

Research Practices in Public Relations Organizations in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript draws from extensive research conducted in various public relations firms in the United Arab Emirates, and describes contemporary research practices on which these firms are building. Their inclination is toward incorporation of permanent research in their organizational framework and in-depth analyses regarding how public relations firms evolve and meet clients' future expectations. In-depth analyses were conducted in national, international, small, average, and high-scale public relations firms to determine how research is helping, at various levels, to excel and impress clients. Mixed research methods were used; 350 questionnaires were distributed and 17 face-to-face interviews were conducted over 7 months. Results suggest that the economic, social, and institutional characteristics of public relations firms in the United Arab Emirates are dissimilar to other countries, so extensive research is required to determine the significance of research concerning improving public relations practices in the country.

Keywords: Importance Of Research, Public Relations, Research, Struggles, Two-Step Flow Theory, UAE

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, both academicians and practitioners have paid great attention to and realized the importance of research in the public relations industry. They agree that investment in research is critical to building and communicating a positive image, and to surviving in the competitive industry of public relations. Considering general practices of western public relations firms, it is evident that incorporation of research in public relations practices acts as a competitive advantage for small, medium, and large organization (Ayish, 2005). The public relations industry follows empirical research methods to compete in global markets. It is due

to research that global theory of public relations excellence has surfaced (Rizk, 2004).

Kirat (2005) argues that public relations research has helped formulate principles that apply to diversified cultures. Research allows public relations to grow, and has been critical for the evolution of the industry. The role of public relations would be ineffective in the UAE without significant investments of time, money, and other resources into research (Ayish & Kruckberg, 1999). Research is systemic investigation into established sources to elucidate facts and reach new conclusions. Research helps practitioners adopt a proactive approach to survive in the competitive world of public relations. All organizations—small,

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medium, and large—keep research at the core of communication. English (2005) and Janeen (2011) suggest that firms face great setbacks publicly if they do not spend significant time enquiring about it, highlighting the significance of research for not only public relations firms, but also all firms.

In the past decade, the most important factors for success for public relations firms were strategy and communication. Using a trial-and-error method, many public relations firms in the UAE are realizing that the most important factor to surviving public relations is information gathering and research (Al Khaja, 1985; Relations, 2011). The right strategy and communication cannot be developed for a client unless public relations firms know the facts about the public. This paper highlights the importance of research to public relations practitioners. Research is conducted on two levels. First is research conducted by public relations practitioners to enhance their skill sets, and second is research conducted by academic scholars, whose primary interest is the public relations industry. Research conducted by scholars follows a theoretical framework, and it usually identifies best practices and improves the public relations profession (Rizk, 2005, English, 2005). Research conducted by practitioners has a different scope; it solves a problem related to a profession and industry. Research scholars, marketing research firms, and sometimes public relations agencies (Grunig, 2005) usually implement research initiated by public relations practitioners.

Several types of public relations research are conducted, including industry research, market research, analysis of competition, and tracking of various news and information sources (English, 2005). Each client of a public relations firm, large and small, requires disparate methods and depths of research. Research is important to determine how firms that use research evolve, and how research helps firms know clients better and build a positive image. Some ways research helps public relations know a target market includes choosing the best media and understanding the market. The significance

of research to public relations firms is evident from in-depth analyses. Clients are at the core of all firms (Kirat, 2005); the customer is king, so organizations always need to know their requirements and delight them in the best possible way. Public relations practitioners are in a better position to present their ideas to clients if they know them, and this can be demonstrated through qualitative and quantitative techniques researchers follow while surveying multiple public relations firms in the UAE. Research is the best answer to all questions for public relations practitioners.

The purpose of this paper is to explore and survey a large, UAE public relations office regarding its use of research, awareness, and resources to discover the aims of research in public relations offices. Choosing the UAE as a subject comes from increases in investments in public relations. According to Rizk (2004), the UAE is one of the most multicultural and developed countries worldwide. Thousands of foreigners work and hundreds of new offices are opening in the UAE. Research and studying people and their needs in new markets are important to public relations professionals in the UAE. The goals of this study are to determine how important research is to public relations firms, how much public relations firms spend on research, and how often research is conducted in public relations firms. This study also assesses whether public relations firms are aware of the importance of research, and whether there are staff members dedicated to research. Findings reveal the benefits of research to public relations firms, and drawbacks for those firms not investing in research continuously. Finally, this study examines challenges public relations firms face when incorporating research into their organizational frameworks. The research questions are:

1. How do companies (or clients/organizations) practice public relations research?
2. How does public relations research fit within public relations departments and within organizations?

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