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The use of technology in relationship management: a public relations perspective

ABSTRACT

Technological innovations have changed many aspects of public relations practice, and public relations is believed to have entered the “fourth wave” of technological change in the field. To achieve its ultimate objective, namely to build and maintain beneficial relationships, thus contributing to achieving organisational goals, it is pivotal to explore the impact of technology on the profession and practice of public relations. Knowledge of the impact of these innovations will equip public relations with the required know-how to contribute to the overall objectives of an integrated communication approach. While technology in itself cannot build or destroy relationships as maintained by Kent & Taylor (1998:324), the way in which technology is used can influence organisation-public relationships, hence emphasising the need for public relations professionals to come to terms with new technology and the opportunities and challenges it holds.

An exploratory study was undertaken to provide new insights into the impact of new communication technology on the profession and practice of public relations in South Africa. The primary purpose of the study was to determine the availability and use of new communication technology by South African public relations professionals for internal and external relationship management. It comprised a theoretical and conceptual analysis of public relations practice and models, dominant business approaches and other concepts related to the objectives of this study. The literature study was supplemented by a pilot study concerning the availability and use of technology by PRISA-accredited public relations practitioners. This article reports on the findings of the empirical section of the study.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is anticipated that globalisation and technology will affect every facet of business in the world marketplace with organisations facing new challenges in terms of social, political and economic conditions. Historically, challenges to the existence of organisations determined the dominant business approaches, and this resulted in mainly mechanistic approaches to business management for many decades. The emergence of different management eras as a result of different management approaches can be viewed as a response by business organisations to the varying challenges they have to face in order to survive (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2001:39).

A combination of technological development, an increase in the mobility of organisations and people in a globalised environment, and growing competition have resulted in the disintegration of the traditionally stable environment within which organisations used to function (D'Aprix, 1994:14). As a result, organisations are faced with the following challenges:

- fundamental shifts in the relationships of corporations with individuals and society are envisaged,
- increasing competition and changes in key elements of market relationships, and
- a fast-increasing need for communication, both inside and outside the organisation.

Organisations are finding that they have to function in an age of chaos as a result of the impact of these factors. As in other management eras, they find that their existence is continually being challenged. In an attempt to adapt to an environment that is changing at an ever-increasing pace, organisations have adopted new management approaches in order to ensure organisational sustainability. The "Information Revolution", also referred to as the "Communication Revolution", forms the basis of a new model of business that has emerged as a result of these changes. This new business model, which has interconnectivity as its ultimate objective, is characterised by an organic view of business (Gouilart & Kelly in Verwey, 1998:4). This points to a paradigm shift by organisations towards a more "humanistic" and "holistic" approach in an attempt to meet the challenges posed by globalisation, increasing competition, and the demands posed by new technology to organisational functioning. This approach is based on acknowledgement of the worker as a valuable resource in the organisation, and the recognition of the importance of interrelationships among components within and outside the organisation.

The increasing interdependency between an organisation, the environment, and the stakeholders has placed renewed emphasis on the vital role of communication for organisational survival. The emergence of new technology has, in particular, proven

valuable because it provides new systems for linking for business, information, knowledge and communications. This has impacted on the communication process through new modes of connectivity, and has influenced consumer decision-making processes. In addition, the information age will in all probability also impact on the way in which goods and services are produced and sold (Graves, Grates & Bicofsky in Bovet, 1995:38). Consequently, all levels of organisational functioning are affected.

Communication in and by the organisation is used to create mutual understanding, and it is directed at maintaining balanced relationships between the organisation and its publics. In this process, management uses public relations in conjunction with other processes to formulate communication strategies, maintain effective two-way communication channels, and determine prevailing attitudes and opinions in an attempt to build beneficial relationships. Internal and external communication activities form part of the public relations function of an organisation. This results in a constant demand for effective communication between the organisation and its publics.

Organisational communication is defined by Andrews and Herschel (1996:1) as a process wherein mutually interdependent human beings create and exchange messages, and interpret and negotiate meanings, while striving to articulate and realize mutually held visions, purposes, and goals. Due to technological advances, organisations presently face the challenge of disseminating large volumes of information at an ever-increasing pace. According to Andrews and Herschel (1996:2), the impact of this age of information is that it has reshaped perceptions of "society" and ideas that are held about management, organisations, communication, education and work itself. The increasing need for information, the desire for effective information management, and challenges and opportunities offered by technology are influencing the structures of organisations, the manner in which people manage, if and how power is shared, and, more specifically, how organisations communicate and are constituted.

By acknowledging the crucial role of communication as a prerequisite for its functioning and survival, the organisation in turn acknowledges the importance of strategic relationship management. Business systems organisations have become more aware of the interrelationship of various components inside and outside the organisation, and the existence of individual relationships between these components and the organisation. These relationships, as pointed out by Lubbe (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:1-2), depend on the nature of the link between the environment (comprising so-called publics, stakeholders or audiences) and the organisation. In this regard, public relations fulfils a vital role by strengthening opinions by means of communication. Ward (in Lindenman, 1998-99:19) maintains that although communication is an important concern of public relations, its ultimate objective is establishing and maintaining beneficial relationships

between the organisation and its publics. The establishment of long-term relationships with strategic publics through public relations is regarded as crucial for achieving organisational goals, and as a prerequisite for valuing public relations as an organisational function (Grunig, 1993:136).

The relationship management perspective maintains that public relations balances the interests of organisations and their publics through the management of these relationships. Ledingham (2003:181) points out that despite a growing body of scholarship focused on the relational approach, a theoretical perspective on this aspect has yet to be articulated and explicated. According to Ledingham (2003:181), relationship management theory specifies how to build symmetry (managing organisational-publics relationships around common interests and shared goals) and when to apply this approach (over time). Ledingham (2003:192) contends that relationship management theory should aim to predict outcomes and identify the conditions under which those outcomes occur. Such a perspective should also accommodate sub-theories that explain part of the relationship management process (theories of the middle range), but may lack the ability to explain the entire process.

Ledingham and Bruning (2000a:63) contend that emergence of relationship management calls into question the essence of what public relations is and does, its function and value within the organisation and the benefits it affords the greater society. Within the new model adopted by business, the establishment of organisation-public relationships has received renewed attention in an 'outward-inward' approach of customer orientation. The increasing recognition of the importance of merging all organisational activities in an integrated fashion has resulted in a paradigm shift by organisations in terms of their approach to internal and external communication. This shift towards a customer orientation¹ has forced organisations to adopt an integrated communication approach, which can contribute to the realignment of all general communication activities, and more specifically result in more coordinated customer-oriented communication. Such an integrated approach encompasses the integration of all communication activities, and it is believed that the goals and objectives of an organisation can best be accomplished through such an approach (Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2000:17). The role of public relations in such an approach is to contribute to the communication objectives at strategic level.

Given the fact that public relations has been a part of organisational life throughout the 21st century (Spicer, 1997:xi), it is assumed that technological advances and the adoption of new business approaches will impact significantly on organisations. In return, it can be accepted that changes in dominant business approaches will impact significantly on the practice of public relations at both a micro and macro levels. Public

relations professionals therefore need to understand how organisations will function in future, and how new technology will impact on organisational functioning and on the field of public relations.

It may reasonably be argued that the advent of modern communication technology should manifest in the communication behavioural patterns of their users. According to Johnson, Fidler and Rogerson (1998), the popular view today is that technological progress will continue to apace and that the rapid diffusion of technologies will have a significant impact on our communication choices and managerial work patterns. In particular there have been enormous changes in the way in which marketing and marketing communication strategies are being implemented. Moncrief and Cravens (1999) contend that technology enables organisations and their marketers to focus more on the customer, regardless of where the customer resides. This impacts at a macro level in terms of improved strategic decision making, and at a micro level in terms of the way in which jobs are performed. Improvements in communication technology have created new media based primarily on the Internet, and has further created new opportunities for database marketing. Marketers are able to seek suppliers and customers from around the world because communication is at a level where virtual relationships can be developed. The development of technology has altered the communication landscape for ever, resulting in a demand of dialogue rather than monologue as a means for achieving real understanding and consensus. For public relations professionals, the interactivity made possible by technology provides companies with the opportunity to aid in crisis communication, product launches, issues management and community relations. In addition, database technology can assist in developing searchable online databases of relevant information, such as user profiles, case studies, product specifications and related information. Given the value of technology for strategic relationship management in the marketing communication field, there is a need to investigate the application possibilities and impact of technology on the profession and practice of public relations in South Africa. This holds especially true now, more than ever before, because as a central communicator, the public relations professional is the company link to every critical business audience.

According to Moss, Warnaby and Thame (1996), the growing acceptance of the importance of public relations in recent years can be attributed, at least in part, to the growing recognition of the need for strategically managed communication interventions that can contribute effectively to the achievement of business and corporate objectives. Utilising public relations strategically entails that public relations should be a key element or input in corporate strategic planning rather than a technical function that is only utilised tactically. In public relations terms, this means that public relations should be operating on a broad strategic level in terms of managing strategically

important issues and relationships. In addition, online communication should hold a cross-functional position because of its relevance for all functions if integrated communication management is to take place.

Given the preceding discussion, the research question that can be posed is whether the emergence of new communication technologies has impacted on South African public relations practice at macro level in terms of the improved strategic management of relationships, and at micro level in terms of the way in which jobs are performed. Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to determine the availability and use of new communication technology by South African public relations professionals for internal and external relationship management.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary research objective of this study is to determine the availability and use of technology for internal and external relationship management in public relations. The following secondary objectives emanate from this primary objective:

- to determine the availability and use of technology in organisations as well as the use thereof by the public relations practitioner;
- to determine familiarity of the public relations professional with the term 'relationship management'²; and
- to provide new insights regarding the impact of technology on the profession and practice of public relations at strategic and technical levels.

¹ For the purposes of this study, the term 'customer' is used to denote the entire spectrum of public relations stakeholders.

² Two terms that are often used and share the same meaning in an integrated marketing approach are 'relationship marketing' and 'relationship management'. These terms are used interchangeably in this article.

In order to achieve the research objectives, the following research postulates were further explored and investigated by means of the questionnaire survey:

1. Public relations practitioners mainly fulfil management roles in organisations or for clients.
2. Public relations practitioners have public relations qualifications.
3. Technology is available in the organisation for use by public relations practitioners.
4. Technology is used in the organisation or for clients by public relations practitioners.
5. Technology applications are used by public relations practitioners.
6. Public relations practitioners are required to use technology to complete their tasks effectively.
7. Public relations practitioners are technologically literate.
8. Technology is used for internal communication by organisations or for clients by public relations practitioners.
9. Technology is used for external communication by organisations or for clients by public relations practitioners.
10. Public relations practitioners are familiar with the term 'relationship management'.
11. Technology for customer contact is available to public relations practitioners for the purpose of relationship building.
12. There is an awareness among public relations practitioners about the importance of being technologically skilled.
13. Public relations practitioners are aware of the implications that technology poses for PR practice.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

A multimedia approach was followed that allowed triangulation to take place. Different data collection methods that combined both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, namely to investigate the role of technology in relationship management, exploratory survey research was deemed appropriate. This method of research offers the advantage of being a relatively inexpensive method that allows for random sampling, and enables the researcher to cover large geographical areas.

Data for this research was collected through a self-administered mail survey comprising qualitative and quantitative questions. It comprised 16 closed-ended questions and provided an opportunity for qualitative input at questions 10 and 16, and at the end of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire set out to investigate the following five broad areas:

Table 1. Areas of investigation

Concepts	Postulates
Demographic Information	1 and 2
Technology Availability	3,4,5,6,7
The use of technology for internal and external communication	8 and 9
Relationship Management	10,11,12
Challenges and Opportunities posed by Technology Developments	13 and 14

A concerted effort was made to include both public relations practitioners employed in organisations and public relations practitioners practising as consultants. Reference was therefore made to “the organisation” and “clients” throughout the questionnaire, where necessary.

3.1 Population

For the purposes of this study, the target population comprised the public relations professionals in South Africa registered with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). The accessible population included a total of 620 Accredited Public Relations Practitioners (APRPs) as well as Chartered Public Relations Practitioners (CPRPs). The reason for including both groups is that, although PRISA makes a clear distinction between these levels of accreditation, both groups are believed to constitute competent practitioners who function at managerial and strategic levels within organisations. The sampling framework was obtained from the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA).

3.2 Sampling

A probability sampling procedure (random selection) was used to select the sample. Systematic sampling of 25% with a selection interval of 4 was used to select a representative sample from both groups. A one-digit random number between 1 and 4 was chosen to start selecting the sampling frame, and thereafter every fourth practitioner was selected at random. The random selection started at number 3 and number 2 for the APRs and CPRPs respectively and every fourth practitioner thereafter was included

in the sample. However, given the low response rate, i.e. 25.8%, and the fact that on the basis of self-selection, each selected practitioner decided for him/herself whether to respond or not, this sample cannot be considered to be representative of the population. The size of the sample totalled 155 respondents, representing a response rate of 25,8%. Although the low response rate means that results cannot be generalised, it is believed that the data provides valuable information given the exploratory nature of the research.

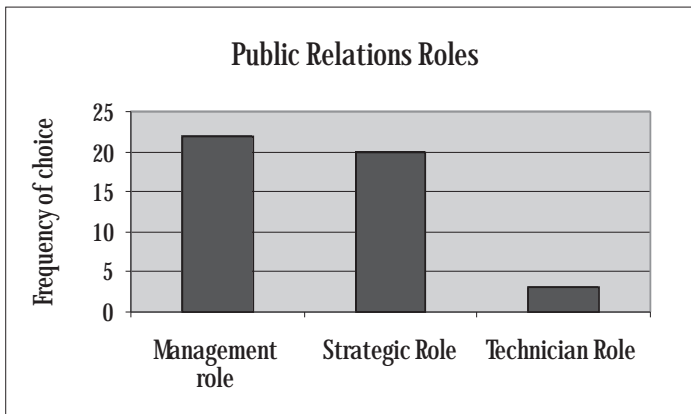
It is possible that time constraints, as an external variable, limited the response rate. The limited time allowed for the respondents to complete and return the surveys may have contributed to a low response rate. Another factor that is believed to have influenced the sample size and the response rate is that email could not be utilised as a data collection method due to the unavailability of email addresses of the population as a result of confidentiality. It is surmised that the use of email for the collection of data would have resulted in a higher response rate. This assumption is supported by the results of the data collected in this survey, which point to the availability of, and access to, email of the sample population, as well as the extent to which this facility is currently being used by the respondents (see Tables 3 and 4).

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Demographic information
The aim was to explore the demographic characteristics of the respondents, namely:
- the role of the practitioner in the organisation,
- the type of industry of employment, and
- the highest academic qualification.

From the results, it was evident that the respondents experienced difficulty in indicating their roles in the organisation or for clients for whom they acted as consultants. The responses to this question point clearly to a lack of clarity in terms of role description among 12,5% of the respondents, who maintained that they fulfilled either two or all of the roles. The factors contributing to this situation are believed to have been a lack of clarity among the respondents themselves in terms of their roles, and a possible lack of clarity in the question formulation. Consideration should have been given to the fact that the respondents possibly fulfil more than one role in the execution of their tasks, and would therefore find it difficult to discern their main role. The following histogram portrays the frequency of choice exercised by the respondents as deduced from the responses. Based on Figure 1, it is evident that the results support *Postulate 1*, namely that the respondents mainly fulfil management roles in the organisation or for clients.

Figure 1. The public relations roles most frequently chosen



The respondents' biographical information in terms of representation in the different industries and the qualifications of the respondents are depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Figure 2. Representation in the industry

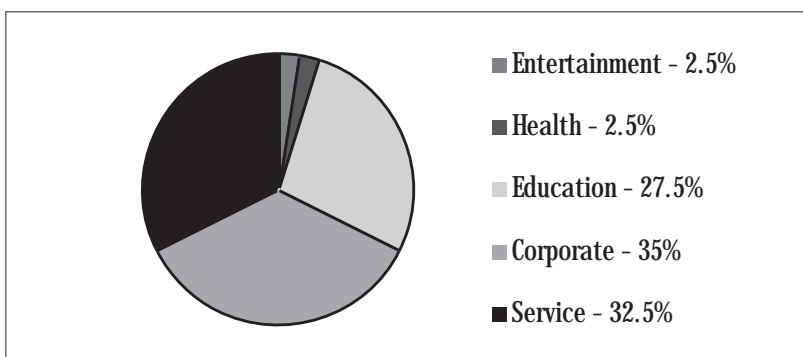


Figure 3. Qualifications of the respondents

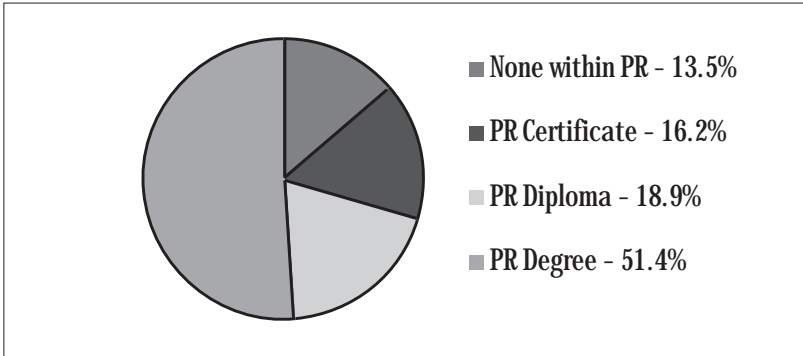


Figure 3 indicates that, as postulated (*postulate 2*), public relations practitioners have public relations qualifications.

The abovementioned results (Figures 1, 2 and 3) imply that the group of respondents consists mainly of public relations practitioners employed in a corporate (35%), education (27,5%) and service (32,5%) environment, who mainly fulfil management and strategic roles, and are in possession of a public relations qualification. The respondents described their role as mainly managerial, namely *to act as communicator facilitator, and assisting in problem-solving and budgeting through the development of a corporate communication strategy and communication planning*.

- *Technology availability*

Postulates 3, 4, 5 and 6 were explored in questions 4 to 7. These questions comprised a variety of multiple, dichotomous, and Likert-scale questions with the focus on the availability of various types of technology in the organisation such as Web design, page layout, PowerPoint, word processing, and communications applications. It was also deemed necessary to determine the use of these types of technology by the respondents, and to obtain an indication of the respondents' technological literacy.

Table 2 portrays the use of the above-mentioned technology in the organisation. It can be deduced that all applications are readily available and significantly used in the organisation or by clients as postulated (*postulates 3 and 4*). This is evident from the high response rate (100%) and the fact that the respondents indicated clearly that the use of these applications varies from 72,5% to 100%.

Table 2. The availability and use of technology in organisations

<i>Technology applications</i>	<i>Not used</i>		<i>Used</i>		<i>Total response</i>
	n=	f	n=	f	
Web design	11	27.5%	29	72.5%	40
Page layout	8	20.0%	32	80.0%	40
PowerPoint	3	7.5%	37	92.5%	40
Word processing	-	-	40	100%	40
Communications applications	-	-	40	100%	40

Table 3 indicates the extent to which applications are used by the public relations practitioner.

Table 3. The use of technology applications by the practitioner

	<i>Do not use</i>		<i>Use infrequently</i>		<i>Use frequently</i>		<i>Use extensively</i>		<i>Total response</i>
	n=	f	n=	f	n=	f	n=	f	
Web design	13	36.1%	9	25%	7	19.4%	7	19.4%	36
Page layout	10	25.6%	8	20.5%	8	20.5%	13	33.3%	39
PowerPoint	5	12.8%	10	25.6%	13	33.3%	11	28.2%	39
Word processing	1	2.5%	-	-	2	5%	37	92.5%	40
Communication applications	-	-	-	-	1	2.5%	39	97.5%	40

The respondents were asked to indicate the types of technology required to complete their tasks effectively. Based on the responses, the importance of word processing (92,5%), communications applications (97,5%) such as faxes, email, etc. (95%), PowerPoint (69.2%), and page layout (55.3%) is evident. These results support *postulate 5*, namely that technology applications are used by public relations practitioners. Except for Web design, the respondents indicated that the other applications were used either frequently or extensively.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that, as postulated (*postulate 6*), public relations practitioners are required to use technology to complete their tasks effectively. Web design is, however, the least used in organisations with only 40% of the respondents being required to use Web design to complete their tasks effectively.

In response to question 7, the majority (85%) of the respondents rated themselves as either average (40%) or good (45%) in terms of technological literacy, thus supporting *postulate 7* that public relations practitioners are technology literate.

- *The use of technology for internal and external communication*

Question 8 addressed the types of technology used by the organisation for internal and external communication. The accompanying table clearly shows the low response rate to most of these aspects. A 100% response rate was, however, received to the question pertaining to the use of email for internal and external communication.

Table 4. The use of technology for internal and external communication

<i>Technology</i>	<i>Total response</i>	<i>Internal use as a percentage of respondents</i>		<i>External use as a percentage of respondents</i>		<i>Response as a percentage of the total sample</i>
	<i>n=</i>	<i>n=</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>n=</i>	<i>f</i>	
Computer conferencing	19	13	68.4%	6	31.6	47.5%
Email	40	35	87.5%	5	12.5%	100%
Telephony	23	19	82.6%	4	17.4%	57.5%
Web pages	33	29	87.9%	4	12.1%	82.5%
E-commerce	18	9	50%	9	50%	45%
Call centres	19	12	63.2%	7	36.8%	47.5%
Proxies	12	9	75%	3	25%	30%
None of the above	-	-	-	-	-	-

Based on Table 4 and the high response rate in terms of email application, it is evident that email is readily available and used by organisations. It is evident that these types of technology (computer conferencing, email, telephony, web pages, e-commerce, call

centres and proxies) are used for internal communication purposes, with the exception of e-commerce, which was regarded by the respondents as being equally suitable for internal and external communication. The use of e-commerce inwardly and outwardly supports Szuprowicz's view (1998:34) on the strategic delivery role of the Internet, Intranet and Extranet and their facilitation of e-commerce. It is evident that e-commerce is not only restricted to the external exchange of information, products and services, but is a type of e-commerce that also facilitates internal procurement (Intranet based). It can therefore be deduced that technology is mainly applied inwardly, which implies that the organisation at present still relies on or uses traditional marketing communication methods for outward communication by means of marketing and/or other departments in the organisation. Based on the results, it is evident that technology is used for internal communication (*postulate 8*), but not used significantly for external communication as postulated (*postulate 9*).

The results show that Web pages, although mainly used for internal communication (87,9%), do not form part of the duties/responsibilities of the public relations practitioner. It was clearly indicated that practitioners were not required by either the organisation or their clients to use Web pages for the effective completion of their tasks (Table 3). However, it was clearly indicated that Web pages are mainly used for internal communication as well as relationship building and management. This gives rise to the question of where the responsibility for Web page usage for communication purposes is seated, in particular with regard to relationship building and management in an integrated communication approach.

- *Relationship management*

Questions 9 – 13 specifically addressed the issue of relationship management. The respondents were required to indicate the most appropriate description of relationship management, to indicate the involvement of their organisation or clients in relationship management, and to identify the types of technology that are available and used to track and connect consumers for the purpose of building and managing relationships.

A total of 89,5% of the respondents were familiar with the term "relationship management" as postulated (*postulate 10*). Five per cent of the respondents chose not to respond to this question. Relationship management was defined by the majority of the respondents (80%), as *the building (initiation, development and maintenance) of strategic relationships with the most important stakeholders of the organisation*. A total of 77% of the respondents claimed that their organisations or clients were involved in relationship management. Although the majority indicated a familiarity with the term "relationship management" (89,5%), 12,5% opted not to choose a definition. Contrary to the responses to these questions, it can be concluded that although the majority of the respondents indicated that they were familiar with this term or concept,

it is evident that the respondents did not in fact know what is meant by “relationship management”.

The availability of different types of technology to track and connect consumers for the purpose of relationship building and management was investigated. Three main types of technology were emphasised, including:

- *database technology* (customer transaction databases, prospect databases),
- *interactive technology* (web sites, call centres, interaction centres, multimedia, etc.), and
- *mass customisation technology* (design of market offerings and visual displays of products, services, etc. on web sites).

A total of 87,5% of the sample responded to the questions on the availability of technology for relationship building and management (Figure 4). Hence, it is clear that as postulated (*postulate 11*), technology is available to public relations practitioners for relationship building.

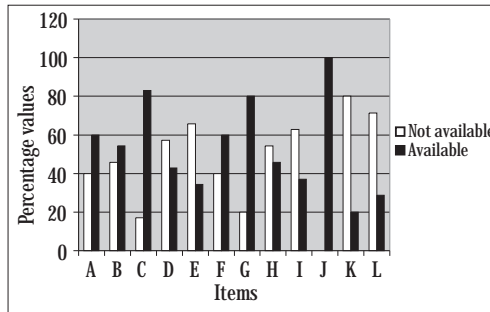


Figure 4. Technology availability

Key:

Y-axis: The availability of technology as percentage values

- | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| Item A: | Customer transaction databases | H: | Extranet |
| B: | Prospect databases | I: | E-commerce |
| C: | Web sites | J: | Email |
| D: | Call Centres | K: | Point-of-purchase automation |
| E: | Interaction Centres | L: | Mass customisation technology |
| F: | Multimedia | | |
| G: | Intranet | | |

Question 13 set out to investigate the use of these technologies for relationship building and management by the public relations practitioner. A total of 85% responses were received and are depicted in Figure 5.

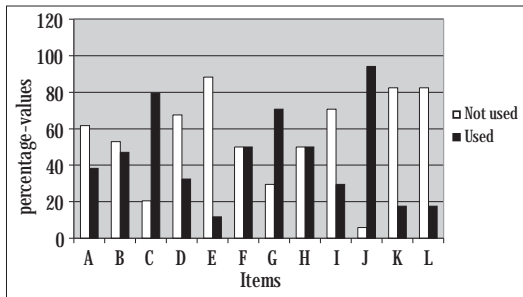


Figure 5. The use of technology by the respondents for relationship building and management

Key:

Y-axis: The use of technology expressed as percentage values

Item A: Customer transaction databases

H: Extranet

B: Prospect databases

I: E-commerce

C: Web sites

J: Email

D: Call Centres

K: Point-of purchase automation

E: Interaction Centres

L: Mass customisation technology

F: Multimedia

G: Intranet

Considering the importance of strategic relationships for the holistic functioning of the organisation and the value of database technology in building and managing these relationships, the conservative use of database technology should raise serious concerns.

Based on the assumption by Zineldin (2000:1) that relationship marketing is not an effective strategy without the effective use of technology, these results may in fact indicate that relationships are not built and managed effectively. It may be concluded that the forging of strategic relationships is thus not regarded as important for the holistic functioning of the organisation. Figure 4 and Figure 5 should be read in conjunction. It is evident that, except for point-of-purchase automation, all other types of technology are readily available (with a 20% and above percentage value) to track and connect consumers for the purpose of relationship building. However, when compared to Figure 5 (the application of these technologies for relationship building), it is evident that only prospect databases, web sites, multimedia, intranet, extranet and email are currently used for relationship building and management (with a 40% and above percentage value). Although the necessary technology for the purpose of relationship building is available in the organisation, *postulate 12* cannot be accepted as it is evident that these technologies are not being applied adequately and therefore not used for to build relationships.

- *Challenges and opportunities posed by technology developments*

Questions 14-16 attempted to determine the level of awareness of the importance of being technologically skilled and the growing realisation, or not, of the importance of being skilled in five years. Likert-scale questions were used, ranging from '1-not at all' to '4-to a very large extent'. The majority of respondents (64,1%) to a very large extent regard it as important to be technologically skilled and, compared to this, indicated a growing realisation among practitioners in terms of the necessity of being skilled in five years' time.

The respondents were required in Question 16 to indicate the extent to which certain aspects relating to technology developments pose challenges and opportunities to the public relations practitioner. The most important aspect is the proportion of respondents agreeing and disagreeing with the aspects as provided. This shows an overwhelmingly positive response to the extent to which technology developments pose challenges and opportunities to the public relations practitioner, indicating an existing awareness among the respondents in this regard. This supports *postulate 13* and *postulate 14*.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

This survey intended to determine the availability and use of technology by South African public relations professionals for internal and external communication, as well the use of technology for relationship management. The overwhelmingly positive agreement among professionals with regard to the perceived challenges and opportunities that new communication technology poses to public relations professionals is considered to be indicative of the level of awareness among public relations professionals in South Africa regarding the value and importance of new communication technology at both micro and macro levels of public relations practice.

However, the limited use of technology by the respondents, particularly for external communication, strongly indicates a tendency by business organizations to exclude public relations in outward communication activities. This can be regarded as detrimental to an integrated communication approach because online communication should hold a cross-functional position, given the relevance for all functions, if integrated communication management is to take place.

Although the results indicate that appropriate communication technology and database technology are at the disposal of the organisation, it can be concluded that limited use is made thereof by the organisation. The possibility therefore exists that organisations are not technology ready and consequently not actively involved in utilising new communication technology in strategically managing one-to-one relationships. It can

also be argued that new communication technology is not widely utilised in relationship management by South African public relations professionals because Africa can be regarded as the world's least computerised continent (Jensen, 2002). Jensen (2002) approximates that only 1 in 160 individuals in Africa use the Internet compared to 1 in every 2 in European and North American countries. Yet it is estimated that South Africa accounts for 1,5 to 2 million of the estimated 5 to 8 million Internet users in Africa. While most of the respondents indicated that they fulfilled predominantly managerial roles, it would appear as if new communication technology is mostly utilised at the tactical level if it is utilised, and not at the strategic level. From this finding, it can be deduced that new communication technologies have not yet impacted at the macro level of public relations practice in South Africa.

7. CLOSING REMARKS

The communication era requires an interactive approach to communication in order to establish and maintain beneficial relationships through dialogic, interactive communication. If interactivity allows marketing to become conversation, as maintained by Deighton (1996:151), it can be accepted that within an integrated communication approach, it could hold the same benefit for public relations. However, of concern is the apparent reluctance of organisations to acknowledge the value of public relations in an integrated approach for external communication activities in particular. With the appropriate technology at hand, it is vitally important that the organisation should optimise the competitive advantage of delivering consistent messages.

The purpose of this article is to provide new insight into the role and impact of technology on the practice and profession of public relations in South Africa. Nothing has changed more than the way in which we communicate; hence, the value of interactive media and business applications of technology for strategic relationship management should be acknowledged. South African public relations professionals should recognise the true potential of new modes of connectivity and understand the important role they can play in ushering South African business into the Age of Communication.

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