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Relationship Cultivation Strategies in Strategic Communication

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Strategic communication is an organization’s planned and purposeful communication aimed at achieving its goals. Public relations has been identified as a fundamental element of strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Siramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2008). Hallahan et al. (2007) specified that the field of public relations can play a part in the development of strategic communication by emphasizing developing theory to determine how an organization can “establish and maintain beneficial relationships with key constituencies” (p. 6). In the public relations scholarship, relationship management has been a primary paradigm since Ferguson’s call in 1984 (Ferguson, 1984). This chapter will review the extent to which relationship cultivation strategies are relevant to the field of strategic communication and how this program of research can be applied beyond the publics in the public relations process.

Literature examining relationship management has highlighted the following three elements of organization–public relationships: antecedents of relationships, cultivation strategies, and relationship quality (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). An antecedent of a relationship represents the impetus for an organization and its public to establish a relationship. Cultivation strategies consist of the communication activities between an organization and its publics that can improve or prevent deterioration of the relationships. Relationship quality is the outcome of the relational interaction by both parties involved in the relationship.

Since evaluating relationship quality has been regarded as equivalent to measuring the effectiveness and value of public relations, scholars have devoted themselves to establishing reliable and valid measures of relationship quality outcomes (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ferguson, 1984; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Jo, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2007; Y. Kim, 2001). Recently, the academic focus in relationship management has shifted from measuring relationship quality outcome to identifying and evaluating relationship cultivation strategies (Hung, 2004; Ki & Hon, 2009a, 2009b; Shen, 2011). This chapter attempts to integrate relationship cultivation strategies with the strategic communication process in order to attract both more scholarly and practical attention to these strategies, which can proactively improve the relationship quality outcomes.

**Relationship Theory in Public Relations**

Relationship cultivation strategies effectively fit into strategic communication due to several shared commonalities. First, strategic communication practice is deliberate and intentional as it attempts to achieve a certain outcome (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Organizations utilize relationship strategies to build and maintain beneficial relationships with key constituencies.
Relationship Cultivation Strategies

Although strategic communication theory prefers the broader term of stakeholders, the concept of publics stays relevant to this discussion because relationship cultivation theory has been developed in the context of public relations theory. Organizational research has demonstrated that any organization’s behavior can affect the status of its relationship with its strategic publics. Organizations cannot simply maintain relationships with their publics, but should devote time and resources to improve their relationships and/or restore any damaged relationships. In order to properly cultivate relationships with their strategic publics or stakeholders, organizations can incorporate a variety of relationship cultivation strategies into their daily communication activities. In this respect, this chapter defines relationship cultivation strategies as organizational behavioral efforts to improve a relational condition with strategic publics or stakeholders.

Relationship cultivation strategies originated from theories of interpersonal relations, specifically romantic relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Stafford, Dainton, & Hass, 2000). Public relations scholars (e.g., J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) transformed the concept of relationship cultivation strategies in interpersonal communication and applied the strategies to organization–public relationships (OPRs). Relationship cultivation strategies are daily communication activities employed by an organization to improve the quality of its relationships with various publics or stakeholders and are often considered proactive approaches to fostering high quality relationships.

The most effective strategies, which have been identified to produce positive relationship outcomes, are access, positivity, openness, sharing tasks, networking, and assurances (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013; Ki & Hon, 2006, 2009a). J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) categorized these strategies as being symmetrical. Below is a brief description of each strategy.

Access

This strategy involves providing channels of communications for both sides of the relationship. Specifically, publics or representatives of publics offer communication avenues for public relations professionals, who provide similar levels of access to members of publics in order to share their opinions regarding an organization (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Making individuals available to the other party, an organization and its publics can engage one another. Since relationship cultivation theory is considered organizational behavior, access strategy can be conceptualized as the attribute of organizational behavioral efforts that provide communication channels to help its strategic publics or stakeholders to reach an organization (Ki & Hon, 2009a).

With the development and popularity of advanced communication technologies, coupled with the use of traditional communication channels, an organization should consider providing more interactive communication channels as an access strategy.

Positivity

In interpersonal communication, positivity is often described as individuals’ effort to maintain enjoyable interactions. Canary and Stafford (1994) provided examples of this strategy, such as joyful and affectionate behavior, polite communication, and avoiding criticism of the other. In the area of interpersonal relationships, this strategy is often regarded as a prerequisite to control mutuality and

In organization–public relationships, the concept of ‘positivity’ is defined as “anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved” (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 14). They contend that positivity strategy can be effective for conflict resolution. A few examples of this strategy include offering encouraging feedback, joyful behaviors, polite communication, and avoiding criticism of the parties involved in the relationship.

Based on relationship cultivation strategy as an organizational behavior, positivity can be defined as “the degree to which strategic publics can benefit from the organization’s efforts to make the relationship more enjoyable” (Ki & Hon, 2009a, p. 246).

**Openness and disclosure**

Scholars of interpersonal relationships have explained openness as the willingness to explicitly express and discuss feelings and opinions about a relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994). In a romantic relationship, openness was found to have the least predictive power of relationship quality (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

This openness strategy was introduced into public relations scholarship as the expression of concerns and opinions among the parties involved in organization–public relationships (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). While openness does not automatically contribute to a positive relationship, the party with more power should justify that any safeguarding of information is in the interest of the less powerful party (Bok, 1989). Scholars agree that openness is a predictor of relationship quality, including satisfaction (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) and trust (Dimmick, Bell, Burgiss, & Ragsdale, 2000). Moreover, L. A. Grunig et al. (1992) demonstrated openness as being a fundamental component of a quality relationship. The study by Ki and Hon (2009a), however, demonstrated an insignificance of openness strategy and argued openness is a fundamental dimension of all relationship cultivation strategies. Based on the approach that considers relationship cultivation strategy as an attribute of organizational behavior, openness can be defined as “an organization’s behavioral efforts to provide information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing that affects its strategic publics” (Ki & Hon, 2009a).

**Sharing tasks**

Scholars examining interpersonal relationships conceptualized sharing tasks as the distribution of routine tasks and equitable sharing of responsibilities (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Sharing household chores is an example of this strategy in interpersonal relationships. Like other strategies, sharing tasks has been confirmed as a significant predictor of relationship quality, including control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1994) and satisfaction (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; Wilmot & Sillars, 1989).

In public relations scholarship, sharing tasks has been defined as a strategy through which an organization and its stakeholders all perform their relevant responsibilities to solve problems and address concerns, so that both parties are able to reach their interdependent goals (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Some examples of this strategy include working together to reduce pollution, supporting philanthropic efforts, providing employment opportunities, or remaining competitive (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). These tasks might be of interest to either an organization or stakeholders or both parties. Because the idea of sharing tasks is similar to corporate social responsibility for an organization, this strategy can be evaluated through an organization’s corporate social responsibility reports, which demonstrate the degree to which an organization has made an effort to work with its stakeholders to address issues or common concerns (Ki & Hon, 2009b).

As this chapter considers cultivation strategy as an organizational behavioral effort, sharing tasks can be conceptualized as “an organization’s behavioral efforts to share in working on projects or solving problems of common interest between an organization and its strategic publics” (Ki & Hon, 2009a).
Networking

In interpersonal relationships, this strategy involves individuals’ willingness to network common friends and affiliations to maintain relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Networking has been determined to affect relationship quality outcomes such as control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991) and liking (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1994).

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) expanded the concept of networking strategy to organization–public relationships and defined networking as an organization’s willingness to form relationships with groups associated with its strategic publics, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups. Networking in particular was found to be a catalyst in relationship-building in Asian countries such as China because it is a culture that emphasizes the importance of personal relationships (Hung, 2002).

Assurances

This strategy involves efforts between individuals to reinforce and reassure one another of the importance of their relationship and of each other (Canary & Stafford, 1994). This strategy was found to be the most important for promoting a commitment to relationship quality outcomes, and it is also a significant predictor of trust (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

In organization–public relationships, assurance is defined as an effort to communicate how an organization values the relationship with its stakeholders (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) describe the importance of assurance thus: “each party in the relationship attempts to assure the other that it and its concerns are legitimate and to demonstrate that it is committed to maintaining the relationship” (p. 551). An organization can employ this strategy by communicating and demonstrating the extent to which it values its publics. Hung (2000) indicates that providing assurances can be effective as it influences satisfaction and commitment among the parties involved in the relationship. This strategy can be conceptualized as “an organization’s effort to assure its strategic publics that they and their concerns are attended to” (Ki & Hon, 2009a).

Measures of Relationship Cultivation Strategies

As the focus of relationship management has shifted from the measurement of relationship quality outcomes to identifying relationship cultivation strategies, several scholars have attempted to establish a way to measure relationship cultivation strategies. Ki and Hon (2009b) conducted one of the first studies to develop a measure of relationship cultivation strategies based on the multiple scale development steps suggested by Spector (1992). They gathered the six cultivation strategies—access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurances—from the literature and conceptualized them based on organizational behavioral perspectives:

- **Access**: “the degree of effort that an organization puts into providing communication channels or media outlets that assist its strategic publics in reaching it.”
- **Positivity**: “the degree to which members of publics benefit from the organization’s efforts to make the relationship more enjoyable for key publics.”
- **Openness**: “an organization’s efforts to provide information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing.”
- **Sharing of tasks**: “an organization’s efforts to share in working on projects or solving problems of mutual interest between the organization and its publics”
- **Networking**: “the degree of an organization’s effort to build networks or coalitions with the same groups that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups.”
- **Assurances**: “any efforts by an organization to assure its strategic publics that they and their concerns are attended to.”
Ki and Hon (2009b) drafted multiple initial items to measure each of the six strategies based on feedback from in-depth interviews with top public relations practitioners. Multiple steps were taken to improve the scale, and the final measure was evaluated by surveying a large number of organization members. They concluded that the scale was both reliable and valid.1

Recently, following examination of relationship cultivation strategies based on the two typologies—symmetrical and asymmetrical—Shen (2011) extended Ki and Hon (2009b)’s measure of relationship cultivation strategies in an organization–employee context. She discovered that a six-factor measurement model could act as a meaningful representation of organizations’ relationship cultivation efforts for their employees. The six effective strategies include openness, assurances of legitimacy, networking, distributive negotiation, avoiding, and compromising. These two studies contribute to theoretical and operational development in the area of relationship management research, specifically relationship cultivation strategies.

Application of Relationship Cultivation Strategies

Only a handful of studies have examined relationship cultivation strategies across diverse relationship types, and these studies have added new cultivation strategies. Ki and Hon (2009a) applied the six relationship cultivation strategies to the relationships between a membership organization and its members. They found the four relationship cultivation strategies—access, positivity, sharing of tasks, and assurances—to be significant predictors of relationship quality outcomes. However, the other two strategies, openness and networking, did not significantly influence any of the relationship outcomes in the context of membership organization. Waters (2009) applied the six relationship cultivation strategies to relationships between nonprofit organizations and donors and stressed that cultivation strategies play an essential role in fundraising success. Bortree (2010) investigated relationship cultivation strategies in the context of non-profit organizations and adolescent volunteers. She added guidance as a new cultivation strategy, specifically as it applied to adolescent volunteers, and concluded that guidance, assurances, and shared tasks are key predictors of relationship quality outcomes in the context of relationships between adolescent volunteers and a non-profit organization.

Discussion and Research Agendas

This chapter introduces and summarizes the effect of relationship cultivation strategies on relationship outcomes. As relationship cultivation strategies have started to gain attention, this area of research offers many opportunities. First, the strategies should be applied to more diverse contexts to determine if they effectively influence relationship outcomes. Specifically, relationship cultivation strategies were primarily examined in the context of non-profit organizations (Bortree, 2010; Waters, 2009) and membership organizations (Ki & Hon, 2009a). Therefore, scholars may consider developing a measure of relationship cultivation strategies to fit other types of organizations such as healthcare organizations, governmental organizations, corporations, and other types of contexts, such as marketing, advertising, health communication and political campaigns, to mention but a few. Specifically, as the majority of business is profit-driven, the consumer is the most important stakeholder in that regard. The importance of positive relationships has continuously been confirmed in organization–consumer relationships (Bach & S. Kim, 2012; Hong & Yang, 2009). For example, Hong and Yang (2009) tested the link between relationship quality and word-of-mouth intention and affirmed that customer satisfaction levels serve as a good predictor of positive word-of-mouth intentions. Although these studies are meaningful for learning the importance of quality relationship formation between an organization and its customer stakeholder group, it is difficult to understand specific tactics or strategies that foster quality relationships. Therefore, scholarly attention is necessary in order to identify relationship cultivation strategies within organizational contexts, which have not yet been effectively examined. More importantly, scholars should test if the measure is an effective...
evaluation of relationship outcome across the various environments in order to ultimately assess a more general measure of cultivation strategies.

Second, the aforementioned studies primarily applied relationship cultivation strategies in an offline setting. Rapidly growing social media is an essential organizational communication channel today and it can be employed to increase strategic communication efficiencies. Relationship cultivation strategies should be explored in the context of new communication platforms to understand and evaluate their effectiveness. Scholars have primarily applied a theoretical framework designed by Kent and Taylor (1998) as a guide for relationship building in online settings. They introduced five relationship cultivation strategies: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, intuitiveness/ease of the interface, and the rule of conservation of visitors. In follow-up research (Kent & Taylor, 2002), they highlighted the dialogic approach as an ethical relationship management method and expanded the strategies by adding features such as mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Recently, Men and Tsai (2012) explored relationship cultivation strategies on social media platforms from a cross-cultural perspective by applying Kent and Taylor’s theoretical framework. They examined the ways organizations use social network sites to communicate with stakeholders in two culturally different countries—China and the United States. Men and Tsai (2012) discovered that organizations in both countries frequently use the dialogic strategies of disclosure, information dissemination, and interactivity. Although it is natural to apply a theoretical framework specifically designed for online environments in order to identify effective relationship cultivation strategies in online settings, it is necessary to test various strategies to determine which of those are most appropriate and effective. Hopefully, this chapter will guide and inspire further scholarly efforts to refine the existing strategies and identify more effective and strategic ways of communicating with stakeholders in online contexts.

Third, given the importance of global public relations, it is necessary to consider culture as an important variable in cultivating relationships with these foreign publics or stakeholder groups. While effective public relations practices may share universal principles, they are not immune from the impacts of politics, media, economic development and cultural values (Vercič, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1996). Typology of high- and low-context cultures by E. T. Hall (1989) has been applied as a useful approach in order to explain the differences between Western and Eastern countries (H. Kim, Coyle, & Gould, 2009). In E. T. Hall’s (1989) typology, context is the situational information that one needs in order to understand the meaning of an event or subject, and cultures can be categorized into either high and low based on the extent to which context is necessary for such understanding. In high-context situations, “most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message,” while low-context situations involve “just the opposite, i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (E. T. Hall & M. R. Hall, 1990, p. 8). Thus, high and low contexts act as an important variable for considering the development of effective relationship cultivation strategies for foreign publics. For example, because Western culture is known to be high-context according to Hall (1989), public relations messages geared toward this audience should be developed in clear and explicit ways. Relationship cultivation strategies have been applied to an Asian context, and personal networking was often found to be a key strategy (Hung, 2002, 2004). Future research should explore ways to cultivate relationships with publics in other unexplored countries while considering cultural and situational variables.

Fourth, different types of publics should be considered to develop more effective relationship cultivation strategies. Ni and Kim (2009) organized types of publics based on a framework of communicative action in problem solving (CAPS) and characteristics of problem solving among publics. They predicted and confirmed that the three different problem-solving characteristics—openness to approaches in problem solving, the extent of activeness in problem solving, and the time or history of problem solving—explain the features of communication behaviors of publics, such as transmitting or selecting information. Moreover, Ni and Kim (2009) noted the publics’ perceptions about the given problems or
situations might explain the communication process. Scholars may need to consider this new classification of segmented publics established by Ni and Kim (2009) whose aim was to find more effective way of communication with these publics and to develop more specific relationship cultivation strategies.

Fifth, relationship cultivation strategies might influence or be affected by types of relationships. Hung (2005) identifies seven relationship types: covenantal relationships, symbiotic relationships, communal relationships, exchange relationships, contractual relationships, manipulative relationships and exploitive relationships. The extent to which each relationship cultivation strategy might be applied would depend on the type of relationship an organization has with its stakeholders. For example, an organization that practices the manipulative relationship type would probably be less likely to prioritize the openness strategy.

Last, the three elements—relationship antecedents, cultivation strategies, and relationship outcomes—are suggested as essential components in the organization–public relationship literature (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000). This chapter only addresses the element of relationship cultivation strategies. Therefore, scholars might consider applying all three of the components in diverse settings in order to empirically document evidence of the linkages among these three elements.

Strategic communication is planned and purposive communication in which a communication agent participates with the aim of achieving an organization’s goal (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). Such goals may include, but are not limited to, winning market share, winning a political campaign, building a positive reputation, and influencing social change. In many situations, organizational goals can be more effectively reached by fostering favorable relationships between the organizations and their strategic publics or stakeholders. To develop a favorable and healthy relationship with stakeholders, an organization should apply effective relationship cultivation strategies. Hopefully this chapter will attract greater scholarly and practical attention to the development and testing of these strategies.

Notes
1 To see a complete measure of relationship cultivation strategies, please refer to Ki & Hon (2009b).
2 A covenantal relationship is one in which both parties make a commitment to a common good through their open exchanges and the norm of reciprocity (Hung, 2005, p. 398).
3 The symbiotic relationship is an interdependent relationship, in which both parties need to work together to coexist (Hung, 2005, p. 416).
4 A communal relationship incorporates the concern that one party has regarding the other's welfare, whereas an exchange relationship depends upon economic exchanges (Clark & Mills, 1979 cited in Hung, 2005).
5 Hung (2005) explains that contractual relationships begin when the parties make an agreement about what each should do in the relationship. This type of relationship is not necessarily an equal one.
6 A manipulative relationship occurs when a party asserts power to obtain what she or he wants through an asymmetrical communication approach (Hung, 2005).
7 Exploitive relationships occur when one party in a relationship takes advantage of the other, or when one party does not fulfill his or her obligations or responsibilities in the relationship (Clark & Mills, 1993, cited in Hung, 2005).

References
Relationship Cultivation Strategies


