neilson 2001; L'Etang 2006) describe the two-way symmetrical model as simplistic, idealistic, and unrealistic. L'Etang (2006), for instance, describes it as a misrepresentation of the organisational communication process, which is influenced by the organisation's interest; hence, it is not possible to have a mutual relationship that is acceptable to all. Cheney and Christensen (2001, 181) describe the symmetrical model as nothing more than "self-reports" by managers, hence the need to use it cautiously. They postulate that the model does not consider the various systems of power and influence that affect PR practice. Pieczka (2006) suggests that despite a good foundation, the symmetrical model contains several contradictions. For example, even though the model is based on interaction and negotiation, it can only be effective if practitioners are part of the dominant coalition.

Murphy (1991) asserted that PR practitioners used a mix of the symmetric and asymmetric models and not the symmetric models only. Murphy therefore used the game theory to develop the mixed-motive model, according to which organisations look at the public interest without abandoning their own interest. Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) agreed with Murphy and developed a fifth model, which they called the new model of symmetry as *two-way practice*. This new model proposed a "win-win" zone in which both the publics and the organisation would find common ground and negotiate a compromise.

A key aspect of the model research was the development of the personal influence model and the cultural interpreter model (Grunig et al. 1995). While the personal influence model was used to develop relationships with external stakeholders, including media, government, and activists, the cultural interpreter model was used by multinationals doing business in other countries. In this model, PR practitioners are mainly locals, since they know the systems of the country. Countries, mostly in Asia and Africa, have been found to operate the personal influence model (Kiambi and Nadler 2012; Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki 1999).

## Models of Public Relations in Africa

Africa, despite the growth of PR, currently does not have a model unique to its environment. Although the possibility of a continent-specific model has been discussed by African scholars (Mersham, Skinner, and Rensburg 2011; Rensburg 2007), very little has been achieved in this direction in over fifty years of PR development on the continent (Skinner 2013). Africa currently does not appear to have an association, similar to the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) or the US Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE), that can guide it to develop a common theory that reflects the philosophy of the continent. The African Public Relations Association (APRA) is not involved in the development of theory like its European and American or even Asian counterparts. The IPR Ghana, the umbrella body of PR professionals in Ghana, is focused on the career development of professionals and not on improving the body of knowledge. Research in this area is therefore fragmented and based more on country-level analysis. Holtzhausen, Petersen, and Tindall (2003, 308) note that the African environment gives “the public relations researcher the opportunity to explore not only the generic public relations practices but also culturally specific practices developed in the African context to address Africa-specific social, political and economic issues while using African communication models”. Mersham and Skinner (2009, 309) argue that the African practitioner “is already at the cutting edge of social change. The practitioner is increasingly charged with communicating development messages and facilitating the development process in a context where traditionalism and western-oriented globalism meet”. These arguments suggest that an African PR model should be a blend of western PR practice and communication practices unique to Africa.

Few studies have been done on models that influence PR practice in Africa. Holtzhausen, Petersen, and Tindall (2003) suggest that the asymmetric and symmetric models are not important to South African PR and recommend a culture-specific PR model. Wu and Baah-Boakye (2009) found the cultural interpreter and personal influence models as well as the two-way models being used in Ghana. Other studies (Kiambi and Nadler 2012; Oksiutycz and Enombo 2011; Van Heerden 2004) have identified the presence of the two-way asymmetric and symmetric models as well as a strong presence of the personal influence model. Dlamini (2016), based on his research on PR models and corporate social responsibility in South Africa, concluded that the

mixed-motive model was best suited for stakeholder engagement. Based on a review of the literature, the following research question was created to guide the study:

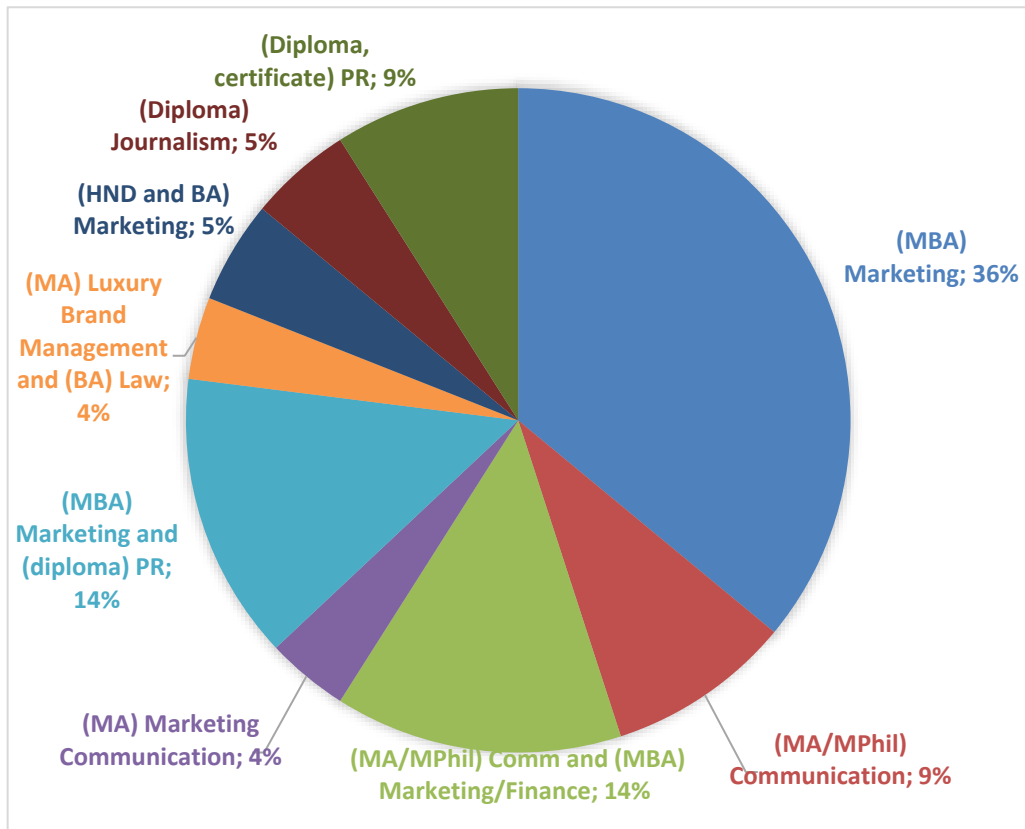
RQ1: What are the PR models that describe PR practice in the financial services sector in Ghana?

## Methodology

The qualitative research approach was used to gather data from communication managers in the financial services sector of Ghana. The qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this research since it has the ability to draw out social meanings that individuals attach to their experiences, circumstances, and situation. Through qualitative methods, the researcher is able to discover and understand the communication experiences, thoughts, and views of participants (Creswell 2014, 4; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, 4). The purposive sampling technique was used to gather data from twenty-two communication practitioners. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on their level of knowledge and experience of the issue(s) being investigated (Merriam 2009, 77). In purposive sampling, cases are selected based on their potential to provide detailed information about the issue relevant to the study.

The sample size of twenty-two was considered appropriate for saturation to occur. Qualitative scholars (Crouch and McKenzie 2006; Latham 2014; Mason 2010) assert that since qualitative methods, such as interviews, allow the researcher to go beyond the normal set of questions through the development of fruitful relationships, a sample size of 12 to 20 is enough to prove the validity of an in-depth inquiry in a natural environment. Mason (2010, 1–2) argues that qualitative data sets must be large enough to ensure that all important perceptions are uncovered but small enough to avoid repetitiveness.

Letters were sent to the selected organisations asking permission to interview practitioners. The researcher then called the practitioners to book a date for the interviews. An interview guide was constructed in line with the research objective. A face-to-face interview was conducted with practitioners at their offices. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. Before the interview, participants completed a consent form, and permission was sought to record the interview. These steps were taken to ensure that all ethical protocols were observed (Babbie 2010, 67; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, 59). The practitioners interviewed consisted of fifteen males and seven females. Most of the respondents had a marketing background, while others had both marketing and communication backgrounds or other backgrounds, as shown in Figure 1. The interviews were transcribed with the help of software (Atlas.ti v7). Data analysis was based on what Lichtman (2013) calls the “three Cs”: codes, categories, and concepts. Recurring themes and patterns were highlighted. The themes were categorised and interpreted in line with the research question.



**Figure 1:** Educational background of participants

## Results

### Press Agency/Publicity

The results show that practitioners do use the press agency/publicity model. Practitioners opined that the purpose of their department was to create goodwill for their organisations. Creating a positive image has become even more necessary following the financial scandals in the country over the last few years, which culminated in the collapse of several financial institutions while others were taken over or forced to merge with other organisations in 2019. The sector is currently facing trust issues. The need for the surviving organisations to be seen as organisations that investors and key stakeholders can trust is driving practitioners to use several publicity techniques to gain attention. The words of the following practitioners echo the sentiments of others:

We try to position the organisation well in the eyes of our stakeholders in everything that we do. Whatever publicity we can engage in to maintain the organisation's positive image, we will do it.

We engage in a lot of activities including media relations, press soirees for senior journalists, and outdoor events to position the organisation positively in the minds of the public.

For us, PR is a subset of our marketing communication department. We use it to communicate the brand to the public. We let the public know what the brand stands for.

Informal methods dominate the measurement of PR programmes. Media clippings (meaning amount of media coverage), in particular, are dominant in the measurement process. According to a practitioner, “we are interested in knowing the amount of coverage we receive. How many media houses published the story, what debate is it generating? These give us an idea of how we are performing”. Another practitioner said, “We use both traditional and social media to measure our activities. Sometimes we contact external agencies as well to measure our performance in the media.” A practitioner from a microfinance organisation made the following point: “We do a lot of informal research to gauge our performance. Sometimes we do formal research but that is once in a while.” Methods of measurement include feedback through phone calls, mystery shopping, peer debriefing, media monitoring, comments from management or staff, enquiries, and so forth. The use of formal methods such as surveys or interviews is infrequent, as noted in the following comment by a practitioner:

Success for a typical event is the number of people who come, and we also gauge how the event was carried out in the media and any feedback at all from the attendees. For example, if we do a branch opening, what we do first and foremost is to monitor the stories that come up in the various media houses and know whether a lot of the media houses carried the story on that particular event. We also speak to some of our staff who are normally at that event to find out their general perception about the event and what we did wrong and what we could have done better.

Almost all the participants acknowledged the use of informal methods, as reflected in the following statement: “If we do a programme, we are able to measure our success through word of mouth—that is, what people say. Sometimes when you have a referral, then you know you have done the right thing.” A participant attempted to give reasons as to why the measurement of PR activities is mostly informal: “Measuring PR activities in our part of the world has been a real challenge. Though there are scientific ways of doing this, senior management does not support it as they do not believe in these tools. So, I would say after every event we do some form of measurement but it’s not scientific.” These results clearly demonstrate that measurement is focused on output more than outcomes.

Concerning media publicity as a determinant of success, many of the practitioners were of the view that the amount of publicity generated is critical in the measurement of success. They were, however, quick to add that publicity alone cannot be used to determine success, as stated by one practitioner: “I will say that publicity is a quantity-driven philosophy which has obvious demerits. It is always important to look at the

impact you are getting as well as the nature of the impact.” Another practitioner pointed out that “the noise level one creates for any service is actually determined by the level of knowledge of the prospective client and sometimes you will not get the desired result”.

Three practitioners with a marketing background felt that the success of a campaign should be based on the amount of coverage., as noted in the following two comments:

Assum[e] that you have invited about twenty media houses to cover an assignment and only five turned up. That means it will not get enough publicity and people will not get to know because the wider the coverage the better.

In this era, information visibility is essential. The more you make noise the better for you. Some might not necessarily want to do anything but the more you hit them with your information and what you are about, unconsciously it imbibes into their mindset and even that alone can give you some leverage. So, it is very important, and we have to do more.

### **Public Information**

The results from the interviews demonstrate that PR practitioners in the financial services sector also perform a public information role. When asked about the role of media clippings in the measurement of PR programmes, practitioners noted that media clippings played an essential role. Almost all the practitioners acknowledged that their managers expected to see the good things the organisation was doing in the media at all times. The clippings, therefore, enable them to determine the level of coverage they receive as compared to their competitors. “Whenever we organise a programme, we engage in news clippings to determine the extent to which the story has travelled. We look at the publicity aspect,” said one practitioner from an insurance company. Media clippings are used to measure the number of people likely to see, hear, or react to a story, as posited by a practitioner from a bank: “When we get major coverage, we know the coverage of the story is really high based on the platform that delivered it. So, when we do clippings, we have an idea of the number of people who have seen it. For online we know the hits on the website.” A practitioner from a savings and loans company also stated: “It is important to know how we are presented in the media and the perception held of us and how that can impact the business. You also need to know how your competitors are doing and position yourself accordingly. Media clippings, therefore, play a critical role in what we do.” Finally, a practitioner from the insurance sector said: “I have a target and I need to ensure that I have some public awareness about the brand and the product. So, every quarter I should have a minimum of two PR stories either in print or radio. I am measured by that. If you have at least those numbers of awareness it is good.”

Clearly, media clippings are seen as more than a measurement tool. Sometimes, they form the basis for other activities by practitioners. Apart from the number of articles published, practitioners also examine the quality and nature of coverage. Practitioners

therefore engage in content analysis (either performing it themselves or contracting an agency) to measure the quality of coverage. Significantly, there appears to be a focus on traditional methods of media clipping more than online methods. Practitioners tend to place emphasis on broadcast media and newspapers, while minimum attention is paid to online analytics. Although practitioners acknowledged engaging in online measurement, it is done on a minimal basis. Practitioners indicated that the trend was gradually changing.

There was no consensus among practitioners when they were asked whether the purpose of PR is to disseminate accurate information while not volunteering negative information. Overall, most of the practitioners felt this was a grey area that needed to be looked at carefully. They believed that circumstances should dictate the approach to use. For many of the practitioners, withholding information is the right thing to do, since it is the organisation that pays their salary. Some of the comments in favour of such arguments include the following:

In one of our local dialects, it is said that nobody points the left finger to his village. There are ways to manage communication but in the end, no one wants to throw dirt at himself. I for one will not do that. It is not in my interest to let the public know we are facing issues. We can give information on a need-to-know basis.

You always want a good image for your organisation and that means there are situations where you need to keep the negative information [under wraps] as it will not serve the organisation well. In other words, you cannot wash your dirty linen in public.

A few (six in total) were of the view that hiding unfavourable information is not worth the risk if you truly value your stakeholders. According to these practitioners, the era of digitisation and the high demand for transparency and accountability make it difficult to hide negative information. They believe that regardless of the circumstances, it is important to inform the public of any negative news. The following comment reflects such views: “In this current age of social media, the speed with which information goes out, there is nothing that you can keep secret. It is always better when the company owns up to the problem and then handles it because if you don’t manage it, someone will manage it for you.”

According to these practitioners, hiding important information is dishonest and unethical and the organisation will face serious consequences if this strategy backfires. “If it is bad, manage it in a way that will not damage your brand but be honest with your stakeholders,” concluded one practitioner. Generally, practitioners agreed that because of the sensitive nature of the financial sector, it is important to weigh up the pros and cons of bringing information out.

Almost all the practitioners suggested that they served as negotiators and mediators between management and publics. Active participation is driven by the need to ensure

a mutually beneficial relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders. This is reflected in the following comments:

It is important to ensure harmony, and in doing that you manage the relationship between the two groups. Else what is the use? We are not only here to disseminate information but to create a balanced relationship between the organisation and the publics.

The primary goal of the practitioner is to facilitate and consolidate the relationship between the organisation and its publics. The practitioner, therefore, needs to bring his professional expertise to bear and apply that to the growth of the relationship.

It is important for us to manage the dialogue between management and the public. Decisions taken by management must lead to an outcome that is beneficial to both parties.

One participant was of the view that being an active participant in the negotiation process was unrealistic: “When I joined this organisation, I noticed that they didn’t have a number of things so I made recommendations, but they were not taken [up], especially at the senior level. I am at the middle level of management. At that level, I am involved in making recommendations but at the senior management level where my inputs are needed, I am not factored [in].” For this practitioner, the reality is that PR practitioners tend to be disseminators and implementors more than mediators. Another practitioner also commented that the structure of the organisation and the place of PR will determine whether the practitioner can actually serve as a negotiator or disseminator of information: “In our part of the world, PR roles have been so broken down that depending on where you find yourself and the structure of the organisation you may either be a glorified messenger or a strategist.” The term “glorified messenger” is sometimes used in reference to practitioners whose main duty is to disseminate information.

Practitioners admitted that they prioritised the writing and production of stories for publication over research. Although practitioners acknowledged the importance of research, they also noted that the nature of their work was such that they did not have the time to do much research, especially formal research. For many of the practitioners, they prefer to outsource the research aspect to agencies while concentrating on writing. In the words of one practitioner: “My department is made up of social media, events and protocol, media management and brand management. Unfortunately, whenever we try to engage an external agency to conduct research for us, management will say we know the problems already, and that is proving to be a challenge.” Lack of management support was identified as being a contributory factor in the focus on writing instead of research. Others also mentioned budgetary constraints as the reason why they do not prioritise research. The difficulty practitioners face in focusing on research is summed up in the following statement: “Unfortunately, in our environment research has not taken root. In some organisations, you can’t do without research, but in the service industry you are looking at what the competition is doing; your intelligence is what you

pick from the market. We don't have a scientific way of measuring issues, so research plays almost close to [no role].”

Many of the practitioners said that they did not have their own research department; hence, communication research was usually conducted as part of general organisational customer satisfaction research, which is usually marketing oriented.

### **Two-Way Asymmetric Communication**

The interviews revealed insufficient use of formal research, at both the formative and evaluative levels. Practitioners acknowledged that they hardly conducted formative or evaluative research. Formative research ensures that practitioners are able to measure and interpret the views, feelings, opinions, and values a public may have toward the organisation. This is usually done before the PR department undertakes a major campaign.

Participants acknowledged that they did not really do much formal research. “What we do is mostly informal. We try to do that through interactions with clients, and based on their responses, we develop the right strategies to further enhance the image of the organisation,” said one practitioner. Another practitioner posited that although she was very interested in conducting attitudinal research, she was unable to do so, as she was not getting the necessary support from management. Participants further noted the lack of formal evaluative research. Formal evaluation is not consistent and is done as part of organisation-wide research and not restricted to the communication programmes. According to a practitioner, “We do not have the necessary resources to do a proper evaluation. So, once we finish a programme, we have to move on to the next one.” Research usually takes the form of community engagement with community members or opinion leaders, feedback from media activities, and stakeholder consultation.

Feedback—formal and informal—obtained by participants is used to develop strategies that position the organisation favourably to gain the acceptance of the stakeholders. For practitioners in the financial services sector, persuading publics to do business with the organisation is very important. Everything they do therefore revolves around this. In most cases, they are the ones driving the persuasion agenda: “We do it on two fronts. Internally we drive engagement. We work with the HR [human resources] department to ensure all staff are on board. Externally, it is our baby.” There is keen competition in the sector. Practitioners work round the clock to ensure that their organisations remain competitive and that the publics act in line with organisational goals:

We aim to improve the bottom line while also promoting the values of the organisation. So, whenever we get feedback on issues from any of our branches, we develop strategies to work on it.

We do perception audit[s], formally and informally, to determine what is working and not working, what customers are saying. Are there things we can look at and shape?

Once the feedback has been received, practitioners use diverse strategies, including press soirees, special events such as promotions, corporate social responsibility, and media relations. A practitioner made the following comment in relation to persuasion:

In selling a product the onus is on the department to be persuasive enough in terms of our communication and marketing campaigns to ensure that people patronise the bank's services and also have a certain view of the bank based on how we guide them. Our communication, in terms of the tone, the structure, even from the images that we use, is meant to guide people to think about the organisation in a certain way, both internally and externally.

Another practitioner mentioned the following as one of his strategies: "I bring together the top 50 clients and organise a dinner for them. The MD of the organisation is also present and he interacts with the clients. The clients appreciate [it] and this gains their loyalty." Overall, practitioners use several strategies to ensure stakeholders remain loyal and committed to them. As the result shows, research results, whether formal or informal, are used to develop strategies that will ensure publics continue to remain loyal and accept the decisions of the organisation. In the words of one practitioner, "Our responsibility as a department is to the organisation. We want to make sure that the organisation's story is effectively communicated to the benefit of the organisation."

### **Two-Way Symmetric Communication**

Practitioners admitted engaging in activities aimed at developing and maintaining a mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics. Practitioners thus serve as a link between the organisation and the publics. According to a practitioner, "We are constantly engaging our publics and also monitoring to see if we are at the same level, and if there is a disconnect we quickly deal with the issue behind the disconnect." Another practitioner noted that his department uses the chief executive as the focus of the organisation as a means of bridging the gap between the publics and the organisation. Staff meetings or informal get-togethers, quarterly meetings, dinner meetings with key stakeholders, and customer satisfaction surveys are some of the activities practitioners used to develop mutual satisfaction.

Findings from both formal and informal research are used to develop strategies that will improve the level of understanding between the organisation and its publics. Commenting on this, a practitioner asserted: "We do customer satisfaction research from time to time. We have redesigned some of our policies based on customer feedback. For example, we have changed our premium competition because customers complained that it was high and they needed us to do something about it." Another noted: "Everything we do [is informed by] the feedback we get. The customers see this and they come back and tell us: 'Oh, we have seen that you have done this'." Practitioners use methods such as media monitoring and customer complaint forms to garner feedback from stakeholders. "The feedback we receive is then used to advise management on policy direction," confirmed one practitioner.

Most of the practitioners revealed that they were involved in the management of conflict in their organisations. A practitioner from a savings and loans organisation opined: “We are the first point of contact when there is a conflict.” Other practitioners made the following comments:

Because we have an interface responsibility, that becomes one of our key areas of operation, and also to the extent that anything that detracts from the shared values and the quality relationship is the duty of the PR department.

Our key role is to provide a certain level of information to assure and, secondly, to assuage the sentiments of people.

One practitioner said that, as part of their strategies to deal with conflict situations, they sometimes asked the chief executive of the organisation to personally call an aggrieved customer. Practitioners noted that they serve as negotiators and mediators between management and publics. “We sometimes arrange meetings between representatives of the executive and key stakeholders who have issues. Issues are discussed at the interpersonal level and the stakeholders usually end up being satisfied,” noted one practitioner. Practitioners also serve on committees that initiate dialogue with publics whose activities can negatively affect the organisation. “We are seen as the department with the expertise to bring solutions to the table,” as one practitioner put it.

Some comments made by practitioners indicate that the symmetrical role is not always fully enacted. Some practitioners pointed out that in most situations, management do not listen to them when it comes to key issues, as in the comment by a practitioner quoted earlier in this article: “I made recommendations, but they were not taken [up] ... at the senior management level where my inputs are needed, I am not factored [in].” A practitioner also intimated that changing management attitude is more in “theory than practice”. For many of the practitioners, because they are not part of management, and also because management do not understand PR, changing the behaviour of management becomes very difficult:

We are largely successful sometimes in changing the behaviour of customers. But when the board believes this is the right way to go, nothing you say will change their mind. So on paper that is the ideal situation but in practice it is not the case.

Honestly, I see it in the other direction. In terms of management, I don't think it has a lot of effect. It looks more at the external than internal. For management I see them being affected by the culture of the organisation more than PR. Therefore, I look at it from the client perspective.

These results demonstrate that symmetrical PR cannot be fully practiced within the Ghanaian context.

## Personal Influence

Apart from the four models, this study also found that the personal influence model has a strong influence on PR practice in the sector. Practitioners build strong relationships with key stakeholders who can influence certain decisions in favour of the industry or the organisation, including the media and regulators. Practitioners tend to engage government regulators, traditional/opinion leaders, and other influential members of the society at the interpersonal level. During such meetings, practitioners often present gifts to these influential individuals. For practitioners, media relations goes beyond invitations to cover programmes. Practitioners believe that the media are essential to the success of their organisations. They therefore establish a strong relationship with them through visiting frequently, giving them end-of-year gifts, supplying the equipment needed, training media staff, and having breakfast meetings, among others. Practitioners see the media as partners. They organise press soirees for senior editors at the end of the year as a way of getting closer to the media:

Because we engage them so often, they usually block negative information about the brand. Any time they pick [up] any negative information they call us to confirm.

Because of the good relationship we have with them, they come to us to clarify information they have about us before they publish it. Sometimes we are able to convince them to drop the story. Other times we write the story for them to publish.

Practitioners also work to develop a rapport with community/opinion leaders (people with strong influence in the various villages, towns, and districts in Ghana) such as chiefs, elders of the community, assemblymen, and district chief executives. They visit them and interact with them as part of their community relations. Sometimes they sponsor events organised by the community. They are therefore able to gain the support of the community when issues come up.

## Discussion

This study sought to explore the models that influence PR practice in Ghana, with a focus on the financial services sector. The interviews demonstrated that the four models of PR—and the general excellence theory—are practiced in the financial sector in Ghana. This is consistent with findings from other regions, including Asia and other western countries. The two-way models are largely practised more than the one-way model. Of the two-way models, asymmetric communication was found to be dominant. This is not surprising, as it confirms the findings of several studies (García 2014; Grunig 1992; Grunig 2001; Leitch and Neilson 2001; L'Etang 1996; Murphy 1991). García (2014, 802) found that the majority of companies in Southern Europe and China practised asymmetrical PR. Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) also found that PR practitioners and their supervisors used both the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models. Grunig (2001) acknowledges that the two-way asymmetric model actually describes most PR practices, although he does not agree with it. Valentini and

Sriramesh (2014, 12) postulate that although Italian PR professionals profess to view symmetrical communication as a critical need for strategic management, very few practise it. Leitch and Neilson (2001, 129) argue:

It is simply absurd to suggest that an interaction between, for example, a transnational corporation and a public consisting of unskilled workers in a developing country can be symmetrical just because the interaction is symmetrical in form. It is even more absurd to suggest the reverse—that the interaction between this worker public and the corporation can be symmetrical if the workers adopt the correct attitude and are willing to compromise. In practice, in cases where access to resources is so unequal, attempting to practice symmetrical public relations might constitute a self-destructive discourse strategy for the least powerful participant.

In Ghana, the conditions necessary for excellent PR to fully function do not exist. In the Ghanaian context, and as this study has found, PR is mostly associated with publicity and building a positive image for an organisation. In the financial services sector, most PR practitioners have a marketing background and thus conceptualise PR based on marketing perspectives. The lack of a professional background in PR among practitioners and the association with marketing means PR will continue to be asymmetrical. Practitioners also see themselves as working in their organisation's interest. Their duty is first and foremost to influence the public to accept the dictates of the organisation. Moreover, most organisations lack an understanding of PR and hence tend not to value the contribution of PR practitioners. The study found that practitioners are sometimes turned into implementers of decisions rather than participators. The breaking down of barriers due to globalisation is accelerating the growth of PR. However, it has not reached the level where it can be considered symmetrical. In effect, asymmetry is very dominant in the Ghanaian context, as practitioners tend to promote the interests of their organisation rather than those of the publics. This also confirms the findings of other scholars, such as Yue (2016).

Despite the dominance of asymmetric communication, the study showed that two-way symmetric communication is also practised, albeit not to the same extent as the asymmetric model. Practitioners initiate dialogue with key stakeholders in order to ensure a mutual understanding between the organisation and the publics. In this regard, they serve as a boundary between the organisation and the publics by interpreting the actions of the organisation to the publics as well as interpreting the actions of the publics to the organisation (Seitel 2017, 38). In serving as a boundary spanner, the practitioner ensures that both management and the publics understand each other.

A lack of appreciation for the symmetric model, and to some extent the asymmetric model, emerged prominently. Even though the role of PR practitioners is to serve as a warning system to management and to ensure that the attitude of management aligns with the behaviour of the publics, this does not usually happen. The study found that management usually disregards the advice of the PR practitioner. The lack of understanding of PR by management was largely attributed to the position that

practitioners find themselves in. This is hardly surprising, as the literature shows that in most cases marketing is regarded more highly than PR, because the results of marketing are visible. Although PR in Ghana has evolved during the last decade, it still suffers from a lack of recognition compared to marketing. Practitioners therefore find it difficult to change the behaviour of management, especially on issues likely to affect the reputation or image of the organisation.

Bowen, Rawlins, and Martin (2019, 45) suggest that the reporting structure of an organisation tends to have an impact on communication. Indeed, one practitioner described changing management behaviour as “just theory”, to emphasise that such things are idealistic. The situation is also not helped by the fact that most practitioners in the sector have marketing backgrounds. Indeed, out of the twenty-two practitioners interviewed, only nine per cent had a communication background, with fourteen per cent having both communication and marketing backgrounds. This shows that within the financial services sector, preference is given to marketing professionals when it comes to managing communication. Practitioners therefore tend to have a limited knowledge of PR management. Joseph (2017) notes that PR practice in Africa faces a number of challenges, including a poor understanding of what the profession is really about; negative cultural practices, attitudes, and taboos; a lack of ethics among practitioners; and a lack of specialisation. These challenges mean that PR practice will continue to be geared towards benefiting the organisation rather than the publics.

The lack of formal or scientific research and evaluation in the industry also shows that the symmetrical model is not practised fully. The use of research and evaluation has been discussed for decades. Practitioners, now more than ever, are under pressure to show the value of the work they do. There is a strong demand for scientific measurement to show how PR contributes to the bottom line (Michaelson and Stacks 2011; Stacks and Bowen 2013; Watson and Noble 2014). Wilcox, Cameron, and Reber (2015, 150) emphasise the importance of research before embarking on any PR programme. The findings of the current study show that formal research is inconsistent and at best negligible. There is a strong focus on informal research. Evaluation is also premised mostly on outputs rather than outcomes. These findings align with the criticisms of the two-way symmetric communication model, as discussed earlier.

The current study has also determined that the personal influence model plays a strong role in PR practice in Ghana. This finding is consistent with those of other studies in other countries, particularly Asia and Africa (Gupta and Bartlett 2007; Kiambi and Nadler 2012; Lim, Goh, and Sriramesh 2005; Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki 1999; Wu and Baah-Boakye 2008; Wu and Baah-Boakye 2009).

## Implications for Public Relations Practice and Theory

The current study has found that PR practice in Ghana does not quite conform to what scholars describe as “excellent PR”. The results show that PR practice is influenced by

a number of variables, particularly the asymmetric and the personal influence models. Practitioners will need to understand these models and how they shape the way they practice PR. It is important for scholars and practitioners to network effectively to develop common frameworks for excellent PR practice. Practitioners can use knowledge and understanding of the models that influence PR practice to improve relationships, establish essential business opportunities, and attain outcomes that will benefit both their organisations and the publics.

Again, the fact that the asymmetric model is practised more than the symmetric models demonstrates that the symmetric models are idealistic rather than realistic. The two-way symmetrical model reflects the concepts of transparency, trust, honesty, and mutual understanding. Professional and ethical PR cannot develop without high standards of truth, honesty, transparency, and accountability. The nature of the financial services sector means that information must be carefully managed without causing fear and panic among publics. Ghana's financial services sector is currently facing trust issues due to several scandals that have rocked the sector in the past two years. Practitioners must therefore align their practice to both symmetric and asymmetric communication models in order to practise ethical PR and achieve excellence.

On the theoretical level, the results call for a review of discussions of the models as practised in Ghana, and Africa in general. The few studies on PR models in Ghana show that the symmetric, asymmetric, and personal influence models are all used (see Wu and Baah-Boakye 2008; Wu and Baah-Boakye 2009). With the advancement of globalisation and the influx of multinational organisations, it is time for Ghanaian PR scholars to develop a model that reflects global standards of practice while at the same time bringing out the unique cultural philosophies that govern Ghanaian business practice.

Research has demonstrated that culture plays a critical role in PR practice. In Ghana, interpersonal relationships are critical to business success. The sense of association is at the core of relationship management. This allows for the development of dialogue and consensus building. The belief in communality ensures that understanding is secured through transparent negotiation that leads to mutual understanding. This is reflected in the personal influence model, which is also practised strongly in the country. However, interpersonal communication goes beyond gaining favours through gifts. Organisations understand that they are an integral part of the community in as much as the community is a part of the organisation. What this means is that any framework that governs PR practice in Ghana must take cognisance of the cultural factors in the country. PR scholars in Ghana have an opportunity to leverage the models to develop models relevant to the Ghanaian environment. Grunig (2001, 29) suggests the need to "move on from the four models of public relations and develop a comprehensive theory that goes beyond the typology represented by the four models". The resulting Ghanaian models of PR can then be incorporated into curricula for students to "[ensure] that future practitioners are armed with practical based tools and are not in an ongoing pursuit to

implement normative theories that may have little to no effect in their public relations' environment" (Gupta and Bartlett 2007, 12).

## Limitations and Further Research Opportunities

This study was limited to the financial services sector; hence, the results cannot be generalised to other fields. Nevertheless, it is posited that findings from other sectors will likely follow the same pattern. As the research was qualitative in nature, it involved a limited number of participants. The results can therefore not be generalised to the entire PR population in Ghana. The study did, however, enable the researcher to explore meaning and gain insight into a phenomenon rarely studied in Ghana.

It is recommended that a larger quantitative study be done to gain further insight into PR practice in other sectors. Scholars can also evaluate management perceptions of PR in developing countries. This would make a valuable contribution to the debate on the place of PR within the organisational setup.

## Conclusion

The current study provides insight into the models that influence PR practice in Ghana, with a focus on the financial services sector. The results demonstrate there is much to learn regarding models of PR excellence in different settings. The results show the need for PR scholars and practitioners in Ghana, and in Africa in general, to work together to develop models that reflect the nature of the practice on the continent.

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