Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Israeli public relations and the Internet

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This paper explores Israeli online public relations practice, including Web 1.0, and social media usage among Israeli public relations practitioners and organizations. The paper demonstrates a gap between the dialogic potential of the Internet and its actual utilization by Israeli practitioners and organizations. Still, it is expected that Internet usage, and mainly social media usage among Israeli practitioners will grow as well as their awareness to the dialogic and interactive potential of social media.

Keywords: Internet; public relations; Israel; PR 2.0; social media

Overview: the field of public relations

Public relations has many definitions. Most definitions emphasize its management function: 'the management of relationships between organizations and publics';[1] 'the management of communication between an organization and its publics';[2] 'the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends'.[3]

Public relations is both a practice and an academic discipline. As a practice, public relations has existed for at least 100 years, according to some, and for thousands of years, according to others, depending on the definition of its origins.[4] Public relations is one of the marketing elements that play an important role in an organization's ability to achieve its goals at relatively low cost. It helps an organization to increase awareness of its services or products, transmit messages to its target audiences, increase selling, recruit human resources, build an image, promote organizational needs and goals vis-à-vis authorities, foster internal organizational pride, handle crisis management, and manage investor relations.[5]

During its initial years, the practice of public relations was grounded in a journalistic approach and the main concern of practitioners was to generate publicity through the implementation of one-way models.[6] Nowadays the field has evolved, and it also includes such activities as public affairs, lobbying, issue management, investor relations, and relations with critical publics.[7]

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As an academic discipline public relations is a newcomer, having developed an identifiable theory only in the past 30 years.[8] Its theoretical development began with theories borrowed from mass communication and later also from business management, marketing, philosophy, organizational theory, interpersonal communication, and rhetorical theory. Nowadays, many recognize public relations as a type of applied communication.[9]

Public relations theory

In the last three decades, public relations theory underwent a major change from the functionalist approach to the co-creational approach.

The functionalist approach centred on the functional role that public relations fulfils in the organization and the contribution of its communicative efforts to the achievement of organizational goals.[10] It saw in the evolution of the public relations profession a functional–organizational need that helps the organization to survive by providing its decision-makers with better control of the organization through the supply of quantitative information about its changing environment. The functionalist approach included theories of media relations, information subsidy, agenda-setting, and persuasion; research in the field examined business-oriented topics, such as advertising, marketing, and media relations.[11] It perceived publics and communication in an instrumental way: as tools that help an organization and its management to achieve goals. Therefore, the communication process was mainly a one-way flow from the organization to the publics. Public relations professionals focused on communicating *to* the public instead of communicating *with* the public.[12] They concentrated on media relations and the distribution of organizational messages through the mass media.

In the last three decades the co-creational perspective became the prominent perspective in public relations. This perspective puts the organization–public relationship (OPR) at the centre of public relations research.[13] The co-creational perspective uses research in order to advance understanding between groups and organizations while it uses communication as a means of negotiating changes in these relationships: 'it is the attitude toward publics that is the defining factor differentiating the functional and co-creational perspectives ... [T]he functional approach values the organization and its mission. The co-creational approach values the relationship between an organization and its publics.'[14]

The symmetrical/excellence theory advanced by J.E. Grunig is the most notable co-creational theory and has dominated the public relations paradigm from the late 1980s to the early 2000s.[15] This theory defines public relations as 'building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission',[16] and it was instrumental in changing the emphasis in public relations from managing publics and public opinion to that of building, nurturing, and maintaining relationships.[17] Other notable co-creational theories are the *relational approach* that sees in the building, management, and maintenance of OPR the main public relations activity,[18] and the *dialogic*

communication approach that adds to OPR building the notion of dialogue and 'dialogic communication' as the theoretical frame guiding relationship building between organizations and publics.[19]

The emergence of the Internet and online public relations

The co-creational perspective emphasizes the role of communication in enabling publics to become co-creators of meanings. The emergence of the Internet and its various dialogic capabilities enabled public relations practitioners to implement the co-creational principles in practice.

While public relations professionals in the past relied almost exclusively on the mass media in order to distribute messages to the public, the Internet opened up new opportunities for direct, two-way communication between organizations and publics. The field of online public relations involves 'the application of Internet technologies by organizations to communicate and build relationships with key publics: customers and consumers, employees, investors and donors, community members, government, and the news media'.[20] The public's ability to interact with organizations via e-mail and other online means (live chat, discussion groups, websites, blogs, etc.) added to traditional communication via post, fax, and phone a new communications element that was faster, cheaper, more direct, and uncensored. Moreover, it enabled online relationship building through its dialogical potential and capability.[21]

The construction of organizational websites included at first Web 1.0 dialogic elements. These elements enable two-way communication but 'do not allow users to add content to a Web page' (for example e-mail addresses, toll-free telephone numbers, and online surveys).[22] Various organizational websites also included online 'newsrooms' that enable journalists to find organizational news, background information, photos, and press releases more easily and faster than ever before. A recent survey among 1404 journalists revealed that nearly half (44.6%) of them reported visiting a corporate website or an online newsroom at least once a week.[23]

In the second phase, Web 2.0 dialogic elements appeared.[24] Web 2.0 elements enable two-way communication and 'allow users to add content to a Web page'.[25] One type of Web 2.0 elements are social media that enable social interaction and 'allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'.[26] Social media enable people to communicate with each other, to collaborate, and to share information. Examples are blogs, social networks, virtual social worlds, wikis, and virtual game worlds.

In recent years, social media elements gained popularity among individuals that have access to broadband technology. This popularity is demonstrated by more than 500 million active users of Facebook as of January 2011, 750 million photos uploaded to Facebook in a single weekend, and over 5 billion photographs hosted by Flickr.[27]

The emergence of Web 2.0 dialogic elements added to the 'read only' Web a 'read/write' Web that enables individuals to become co-creators of content and to

participate in social media through its collaborative capabilities. Web 2.0 is not only a technological development that modifies existing channels of communication, but also a new way of thinking.[28] One of the communication elements that were changed in the mid-to-late 1990s is public relations practice, as a new model of public relations emerged: Public Relations 2.0 (PR 2.0).[29]

PR 2.0 is a model that advocates a new approach to public relations. According to a popular commercial book it emphasizes the usage of social media tools in order to reach publics, calls for direct online conversations with publics, and forces public relations professionals to focus on mainstream publics as well as on niche groups.[30] Web 2.0 and PR 2.0 change the 'old rules' of public relations. In an online public relations e-book, David Merman Scott,[31] a former content marketing specialist, proposed new ways to change the old rules of public relations and to embrace new Web 2.0 public relations strategies in order to address the public directly.

One of the new online dialogic tools that became popular in recent years is the corporate (or organizational) blog. Organizational blogs are maintained by people who hold posts in an official or semi-official capacity at the organization; the blog is endorsed explicitly or implicitly by the organization, and posted by a person perceived by the public as clearly affiliated with that organization.[32]

An increasing number of executives and organizational representatives run and manage blogs that enable them to have two-way, open, and direct conversations with members of the public while using a 'conversational human voice', candid speech, and a conversational style.[33] A business blog can humanize communication by enabling companies to talk with customers and allowing customers to talk back, instead of just talking at them.[34]

Blogs change the way organizations communicate with their publics while bridging the gap between them to the 'length of a click'.[35] They also incorporate dialogic communication principles to a greater degree than do traditional websites, and therefore they are more suitable for online relationship building.[36]

By mid 2006, a website named more than 500 public relations bloggers; including writers from 29 countries, the list was growing at a rate of about 100 listings every six months, evidence that public relations professionals understood the advantages of social media public relations.[37]

Blogs and organizational blogs became an important information source also for journalists who use them for work-related tasks such as searching for story ideas, seeking information and sources, and uncovering breaking news.[38] As for 2010, a survey among 1404 journalists revealed that 73.4% reported reading regularly one or more blogs to keep up with subjects they covered.[39]

Other important social media elements that emerged in recent years are social networking sites, such as MySpace (www.myspace.com), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), and Facebook (www.facebook.com), as well as micro-blogging services such as Twitter (http://twitter.com/). These elements present new opportunities for public relations professionals to create open groups for their organizations and events. This is done by sharing information and pictures with publics, making various announcements, participating in discussion groups, and

inviting others to join. A recent study claims that both for-profits and nonprofit associations started to incorporate these strategies into their public relations efforts, although they do not utilize their interactive potential yet.[40]

Similarly, new features such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication), bookmarks, tags, and wikis, in addition to viral technologies and community-based websites such as Digg (www.digg.com) and Del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us/), enable organizations and publics to stay informed about each other. In 2006, the 'Social Media Press Release' was presented by Todd Defren and Shift Communications.[41] This was a new communication tool that tried to evolve the traditional press release into more than a message-transmitter, while using a mixture of new media elements (podcasts, video-casts, texts, photos, and hyperlinks).

By 2007, a wide range of online media services were available to public relations practitioners, including RSS feeds, media monitoring services, video news releases delivered digitally via satellite or the Internet, online public relations surveys, and online photography as well as videography.[42] Nowadays, as social media continues to grow, Location Based Services (LBS) such as Foursquare (http://foursquare.com/) and Facebook Places (http://www.facebook.com/places/) open up new opportunities for organization–public interactions, while utilizing the great potential of mobile technologies in the field of public relations.

The evolution of public relations in Israel

Several studies explore the history and evolution of Israeli public relations practice.[43] In the early years of the State of Israel, the Zionist institutions and the government of Israel promoted the idea of 'social integration', whose aim was to unite the Jewish immigrants in a new culture. Therefore, in order to support nation-building and social integration, most Israelis preferred the model of 'social responsibility of the press' over 'freedom of the press'.[44] In those days public relations was mainly governmental, while governmental spokespersons distributed a one-way flow of positive information from the government to journalists.

From the 1970s until the 1990s, various political, social, and economic changes resulted in a much more diverse and competitive media.[45] The government disseminated control over the media and journalism became more critical. In addition, public relations practice became more professional while public relations practitioners did not work only for the governmental and public sectors, but also for the private sector.[46] The demand for public relations services as well as a recognition of its importance contributed to the flourishing of this profession.

Today there are approximately 400 public relations firms in Israel that work with the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors.[47] The Israeli Public Relations Associations (ISPRA) is the main association of public relations practitioners and holds two annual conferences, as well as occasional professional seminars.

As an academic discipline, public relations is still a newcomer in Israel and it is taught in universities and colleges mainly in the form of courses and workshops in

communication departments. Nevertheless, it seems that public relations is gaining popularity among Israeli academics. In 2011 a new Master's programme in public relations was launched at the University of Haifa, and several new courses and seminars in online public relations started in a number of universities and colleges.

Various publications address Israeli public relations practice. Among them are publications about the profession's development, nature, and practice,[48] media strategies for marketing places in crisis,[49] promotion of places and touristic zones,[50] the history of the field,[51] public relations and politics,[52] and public relations practices among social movements.[53] Only a few studies address online public relations, among them studies that explore the usage of blogs and websites in political and municipal campaigns,[54] place branding and marketing of cities and places in crisis,[55] online terrorism,[56] and Internet usage among human rights and grassroots organizations.[57]

Organizational public relations and the Internet

In the early days of public relations research, studies turned to organizational theories, since they recognized that public relations had always been practised in organizational contexts.[58] One of the early attempts to build a foundation for public relations theory was Prior-Miller's exploration of four sociological perspectives that constituted the framework for organizational theory.[59]

Organizational managements understood the importance of internal and external communication and therefore used public relations in order to inform external publics of the organization's goals, to identify and satisfy the needs of internal and external publics, and to better adapt the organization to its changing environment.[60]

Nowadays, public relations practitioners work in a wide range of organizations but mainly in corporations, nonprofit associations, and governmental agencies.[61] Although these organizations differ from each other in many respects, for-profits and nonprofits share many similarities from a public relations perspective, and research even suggests that the attitude of public relations professionals toward public relations and the Web in both organization types is similar.[62] Both for-profits and nonprofits must build and maintain relationships with stakeholders in order to survive.[63] They need to get out their messages and to grab the attention of various publics, whether they are potential members, clients, volunteers, the media, customers, or donors, through the use of public relations strategies and tactics.[64] According to population ecology theory and institutional theory,[65] organizations compete for publics from the same resource pool, while the environment makes the choice which organizations will succeed and which will fail.[66]

Online public relations enables businesses and nonprofit associations to empower themselves, to increase the effectiveness of their communications by being more visible and more widely heard, and to contact various publics more easily.[67] Nonprofit associations, which usually have limited resources, can use

the Internet in order to reach out to publics and potential members, to organize members and friends in order to promote an issue or influence organizational actions. They can make their voices heard on issues that previously did not receive media attention or were censored, level the field with corporations, and contact and inform stakeholders around the world without any regard to the group's size, power, or financial ability.[68]

This study embraces the co-creational perception from public relations theory since it emphasizes the importance of dialogue and two-way communication to organization–public relationship building. It focuses mainly on Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations while attempting to reveal whether they use Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and social media elements in order to create a dialogue with their publics. The study also asks whether these organizations respond to online queries sent to them by members of their publics, and how do they perform, from a public relations perspective, compared to businesses and nonprofit associations overseas. However, this study does not touch on international public relations.

Nonprofit associations and the Internet

In 2011, there were approximately 30,000 registered nonprofit associations in Israel.[69] A recent report prepared for the Israeli parliament's (Knesset) finance committee revealed that in the recent economic crises, 22% of Israeli nonprofit associations reported that they were in a severe financial stress, and 81% reported that they faced financial difficulties.[70] This data illustrates that nonprofit associations have to reach out to donors, publics, and potential members, and to compete with each other for resources in order to survive. The World Wide Web and the Internet may be powerful tools, especially for nonprofit associations, which usually have fewer resources (time, money, and manpower) than do larger, more powerful organizations, and therefore find it harder to get their voices heard.[71]

Nevertheless, a recent study reveals that out of a sample of 1876 Israeli nonprofit associations (from the fields of culture and leisure, education, religion, welfare, and others) more than a half (53.19%, $n = 998$) lack any direct online accessibility. Furthermore, in many cases a Google search reveals that the only online mention of these nonprofit associations is in the context of lawsuits in which they are involved.[72] These findings suggest that there are still many Israeli nonprofit associations that do not understand the importance of online accessibility and do not acknowledge the significance of engaging in two-way communication with their stakeholders.[73]

On the other hand, a second group of nonprofit associations exists. Nonprofit associations from the second group usually own a website or use other online dialogic elements. A study among 600 Israeli nonprofit associations found that most nonprofit associations that have an online presence insert into their websites mainly Web 1.0 dialogic elements. The most popular dialogic element (95.9%, $n = 567$) is the e-mail address and the contact form, while the second most

popular element (42.1%, $n = 249$) is the mailing list and the membership club.[74] As for Web 2.0 dialogic elements, such as blogs, social networks, wikis, podcasts, or photo/video sharing, they are rarely used.[75]

As for responsiveness to online queries, the second group of nonprofit associations is mostly responsive. A field experiment in which two identical requests for information were sent to 600 nonprofit associations revealed a total responsiveness rate of 71%, while 60.8% ($n = 365$) responded after the first attempt and 10.2% ($n = 61$) responded after the second attempt.[76]

Nevertheless, there are still many nonprofit associations that use their online presence mainly for one-way communication; a proprietary market research project among 104 Israeli nonprofit associations noted that 60% of the nonprofit associations used their websites mainly for information dissemination among donors, mailing lists, volunteers, and members.[77] Another study among 72 Israeli nonprofit associations revealed that most of them used their websites mainly as an 'online brochure' to disseminate information to their publics.[78]

To sum up, Israeli nonprofit associations are divided into two groups: one group cannot be reached directly online and the other group uses various Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 dialogic elements and responds to online queries. Nevertheless, even the second group does not fully utilize the dialogic potential of the Internet.

Businesses and the Internet

Similar to the nonprofit associations, Israeli businesses are divided into two groups: one group does not have an online presence and cannot be reached directly online, and the second group has an online presence and uses various dialogic elements in order to communication with its publics.

Although in the early days of the Internet organizations worldwide perceived an urgency to create websites only in order 'to be there' and to demonstrate their modernity and innovativeness,[79] it seems that there are still many Israeli businesses that do not have a presence on the Internet or do not enable online direct communication.[80] A recent study found that out of 250,000 Israeli businesses that appear on the Israel Yellow Pages (www.d.co.il) only 32,348 (12.93%) were detected as having an online presence of any type (including e-mail addresses, blogs, forums, social networks, and other dialogic elements).[81] According to social exchange theory,[82] these businesses raise the cost of initiating an interaction with them since individuals searching the Internet for a product or a service are not aware of their existence, cannot communicate with them online, and have to make a special effort in order to contact them offline. As a result, these individuals may decide to turn to their competitors, and a potential relationship is lost.

Nevertheless, the number of Israeli corporations that use the Internet in order to engage with publics is increasing. A recent survey indicates that 74% of large Israeli brands use Facebook in order to build relationships with their publics.[83] A study of 600 Israeli businesses (from various fields, such as agriculture,

manufacturing, communication, trade, banking, and others) found that businesses with an online presence use mainly Web 1.0 dialogic elements; the most popular is the e-mail address or the 'contact us' form (93%, $n = 546$) and the second most popular is the mailing list and the customer club (21.3%, $n = 125$).[84]

As for actual responsiveness to online queries, a field experiment in which two identical requests for information were sent to 600 businesses revealed a total responsiveness rate of 62.2% as follows: 53.2% ($n = 319$) responded after the first attempt and 9.0% ($n = 54$) responded after the second attempt. In other words, most businesses were responsive to an online query. Similar findings were reported by an Israeli popular news website (Ynet) that checked the level of responsiveness of 29 Israeli companies. The results showed that 18 companies responded within one day, but nine others did not respond at all (while in two additional cases the e-mails either were returned or there was no e-mail address at all). When the nine were asked about this, the companies blamed the users for not providing a correct phone number, for not approaching them more than once, and for not choosing the correct e-mail address from their websites.[85]

To sum up, many Israeli businesses still do not have an online presence or do not enable any direct online two-way communication, hence making it difficult for publics to contact them online. Nevertheless, a second group of businesses exists. This group uses the Internet (mainly Web 1.0 dialogic elements), experiments with Web 2.0 and social media elements, and usually responds to online queries.

A comparison between the Internet usage of Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations

Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations that have a presence on the Internet differ in their usage of the Internet. Nonprofit associations use the Internet with a more co-creational and 'conversation orientation', and businesses use it with a more functionalist and 'target orientation'.[86]

Nonprofit associations insert significantly more Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 dialogic elements into their websites, among them forums, social networks, blogs, micro-blogging, and other elements that enable a 'conversational human voice', candid speech, and a conversational style in spite of having fewer resources.[87] They also exhibit significantly higher responsiveness rates than businesses.[88] It seems that Israeli nonprofit associations that decide to create a presence on the Internet are indeed willing to engage in a dialogue with their publics. Indeed, many nonprofit associations are active in the fields of welfare, health, and education, and they provide their publics not only with information but also with various online opportunities to share their problems, to consult, and to receive advice regarding their illnesses and personal or social difficulties.[89]

On the other hand, not many nonprofit associations include in their websites 'target oriented elements' such as 'volunteering' or 'providing donations' that may help them to achieve their organizational goals.[90] A study in progress indicates that although online technologies enable human rights organizations to easily recruit

new members, raise donations, and call for action, most organizations insert into their websites only basic dialogic elements.[91] In addition, grassroots organizations continue to embrace traditional norms of online information dissemination and do not challenge the status of mainstream media in determining new rules for content production.[92] These findings correspond with other findings that only a small percentage of Israeli nonprofit associations state that the main target of their website is fundraising or volunteer recruitment.[93] A potential explanation for this might be a lack of knowledge or awareness of the mobilizing potential of the Internet (and mainly social media) and a lack of resources (time, manpower, and money).[94]

Contrarily, businesses insert fewer Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 dialogic elements into their websites and exhibit lower rates of responsiveness than nonprofit associations.[95] The dialogic elements used by businesses point towards a 'target orientation' aimed at promoting organizational economic goals. These elements include toll-free telephone numbers, purchase mechanisms, and a higher willingness to continue an interaction by phone.[96] It seems that businesses still practise 'markets as targets' instead of 'markets as conversations'.[97]

Web 2.0 dialogic elements are still not very popular among Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations.[98] The findings reveal that only a small percentage of businesses and nonprofit associations use Web 2.0 and social media elements such as blogs, social networks, and micro-blogging. In other words, both businesses and nonprofit associations still do not utilize the dialogic potential of the Internet in order to engage in a real conversation with their publics.

A comparison between organizational public relations in Israel and overseas

In spite of the advantages of online public relations for organizations, various studies worldwide indicate that both businesses and nonprofit associations fail to utilize the dialogic potential of the Internet.

Research on nonprofit associations points to the fact that although some of the nonprofit associations' websites contain dialogic elements, the organizations fail to utilize them in order to create a dialogue and build relationships with their publics.[99] Naudé, Froneman, and Atwood found that public relations practitioners in South African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do not use the interactive features of the medium to their fullest potential and do not view relationship building and mutual understanding as the purpose of their public relations efforts.[100] Kang and Norton noted that nonprofit associations in the United States do not use the Web effectively to contact audiences and build relationships.[101] Ingenhoff and Koelling argued that the dialogic potential of the Internet is not utilized efficiently by Swiss nonprofit organizations.[102] Another study reached the same conclusions regarding nonprofit associations' usage of social media elements.[103]

Research on businesses comes up with similar findings. Several studies were conducted a decade ago,[104] but more recent studies also point to a gap between

stakeholders' expectations from corporations' Web-based public relations efforts and the corporations' actual performance.[105] Others point to a gap between the dialogic potential of organizational blogs and its actual utilization by public relations professionals,[106] or a 'non-dialogic' usage of social media elements mainly for product launching and branding.[107]

When an organization includes dialogic features in its website, it creates expectations among individuals that their communication will receive a quick and relevant response.[108] Nevertheless, worldwide studies on responsiveness point to the fact that businesses and nonprofit associations fail to respond to external e-mails.[109] In many cases, the failure to respond simply means a lack of responsiveness; in other cases, the response is not given in time or is only partial or unhelpful. Attempts to explain these gaps include such explanations as a lack of organizational resources and especially of time, staff, or budget;[110] the need to train members of the organization to respond to electronic communication and to make sure that someone is available to do this is viewed as prohibitive. Other potential explanations include public relations practitioners' loaded schedules, low organizational priority given to the website, lack of technical and conceptual training,[111] organizational 'red tape' that slows down response time to external messages, threat-rigidity, and the 'freezing' of organizations whenever they received a message from an unknown external source.[112]

A field experiment reported here revealed a relatively high responsiveness rate of 66.6% ($n = 799$) among Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations.[113] Furthermore, the responsiveness rate of Israeli nonprofit associations (71%) was equal to and even higher than the responsiveness rates reported in other studies worldwide.[114] It seems that Israeli organizations which insert various dialogic elements into their websites are indeed willing to engage in two-way communication with their publics. In addition, similar to other studies,[115] the findings of the Israeli study reveal that businesses and nonprofit associations which insert more dialogic elements into their websites are significantly more responsive than businesses and nonprofit associations which insert fewer dialogic elements into their websites. It seems that the insertion of additional dialogic elements into a website demonstrates a real willingness to engage in a two-way communication with the public. Similarly, nonprofit associations that offer Web 2.0 dialogic elements (such as blogs and social networking) have a higher responsiveness rate than nonprofit associations that do not offer these elements.[116]

As for the response time, various studies worldwide argue that there were cases in which there was a response, but the response took too long to arrive or it was unsatisfactory. According to some, '[r]esponsiveness and response quality (i.e., the degree to which the information required by the guest is provided), therefore, are crucial dimensions of response behaviour'.[117] Others argue that 'countless online sales have been lost because a company did not respond in a timely manner to customer concerns that arose in the middle of the transaction process'.[118] Response time also has symbolic importance. A quick response has the signalling power of immediacy, care, and presence, and therefore there is a

preference for quick replies.[119] Most Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations that responded to the request responded quickly within a few hours and days (94% of the responses were received within a week), and only a minority responded later. Hence, Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations presented a relatively high responsiveness rate and a quick response time.

Public relations practitioners and the Internet

Until the mid 1990s Israeli public relations practitioners used the Internet as a means of publishing news and news releases about the bodies they represented.[120] In other words, Israeli practitioners used the Internet in a 'monologue' way 'to get the message out' by gathering and disseminating messages,[121] and to facilitate media relations.[122] From about the mid 1990s Israeli practitioners started to use various Web 1.0 dialogic elements and they understood the importance of providing up-to-date and quick responses.[123] They also understood that being aware of the publics' state of mind can help them identify emerging issues[124] and prevent potential crises through issue management.[125]

In recent years Israeli public relations practitioners started to use Web 2.0 and social media elements. They use search engines in forums and chat rooms in order to detect negative comments about their clients or their products and to insert immediate positive responses either in the guise of visitors or as official organizational representatives.[126]

A survey conducted in 2009 among Israeli public relations practitioners indicated that most practitioners had experience with or started to familiarize themselves with social media elements.[127] Nevertheless, the usage of social media elements was still in its initial stage and its potential had not yet been utilized.[128] The survey revealed that 80% of the participants had at least one personal experience (for any purpose) with blogs, most practitioners (73%) read blogs that were relevant to their clients, 44% actually wrote or had written a blog in the name of their organizations or clients, and 64% of the respondents rated blogs as the most effective of various social media tools in achieving campaign goals.[129] In addition, 78% of the participants used at least one social media element in at least one campaign, while only 22% did not use any of the elements. The most popular elements were blogs (56% used this device for at least one campaign), social networks (53%) and forums (49%).[130]

An interesting finding was that Israeli clients of public relations services do not as yet acknowledge the potential and importance of social media elements in achieving campaign goals.[131] When Israeli practitioners were asked whether their clients were usually interested in integrating social media elements into their campaigns, only 32% responded positively, while 68% answered that their clients 'seldom' (36%) or 'never' (32%) wanted them to use social media elements.[132] In addition, 56% of the practitioners thought that the emergence of social media has not changed the way their organizations or their clients' organizations communicate. Finally, the survey also revealed that Israeli public

relations practitioners still do not trust social media, while nearly half the Israeli practitioners (46%) thought that social media did not tell the truth. Hence, this survey also points to a gap between the dialogic potential of the Internet and its actual utilization by Israeli public relations practitioners.

A gap between the dialogic potential of the Internet and its utilization

As can be seen from the previous studies, there is a gap between the dialogic potential of the Internet and its actual utilization by Israeli businesses, nonprofit associations, and public relations practitioners. Many Israeli businesses and nonprofit associations do not have an online presence or do not enable online direct communication. Others, that have an online presence, mainly use Web 1.0 dialogic elements and usually do not engage in a dialogue with their publics through Web 2.0 and social media elements such as blogs, social networks, and micro-blogging. Finally, a field experiment suggests that most businesses and nonprofit associations respond to an online query sent to them by a member of their publics.[133] Nevertheless, one-third of the organizations explored in the field experiment did not respond to an online query. It is important to note that in the era of the Internet organizations can no longer ignore any of their publics; They cannot ignore them not only because stakeholder theory argues that firms should attend to the interests of all their stakeholders and not just their stockholders,[134] but mainly because individual members of a public have power, and they can influence and damage an organization's reputation. Angry individuals can use blogs, social networks (such as Facebook and MySpace), micro-blogging (such as Twitter), and video sharing platforms (such as YouTube) in order to criticize an organization and to 'tell the world' how bad its service, product, or attitude is. Seth Godin, a well-known marketing guru, explains to companies why they should care about individuals trying to approach them: 'Angry phone calls are your friend. They're your friend because the alternative is angry tweets and angry blog posts.'[135]

Hence, businesses and nonprofit associations that insert dialogic elements into their websites and invite people to contact them online have to invest resources (money, humans, time) to respond to online queries. 'Companies should not provide interactive links in their web sites unless they are willing to support them.'[136] Furthermore, organizations have to maintain and manage their blogs, social networks, Twitter accounts, and all other social media elements that they decided to have, since individuals use these platforms in order to contact them, and they expect a response.

The future of Israeli public relations

It seems that nowadays awareness of the importance of an online presence on the Internet and a direct engagement with publics among Israeli practitioners and organizations is increasing.

A recent survey indicates that Israeli public relations practitioners believe in the future of social media and think that its usage will grow. The majority (60%) estimate that they will 'probably' use some kind of social media elements in a media campaign during the coming year; and 73% say that they would 'very' or 'very much' like to 'deepen their knowledge regarding social media usage'. Moreover, 51% believe that 'social media usage for public relations purposes will become more dominant in the future than traditional media usage'.[137]

The current challenge for Israeli public relations practitioners is to understand Web 2.0 and social media usage and to utilize them to engage in a dialogue with their publics. According to a blog post by a public relations researcher, 'Whereas the fundamental nature of the public relations function clearly has not changed, the new relationships that are being enabled by social software is making possible the practical implication of more transparent two-way flows and this is new.'[138]

Notes on contributor

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Notes

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