Comparing the roles of PR practitioners in the public and private sectors in the UAE

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The nature, importance, and role of the public relations department have been debated since the concept was born. The official definition of PR given by the Middle East Association of Public Relations is that PR is a sustained and a planned effort undertaken by serious practitioners to maintain mutual understanding and good will between an organization and its external and internal publics (MEPRA, 2011). MEPRA (2013) indicated that PR is “the importance of letting clients know the whole truth—good, bad, and unvarnished” (p. 1) Still the definition in the Arab world, particularly in the UAE, is facing a problem because people “think it is all about issuing a press release” (Astbury, 2013, p. 1) and they are mixed up between PR and advertising. They think they are the same. Public as well as private firms have different perspectives regarding the existence and implementation of the public relations concept at their firms (Abbas, 2001). For some organizations, PR can either make them or break them – its existence is critical (Al Hashimi, 2002). On the other hand, some organizations do not consider it important at all, so for them this department is virtually non-existent (Anker, 1997). But with the advent of technologies that have moved more and more people from the brick to click model (Branson, 2012; Haan, 2004), firms have now started to take public relations seriously (Dominick, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

The main issues that need to be revisited with the advent of technology are: the main function of PR, the level of its awareness in private and public firms, the characteristics of an effective PR practitioner, the academic qualifications required for this field, which practices are most effective by PR practitioners in UAE-based public and private firms, and the major challenges faced with contemporary PR. This research addresses these questions.

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Theoretical Framework

According to Butterfly & Pires (1999), in today’s technological revolution, PR practices can be found everywhere, and especially in the private sector. The private sector has always valued its publics (Botan, Carl & Vincent, 2006), but today even more so as companies follow a proactive approach (Yang, 2002). In addition to making relationships with publics in the physical world more personal, PR has now started to develop and maintain relationships via websites and the Internet as well (Ayish, 2005). The Internet is helping customer service become more responsive and effective. Rather than isolating PR, the technology is helping practitioners get more connected with publics (Astbury, 2013). For example, most of the PR practitioners use social media like Facebook and Twitter to update their customers about their activities. According to Cameron (2002), there are few PR professionals who are competent enough apply Internet-based technology in the public sector. Technology-related tools remain the forte of private sector PR practitioners.

Lewton (2001) pointed out that in the past the role of PR was restricted mainly to corresponding with mass media, but this is not the case now. These days PR departments need to deal with external and internal stakeholders, which broadly include the various publics, consumers and clients of a company (Oksiutycz, 2001). Public relations must cover the whole marketing mosaic. PR must face new challenges and anticipate upcoming challenges, like workforce diversity issues that it needs to meet in the future (Knights, 2012). Change manipulation and crisis management are two other major challenges that PR professionals have to address, whether in the public or the private sector (Pate, 2009).

As the world becomes more materialistic (Loat, 2001), customers have lost trust in organizations they had in the past. In order to be effective, public and private sector PR practitioners need to bridge the trust gap (Grunig, 1992) by better serving publics (Knights, 2012), listening to their problems, and recognizing that their issues need solutions and resolutions. In this new era it is expected that public relation officers use all devices, tools and resources to fulfil their assigned roles. Goran Sjoberg (2002), a well-known Swedish PR expert, is of the point of view that the PR profession has been evolving significantly during the last four decades, and still is (Guth, & Marsh, 2000). The characteristics that one can find in effective PR practitioners today are that they are competent, knowledgeable, experienced, scientific, and academically qualified (Mumford, 2012; Yubol, 2011).

This study aims to compare the differences between the practices of public sector and private sector PR practitioners, the characteristics they possess, and the challenges they face. The study also explores the future of PR practitioners the public and private sector specifically in the UAE.

The UAE is a collection of emirates occupying a total area of 82,880 square kilometers. It has a population of approximately 9.4 million, one of the fastest growing countries in the world. The national language is Arabic, and the national religion is Islam (Word Population Review, 2014). Nationals comprise only 13% of the population, while the non-nationals are 87%, with females accounting for 49.3% and males 50.7% (Interact, 2012). The largest group of non-UAE
nationals is South Asian (58%), followed by other Asians (17%) and Western expatriates (8.5%). There is an increasing presence of Europeans, particularly in cities like Dubai the UAE’s largest city with a population of 1.78 million (World Population Review, 2014).

Some of the main industries in the UAE are aluminum, cement, oil and gas, fertilizers, construction, tourism, and food processing. An important resource is natural gas and oil, mostly concentrated in Dubai, a major city. GDP per capita is Dh139,000 ($37,875), and the illiteracy rate is 9%. There are 1.26 million fixed lines and 4.9 million mobile line subscribers. There are 42 TV stations, 26 radio stations, 9 newspapers and over 60 magazines (Interact, 2012).

**Method**

Qualitative research techniques were used to gain insights into the research problem. A qualitative questionnaire, which included open-ended questions, and in-depth, face-to-face interviews with the target respondents were conducted to explore differences in the practice of public sector and private sector public relations practitioners in organizations of the UAE. A secondary data and literature review was conducted to refine the research question.

Out of all the organizations working in the public and private sectors in UAE, 30 public sector firms and 30 private sector firms were selected using convenience sampling. Thus the total sample size was 60 firms from the UAE. Because the UAE is a small country where very few people work in PR organizations, the qualitative questionnaire and in-depth interview sample size was small, as PR employees are hard to locate and get responses from.

Multiple response methods were adopted, but the most prevalent ones through which the target respondents recorded their feedback were electronic mail, telephone, and in-depth face to face interactive interviews. Data were recorded and analyzed in the form of themes is presented in the form of a comparison between public and private sector public relations practitioners.

**Data Collection**

Out of the 60 qualitative questionnaires that were distributed in 15 different workplaces among the target respondents, 21 were returned from the private sector, while 23 out of 30 were returned from the public sector, both sets from 21 different workplaces.

The sample companies selected from the private sector includes Al Fardan Exchange in Abu Dhabi; Al Futtaim Motors; Etisalat (UAE Telecommunication Company); Umm Al Quwain Bank (Ajman Branch); Dubai Islamic Bank; DAMAN, health insurance companies; National Bank of Abu Dhabi; HSBC bank: InvestBank; Two Four 54; ADIB; Al Khaleej Bank; Saderat, a private school; and Iran Bank in Al Ain. The age of the target respondents in the sample size was between 25-50, 12 females and 9 males. In terms of education, nine had a bachelor’s degree, six had diplomas, and six were high school graduates.

The sample companies selected from the public sector include: Abu Dhabi Education Council; Municipalities, Schools, Courts, Municipality and Planning Department of Ajman; Depart-
ment of Economic Development; Abu Dhabi Food Control Authority; Al Ain Distribution Company; Bayanat-Abu Dhabi; Abu Dhabi Police; Judicial Department; and Ministry of the Economy and Agriculture Sector. The age of the target respondents in the sample size is between 20 to 53. The sample included 12 females and 11 males. Regarding education, 17 had a bachelor’s degree, 5 had diplomas, and 3 a high school education. Each employee was selected on the basis of the convenience of the researcher and the criteria defined for the respondent. The qualitative questionnaire was specifically designed for PR practitioners, so their expertise level in the concerned field was major criterion. The design took into account diversified nationalities, backgrounds, gender and age of practitioners to get diversified opinions. The reasons for choosing the places in both sectors were: both have branches in most of the UAE Emirates and, according to what the respondents said, they are connected and practiced the same roles. Another reason for choosing different field PR practices in education, telecommunication, banking and health insurance is to compare the variety roles of PR practitioners in the UAE.

Significance of the Study

This article addresses a gap identified in previously studies in the UAE that failed to measure the awareness of PR within many organizations. The style of PR practices in the private and public sector has not been adequately compared. The benefits, drawbacks and the challenges that managers face in each sector have not been well discussed. This study will help in the development and growth of the PR sector in the UAE. Moreover, it will help to formally design PR departments and shift more easily from a brick to a click model in the public and private sectors. Income, cosmopolitan society with experienced professionals all over the world and a great foreign direct investment call for effective PR strategies (Creedon, Al Khaja & Kruckeberg, 1995).

According to Astbury (2013) hundreds of foreign companies in the UAE all need PR services to grow and compete. Whether public or private sector, or at a basic or advanced level, both sectors have opened up PR departments to new areas like tourism, telecommunication, trade, real estate and transportation in order to survive and progress (Badran, Turk, & Walters, 2004).

Background and Evolution of PR Agencies in UAE

“The last two decades have seen a huge expansion of public relations in various domains of economic, political, social and cultural sectors in the Arab World” (Kirat, 2005, p. 324). In the UAE, the public relations concept is as old as 12,000 years. As in other countries, the term public relations is misappropriated in the UAE, and it is considered to be concerned with public service or departments that are involved in arranging for visas, transport, and other hospitality functions. It is a great error to consider this as the only functionality of a PR department (Harris, 1991). In the 1970s and 1980s, various types of institutions and organizations were developed in the UAE, such as the transportation, health, higher education, media, agriculture, sports, vocational institutes sectors. There was fast and drastic change monitored in almost all sectors of society. In me-
dia, progress was also witnessed: first only in newspapers, but after that in magazines and other sorts of specialized publications (Babbili & Hussain, 1994).

In the mid-1980s, almost 63% of public and private firms in the UAE had their own public relations department. Some of the departments were fully structured and functional, while others were semi-structured. The organizations and the institutions that did not have departments of their own assigned the PR role to other departments in their firms, like the marketing department, the human resources department, sales, or financial departments (L’Etanga, Falkheimer & Lugo, 2006). Some of the firms also outsourced PR functions to third parties (Al Khaja, 1985). In the 1990s the UAE turned into a trade center for many international entities. Famous media companies like CNBC, MBC, CNN and many more started their operations, and that was the boom period for the PR practitioners as well. Dubai Media City was progressing and had attracted more than 24 foreign as well as local firms. There was development in fixed phone lines, internet usage grew to a level of approximately 332,000 Internet subscribers. Mobile phone operations and lines also started (UAE Yearbook, 2005). All this development in media resulted in the development and progress of the PR industry. The year 1990 was undoubtedly a year of glory for the public relations industry and for practitioners. The interest level in PR increased, and multiple organizations and consultancies were started focusing upon providing PR services only as third-party providers. It was a time when commercial, specialised, private and public companies realized that PR could make or break them, and that it was critical to break the clutter created by the competition. The pioneering Emirates Airline, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, and the Dubai municipality particularly benefited from public relations practices (Ayish & Kruckeberg, 1999).

Training and Education in Public Relations

As PR was gaining importance, the University of the UAE in Al Ain developed an academic discipline in mass communication, where public relations and journalism along with radio and television were taught. This step was critical in order to produce the local employees that would work later on in the public and private sectors. With the passage of time, more and more people started to enroll in PR education programs, and so other universities started programs as well, such as the University of Sharjah, the American University of Sharjah, Ajman University and the American University in Dubai.

Modern organizations cannot survive without effective public relations (MEPRA, 2012). Democratic societies, and those nations that are striving toward democracy, need public relations as well. The Arab world counts more than 80 mass communication programs in higher education institutions and universities. Over 50% of the students enrolled in these programs are public relations majors (Kirat, 2005, p. 324).

Over the years PR departments have flourished, and females enrolled in degree programs are two thirds of the total student populations. “With progress in the PR industry, the production of qualified PR practitioners is also increasing” (Creedon, Al Khaja, & Kruckeberg, 1995, p. 56). At present the UAE is undoubtedly considered a hub for PR agencies that offer a wide variety of
services. Today there are 76 PR agencies in Dubai alone. In various national and regional locales, multiple platforms are established to support the PR industry and PR professionals. The PR industry has mostly adopted the Grunig and Hunt communication model, which has four aspects: two-way symmetric, two-way asymmetric, press publicity and agentry, and public information (Grunig, 1989).

**Comparison of Public and Private Sectors in UAE**

The population of foreigners far outnumbers nationals in the UAE, so many see it as a land of opportunity, and the private sector is growing rapidly (Astbury, 2013). Still, Emiratis apparently eschew to work in the private sector. The main reasons that local people identify for not being interested in the private sector are: low salaries, long office hours, and low numbers of holidays. The private sector is not lucrative especially for females. However, for people who have migrated to the UAE from third world countries where economic conditions and security are not as good, these jobs in the private sector are acceptable (Morada, 2002).

**PR and the Public Sector**

Ayish and Kruckeberg (1999) have argued that the UAE public sector has gone through major changes and development. Areas of this sector that have been affected with the advent of PR are education, military, tourism, among others. Government departments, institutions and agencies have faced a lot of challenges in making strong and healthy relationships with all the important publics inside and outside their organization (Badran & Ayish, 1996). Public organizations need to maintain and establish a healthy two-way interactive relationship with these publics, and this can be achieved by employing tools like strategic planning, opinion polling, planning, and management and research in order to serve them effectively and efficiently.

Some of the challenges faced by public relations in the public sector can be summarized as follows: top management totally misunderstands the concept of PR; the budgets allocated to PR in the public sector are too low (Badran, Turk & Walters, 2003); too many unqualified employees in PR departments; departments are understaffed; job descriptions for PR practitioners are unclear; and public sector PR over-concentrates on press and publicity. Related to these issues is the fact that there is a lack of investment in time and money on research, polling, and investment at the strategic level planning. PR departments are often not involved enough in organizational decision making (Badran & Ayish, 1996; Badran, Turk, & Walters, 2003)

**PR and the Private Sector**

The strong presence of the private sector in the UAE has a deep impact on the flourishing of public relations. There are almost 40 private PR agencies working in UAE. The majority of private sector firms have in-house PR departments to achieve efficiency. Those that do not have in-
house departments outsource PR activities (Kirat, 2005). The UAE private sectors typically hire PR agencies to handle their PR needs. As a sign of the growth in the sector, most private firms today are represented by PR firms, and still more PR firms are opening up (Ayish, 2005). It is believed that international public relations firms represent 40% of all private firms in the UAE, and they are growing at rate of 30% each year (Sunil, 2004).

**Theories and Models of PR**

UAE public relations agencies and practitioners generally are following four different types of PR theories and models. The first is the one-way model, which is getting the attention of media (Pereira, 2013; Kirat, 2005). Another basic model for UAE PR practitioners is the “public information model” (Hamada, 1999, p. 19). In this model, the role of practitioner is to give their publics truthful information regarding the practices of organization and “no negative information” is part of the deal (Badran & Ayish, 1996, p. 2). The third model is an asymmetrical two-way model. Practitioners of this model emphasize the investment of time in research, and then devise new PR and publicity messages and strategies accordingly (Badran, 1994; Astbury, 2013). Finally, the last communication model is a two-way symmetrical process (Rizk, 2004). In this model practitioners also invest time in research, but implement ideas to improve the understanding between publics and stakeholders, and to manage conflicts (Sunil, 2004).

The present research has undertaken to take into view multiple theories and models, and then checked their evolution at various levels. For example, it assesses how practitioners understand model concepts, their level of implementation, the sector of implementation of a given model, and what advantages and disadvantages exist.

**Research Questions**

The research questions this study undertook were:

RQ1. What are the differences between PR practitioners’ roles in the private and public sectors in the UAE?

RQ2. What main challenges do PR practitioners in both sectors face?

The data are analyzed and presented in a thematic way for both sectors.

**Public Sector PR Practitioner Results**

*Difficulties in getting agreement between public sector parties.* “In the past, public relations were not taken into account as something serious and beneficial for companies in the UAE” (Interviewee #15, 2013). It was difficult to get agreement from all parties involved on a single issue. The public relations practitioner in the public sector needs to be a good listener, a problem solv-
er, and to be patient. Interviewee #15 and #18 agreed that the practitioner needs to listen and then act; he or she should not rush into decision making. The maintenance of client privacy and confidentiality is also a critical aspect. “If the practitioner lacks these qualities, it would be a great challenge for him or her to get the agreement of those involved” (Interviewee #9, 2013). There needs to be solid communication and good relations between the client and the practitioner to win agreement.

**Social awareness of public relation services.** With the advent of social media and greater client awareness, “the duty of public relation officers has become more complex” (Interviewee #10, 2013). Clients expect a high level of quality in coordination and communication from PR practitioners to get optimal results from campaigns. “In the past the emphasis was on the physical world” (Interviewee #3, 2013), but today people are almost obsessed with the virtual world as well. They need to be involved with practitioners via websites and social media. People expect to be connected all the time.

**Establishment of a harmonious working environment.** In a typical school environment, the role of the public practitioner is different than a private sector practitioner. The public sector PR officer needs to establish a harmonious working environment for all stakeholders while developing a positive image of the firm. In school situations, for example, the public relation officer needs to maintain synchronization of staff, teachers, and students. “My role as a PR practitioner is not only to maintain the school’s reputation but the whole reputation, which includes school management, curriculum and teachers’ reputations” (Interviewee #3, 2013). Sometimes, PR people also need to bring parents into the loop as well. Interviewee #12 said, “The education field is very sensitive. The name of the school grows and spreads through PR people.”

**Characteristics of a good public sector PR practitioner.** Most respondents identified the following characteristics and qualities for efficient public sector PR practitioners: trustworthiness; liked by people, and credible. They should not be hasty decision makers, must be able to absorb, think and then act accordingly. They need to be excellent listeners, and should give everyone an equal chance to express a point of view before actually making a decision to avoid disagreements. Interviewees #12, 15 and 21 indicated that in order to be heard, it is necessary that they have a benevolent image among the concerned parties. They must be able to understand and develop good relationships between the parties.

**Challenges faced by public sector PR practitioners.** Some of the challenges faced by public sector PR practitioners involve cultural and diversity issues. It is difficult for firms and public sector organizations to manage a work force of different ethnicities, cultures, genders, ages and religions. It gets hard for practitioners to be supportive and positive in situations of disagreement. Interviewees #1 and #7 said that it is important for practitioners to stay neutral in situations of disagreement. They need self-control, patience and understanding, which are often hard to achieve. No matter what, the practitioner must stay positive and make people happy at the end of a disagreement. “But that does not mean that a practitioner can ignore problematic situations” (Interviewee #6, 2013). Rather, he or she is expected to solve problems in a way where everyone is happy at the end of the day. Making everyone happy is a daunting task. The difficulty level
and the tasks PR practitioners need to perform are escalating. People expect more from them in both the virtual and physical worlds, which raise the bar for effort. Practitioners should create an awareness of their needs and do the right thing on behalf of firms. “The job is not for shy people” (Interviewee #11, 2013). One needs to be an extrovert to be a good practitioner. In the clutter of competition, maintaining a positive image is important to keep customers coming back. It is the job of the PR department to keep both external and internal stakeholders happy, and for that they need to solve problems, and listen to their feedback. A good practice is to organize and arrange events for friends, family and clients to establish a relationship at more personal level. PR departments and practitioners can make or break an organization.

Building mutual understanding between the organization and its stakeholders. The characteristic of a successful PR agent’s endeavors result from planned management efforts. The desired outcome of these planned and continuous efforts is the strengthening of mutual understanding between the organization and its stakeholders. This is achieved by solving problems that arise because of differences of opinion, differences in cultural backgrounds, and other factors. The practitioner needs to exhibit personal power to develop superior communication relationships among the parties (Interviewees #16 & #23, 2013).

Benefits of developing PR departments in UAE firms. With the advent of new technology and the addition of a click model to that of the traditional brick model, job opportunities in the UAE PR sector are increasing with every passing day. Private as well as public firms in the UAE want to mix foreigners with local staffs to increase productivity levels and to establish and improve a positive image. A lot of professional degrees and institutes can help develop the right skill set of an effective PR practitioner. “Some companies in the UAE have PR departments that are effectively run by local employees” (Interviewee #19, 2013). The PR department is effective for female employees to help them avoid gender discrimination and protect their rights. The PR department can effectively deal with cultural differences, traditions, language barriers, and the religions of a diversified workforce.

Drawbacks of developing PR departments in UAE firms. Although there are a lot of jobs in public relations in UAE firms, there are not enough local employees to fill those posts. The end result is that foreigners are hired (Interviewees #3, #14 & #18, 2013). This is the case at the Abu Dhabi Media Company. The government sector in UAE is in immediate need of developing PR departments, which are insufficient, and that affects their foreign relations. The local staff in PR departments often lacks the necessary personality types and skill sets to prove themselves as effective PR agents. They also are not totally independent. Rather, they are dependent on foreigners to perform tasks because Emiratis lack skills and confidence. “The concept of PR is not truly understood by the people in the UAE” (Interviewee #22, 2013), and they are running PR departments without solid bases. Also, local PR practitioners often lack leadership skills. The PR staff members often lack the necessary diplomas, degrees, certification and equipment to properly perform their tasks. The end result is that firms are bearing a cost for PR departments, but they are not reaping the benefits.
Private Sector PR Practitioner Results

Awareness of public relation concept in private sector. Most private sector banks in the UAE consider PR as the way of dealing with people or customer relations. The majority of businesses think of public relations the same way, but PR is more than that for a few. Public relations are an interactive communication process between the publics and the organization. More profoundly defined it is a relationship between the company and the outside world. The focus is on building good image and good reputation.

People working in private UAE banks were particular in defining the concept of PR. According to them, PR is everywhere around them. Interviewees #5 and 11 said public relations is communication with government and relevant agencies, and it covers the processing of transactions, the establishment and promotion of the unique identity of banks, and the establishing of relationships at an internal and external level. The public and stakeholder groups identified by the banks are the analysts, media, and investors other than government agencies.

Activities performed by PR practitioners in the private sector. Some of the activities performed by private sector PR practitioners to make their publics happy are: initiating reward programs, sending the latest information to the stakeholders to keep them updated, announcing special holiday discounts, keeping stakeholders in the loop while updating data, and advertising to all publics via television and print media. Other activities includes “discussion of the crucial matters over coffee, solving problems, and bringing the relationship to more personal level” (Interviewee #12, 2013)

Challenges faced by private sector PR practitioners. Interviewees #1 and 9 said they believe that it is difficult to satisfy publics when a problem is not in the control of a firm. This applies especially to banks with respect to increases in the interest rates of credit cards. Customers get angry and blame it on the bank or organization, so this issue needs to be tackled with care. Practitioners need first to calm customers and then help them realize how the increases was a corporate decision and not in the hands of local banks. “It is very hard to control an angry mob” (Interviewee #1, 2013). It is important that issues be discussed politely and that the public view is understood before passing judgment.

Characteristics of a good private sector PR practitioner. Respondents from the private sector PR practitioners identified the following as characteristics of good private sector practice: the PR practitioner should evolve with practice and not stay stagnant, a practitioner should be friendly enough to build a personal relationship with stakeholders, the practitioner should be an extrovert, there should be an ability to communicate in multiple languages, and a practitioner should possess a tolerant and sympathetic disposition. People working in PR should be confident and must be able to perform as an individual as well as in teams (Interviewees #3 & #20). The diplomas, degrees and certifications in this field can help the right individuals build up required aptitude and excel in this sector.
Conclusions

All in all, private sector PR is more advanced and developed than is the public sector. Private sector PR in general has better staff members with the right skill sets and aptitudes. In public sector PR organizations, the awareness of the concept of PR is generally lower, even with experienced practitioners. The characteristics and the challenges faced by PR practitioners in the private and public sectors are more or less the same. In public sector firms, PR departments have local employees, but these often do not have the required skills or aptitudes, while in the private sector there is a greater blend of foreign as local employees, so they have an advantage in tackling and resolving diversification issues.

The main problems identified by UAE public sector PR practitioners are: a lack of agreement among parties, a lack of local staff qualifications, and a lack of tools that can help in the achievement of designated goals. The PR agent must be able to solve problems and satisfy publics. The public PR officer needs to resolve the problems inside as well as outside the organization. The internal problems include work conflict between employees, while the outside problems involve dealing with the media and other agencies.

Recommendations

After data analysis, the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for PR practitioners to perform better in the UAE firms are extensive. To improve public relations in the public sector, the human resource department needs specifically to recruit and hire people who are academically and scientifically qualified. They should have positive attitudes and skill sets so that they can perform well as practitioners. They should evolve skills continuously by enrolling in training programs. Special agencies and government departments must formally structure PR departments to recruit both Emiratis and foreigners. PR employees should be flexible in dealing with the public, keeping in mind that each public is different and deserves special treatment. For example, the public might have unique needs in terms of equipment, lack of commitment, lack of technical staff, and other factors that can result in conflict. A special method should be devised to tackle conflicts for each public.

PR can be improved by listening to publics and by training practitioners properly. A public feedback form should be introduced to gather insights from concerned parties at contact points. Conversational skills and the communication skills should be advanced.

Findings and Future Studies

Senior citizens and the elderly were a category of people identified by public sector firms as the most difficult to cater to because they were considered as less flexible than younger publics. People who are unable to speak English or Arabic (Chinese nationals were mentioned) get angry, because they think no one understands their problems, and they get frustrated trying to com-
municate their concerns. There is no specific gender that is problematic – males and females behave in the same way when it comes to dealing with the PR agents. Illiterate publics are also a problem for PR practitioners.

Respondents mentioned a variety of skills important for a career as an effective PR agent. A person should have academic qualifications to deal with the news media, and he or she needs a working knowledge of relevant communications technology and practices. A person must know how to attract, retain and build a customer base. A professional PR agent needs a smiling face, good listening skills, tolerance, a high patience level, and regular training courses. He or she should know more than one language – e.g., fluency in English as well as Arabic. The practitioner must be able to follow proper etiquette and formally cater to publics. The ability to organize and engineer strategic public relations to present an internal and external picture of the firm is essential.

Future studies should be conducted to explore different groups in society that are most influenced by the practices of PR agents. The areas that need to be tested and explored by using the qualitative and quantitative techniques are: the relationship and lived experience of dealing with multiple publics inside and outside an organization, how to deal with people from different countries and different languages, and transparency in the practices.

This study’s results show that understanding PR concepts and their applications are advanced in private sector, but lacking in the public sector, which frames PR as hospitality and service. Public sector PR firms use a public information and one-way asymmetrical models. While in the private sector, firms blend all four communication models and PR practices are implemented in their full and true sense as the field has come to be known and practiced across the world.

**Scope and Limitations**

The study helps gain insight into the practices that are adopted by PR practitioners in the UAE and the main challenges they face in the private and public sectors. Although the sample size was carefully designed to fit the UAE, it cannot be generalized to other cultures and environments. Some of the agents interviewed were practicing PR in both virtual and physical worlds, while the others were just practicing in the physical world so there were differences in approaches. But most of the responses from respondents were similar, and they are consistent with previous literature. This adds credibility to this study, which can be replicated with slight modifications. Future studies must consider rapid shifts observed in PR practices and technology and keep pace with them.

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