

From Principle to Policy to Practice? Diversity as a Driver of Multicultural, Stakeholder Engagement in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

This study, based on findings from a survey distributed to PRSA members, explores the role diversity plays in public relations practice today and the extent to which an organization's diversity values contribute to ethical stakeholder engagement. A 2005 report issued by the PR Coalition called on public relations to take a leadership role in strengthening the importance of diversity in American life. These findings suggest that practitioners still support that role, but there remains a steep disconnect between the importance of diversity in public relations and what that means in everyday practice. Diversity as a core organizational value—as evidenced through policies and programs—is crucial to organizational success; conveying those values to stakeholders is also an important part of public relations' ethical responsibility. The communication strategies and tactics used to do so, however, are limited and indicate missed opportunities for public relations practice generally.

Keywords: diversity, engagement, ethics, LGBT, stakeholders, values

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the PR coalition—a partnership of 23 organizations representing 50,000 communication professionals—commissioned a report regarding diversity in public relations. To that end, the coalition surveyed 362 communication professionals from corporate, agency, and education-based organizations regarding their perspectives on diversity. They found broad support for promoting better diversity within organizations and argued that organizations must do a better job recruiting, mentoring, and advocating on behalf of a more diverse employee base. The coalition called for a more-sustained focus on diversity initiatives within public relations and communications professions, explaining, “public relations and communications professionals have an

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important role to play in seeing that there is a sustained focus on diversity in American life” (PR Coalition, 2005, pg. 11). Since then, a growing body of public relations research has investigated diversity, including a 2013 special issue of PRSA’s *PR Journal*, which explored current issues of diversity in PR, approaches to diversity management, perceptions of diversity within the workplace, and specific campaigns that have targeted diverse publics.

This study builds on the Coalition’s 2005 report and recent research in three ways. First, while the report provided a benchmark regarding the role diversity should play in public relations, this study explored the specific types of diversity policies and programs implemented by organizations and more closely examined why diversity is important in public relations. Second, while the report briefly references the LGBT community, neither the official definition of diversity developed by the coalition for the purposes of the report, nor the major findings offered in the report, explicitly referenced the LGBT community. This study adds that perspective—building on recent public relations research that has begun examining the LGBT-specific lens—by investigating the extent to which organizations actually have initiated LGBT-specific policies and programs. Finally, this study responds to recent calls to better-examine the role diversity plays in external public relations practice and stakeholder engagement generally. The Coalition’s 2005 report argued for public relations’ leadership role in diversity advocacy, and research increasingly has placed a focus on diversity as an ethical mandate for public relations. This study revisits those calls, to determine the extent to which public relations has responded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public relations research has examined various aspects of diversity. As the following review demonstrates, many researchers have explored the role diversity plays within the public relations function, including the experience of various minorities working in public relations and the importance of diversity training and multicultural awareness. A smaller area of research has investigated the LGBT-specific experience in public relations. Finally, a growing number of scholars have emphasized public relations’ ethical mandate to embed diversity principles in external stakeholder engagement.

Much of the diversity-focused public relations literature has explored the professional profile of public relations itself, including the diversity reflected among public relations practitioners and how that diversity contributes to organizational effectiveness. In an early, foundational study, Kern-Foxworth (1989) explored the role of racial and ethnic minority practitioners, finding that their salaries, even for those in mid-management positions, were not equal to their white counterparts. Subsequent articles argued that public relations firms should better reflect the growing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity seen in the marketplace (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Kotcher, 1995). More recently, scholars have argued that—while public relations has made strides—certain minorities remain underrepresented (e.g. Sims & Sims, 2008; Logan, 2011). Pompper’s research (2004, 2007) of African American and Hispanic female public relations practitioners examined how the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender creates

additional hurdles in terms of self-esteem and workplace effectiveness—reinforcing public relations' responsibility to reflect and positively address ethnic diversity. Consequently, these studies have reinforced the call for public relations to take a lead role in modeling principles of diversity. As Sha (2006) argued, through her focus on racioethnic identity, public relations has a mandate to develop intercultural communication competencies (p. 61). Cultural identity influences behavior, and "By acknowledging and incorporating the importance of cultural identity, intercultural public relations improves the ability of organizations to communicate in a culturally sensitive—and hence, more effective—manner" (p. 61).

Several scholars have emphasized that successfully incorporating principles of diversity into public relations must begin in the academy. Not only must public relations programs realize the benefit of diverse faculty, they also must incorporate a multicultural focus in the classroom. Tindall (2009), for example, researched the experience of Black female public relations faculty members, revealing how the intersection of minority race and gender can create an often-difficult academic road. Tindall argued, "greater understanding of diversity within all aspects of the field are imperative in achieving excellence in public relations education and practice" (p. 1). Tsetsura (2011) added that teaching students multiple dimensions of diversity—beyond only race, ethnicity, age and gender—helps educate future public relations practitioners who are able to craft and execute effective and quality campaigns globally. Similarly, Gallicano and Stansberry (2012), revealed the long-term benefit that a diversity-focused assignment provides in teaching students the importance of multicultural understanding to effective public relations practice.

Although scholars have investigated various dimensions of diversity in public relations, few articles have highlighted the LGBT-specific lens. In one of these important works, however, Tindall and Waters (2012) researched gay men's experiences of being out the public relations workplace. One of their key findings emphasized the importance of having inclusive LGBT policies. In the context of organizational management literature, King, Reilly, and Hebl (2008) added that the longer gay employees wait to disclose their sexuality, the less positive their experience in doing so. They found a positive relationship between an employee's ability to directly, quickly come out to their coworkers and their overall morale. Both studies' findings supported a 2013 report released by the Williams Institute—UCLA's law center dedicated to LGBT research—regarding the state of LGBT-supportive workplace policies, which reviewed 36 research studies that reinforced the positive impact of LGBT-supportive policies on workplace climates and business outcomes (Badgett et al., p. 1). None of the studies, though, focused on communication-specific disciplines; most studies focused on organizational and behavioral psychology, organizational management, and human resources.

Similar to the dearth of research exploring the LGBT experience in PR, few articles have directly addressed *how* public relations practice incorporates diversity into external communication practice and stakeholder engagement. Most research that has done so has focused on the ethical mandate facing practitioners in terms of crisis response and social responsibility campaigns. Oliviera (2013) argued, for example, that a stronger

focus on multi-cultural competence could aid organizations specifically in times of crisis; understanding cultural difference helps organizations more effectively understand and respond to various publics during crises. Similarly, Waymer and Heath (2007) added that crises shift the dominant power structure, even if temporarily. During those times, it is important for organizations to be "reflective, inclusive, and proactive" in responding to marginalized publics, whose "voices are quite likely to surface, albeit easy to overlook" (p. 106).

Research also has highlighted the growing area of social responsibility as an apt area to embed principles of diversity. Uysal's (2013) content analysis of diversity on corporate websites, for example, found support for integrating diversity into public relations practices and argued that research should do a better job investigating diversity in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Uysal's findings reinforced Hou and Reber's (2011) placement of diversity as one of the central criteria for evaluating CSR programs (along with initiatives focused on the environment, community relations, employee relations, human rights, and media). The research also reflected Martinez's (2007) premise that a growing focus on multiculturalism and diversity is helping public relations better contribute to social change on a global level. As Hon and Brunner's (2000) posited, "Diversity as social responsibility provides public relations with its greatest opportunity because no other organizational function is charged with balancing organizations' and public interests in this way" (p. 336).

Beyond research that has explored diversity's role in crisis communication and social responsibility, however, a gap remains regarding the overall guiding role of diversity in public relations, particularly best practices in stakeholder engagement. Research has found that there is a disconnect among practitioners regarding the day-to-day role of diversity in relationship building (Brunner, 2008). As Vardeman-Winter (2011) noted, scant research has explored how public relations processes address race, and how politics of power limit public relations' ability to effectively reach all relevant publics. She argued, "In an increasingly culturally diverse and global communication environment.... Theories and practices should reclaim the nuances of lived experiences and personal identities that impact how individuals select, receive, react to, and process messages" (p. 415). Leichty (2003) added that public relations scholars must examine how dimensions of culture can serve as a central element of public relations practice. A multicultural focus that reflects public debate and discourse—rather than a corporate-centric focus, which risks ignoring minority viewpoints—helps public relations better address its ethical communication mandate. Accordingly, Leichty called on scholars "to determine what kinds of cultural diversity enhance public relations practice," and explore, "what communication practices sustain a needed level of cultural diversity within the discipline" (p. 300). If the public relations function is to serve as an organization's ethical conscience, as scholars have argued (e.g. Bowen, 2007; Moyer, 2011), practitioners therefore must make multicultural engagement an ongoing, proactive part of their broader public relations program. As Hon and Brummer (2000) argued:

The implications for public relations when organizations embrace an integrated diversity strategy may be tremendous... diversity plays a key role in communicating with multicultural audiences, enhancing the organization's image, serving customers, and recruiting the best employees and talent. (p. 335-336).

This article responds to these calls, and investigates the ways in which public relations can drive diverse, multicultural engagement. It builds on the foundational research that has explored the make up of the public relations industry, diversity in the public relations classroom, the importance of multicultural awareness during times of crises, and how diversity can benefit an organization's social responsibility efforts. This project is guided by research, however, that has called for public relations to assume a leadership role in emphasizing diversity as a driver of ethical stakeholder engagement, particularly the PR Coalition's initial 2005 report calling for a more-sustained focus on diversity initiatives within public relations. Ten years after that initial report, this study explores if, how, and the extent to which public relations has responded to the challenge and better-incorporated diversity into ethical practice and stakeholder engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners perceive the role of diversity in their organization?

RQ2: To what extent are LGBT-specific provisions included in organizational diversity policies, programs, and practices?

RQ3: How do public relations practitioners perceive the role of diversity in their external communication initiatives, and to what extent do organizations incorporate messages of diversity into their external communication practices?

METHOD

A national survey distributed to 5,000 Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members provided the data for this research. The goal of the survey was to examine specifically how public relations and communication professionals perceive the role of diversity within their organizations specifically and within the discipline more broadly. The researcher applied to PRSA's research committee for use of their membership list. This application included proof of institutional IRB approval; the survey invitation email and survey instrument; and a project description and justification including the relevance of the research to PRSA's membership. The survey was distributed mid-January in order to miss the holiday season and provide enough time between other PRSA-sponsored surveys. A reminder was emailed approximately two weeks later.

Accessing the survey link and completion of the interview indicated participation consent. Participants were able to discontinue participation at any time. As incentive, interested respondents were able to enter a drawing for one of four \$50 gift cards. In

order to protect confidentiality, those respondents submitted an email to an independent email account created for the project. Though all identifying information, including IP addresses, were removed from individual survey responses, the independent email address was established to assure participants of the steps being taken to protect confidentiality and therefore encourage participation. Finally, respondents were invited to participate in a series of in-depth, follow-up interviews in order to provide a deeper diver regarding the role of diversity in the organization and in organizational communication strategies. The findings from those interviews, however, reflect a second piece to this research. This article focuses specifically on the survey data.

The three-section, 30-question survey was designed to build on the PR Coalition's 2005 survey. The first section explored sentiment regarding the role of diversity policies and programs in the workplace and asked what respondents knew about their own organization's diversity principles and policies. The second set of questions examined how respondents' individual perspectives and organizational knowledge applied to one specific minority group (the LGBT community). The third, and largest, set of questions gauged respondents' perspectives regarding the role of diversity in specific external communication initiatives, and explored the extent to which their organization had included messages of diversity in various external communication practices.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked for personal demographic and workplace profile information. All questions in this section were optional. The goal, however, was to gain a general sense of the respondent age range, race, sex, work experience, workplace type, workplace size, and industry. Because a specific set of questions tested respondents' perspectives regarding the LGBT community specifically, one demographic question also asked respondents if they identified as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), to which willing respondents could answer yes, no, or unsure. The purpose was to determine if LGBT-identifying respondents were over or underrepresented in the sample.

Question type varied based on the different types of information sought (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newbold, 1998). The survey comprised interval questions, multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and one "select all" question. Responses to close-ended questions were coded and evaluated through a basic quantitative analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were coded qualitatively through a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), in order to organize individual responses into descriptive categories and ultimately into the core, overarching themes.

Because this study hopes to build on the PR Coalition's report and provide an updated, but baseline understanding regarding the role of diversity in guiding public relations principles and practices, the data analysis provides simple descriptive statistics in order to reveal the key themes and takeaways. The goal was not to reveal specific correlations between demographics and sentiment. In many cases, analysis relied on specific follow-up questions that were asked to help clarify respondent perspectives. For example, one question asked respondents the degree to which they felt that diversity

should play a role in external communication practices. A separate question asked respondents to select all applicable tactics their organization has used to communicate diversity-driven messages. Similarly, responses to open-ended questions in many cases helped clarify respondent sentiment. For example, one question gauged how important diversity policies and programs are for an organization. Respondents who indicated that policies and programs are somewhat or extremely important then were asked to explain “why.” Accordingly, the open-ended comments provided key context for respondents’ answers.

While this study’s primary goal was to determine the role of diversity in public relations broadly, the survey also investigated the specific example of the LGBT community. This was done for specific reasons. First, only a few studies have explored LGBT-specific diversity in public relations. Second, with recent advances in LGBT equality nationally, and the quick pace with which the community has been able to secure more workplace and societal protections, the time is appropriate to specifically investigate perceptions of LGBT-specific diversity in public relations. This focus on the LGBT community was not meant to negate important perspectives of other specific minority groups and/or markers of diversity. It does provide important insight, however, for a group that has been underexplored in public relations literature. Moreover, it incorporates a new perspective not explicitly teased out in the initial 2005 report.

FINDINGS

The survey was distributed via email on behalf of the researcher to 5,000 members of Public Relations Society of America, which reports approximately 21,000 members in all (PRSA, 2015). The PRSA reported 1,841 “unique opens,” which indicates the number of individuals who actually opened the email with the survey link. In all, 356 members responded to the survey—a 7% response rate based on total email distribution, and a 19% response based on number of unique email opens. This number is comparable to the 362 respondents surveyed in the PR Coalition’s 2005 report. Due to skips and non-required questions, the number of respondents per question varied, though 240 respondents answered all required questions (5% of total, 13% of unique opens).

Respondent and Organization Profile

Demographic and professional questions were optional, but of those respondents who answered, 61% were between the age of 30 and 49 (n=144), 76% were white (n=178), and 76% were female (n=177). In addition, 10% of respondents (n=24) indicated that they identify as LGBT. This percentage is somewhat higher than figures reported by the Williams Institute (Gates, 2011), which estimates that the LGBT community makes up approximately 3.5% of the U.S. population. Because of the focus of the survey, however, the higher representation of LGBT respondents is not altogether surprising.

In terms of their professional profile, 70% of respondents (n=178) have worked at their current organization between one and nine years; 77% (n=182) hold mid-career and management-level positions. More than half of the respondents (55%, n=132) worked in

organizations of fewer than 1000 people. More than half of those respondents (n=72), however, worked in organizations of fewer than 100. Respondents reflected a good balance regarding the type of organizations for which they work, spanning government (n=32), education (n=33), PR/Ad/Consulting (n=53), non-profit (n=54), and corporate (n=56) settings.

Almost two-thirds of respondents (63%, n=194) ranked their organization as somewhat or extremely diverse, though 32% (n=97) ranked their organization as somewhat or extremely lacking diversity; 13 of 304 respondents remained neutral. Supporting their perspective of working in a somewhat or extremely diverse organization, 26% of respondents felt that certain groups underrepresented in their organization (n=73).

Eighty three percent of respondents (n=252) indicated their organization has an official diversity policy, compared to 5% (n=16) who indicated the lack of a policy and 12% (n=36) who were unsure. For those organizations with diversity policies, respondents indicated that the policy covered a wide range of employee diversity, including race (91%, n=230), sex (90%, n=224), disability (90%, 226), national origin (85%, n=215), creed/religion (83%, n=210), and age (83%, n=210). The two lowest-reported categories of the explicit diversity groups surveyed were sexual orientation (71%, n=180) and gender identity (48%, n=120). Respondents also provided several additional ("Other") categories that were not explicitly surveyed, citing policies that included pregnancy, marital family status and history (n=11); military and veteran status (n=7); and characteristics related to general personal appearance such as height and weight (n=3).

The Role of Diversity Generally

Respondents were asked how important a role a diversity policy played in their decision to work at their current organization. The responses were balanced: 35% of respondents (n=81) indicated that the policy was somewhat or extremely important; 35% (n=82) indicated a neutral stance; and 31% (n=72) indicated that it had little-to-no influence on their decision. That said, 85% of respondents (n=232) said that diversity policies and programs are either somewhat or extremely important for organizations. Of those respondents, 188 added specific comments regarding "why" they felt such policies and programs were important. Their comments fell into three general categories. First, most respondents (n=115) argued that diversity makes organizations more competitive. They argued that a focus on diversity builds a stronger workforce able to learn from each other, which leads to more creative, strategic thinking that can help set apart an organization in the marketplace. They also argued that organizations' business and communication practices must reflect the growing diversity within the U.S.; it is crucial to understand the evolving diversity in local communities in order to respond effectively to their needs.

A second, smaller set of comments (n=48) argued that diversity simply should be an organizational value, emphasizing that respect and equality in the workplace is a fundamental value that all organizations should follow, regardless of its impact to the bottom line. The final set of respondents (n=38) argued that diversity policies and

programs are important for practical reasons, primarily related to systemic discrimination still facing many minorities. These respondents emphasized that without these protections many minority groups could fall victims to hiring prejudices.

LGBT-specific Diversity

A specific set of questions surveyed respondents to determine how their sentiment regarding the role of diversity policies and programs generally translated to the LGBT community. Given recent, widespread advances in LGBT protections, the ways in which organizations address LGBT-specific policies and programs are evolving quickly. Moreover, as the literature review demonstrated, there is a lack of public relations research addressing the LGBT community. Respondents were asked how important LGBT policies and programs were to their organization and how well their organization does in initiating LGBT-specific policies and programs. Additional questions then tested respondents' knowledge regarding specific policies and programs that have been used as a legitimate barometer for LGBT-inclusive protections: same-sex health benefits; bereavement benefits; family leave benefits; and workplace LGBT diversity training (Human Rights Campaign, Corporate Equality Index).

Echoing respondents' support for diversity policies and programs generally, 81% of respondents (n=212) felt that LGBT-specific policies are somewhat or extremely important (see Table 1). Similarly, 83% of respondents (n=217) felt that LGBT-specific *programs* are somewhat or extremely important. Only 20% of respondents (n=52) felt that their organization does a below average or poor job in terms of initiating these policies and programs, compared to 32% (n=84) who indicated their organization does an average job, and 48% (n=126) who indicated their organization does an above average or excellent job in executing LGBT-specific policies and programs.

That said, although 80% of respondents (n=210) indicated their organization does an average, above average, or excellent job with LGBT policies and programs, they also indicated little knowledge regarding those policies and programs. For example, when asked how much LGBT diversity training their organization offered, 73% of respondents (n=182) said either "none" (n=139) or were unsure (n=43). Similarly, most respondents were unsure if their organization offered health benefits for same-sex unmarried couples (43%, n=107), bereavement benefits (54%, n=134), or family leave benefits (55%, n=137). Conversely, 28% of respondents indicated some or extensive LGBT diversity training; 33% (n=83) reported full health benefits for same-sex couples; 30% (n=75) reported full bereavement benefits; and 26% (n=64) reported full family leave benefits.

Table 1: Role of LGBT-specific diversity in organizations (n=262 for each question)

Role of LGBT Diversity	Interval	Total Responses	% / Total	
Importance of LGBT policies	Extremely Important	150	57%	81%
	Somewhat Important	62	24%	
	Neutral	40	15%	
	Somewhat Unimportant	7	3%	
	Extremely Unimportant	3	1%	
Importance of LGBT training/programs	Extremely Important	148	56%	83%
	Somewhat Important	69	26%	
	Neutral	35	13%	
	Somewhat Unimportant	8	3%	
	Extremely Unimportant	2	1%	
How well does org do re: LGBT policies and programs?	Excellent	54	21%	80%
	Above Average	72	27%	
	Average	84	32%	
	Below Average	34	13%	
	Poor	18	7%	

Communicating Diversity

Similar to the support most respondents had for organizational diversity policies and programs, 74% of respondents (n=178) argued that it is either somewhat or extremely important to communicate diversity policies and programs externally (see Table 2). Only 9% of respondents (n=22) argued that diversity-focused external communication was either somewhat or extremely unimportant, with the balance remaining neutral (n=42, 17%).

Table 2: Importance of communicating organizational diversity values externally (n=242)

Extremely Important	84	35%	74%
Somewhat Important	94	39%	
Neutral	42	17%	
Somewhat Unimportant	13	5%	
Extremely Unimportant	9	4%	

When asked how their organizations communicated diversity values externally, however, the responses were somewhat limited. Respondents were asked to select all applicable tactics from a list of 11 options (See Table 3) used to communicate organizational diversity values, including “not applicable” as well as an “Other” category in which respondents could specify tactics not listed among the available options. The top two tactics used were employee recruitment materials (n=129, 53%) and organizational websites (n=117, 48%). The third most-selected category was “not

applicable” (n=69, 29%). The least used tactics to communicate organizational diversity policies and programs were establishing business-to-business relationships (n=11, 5%) and launching new products (n=7, 3%). Similarly, few respondents indicated that their organizations communicated diversity-focused messaging via social media (n=35, 14%), “State of Diversity” reports (n=35, 14%), and general “customer-focused materials” (n=33, 14%).

Table 3: Tactics used to communicate diversity, sorted from Most to Least Used (respondents for question, n=242, asked to "select all" that apply)

Tactics (select all)	Response Total	Response %
<i>Employee recruit. materials</i>	129	53%
<i>Organizational Websites</i>	117	48%
<i>Not applicable</i>	69	29%
Media relations	46	19%
"State of Diversity" Reports	35	14%
Social Media	35	14%
Customer-focused materials	33	14%
Campaigns	26	11%
“Other”	19	8%
B2B Pitches	11	5%
Product launches	7	3%

In all, only 40% of respondents (n=96) indicated that they had observed their organization or client make diversity-driven messaging part of any external communication initiative. In order to help isolate certain types of communication initiatives that possibly could incorporate diversity-based messaging, however, respondents also were asked specifically about their organization’s and their clients’ social responsibility programs. Of the 30% of respondents (n=72) who indicated their organization has a social responsibility program, 35 respondents (14% of total responses, n=242) reported that they have worked on organizational social responsibility campaigns that have included diversity-focused messaging.¹ In terms of client work, 58 respondents indicated they had worked on client social responsibility programs, out of which 17 (7% of total responses, n=242) have worked on client programs with diversity-focused messaging.

Finally, respondents were given the option to provide any additional open-ended comments regarding the role of diversity in organizational policies, programs, and communication or business practices. The 66 respondents who provided additional comments reinforced many of the key findings and offered insights regarding diversity’s potential benefit to operational strategy. Two major themes emerged. First, respondents reiterated how diversity policies and programs contribute to an organization’s competitiveness. They emphasized that diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives should be “front and center” in organizational business and communication strategies. Diversity

¹ Even more respondents (n=78, 32%) were unsure whether or not their organization had a social responsibility program, and 38% of respondents (n=92) indicated that their organization does not have a social responsibility program.

needs to be “tied to the bottom line” and take a more central role in overall business models. As one respondent argued,

It's becoming increasingly important to include diversity in business communications and strategy. Those organizations that do not actively participate in diversity programs are perceived as being less successful, inclusive or open with strong reputational repercussions.

Many of these comments emphasized the role that organizational leadership should play in setting this example. This perspective echoed the importance of diversity to organizational competitiveness, but they emphasized that it begins internally with leadership. As one respondent explained,

Ultimately, promoting diversity is a choice that illustrates an organization's view of the world, as described by its leadership. So, whether consciously or not, policies that promoted diversity - or the absence of same - says something to your audience and stakeholder about what the cultural norms of your organization are.

Second, respondents emphasized the need for organizations to have honest discussions regarding the goals for diversity in the organization, and to become transparent regarding how diversity influences (or should influence) that organization's business practice. For example, some respondents argued that organizations should consider defining diversity more broadly, beyond only demographic groups, to include diversity of ideas, experiences, and approaches. Other respondents argued that too much of a focus on diversity, in terms of ensuring certain types of representation, could become discriminatory itself. In terms of transparency, one respondent warned, “Some companies show a diverse workforce in brochures or websites, but that is truly not reflective of their employee population.”

DISCUSSION

The respondent profile reflected a balanced range of organization types and professional experience, and represented organizations that have specific diversity policies covering an array of diverse groups. Most respondents said their organization generally does a solid job with diversity policies and programs, including those specific to the LGBT community, and they felt that their organization employee base reflects a wide range of minority groups. The consistency in survey responses generally reveals three key findings that inform public relations practice and ethical stakeholder engagement.

The first research question explored practitioners' perceptions regarding the role of diversity in their organizations. Respondent comments reinforced the growing body of research that consistently has found the positive influence of diversity on organizational culture and competitiveness. Respondents supported the premise that diversity policies and principles create a stronger workforce, which leads to more creative, strategic

thinking. Open-ended comments suggested that it begins with a diverse employee base, which should reflect increasingly diverse communities and external publics. Respondent comments also supported LGBT-specific research that has highlighted the importance of LGBT representation to organizational success. Most respondents indicated that LGBT-specific policies and programs are somewhat or extremely important.

The second research question moved beyond general sentiment regarding diversity policies and programs, and explored the extent to which organizations implemented LGBT-specific policies and programs. Respondents also indicated that their organizations generally do a good job regarding LGBT diversity and inclusion; 82% of respondents felt their organization does an average, above average, or excellent job regarding LGBT-specific policies and programs. That said, when asked about the existence of specific policies and programs, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated for each question that their organization does not have such a policy or program, or that they were unsure. This second key finding has two possible implications. First, it is important to investigate how respondents determine organizational success regarding diversity and inclusion initiatives. One potential answer is that the more intangible measures related to overall organizational culture—in terms of a general feeling of acceptance for LGBT employees—is a stronger driver of sentiment than specific policies and programs. The second implication is that organizations should do a better job internally in terms of communicating specific policies and programs to all employees. After all, 81% of respondents indicated that LGBT policies were somewhat or extremely important, and 83% indicated that LGBT programs were somewhat or extremely important. Perhaps this level of interest/support suggests that communication professionals are actively seeking more information and training from their organization regarding the LGBT community.

The third research question investigated the role of diversity in external communication practices, and the findings offer perhaps the most intriguing insight regarding diversity in public relations today. Eighty four percent of respondents indicated that diversity policies and programs are somewhat or extremely important. When asked how important it is to communicate these policies and programs externally, 74% replied somewhat or extremely important. When asked “why,” open-ended responses emphasized how diversity contributes to competitiveness, reputation, and marketability, by demonstrating broadly that the organization can speak to the diversity of its key stakeholders (e.g. employees, customers, and businesses partners). That said, 60% of respondents have not worked on an external communication initiative in which diversity has played a role. In fact, when asked to select all tactics used to communicate diversity externally, respondents indicated that not many tactics are used beyond official employee recruitment materials (53%) and organizational websites (48%). “Not Applicable” was the third-highest category, selected by 29% of respondents. No other category was selected by more than 19% of respondents. Given respondents’ comments regarding how diversity begins with a diverse workforce, it makes sense that employee recruitment materials and organizational websites would be used frequently, though it is surprising that still only half of the organizations

represented use those tactics. The findings also indicate that many organization-public touch points, such as social media, campaign and customer-facing material, and business-to-business engagement, are not used.

This third set of findings provides important insight for public relations regarding the importance of communicating an organization's diversity-specific values externally. The findings reinforce the public relations professional's role as an organization's ethical conscience (e.g. Bowen, 2007; Moyer, 2011) and reinforce prior research that has called on public relations to identify how diversity can contribute to relationship building and effective stakeholder management. Organizations not only must reflect the diversity of its stakeholders, they also must communicate those diversity-based principles and practices to stakeholders. Responses indicated that organizations do a solid job in terms of conveying diversity values to current and future employees, but they also indicated that organizations also must determine how to convey these values to potential customers, clients, business partners, and communities. It is important, therefore, to think beyond traditional tactics such as employee recruitment materials and organizational websites. Ethical stakeholder engagement requires communication regarding diversity values via tools such as social media, traditional media, annual reports, and social responsibility campaigns.

Respondents argued that, central to this process, diversity must become part of the business model. The goal is to have diversity integrated throughout a business strategy and organizational culture, and it must be championed and expressed by leadership. Doing so can help shape effective internal and external communication strategies. Accordingly, respondents argued that leaders must have honest conversations, remain transparent about their diversity policies and procedures, direct diversity and inclusion initiatives with the goal of forming a truly multicultural organization, and then communicate those values widely to key stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The challenge, as scholars have noted (Vardeman-Winter, 2011; Leichty, 2003; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Bunner, 2008), is how to connect diversity more concretely to public relations practice and theory. These findings suggest that communicating diversity and conveying a commitment to multiculturalism helps build trust with key stakeholders, indicates an organization's openness to dialog and change, and reinforces its investment in evolving local communities. In this regard, embedding diversity values in communication practices reflects the principles of relationship management (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000), which calls on public relations practice to pursue mutually beneficial relationships built on trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. Embedding an organization's diversity values in communication practices reflects an investment in building long-term, quality relationships.

The findings also support stakeholder management theory. Public relations is charged with first creating and then maintaining and improving stakeholder relationships (Smudde and Cortright, 2011). Organizations must understand a stakeholder's

relationship to that organization, ask why different stakeholders have varying degrees of influence or perceived legitimacy, and ensure all stakeholder voices are being heard (Friedman and Miles, 2002; Mitchell et al., 1997). Implicit in this mandate, supported by respondent comments, is the need to (1) understand the diversity of an organization's internal and external stakeholders, and (2) engage the diversity of those stakeholders, which requires conveying an organization's own diversity values. Diversity-driven communication therefore must move beyond only internal / employee relations. Diversity affects all stakeholders.

An opportunity exists, therefore, to build on the PR Coalition's initial findings and now make diversity an active part of public relations practice through what could be labeled "multicultural stakeholder engagement." The process begins at the top, with an organization's leadership fostering an inclusive, diverse workforce; having honest and transparent conversations regarding diversity-specific organizational values and goals; and proactively conveying policies and programs to internal stakeholders. Multicultural stakeholder engagement simultaneously requires public relations to take the lead role in communicating values of diversity externally, using a wide range of tactics to key stakeholders. Multicultural, indeed ethical, stakeholder engagement demands that organizations not only reflect, but also speak to the diverse culture in which they operate. By bridging the goals of relationship management with the principles of stakeholder management, practitioners can more effectively incorporate diversity in the public relations process, moving it from organizational principle to external practice.

Future research should further investigate best practices for communicating diversity. This study found that many traditional public relations tactics are seldom used to convey diversity-driven messaging. It is important to examine, therefore, which tools beyond recruitment materials and organization websites are most/least effective. In addition, respondents cautioned that often, in an effort to reflect diversity to key stakeholders, organizations misrepresent their own diversity. Research therefore should also explore how organizations can convey their own diversity values ethically and sincerely. Finally, research should investigate these same questions from the stakeholders' perspective. One survey question not presented in the findings asked respondents how often they choose products or services based on what they know about an organization's diversity policies and values. Of those who responded (n=237), 62% indicated that they occasionally, often, or frequently choose products or services based on known diversity values. In other words, close to two-thirds of the respondents have selected a product or service based on what they know about an organization's diversity values. Certainly, this could indicate the potential benefit of better-integrating diversity-specific values into an organization's external communication strategy.

Limitations

There are several limitations with the current study. First, while the response rate was higher than recent PRSA surveys, the low response rate limits the ability to make generalizable claims regarding external validity. Second, future research should determine how to gauge more intangible markers of sentiment regarding diversity. As

seen with the LGBT-specific findings, tangible policies and programs might not be the best predictor of sentiment. Finally, there should be a more thorough discussion regarding the “whys” and “hows” of participant responses. To that end, the follow-up article to this study takes a deeper dive on survey questions, through a series of in-depth interviews with survey respondents.

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