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Relationship Management as a Successful Approach to Public Relations in Public Libraries : A Case Study

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Abstract

In the wake of reacting to the global pandemic, and with the knowledge of another impending wave, the idea of libraries as a "third place" has finally fully been turned on its head. Perhaps library professionals always knew this was a bit of a stretch – libraries are not just buildings and this has surely been proven true as many scrambled to work from home while the majority of leadership fretted about proving the value of that labor to stakeholders. As many return to their buildings, what do promotion, marketing, and public relations look like?

Library professionals are pulled in so many directions, the expectation that they are brand ambassadors and marketers can feel like too much. In some libraries, the staff is restricted from engaging in marketing, and in others, they are expected to do everything on their own. Updated job descriptions should include elements of marketing and public relations and those expanded responsibilities should be compensated accordingly. It is unrealistic to assume that the staff who spend the most time interacting with patrons do not engage in some kind of public relations, so why not make it official? Library professionals need the tools to do this effectively, which is where relationship management theory is especially helpful.

By examining relationship management theory and its five major components: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment, within the context of an actual public library setting, there is persuasive evidence that this is a good model for library public relations. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship that libraries have with their publics and how they can utilize relationship management principles to run successful public relations campaigns and truly understand the needs of their community within a mutually beneficial relationship.

According to the American Library Association – the largest professional organization for librarians – public libraries are in a period of transition when it comes to how to best address the needs of their publics (American Library Association, 2017). As the Internet and open access to resources grow, public libraries are often undervalued and seen as antiquated and irrelevant to the needs of a modern society (Denning, 2015).

Because public libraries receive most of their funding from taxation, their community must understand their value and be actively involved in the library's success. While library use rose slightly between 2011 and 2013 from 58% to 63% for people aged 16 and up (Pew, 2013), voter support for public library funding has declined from 73% to 58% over past 10 years (OCLC, 2018). In a political climate where the President's budget includes elimination of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS, 2019), what can public libraries do to increase their relevance and engage their publics?

One of the biggest hurdles to a library's ability to effectively promote itself is the reluctance to adopt business-like practices. They tend to use transactional marketing tactics rather than a long-term strategy that focuses on promoting the value of the library in the community (Parker, Kaufman-Scarborough, & Parker, 2007). Librarians are trained as information professionals, not public relations experts, and are not always well-versed in the concepts, practices, and execution of public relations campaigns or marketing

approaches (Shontz, Parker, & Parker, 2004). Making the connection between marketing library services through strategic public relations and having a good relationship with the community is a crucial step for libraries hoping to maintain their status as a valuable community resource (Sen, 2006). There is growing evidence to suggest that promotion, marketing, and public relations should be part of the strategic planning process that most libraries carry out each year (Garoufallou, Siatri, Zafeiriou, & Balampanidou, 2013). By incorporating a long-term public relations plan into the strategic plan, they establish credibility within the organization to dedicate resources for this purpose.

In recent years, public relations and marketing of library services and resources has been slowly gaining acceptance with some literature tying principles of librarianship, like problem-solving, to the utilization of business principles (Gupta and Jambhekar, 2002). Some librarians have already recognized the need to address library public relations using a business-like model and they can serve as a trusted resource for others (Caplan, 2011). Additionally, evidence of successful public relations and marketing campaigns encourages a wider acceptance of these practices in libraries (Cowart, 2011). Understanding the challenges libraries face both within their communities and within their profession can help determine best practices for their public relations efforts.

Librarianship is rooted in service and yet, when thinking about public relations and marketing, most will opt for a *transactional* approach – promoting their holdings and services – over a relationship-based model that encourages two-way communication with their patrons (Garoufallou et al., 2013). Libraries and librarians who hope to both attract new patrons and keep their current ones engaged will be more successful with a relationship management approach (Besant & Sharp, 2000). This approach encourages dialogue between an organization and its publics that results in a mutually beneficial relationship. Libraries – much like non-profit organizations (which most libraries are) – will benefit greatly from this public relations style (Wiggill, 2011) because publics are much more engaged with organizations that embrace their input (Wise, 2007).

This case study examines how effectively The Ferguson Library in Stamford, Conn utilizes principles of the relationship management theory of public relations. This library was selected because of the open nature of the administrative staff and their willingness to participate. In 2010, The Ferguson Library's funding was decreased by more than 10% by then mayor Michael Pavia. This led to shorter hours of operation, fewer library employees, and diminished materials (Kayata, 2018). The administration recognized the need for a shift in their approach to their relationship with the community and began a more intentional, two-way dialogue with their publics. The background and results of this shift will be examined through the lens of the relationship management theory and its five components: trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment (Ledingham & Brunig, 1998). The outcome of this study contributes to the growing body of research for public libraries to consult when implementing public relations strategies.

Literature Review

Relationship Management Theory

There are numerous theories related to public relations and marketing of an organization. Based on the typical relationship of a public library and its community, the most applicable for determining best practices for their public relations efforts is relationship management (Besant & Sharp, 2003). Until recently, the field of public relations was dominated by the idea that organizations needed to project an image or corporate "personality" to distinguish themselves in the marketplace (Grunig, 1993). The concept of image versus substance examined by Grunig (1993) is the basis for a major shift in public relations toward a relationship-based model. Grunig (1993) used the term "behavioral relationships" to denote the activity of fostering and maintaining meaningful relationships with an organization's stakeholders. He does not dismiss the need for images or "symbolic relationships," but rather sees them as interdependent.

The idea that organizations should be engaging in "relationship management" with their publics was

further examined by Ledingham and Bruning in their 1998 research study on organization-public perception between a telephone company and their subscribers (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The research helped to solidify the belief that the state of an organization's relationship with its stakeholders can be measured by the dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), as these were the characteristics that participants deemed most important within the organization public relationship (OPR). By defining the relationship "measures" or "dimensions," the study gave validity to including public relations as part of a strategic plan for an organization. An effective strategic plan incorporates meaningful feedback from an organization's publics (Germano & Stretch-Stephenson, 2012), thus illustrating the need to identify public relations as a fundamental business activity.

Further studies, including one conducted by Bruning about the "relationship attitudes" of university students with regard to their institution (Bruning, 2002), continued to point toward the emerging paradigm of public relations as a relationship-based discipline. The 2002 Bruning study underscores one of the main priorities for public relations professionals – retention. This function of public relations is often overlooked, but is crucial to organizations remaining viable and not having to look for new "customers" constantly.

The notion that the organization-public relationship should be "mutually beneficial" became more popular and thus required a shift in research "from measuring communication flows to examining and understanding the variables that influence the building and managing of mutually beneficial organization–public relationships" (Bruning, 2002). In his chapter, *Public Relations Theory II*, Ledingham posits that "Organization-public relationship dimensions define the state, or quality, of an organization-public relationship, which, in turn, acts as a predictor of public behavior" (Ledingham, 2006). This definition helps organizations decide where they should focus their public relations efforts, even though there are few agreed-upon measures for the outcomes of the relationship management approach to public relations

(Wise, 2007). Though one can argue that consistent growth in an organization's customer base is a good indication.

In 2003 Ledingham published his paper putting relationship management forth as not just an area of study but a "general theory of public relations" (Ledingham, 2003). By this time there was enough scholarly research to warrant a theory that explained and outlined the relationship management approach to public relations. The theory is predicated on the five dimensions previously discussed (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), as well as the idea that these interactions must be "known" by key publics. Hence, the more an organization supports a community, the more likely that community is to view the organization favorably (Ledingham, 2003) as long as they have knowledge of the organization's attitudes and activities. Just as in an interpersonal relationship, when an organization-public relationship changes over time it is the responsibility of the organization to consistently monitor the state of relations and remedy any shortfalls (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004). This is entirely dependent on the organization embracing a two-way, symmetrical perspective in their communications with the public - publics must be actively part of the conversation with the respective organizations (Wise, 2007).

While there is not a large amount of literature dedicated to a relationship management approach to public relations for non-profits or public entities, those studies that exist point toward the relationship-based approach as a successful option. For non-profits, there is a clear push for public relations professionals and non-professionals to adopt a relationship management approach (Wiggill, 2011); and with good reason, since these types of organizations – much like libraries – are more involved with their publics than a manufacturer or service-provider. They are more dependent on stakeholder engagement. Libraries straddle the line between a non-profit and a government agency because their funding comes from both tax dollars and private fundraising. With public trust for government agencies and their employees always in question, libraries must address that perception through intentional relationships with their

patrons (Kim, 2005). Indeed, these kinds of organizations can only reach their goals if they work closely with their publics and encourage loyalty - by addressing the needs and desires of stakeholders, organizations can benefit from the symmetrical communication that encourages strong relationships (Wiggill, 2011).

Traditional Public Library Narratives

As outlined at the beginning of this paper, librarians may be resistant to the utilization of business practices, such as public relations, in the promotion of their library resources and services. Further, some in the profession have taken the stance that those very business practices are what has put libraries in the position of justifying their existence in the first place (Koizumi & Widdersheim, 2016). Public librarians are ingrained with the notion that they are part of the social fabric of a community and are providers of knowledge and information and, many times, feel that they should not have to engage in *promotional* activities. In his book, *Barbarians at the gates of the public library : how postmodern consumer capitalism threatens democracy, civil education and the public good,* D'Angelo (2006) paints a bleak picture of how in the "New Economy" era, librarians are nothing more than "customer service" managers and will be eventually eliminated. With that level of disdain for business-like practices being promoted within the profession, a possible explanation as to why librarians may be reluctant to adopt obvious public relations strategies emerges. Perhaps a more practical reason for many public libraries' reluctance to adopt a public relations program, however, is their lack of expertise in this area (Besant & Sharp, 2003).

Though large library systems are able to employ public relations and marketing teams, these promotional activities very often fall onto the library director at most small to medium sized libraries. While many librarians are uncomfortable with the term public relations, they very often feel that marketing is a more appropriate practice (Shontz et al., 2004). Whether they practice public relations or marketing, or both, neither largely depends on whether they have had exposure to these principles, either through their degree program, or some sort of professional development. In Shontz et al.'s

research, a survey found that many librarians actually had an appreciation for marketing and understood the need to promote their library's offerings (2004). Those who responded negatively were those who had little to no exposure to marketing practices "which suggested that negative attitudes about marketing may result from a lack of understanding about, and experience with, marketing techniques" (Shontz et al., 2004).

The way libraries and librarians think of themselves with regard to their patrons is complex. When it comes to the library's *publics*, librarians lean more toward the idea of the *public citizen* charged with understanding the vital role that libraries play in civil society versus the *citizen-consumer*, who is instrumental in determining a library's role in that society (Ingraham, 2015). There is a lot of emphasis on the *library* and less on the *public* aspect of public librarianship. That is not to say that librarians are not fully committed to their communities – indeed, they are. They are especially committed in areas where resources are scarce and their buildings are a safe haven for some patrons (Ingraham, 2015). In addition, the rhetoric surrounding librarianship has become more and more complicated in the digital era.

When you can use a search-engine at a computer station, do you still need a librarian or a library? The answer is yes, but it requires keeping the public informed about what the library can offer and why it is valuable, "Libraries are only vital if the public perceives them as vital" (Stuhlman, 2003).

How a Library's Publics View the Modern Public Library

How the public perceives the modern public library is as important, or more so, than how libraries perceive themselves. While there is no doubt that most people view the library favorably as an institution (Pors, 2008), they may not be active users and may not know what a modern library has to offer. In a survey to determine how library users perceive their local library's services, the respondents generally had a good perception of their experience (Lilley & Usherwood, 2000). However, their

perceptions were based on a number of different factors, none of which included an intentional marketing or public relations campaign. This is problematic when some of the responses included references to financial burdens in the community, e.g., if money were scarce, the library would be on the short list of institutions to defund (Lilley & Usherwood, 2000). Members of the community who do not use the library regularly are just as vital to engage with good public relations as those who do use their services (Oliphant, 2015) since they may be a deciding factor when funding issues arise.

This sentiment is echoed in a survey conducted by Alison Rothwell (1990) of 120 participants, of whom some were regular users and some were not. Those who were not, tended to have a negative image of a librarian, using words like "condescending" and "unfriendly". This harkens to the notion that libraries should be using public relations in their communities to control their image. In Green's article about barriers to public library usage (1994), it becomes clear that perceptions are reality when it comes to how an institution is perceived. By controlling their own message and engaging with their publics, libraries will be better off. "Any strategy must overcome barriers of image and perception to make libraries and librarians 'treasured assets' within an organization or community" (Green, 1994).

The public's perceptions and opinions of the library cannot be easily classified. In a 2005 report by Public Agenda, funded by the Americans for Libraries Council and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, there is much evidence that the public does value its libraries. When comparing other tax-payer funded organizations like the police department or the local public schools, public libraries received higher marks for responsible use of funds and how well their institutions were run (Public Agenda, 2005). This becomes somewhat confusing when looking at the individual case studies included in the report that show library systems in Providence, Rhode Island, Salinas, California, and rural Georgia all in jeopardy of losing some of their public funds (Public Agenda, 2015). This illustrates the need for more

relationship-based public relations for libraries to maintain and increase the public's consistent support.

Evidence of Successful Public Relations Campaigns by Public Libraries

There are various examples of cases where libraries were successful with their public relations campaigns. Very often, these successes are centered around some sort of funding issue or some other initiative that threatens the public library. In Billings, Montana, residents were faced with an interesting dilemma – an anonymous donor gave the town a substantial sum to build a new library, but taxpayers would need to approve the remainder through a bond issue (Roberts & Hoover, 2014). A similar bond had been defeated in prior years, so the librarians knew there would be resistance. Enlisting the assistance of their Foundation board – a group of well-connected community members – the libraries conducted one-hour tours of the library ending with lunch and a short presentation on library happenings (Roberts & Hoover, 2014). Friends groups are vital for libraries to engage with their community (Lowman & Bixby, 2011). These volunteers were passionate about the library and were able to introduce the library and all it has to offer to many members of their community.

In March of 2016, another funding issue for libraries made news when lawmakers in Kansas sought to remove the ability for library officials to levy taxes. When news of this fast- tracked bill reached the Kansas Library Association, they alerted Kansas public librarians who sprang into action (Braum, 2017). The librarians used social media, word of mouth, and any other means at their disposal to engage with library supporters and others in the community to voice their concern. They were successful in removing the harmful language from the bill due to the engagement of their community. In their book, *Winning Elections and Influencing Politicians for Library Funding*, Sweeney & Chrastka (2017) methodically prepare librarians to fight for their own funding. In the book, the authors coach the librarian to "start with some kind of awareness or marketing campaign to talk about why the library is important"

(Sweeney & Chrastka, 2017, p. 9) and go on to illustrate how community engagement is the key to success. While these advocacy campaigns, and others, have been successful, they also make a case for a proactive approach to library public relations. If publics are engaged with libraries in a continuing, mutually beneficial relationship, many of these advocacy issues would never become a crisis in the first place.

What has become evident is that libraries that are successful with their public relations have embraced the needs of their community. In a 2017 series by The Brookings Institution, libraries emerged as an important *third place* for many communities (Cabello & Butler, 2017). A *third place* is defined as a place other that a primary residence or workplace. The article focuses on the role of the library as a vital source of health information – especially for those communities that are vulnerable. This is also illustrated in the case of a West Virginia library director who rents bicycles to her patrons to encourage regular exercise (Miller & Chandra, 2018). The director acknowledges that libraries are "much more than books" and looks for unique ways to engage her community (Miller & Chandra, 2018).

Effective Messages and Methods of Delivery to Publics

When libraries are effectively engaging with their publics, there are numerous messages and delivery methods for those messages. Message content will vary based on community, but having a good idea of your market orientation, helps librarians form messages that resonate with their publics (Sen, 2006). The librarian can use various forms of market research to determine what kinds of messages will be effective in the community surveys, focus groups, etc. Using electronic methods of connecting with patrons is advantageous not only because of the ease of use, but many library users who prefer to use online catalogue or databases (Waller, 2008) do not visit the physical library anymore.

Librarians became avid users of Tumblr when it became a popular social media platform. The format of Tumblr appealed to librarians because it is, in essence, an

unrestricted blogging tool, and because librarians are known to be avid supporters of open source information. As a means of communicating with their publics, this was a good option since the platform allows for comments and two-way communication "The social networking element of the platform is what makes Tumblr an excellent place for community building and connecting" (Anderson, 2015). Tumblr also features an ask button that can be enabled – this is helpful for librarians who are always ready to answer questions (Anderson, 2015).

Facebook is another useful tool for librarians to engage with their patrons. A library's Facebook page can be used like an ancillary website to promote everything from new holdings to library events (Aharony, 2012). A library's Facebook page provides yet another way for librarians to interface with their patrons either by conversations through the comments feature on Facebook posts or through the messaging feature for private messages. Facebook is also a place where patrons can ask questions during non-business hours, although this requires that a librarian or staff member be assigned to monitor the page (Aharony, 2012). An interesting observation by Aharony (2012, p. 366) illustrates that librarians may be underutilizing the communication aspect of Facebook: "Perhaps both academic and public librarians should take into consideration the fact that Facebook provides further channels of communication for libraries and make use of them."

Though social media is the most prevalent type of online engagement that libraries have with their publics, there are other platforms that are used, especially by large library systems. YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest can all promote a library's events and can feature influencers to grab patrons' attention (Xu, 2017). These platforms allow libraries to establish their brand across a wide audience. The nature of social media encourages patrons to get more involved with their library since there are no barriers to entry – as long as you can get online, you can interact. There are many ways to utilize this direct connection to patrons: Boston Library allows patrons to tag, comment on, and share their favorite books (Xu, 2017).

One of the other ways that libraries engage with their publics is through their website. In most cases, a library's website will have a portal to their OPAC (online public access catalog) which contains the library's holdings, both physical and digital. The newest technology links a library's catalog to keywords that are exposed in a data search (Onaifo & Rasmussen, 2013). This is an important advance for libraries to compete with the easy access to information on the Internet since this ease-of-use has contributed to the perception that a librarian's expertise is less necessary (Denning, 2015). By having a library's holdings come up in an ordinary information search, the public will be reminded of the library's inherent value to the community: providing resources to anyone who needs them free of charge and without prejudice.

Method

This case study explores how The Ferguson Library establishes and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship with its publics. Utilizing the relationship management theory of public relations as a lens, this study examines the library's approach as a model for best practices.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review of both relationship management theory and existing research on library public relations, these questions are presented:

RQ1: What strategies and tactics does The Ferguson Library use to engage with its publics?

With numerous ways for organizations to communicate with their publics, this case study investigated the methods that The Ferguson Library utilizes to help direct the data collection.

RQ2: Does the public relations strategy for The Ferguson Library incorporate the dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment and, if so, to what extent?

Because relationship management theory incorporates these five dimensions (Ledingham & Brunig, 1998), finding evidence of them within the communication between the library and its publics will help to validate the importance of them and determine how well the public relations campaign is working.

RQ3: To what extent does The Ferguson Library's publics engage in two-way communication with the library through social media?

A foundational aspect of relationship management theory is the existence of two-way communication between an organization and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). By examining a sample of The Ferguson Library's social media posts, we can illustrate the extent to which the public engages in this communication.

RQ4: How does The Ferguson Library measure outcomes of their public relations program?

An in-depth interview with the President, Director of Public Services, and Director of Development and Communication for The Ferguson Public library, revealed their measures of success and how they build on those to increase community engagement.

Case Study Method

Although case studies have limitations with regard to a definitive result or hypothesis, they can help us to understand a "real-life phenomenon in-depth" (Yin, 2009). While this case study will look at the frequency and incidence of The Ferguson Library's communications with its publics, I am more interested in how their overall strategy results in a mutually beneficial relationship with their community. The case study method provides the possibility to generalize and predict results from a single, representative case (Yin, 2009). There is a lack of existing research on the subject of public relations for public libraries and this case study seeks to provide some insight for further examination. The chief limitation of this study is the lack of direct representation from members of The Ferguson Library's publics. This was mostly due to time and logistical constraints and could be remedied by a subsequent study that incorporates a survey or focus group comprised of community members.

Data Sources

The study examined two of The Ferguson Library's social media accounts: Facebook and Twitter. These accounts have been established for over 10 years and have a heavy volume of entries per week making a sample based solely on a timeframe

prohibitive. Best practices for sampling of media content from periodicals or broadcasts have numerous studies to indicate which method yields the best results (Kim, Jang, Kim & Wan, 2018). It is problematic to sample social media with the same methods due to the lack of traditional constraints inherent in platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Kim et al., 2018). With that in mind, this study will use a purposeful sample that is representative of the majority of content on each of the sites, but also contains information rich content that will illustrate The Ferguson Library's relational approach (Emmel, 2013). I looked for trends in each of the platforms and how they relate to each other.

Next, news articles over the last 10 years that contain references to The Ferguson Library were examined. The articles came from a local publication: *The Stamford Advocate*. Themes that were also uncovered in the social media content analysis were identified along with other themes that emerged while sifting through the data.

Finally, I conducted a group interview with The Ferguson Library's President - Alice Knapp, Director of Public Services - Susan LaPerla, and Director of Development and Communication - Linda Avellar to gain their insight regarding their community relations and approach to public relations. The interview was conducted online and used a semi-structured format with open-ended questions that encouraged elaboration from the participants. The interview was recorded (with their consent) and the results were transcribed to correlate themes and findings with the other data sources.
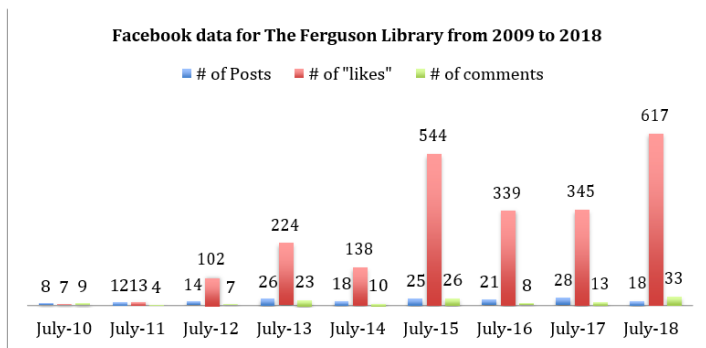
Data Analysis

By using three distinct data sources, known as triangulation, the conclusions drawn will have more credibility as they are demonstrated in more than one source (Rhodes, 2018). Key themes and patterns were identified in the social media samples to relate back to both the news article samples as well as the group interview transcript. Those findings were then related back to the relationship management theory of public relations to analyze the data. Also, findings that were unexpected or do not fit the case study's assumptions were acknowledged.

Results

When looking at the vast amount of material available for study, it was necessary to isolate a small sample of both social media data (Facebook and Twitter), as well as newspaperr articles and mentions. The sample used for examining social media data was determined based on highest interaction correlating to time of year when libraries are most used. This time period was identified as the month of July since school is out and libraries are increasing their events and programming for summer reading (Anstice, 2016). These smaller samples will be examined in-depth for content and themes, but looking at the overall volume of material available provides a measure of the resources that The Ferguson Library dedicates to communication and community outreach.

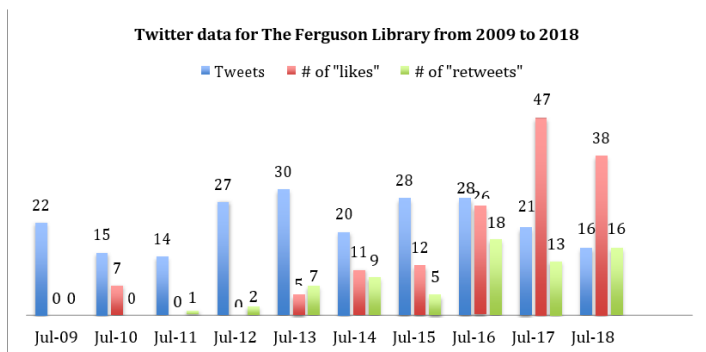Table I shows the volume of Facebook posts in the month of July from the inception of The Ferguson Library's Facebook page on May 15, 2009 to the present. It is important to keep in mind that the increased frequency of posts as well as the increase in interactions can be, at least somewhat, attributed to the increased prevalence of social media use in all public relations programs (Wang, 2015).

Table I:

Facebook data for The Ferguson Library from 2009 to 2018

■ # of Posts   ■ # of "likes"   ■ # of comments

July-10	July-11	July-12	July-13	July-14	July-15	July-16	July-17	July-18
8 7 9	12 13 4	14 102 7	26 224 23	18 138 10	25 544 26	21 339 8	28 345 13	18 617 33

Similarly, an overview of The Ferguson Library's Twitter page for the month of July starting in 2009, shows an upward trend. It is interesting to note that interactions on Twitter are less robust across the board than those on Facebook. This can be due to a number of factors, but most likely can be attributed to the overall purpose of Facebook as a way to connect with others versus Twitter's focus as a trending news source (Forsey, 2019). Table II shows the Twitter data for The Ferguson Library. Because retweeting is more predominant than commenting on Twitter, that variable has been used in lieu of comments for this data set.
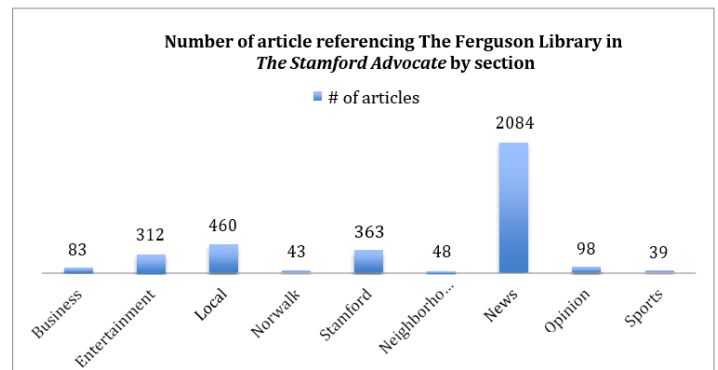
Table II:

Twitter data for The Ferguson Library from 2009 to 2018

■ Tweets   ■ # of "likes"   ■ # of "retweets"

Jul-09	Jul-10	Jul-11	Jul-12	Jul-13	Jul-14	Jul-15	Jul-16	Jul-17	Jul-18
22 0 0	15 7 0	14 0 1	27 0 2	30 5 7	20 11 9	28 12 5	28 26 18	21 47 13	16 38 16

When selecting the data set for newspaper articles and mentions, the amount of material available was extensive. There are two local newspapers in Stamford, Connecticut, that serve the same community as The Ferguson Library. *The Stamford Advocate* is the more prolific of the two and has been published in Stamford since 1829. The statistics in Table III are current as of April 2019 and illustrate the amount of content available for this study. While much of the content is connected to community calendars and weekly community updates, the numbers show that the library is a central institution in the Stamford community. The figures reflect the total number of records that were returned by putting in the search term "Ferguson Library." It is necessary to note that the search contains material that may not be specific to Ferguson, but all libraries that are in this geographical area. For the more in-depth analysis that follows, all material relates directly to The Ferguson Library.

Table III:

Number of article referencing The Ferguson Library in *The Stamford Advocate* by section

■ # of articles

Business	Entertainment	Local	Norwalk	Stamford	Neighborho...	News	Opinion	Sports
83	312	460	43	363	48	2084	98	39

Facebook and Twitter Content

The Ferguson Library's Facebook page was created on May 15, 2009. Although Facebook was created in 2003, 2009 is the year that the like button becomes part of the Facebook experience and the year that Facebook becomes the leading social network in the United States (AP, 2014). Although The Ferguson Library posted on their Facebook page on the day it was created, they did not post again until August 4, 2009, indicating a lack of content, resources, or knowledge about social media. From 2009 to 2019, their social media posts have increased to an average of almost one post per day with steadily increasing community engagement. As of April 2019, The Ferguson Library's Facebook page had 4,003 people who "like" their page and 4,209 people who "follow" them. Divided by the population of Stamford, Connecticut, where the library is located, the percentage

of residents who "follow" them on Facebook is 3.2%. This seems like a small number, however, when looking at the same set of numbers for the New York Public Library – which has a huge marketing and public relations department – the percentage is exactly the same.

The sample being used as indicative of The Ferguson Library's social media efforts is comprised of the posts between July 1 and July 31, 2018. As explained earlier in this section, the month of July is typically the busiest month for a public library. While the number of posts for July 2018 was slightly down from 2017 (from 28 to 18), this was largely due to an air conditioning repair that took a week to complete. Even with the missing week of Facebook posts, there were more "likes," "comments," and "shares" in 2018 versus 2017. Out of the 18 posts for the month, five were directly related to the problems with the air conditioning, seven regarding library programming (i.e. story time), and one "thank you" post to Pitney Bowes for sponsoring the library's Sunday hours. The remaining posts highlighted a staff member (Gus, the maintenance man), showed pictures of the beautiful gardens at a smaller branch, and reminded patrons of the book mobile that was stationed in the nearby park for ease of use. The post that received the most interaction that month was regarding the U.S. Citizenship course that is taught at the library. The class attendees posed for a picture with the caption, "We're proud of these future U.S. citizens who completed the U.S Citizenship Course at the library. Congrats to all!" This post received the most interaction with 109 "likes," seven "shares," and three "comments." All three "comments" were congratulatory, and were all acknowledged by The Ferguson Library with a "like."

When looking at the month of July for The Ferguson Library's Twitter account, 2016 saw the most interaction and was chosen for this reason. There were 28 "tweets" from The Ferguson Library Twitter account from July 1 to July 31, 2016. Of those, nine were informational regarding library hours or updates, six were conversational either responding to a patron or asking a question. The remaining posts were a mix of programming related information such as author

appearances and also updates on a renovation project at the main branch. There were only three total comments from patrons – of those two were asking questions about the use of an image and one was a "thank you" from a local organization that the library had promoted. In all, there was very little back and forth interaction on the page.

Newspaper Articles and Editorial Content

While there is a large amount of collateral material that contains the search term "Ferguson Library" available on *The Stamford Advocate* online, much of this content simply references the library as the location of an event or as a point of reference in the town; for example, "Yes, restaurants open and close more often than anyone would like in Stamford, but the prominent corner at the base of Landmark Square across from Ferguson Library would have been a glaring hole in the landscape," (from an editorial, *The Stamford Advocate,* 2018, July 10). Sifting through the articles, although many are peripheral references to the library, one is impressed with the regularity that the library is mentioned. This in itself, is somewhat of a testament to how much The Ferguson Library is invested in their community.

However, there are articles and editorials related specifically to library functions and their role in the community. The particular articles for this study were chosen by looking at the most recent articles in both the news and opinion sections. It was determined that most of the articles in the other sections were purely informational and did not reflect any value indicators, such as endorsement or disapproval of the library or its programming. Also, in the interest of time and efficiency, five articles from each category were selected.

In the opinion section, five articles dated from 2011 to 2017 were scanned for content. Three of the articles were written by private citizens, one by the mayor, and one by the president of the library. Of the three articles written by citizens, two were adamant about fully funding the library based on its position in the community as a source of information and necessary services. The third article was written as a plea for government fiscal responsibility

and saw the library as both a vital component of the community, but also as a potential drain on limited tax funds. This was an interesting viewpoint as it brings in the notion of whether the library acts as an arm of the government or more of a non-profit organization. In many ways, the community has little knowledge of how the library is funded and only becomes aware when the funds are in jeopardy. In essence, these three articles reinforce the idea that the library is a central part of their community, even if they are looking at the issue from differing perspectives. In the piece written by the mayor, the library is mentioned as one of the organizations that he intends to keep solvent through his tenure – ostensibly, because of the community's wishes. In her piece regarding the broadband gap for libraries and schools, the library president explains how the library is a key to providing equity of internet access to all people in the community.

The five most recent articles about The Ferguson Library in the news section present a clear theme of community. The most recent article explains an impasse between the library and the union that most of the library's workers are part of. The article does not portray the library in a favorable light, however, it does repeat the theme of how central the library is to the community. In the subsequent articles examined, the library is characterized as a safe and welcoming space for all members of the community. Two of the articles, in particular, expound on the idea that the library is an inclusive place where everyone is equal. One article explains that the library has eliminated the gender question from its library card application to remove any stigma for transgendered or gender-neutral individuals. Another article recognizes the library as a place of inclusion for hosting a black history panel and an "open mic" for the community at large.

Group Interview with Library Administrators

The final component to examine in this case study is the group interview that was conducted with the Library President, Alice Knapp; Director of Public Services, Susan LaPerla; and Director of Development and Communications, Linda Avellar. After a general overview of their tenure and duties, questions were directed to the group to elicit information about how they approach public relations with their community. Each of the participants explained their role in the process of working and communicating with their community. They were extremely knowledgeable about the community's demographics and challenges, and acknowledged their role as problem solvers and as providers of a "safe-haven" for patrons.

One of the points made by Linda and Susan was their effort to intentionally brand the library with recognizable marketing collateral. They both felt this was an important distinction from other library organizations, because a cohesive marketing look and feel gives the impression that everyone involved is speaking with one voice and one vision. It portrays a solidarity within the library organization that they hope will transfer to the community.

When asked about how the community influences their decision-making, Alice Knapp explained that their approach involves listening to community wants and needs through various means. They hold community conversations at the library throughout the year to gauge community satisfaction as well as listening to ideas and suggestions. They also partner with other local organizations to bridge gaps in awareness for their community – this can be as simple as tax services or as complex as navigating social services for the families. Another way that The Ferguson Library sets itself up for success in public relations is intentional planning. They incorporate high-level goals into their strategic plan each year and refer to them often throughout the year. Susan LaPerla was adamant about this being a key to success, adding: "We're not an organization that makes the plan and then puts it up on the shelf. We look at it every day."

Lastly, there was a long conversation about tactics for learning about the community's wants and needs. One of the ways they are doing this is by sending out surveys to current library patrons through email. They also ask some key questions when a new patron signs up for a library card so as to know what their interests and concerns are. This gives them direction for their marketing and PR

campaigns. This led to their explanation of how they have integrated story-telling into their fundraising efforts. Their annual appeal increased approximately 30% last year, so they feel that they are making the library's story more relevant to their constituents.

Discussion

The results of this case study give strong evidence that the administration of The Ferguson Library utilizes components of relationship management theory in their approach to community relations. The consistency and frequency of social media posts and responses, as well as their continued appearance in news stories and editorials from the local newspaper illustrate the library's efforts to remain connected to the community through information and dialogue. The interview that was conducted with the management of the library gave context to the social media and newspaper data making it clear that those tactics are intentional and planned carefully by the library.

The first research question asked about the strategies and tactics used by the Ferguson Library to engage with their community. The communication between the library and the community is comprised of many different avenues including social media, email and personal interactions, both in the library and at library-coordinated events off premise. The administrators project a concerted effort to engage with their community as the primary focus of their communications. They indicated that their overarching strategy is to be seen as the center of the community, as problem-solvers, and welcoming to all. In the interview conducted for this study, Susan LaPerla referred to the library's strategic plan as the roadmap for their ongoing strategy. The plan declares the mission of the library this way: "Provide free and equal access to information, ideas, books and technology to educate and enrich the Stamford community." These are the principles that guide the strategy for the library's public relations and provide insight as to why particular tactics are used. For instance, the use of social media to communicate with their community is a frequently used tactic. When looking at the data set, the use of Facebook emerges as the more popular social media platform for

engaging with the community. Most of the Facebook posts that are put out by the library are purely informational - that is, they are not specifically looking for a response or asking for input. This is an area where the library could gain more insight and collect information from their community if they desired.

The second research question looked at the five components of the relationship management theory and whether the library's communications incorporated some or all of them. In looking at their communications as a whole, the answer is yes. When reading through the strategic plan for The Ferguson Library, it is evident that they understand the benefits of involving their publics in decisions regarding library services. They conducted a community-wide survey and also put together community stakeholder interviews to help them shape the library's message. The themes that emerged through the social media and newspaper data can be tied to dimensions of involvement, commitment, and investment. There was strong evidence that the library is committed to the community, is involved in their lives, and invests time and money in programming and events that the community wants. The other two dimensions of the theory – trust and openness – are harder to identify through the existing data. While the interview conducted with the administrators included references to these components as part of their approach, they are harder to measure from a one-sided examination. Without speaking to members of the community directly, it is difficult to determine whether they find the library trustworthy – doing what it has stated it will do -– and open – sharing plans for the future with the community (Ledingham, 2003).

The third research question seeks to determine whether the library's publics engage in two-way communication through social media. In answering this question it is important to define what is meant by two-way communication. If we include all interaction on the social media platforms to include "likes" and "shares," then there is a good deal of evidence that The Ferguson Library's publics are engaged through social media. Alternatively, these interactions are very passive – it is a

low effort interaction to click a "like" button. The small number of comments leads to more questions. Is the community not truly engaged with the library or is it a matter of content? If the library used content that was more interactive, for example, if it asked the community's opinion or ran a contest of some kind, would this elicit more responses? This ties back to the idea that the library informs, rather than interacts with its publics. True relationship building requires more input and incorporation from outside the organization.

The final research question asks The Ferguson Library to identify ways that they measure the success of their public relations efforts. This was answered by the administrators in a group interview setting and was well addressed. Interestingly, even though the questions were directed towards a public relations approach, many of the responses were marketing-focused. This seems to be a common theme among libraries: the fact that they are comfortable marketing their services and programming, but are reluctant to engage in a public relations campaign that encompasses relationship building (Besant & Sharp, 1999). This confusion between marketing and public relations aside, the president of the library made it clear that part of their jobs entail the sustainability of the library and, with that, comes a strong relationship with the community. Successful fundraising was their most important measure of success. This is not surprising given that it is a verifiable result of their efforts and contributes to the ultimate goal of sustainability in the community. This is also where the idea of storytelling becomes more important. By incorporating a more personal, narrative approach to community outreach, the library has been more successful than ever in their fundraising efforts. It would be interesting to investigate the stories being told and whether they reflect specific community values and concerns.

Study Limitations and Future Research

One of the biggest limitations of this case study is the lack of direct input from the community itself. This would be a valuable perspective when measuring the success of the public relations efforts of The Ferguson Library. While a survey or focus group would be somewhat simple to conduct for the researcher, it could cause confusion and possibly problems in the community by raising issues that the library is not prepared to deal with. One of the biggest failures of a public relations campaign is to never act on the captured information of a willing group or their desires. (Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). The other limitation of this study is the singular nature of looking at one public library system. President Alice Knapp mentioned that The Ferguson Library was unique among libraries of their size to have a dedicated staff for public relations and marketing. It would be interesting to look at what methods other similar sized libraries, which do not have a trained public relations professional, use. Future research should encompass a cross-section of libraries that are successful with their outreach. This research is not only useful in the realm of communications study, but for public libraries themselves.

Conclusion

This case study offers contributions to both communication researchers and librarians who want to examine the issue of public relations in a public library through the lens of relationship management theory. A public library has many facets to address in its approach to public relations and many, if not most, librarians do not have the time nor the training to implement a cohesive campaign. This study corroborates the existing literature that relates carefully planned public relations in public libraries to successful fundraising and community engagement. Many of these studies point toward relationship management as a viable approach because of the nature of a library and its community. There is no doubt that the public library is regarded as a community hub, or as Alice Knapp, President of The Ferguson Library stated, "the heart of the community." But does that guarantee a sustainable future? The evidence in this case study as well as the body of literature on relationship management suggests otherwise. To be truly engaged with patrons, libraries should consider an intentional public relations campaign that involves frequent dialogue with their community. Continuing research in this area should address how to engage patrons in more two-way communication as well as how libraries can incorporate

their community's input without disrupting library functions.

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