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Nonmarket marketers: A new way to look at public affairs practitioners

Keywords: public affairs, nonmarket, stakeholders

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of public affairs practitioners and how they view themselves against the changing organisational, communications and public policy landscape. It argues practitioners now exhibit a form of cultural hybridity and identity stretch reflecting broader marketing and promotional worker identities. The paper follows in the tradition of Mellahi, Frynas, Sun and Siegel (2016) that argue for greater theoretical integration in nonmarket strategy literature, and Porcu, Del Barrio-Garcia and Kitchen (2017) that suggest integrated marketing communication (IMC) takes a broader organisational perspective. The study is shaped by a critical realist worldview and draws on data from a larger mixed methods study of UK practitioners that investigates the knowledge and capabilities for public affairs practice. For the purposes of this paper, it addresses two specific questions: how do public affairs practitioners view themselves and how does this conceptualisation relate to wider debates about what constitutes IMC.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Nonmarket stakeholders and IMC

Porcu, Del Barrio-Garcia and Kitchen (2017) argue IMC has evolved from a narrow marketing-centred approach to more of an organisational perspective with scholars suggesting the word marketing being dropped completely (Christensen & Cornelissen 2011; Einwiler & Boenigk, 2012; Smith, 2012). This suggestion recognises the move away from viewing integration as a marketing communication concept co-ordinating messages to consumers, to one that has organisational wide value (Schultz & Shultz, 1998; Shultz & Kitchen, 2000). Additionally, scholars suggest a shift towards a communication-based relationship-marketing model (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998) focusing less on transactional one-way communication with customers to a relationship and inbound communication approach. They highlight explicitly a move towards a stakeholder rather than a customer orientation.

The twenty-first century marketplace has become the stakeholder era (Niewman, 2005), necessitating a different approach to integration. Communications is not owned by communication professionals but is interactive owned by stakeholders that move beyond the customer. Strategic integrated communication is vital not to provide one voice but to enable organisational integrity, alignment (between internal and external stakeholders) and purpose. This shift towards a stakeholder approach to marketing has its roots in stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1994) and the importance of stakeholder dialogue (Driessen et al., 2013). However, dropping the word marketing is not universally accepted. Kitchen (2017) argues the term IMC remains relevant, though is becoming entwined with brand, consumer and stakeholder concepts.

The extant marketing communications literature is extensive, but common threads include its role in balancing unified communications for consistent messaging and image and differentiated communications to multiple consumer groups (Lee & Park, 2007). Wang et al. (2009) use the terms public relations, advertising, direct sales and promotion when discussing marketing communications, and Kliatchko (2008) point to the use of various channels and the importance of content. For Porcu, Del Barrio-

Garcia and Kitchen (2017) in their review of the scholarship four dimensions of IMC emerge: message consistency, interactivity, stakeholder-centred strategic focus and organisational alignment. These are strands that run through the various roles performed by marketing communication professionals. Others such as Davis (2013) talk of a growing promotional orientation in society and talks of communicators – including marketers - becoming promotional intermediaries. The IMC debate reflects the growing recognition that there exists both market and nonmarket stakeholders. Here nonmarket relates to those stakeholders that are involved in the institutional or societal context of economic competition (Baron, 1995; Lux, Crook & Woehr, 2011). Mellahi, Frynas, Sun and Siegel (2016) point to the extensive body of literature demonstrating that an effective nonmarket strategy is critical to the survival and performance of the organisation.

2.2. Public Affairs

Public affairs deliver nonmarket relationships through engagement with political audiences. Scholars (Post, 1982; Meznar & Nigh, 1995; Boddewyn, 2012; Fleisher, 2002, 2007; Hillman, 2002; Paluszek, 1995; Schuler, 2002; Toth, 2006) have conceptualised public affairs with a common theme around its role in building relationships with those who shape public policy. Public affairs is situational (Bauer, 2015) arguing the field is influenced by the political systems, democratic values and markets in which it operates and as such is shaped by a range of institutional and organisational factors. Scholarship places public affairs firmly within a market (if not explicitly marketing) orientation. This makes understanding public affairs as a unified discipline complex as its role varies (Windsor, 2005). A range of metaphors has been used to describe these roles including being the window-out and window-in for the organisation (Post, 1982), a buffer or bridge (Meznar & Nigh, 1995) and issues identification (McGrath, Harris and Moss, 2010).

Of relevance is the work of Harrison (2000) suggesting public affairs performs marketing roles (linking to consumer issues that can differentiate and drive sales); public relations (with a focus on promotional and loud campaigning); as well as traditional lobbying (the discreet and quiet exchange of views). Scholars (Fleisher, 2007; McGrath, 2006; McGrath, Moss & Harris, 2010; Figuee, Gosselt, Linders and De Jong, 2017) have also explored the behaviours and skills necessary for the role, determining that practitioners demonstrate typical competencies necessary for communicators generally, but are differentiated by their social capital and knowledge of the political system.

2.3 Professional Identity and Identity Construction

Noordegraff (2016) argues professional work is changing because organisational and societal contexts are changing and professionals often exhibit ephemeral identities. As such professionalism is becoming more connective, networked and community based (Furbey, Reid & Cole, 2001; Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick & Walker, 2007). Ibarra (1999) defines professional identity as “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (1999, pp.764-765). Here the key is how individuals define themselves and demonstrate their abilities. Professional identity is a signifier to others that an individual has special and unique abilities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

As Pratt, Rockman and Kaufmann (2006) point out professionals are defined by what they do rather than the organisation they work for and career success is often dependent on successful professional identity construction (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle 1999; Hall, Zhu & Yan 2002). However, Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio (2006) argue the organisation itself does impact on individual identity terming this corporate professionalism. Certainly careers are changing, as Baruch (2004) argues, these are now spiral and multi-dimensional or kaleidoscopic as suggested by Mainiero and Sullivan (2005, 2006), rather than linear. From a global organisational perspective, Abbott, Zheng and Du (2014) talk of individuals now needing to exhibit cultural hybridity (cultural amalgamation and integration of multiple cultures into the organisation) and identity multiplicity (here individuals have to navigate multiple perspectives, knowledge repertoires and norms).

The literature suggests that public affairs could be considered a form of marketing communications as part of a larger understanding of IMC. Given the changes affecting professional work, this paper uses professional identity as a specific lens through which to understand the contemporary situation and how public affairs practitioners view themselves.

3. Methodology

The original study on which this paper is based takes a critical realist worldview drawing on the work of Bashkar (1989). Here there are three domains of reality: the empirical (experienced); the actual (aspects that occur but are not necessarily experienced); and deep structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena. So, the world is complex and due consideration must be given to the structures and processes that underpin reality. This is important for public affairs where the discipline is at the centre of a wide variety of processes, structures and relationships within the organisation, and between organisations and the policy environment which itself is a complex web of decision-making connections. Consequently, there is a need to understand public affairs from a broad set of perspectives.

The study takes a mixed methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques supporting the views of Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) that feel integrating methods can be helpful if they provide better opportunities to address specific research questions. The study has four strands. A systematic literature review contributes primarily inductively to help identify emerging themes. There are elements of deductive enquiry in that the literature is extensive and as argued by Reichertz (2010) previous developed knowledge cannot be ignored so it has abductive tendencies. Additionally, the study consists of 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners and policy makers. Sampling took a non-probability approach using a blend of convenience and snowball methods. This technique is prone to bias but care was taken to ensure a broad mix of respondents. A small-scale survey and a competency framework analysis also form part of the main study.

This paper, however, only presents work from the qualitative component of the study. Data analysis uses the Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012) approach to demonstrate rigour in qualitative analysis. Here themes in the interviews were identified and put into categories (open coding) using constant comparison insight (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Open coding enables the researcher to capture the main sense of what is said by rephrasing using fewer words (Kvale, 1996). This then moved to conceptual

coding reflecting on the language used by interviewees (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) to establish first order concepts. The analysis then moved to axial coding where relationships were sought between the concepts to create second order themes. Finally, these themes were gathered into several overarching aggregate dimensions.

4. Findings

4.1 Changing landscape and a changing practice: Technology impacts skills

The majority of respondents talked about environmental complexity and the importance of transparency but they also highlighted changes in the communication industry. As one said: “greater emphasis that there is [now] on digital campaigning and the role of Twitter and Facebook and all of that in lobbying. I think has changed the way people actually approach public affairs”. Another respondent said:

Public affairs has changed dramatically since I first came into consultancy back in 1989 and that has been mostly as result of technology...access to information was seen as a privilege...now large clients can put their finger on a keyboard and find out by and large what they need to know very quickly themselves...public affairs is now more about information that is difficult to get hold of or ethereal and putting an analysis on it, what does it mean, how will it play out

These changes appear to have led to a much more integrated approach to public affairs and a widening of skills. Overwhelmingly, respondents spoke of the integrated nature of the role and the importance of understanding the wider communication landscape and having the skills necessary to take a more integrated approach “I think digital has changed everything”. Another said: “I don’t think there is anybody in the team that would describe themselves as a parliamentary affairs person anymore”. He continued: “it is about wider communications and that is what we are looking for and we have creativity and digital written into every job description”.

Yet traditional media too is becoming increasingly important. “I think it is difficult to do public affairs without good knowledge of how media works”. Another said: “I do think the industry has become more professional and more integrated. When it was quite stand-alone we just dealt with the politics side, now more integrated discipline linking to press and social media”.

4.2 Connection to the business and stakeholder relations grow but core skills remain

The majority of respondents talked about the broader remit of stakeholder relations in part prompted by the increasingly complex public policy world and the role of digital in amplifying and stimulating debate. “Thought I could put a circle around it. I build relationships with key people – officials, politicians. Not at all. Now it is about business, local government, other communities...about conversations”. Also, respondents talked of the increasing importance placed on linking the business and operational world to the world of politics and policy that now requires much stronger commercial acumen, as well as an understanding of the socio-political world and how different policy discussions will play out commercially in the market, operationally and competitively. “In the early days [PA practitioners] were policy people now they are business people first”. Another respondent argued:

Any business or organisation lives in a world that is run by legislation and regulation and it is very important if you want to be successful...that you need to

ensure that the legislation and regulatory environment doesn't rule you and that you have a role in engaging with the process

As another said:

Key is for public affairs not to get bogged down in the minor issues need to focus on the big things. Understand that their role is to implement the organisational strategy...Must have a strategic look over the longer-term – it is about the business

Or as another pointed out: “it is about the ability to talk and present the case, the one-to-ones, keeping the channels going”. Practitioners are clear about what they do: “Public affairs is a force for good in the sense in that it is a very dangerous place to be in when government takes decision on regulation without consulting the people that are going to be affected by that regulation”, or as another said: “it is about supporting democracy...all sides need to be understood”. Nearly all placed understanding the political system as critical to what they do and part of their unique skill set: “understanding of the political system and policy development and to be involved [in it]”. As another suggested: “it is feeding and understanding what is happening, understanding what the political priorities are then focusing and tying this in to your business and strategic needs”. As one practitioner said: “[you] talk to range of different people and capture the subtleties of communications, you are a jackdaw looking forward and back and acquiring information”. That said, the majority talked about the importance of applied communication skills and not just lobbying skills. The concept of framing also emerged, along with the need for excellent general communication skills. As one said: “[this] encompasses written and verbal communication, getting the message across”. Or as another argued: “[it is] the ability to put ideas down on papers, it's that simple...bringing the ideas to life so that they are understandable”.

Finally, different roles performed by practitioners emerge. As one respondent said: “I have had experience of working in several different fields, different roles depending on which industry you work in”. Another argued: “there are people who specialise in the minutiae of policy...then there are people who do the policy analysis work... then there are those that do regulatory”. Although the researcher agreed not to give specific examples of campaigns due to the confidential nature of public affairs work, activities varied from simple negotiations with minimal profile on issues nobody is interested in to high profile media and digital campaigning on issues such as taxation on alcohol reflecting loud and quiet campaigning. After all, as one individual said: ‘it all depends on the client’.

5. Discussion

Although the word marketing does not appear in the responses of practitioners, the key is that they see their role evolving becoming more integrated into the wider communication function. Here integration is viewed as organisational supporting Porcu Del Barrio-Garcia and Kitchen (2017). Practitioners view themselves as helping to build relationships that have organisational wide value helping to deliver the business strategy in line with Schultz and Shultz (1998) and Shultz and Kitchen (2000). These relationships are not just about message consistency, a key requirement of marketing communications (Porcu, Del Barrio-Garcia & Kitchen,

2017), but also evidences a communication based relationship-marketing model (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). The word stakeholder emerges strongly and this goes beyond a narrowly defined political audience to encompass wider influencers of the stakeholder era that move beyond customers (Niewman, 2005) and requires stakeholder dialogue (Driessen et al., 2013).

Practitioners are clear that they are charged with building relationships with public policy audiences (Boddewyn, 2012; Fleisher, 2002, 2007; Hillman, 2002; Meznar & Nigh, 1995; Paluszek, 1995; Post, 1982; Schuler, 2002; Toth, 2006), but these audiences have expanded over the years. There is a recognition that the role does vary in line with Harrison (2000) and Bauer (2015) and is shaped by a range of factors including the market. In terms of skills, although the focus on social capital and understanding the political system remains, supporting Figuee, Sosselt, Linders and De Jong (2017) and identity scholars (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockman and Kaufmann, 2006), the role is more integrated contributing to delivering business strategy and organisational alignment. The range of communication channels deployed has expanded involving media relations and digital content. These skills are associated more with marketing communications (Kliatchko, 2008; Wang et al, 2009) and in line with promotional intermediary concepts (Davis, 2013). This shift in practice is due to the increasingly complex operating environment and mirrors the views of Noordegraff (2016) that professional work is changing because societal and organisational contexts are changing. It is suggested this is triggering ephemeral identities. Public affairs practitioners are increasingly viewing themselves within a wider organisational context, and with a larger remit of stakeholder (and not just narrow) political relationships. Although there is an understanding of their unique contribution and skills as a signifier to others supporting Van Maanenn and Barley (1984) they are exhibiting identity stretch. Given the variation of their roles (even more apparent in the larger study), it could be argued they show signs of identity multiplicity and cultural hybridity concepts drawn from Abbott, Zheng and Du (2014). This suggests that the field is becoming more multi-dimensional and kaleidoscopic (Baruch, 2004; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2006) in line with identity scholarship.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, Contribution and Recommendations

This paper asks two questions: how do public affairs practitioners view themselves and how does this conceptualisation relate to wider debates about what constitutes IMC. Public affairs practitioners identify clearly with the norms of being a public affairs practitioner but there is a recognition that what this means is evolving and they are adopting broader communication skills. It is argued this aligns them more towards marketing communication. Given the importance practitioners place on the integration of public affairs into the organisation and the impact policy has on competitiveness, recognising IMC within a broader context seems sensible as is linking market and nonmarket stakeholder engagement more fully. The limitations of this study relate to its scope, drawing on UK qualitative data that is subjective reflecting how individuals view their practice. Further studies need to be undertaken to explore integrating nonmarket activity into the overall strategy of the organisation and the mechanisms to do so as argued by Mellahi, Frynas, Sun and Siegel (2016). As part of this, it is suggested further research into understanding the identities of those responsible for delivering market and nonmarket communications within a complex and changing environment can contribute to this process.

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