MUSEUM PR:

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE MUSEUM COMMUNITY

A Capstone Project

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By

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Abstract

Public relation strategies and tactics have helped businesses, non-profits and institutes of higher education communicate effectively to meet their goals for decades. However, cultural institutions are now also benefiting from public relation practices. As of 2005 the American Association of Museums estimated that there are about 17,500 museums in the United States that compete for money, resources and visitors. Effective public relation strategies have become important in order to achieve success. This paper posits that museum public relations should be considered a subset of traditional PR because of its position in the marketplace. Many museums are non-profits, and they have a unique set of communication concerns that forces them to engage with multiple publics in order to operate efficiently. After conducting interviews with PR professionals working in museums around the United States, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between traditional PR and PR practiced in museums.
Introduction

The International Council of Museums defines a museum as, “a non-profitmaking, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment” (International Council of Museums, 2010). This definition encompasses different aspects of a museum’s business, communication and public service missions in order to offer a broad and stable vision of what a museum is and can be. However, for the purposes of this paper the communication aspect of a museum will be scrutinized in order to evaluate the role of public relations in these institutions. The research question being asked in this paper is whether museum PR should be considered a subset of public relations because of a museum’s unique set of operating standards and publics.

Museums are not only non-profits, but also institutions of culture, science, history and amusement for visitors every year throughout the world. Museums adhere to a special set of ethical standards and practices in order to protect the integrity of the institution and artifacts (Code of Ethics, 2000). Therefore, a different set of communication standards might be in place in order to fulfill a museum’s unique role. With multiple publics to serve including industry professionals, donors, potential donors and a wide range of visitor demographics, the public relations practices used within a museum differ in comparison to PR for corporations or advocacy organizations. [??]

This paper will review the literature surrounding public relations and museums in general and then will focus on defining museum PR and its professionals. Next the qualitative
data gathered from museum PR professionals across the nation will provide evidence for the different communication concerns of museums from their social media outreach to their PR tactics. And finally the author will make some conclusions about the current state of PR in museums and if museum PR should be considered a subset of public relations.

**Literature Review**

Recent academic literature focusing on communications within a museum is severely lacking. The most comprehensive book to date on museum public relations comes from Donald Adams (1980). Since this general guide to public relations was published only a handful of articles have been written on the topic and mainly in museum publications. Scholarly PR literature in this area is virtually non-existent or rarely cited (American University Library, 2011). However, a renewed focused seems to be coming to the museum public relations field with international museum conferences like *Communicating the Museum* focusing exclusively on communication strategies in 2008 (Communicating the Museum, 2008). As the field of public relations becomes more professionalized and communication strategies become a part of every organization, more scholarly research across organization types is needed.

**What is a museum?**

Museum associations in the United States as well as internationally have defined a museum as a non-profit institution geared towards conservation, research and communication (Ginsburch & Mairesse, 1997). However, the definition of a museum can be more fluid. The average person might see a museum as a place to explore, in the most physical sense, the ideas and history behind a subject. The general public gives little consideration to funding or
the specific purpose of a museum but rather considers what the institution physically has to
offer. If an institution can offer things like education, entertainment or insight through a
visitor’s experience and interaction with projects then most people would consider it a
museum. This leads to a different definition in which objectives and not activities of an
institution should be considered when defining a museum. And in order for museums to
evolve and change over time a more fluid approach to defining its function needs to be
embraced (Ginsburch & Mairesse, 1997). For example, the museums of the early 19th century
emphasized the “look but don’t touch” mentality of an exhibit. However, in 2011 museums
are trying to become more interactive in order to engage their visitors (Center for the Future
of Museums, 2008). And in almost a parody of this old fashioned approach to a museology,
the Philadelphia Children’s Museum named itself the Please Touch Museum to emphasize its
hands on approach (Please Touch Museum, 2011).

What is Public Relations?

The definition of public relations has changed over the past century and evolved to
mean something different to every organization, industry or professional. Modern public
relations tends to emphasis the role of the public to the organization but historically this was
not the case. P.T. Barnum, a founding father of PR, seems to have given little consideration to
the public when marketing the American Museum in the 19th century with the use of
exaggerated claims and promises which essentially fooled the public into attending. This kind
of publicity was used in order to ensure high attendance to the museum’s exhibits (Adams,
1983). But as public relations moves away from unethical persuasion and more towards an
open two-way communication format the attitude has changed as well. The UK’s main body
of PR professionals, the Institute of Public Relations, defines PR as, “the planned and
sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics” (Harrison, 1995). This definition encompasses the PR professional’s multiple roles as well as the overall goal to work with publics and therefore most accurately relates to PR in a museum setting. In the most general sense the function of public relations is to manage the communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The History of PR

The evolution of PR can be seen through four conceptual models and time periods: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). However, while these models and time periods effectively frame the history of PR from the 19th century to the present it is important to note that public relations existed before then. Lamme and Russell discuss the development of public relations from a more theoretical and historical angle that puts the emphasis on what happened before 1900 in order to understand modern public relations (Lamme & Russell, 2010). But for the scope of this paper it is more beneficial to analyze modern public relations models/time periods in order to effectively apply it to current museum PR. Table 1 outlines the four models of public relations as defined by Grunig & Hunt (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The press agentry model begins modern public relations history since the press agents of the mid 19th century are the first example of full time PR practitioners working for people such as Andrew Jackson, Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Their function as press agents was mainly seen in terms of publicity, promotion and propaganda. Propaganda and persuasion were the main functions of the model and often were achieved
through distorted or incomplete information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Propaganda has many
definitions but can be considered a subset of both persuasion and information where the
communication message’s goal is to manipulate the receiver for the benefit of the sender.
Typically considered dishonest and unethical, propaganda varies in severity depending on the
amount of deception to the receiver (Guth, 2008).

After the press agentry model was formed a more honest approach to information was
born through the public information model. At the turn of the 20th century, large corporations
in reaction to muckraking journalism used the public information model to disseminate their
message. This led to the creation of the press release, which was used to give journalists
general information about the company and situation. Unlike the press agentry model,
however, the information was accurate and truthful but tended to be in favor of the
organization (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The main function was to inform with PR practitioners
typically functioning as journalists-in-residence for organizations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The third model and corresponding time period is the two way asymmetric. Even after
evolving its message tactics from propaganda to accurate information, public relations
communication was still one-way with the PR professionals communicating with the public
through the media. But after WWI this changed when some professionals began looking to
social and behavioral sciences for ways to improve their communication techniques (Grunig
& Grunig, 1992). This more scientific approach to persuasion used theories and human
behavior to open up a two-way communication flow between the public and the practitioner.
PR professionals using this model of asymmetric PR mimicked the press agentry
professionals by trying to persuade and change the public’s behavior in favor of their
organization. However, the “engineering of consent” was not dishonest or unethical and had a scientific and methodical approach (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The final public relations model defined by Grunig and Hunt is the two-way symmetric. This model uses two-way communication in order to achieve a mutual understanding between the public and the organization where feedback is key. Understanding instead of persuasion differentiates this model from the asymmetrical concept (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Both use two-way communication and research-based approaches to craft a message, but practitioners using a symmetrical approach consider the principle objective to be the creation of a mutual understanding between the organization and its publics. The PR practitioners main function is that of a mediator fostering this mutual relationship (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Educational professionals are usually considered the leading figures in this area since most scholars use and teach this approach as effective public relations. These scholars tend to focus on the communication theories instead of the social science theories behind this model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Overall, these models and their corresponding time periods speak to the evolution of modern public relations over the past 150 years. It is important to note that all of these models are still being practiced today (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Depending on the organization type and leadership all these models are used either separately or in conjunction in order to meet the organization’s goals. Table 1 outlines the percent of organizations currently engaged in a model of PR as well as industries where a model is typically found. Yet an organization could use multiple models.
**What is museum PR?**

Now that museums and public relations have been discussed and defined the next objective is to create a definition for museum public relations. There is no formal definition of museum PR and it tends to be simply considered public relations practiced by museums. However, when considering a museum’s multiple publics, institutional status and unique organizational motivation a more precise definition is needed. An article in *Museum News* responded to this idea of museum public relations by saying the medium is not as important as the message, which consists of the museum’s efforts, employees, collections and level of audience understanding (Louer, 1989). This broad perspective of museum public relations gives a communication role to everyone and everything in order to disseminate the message. While PR in other institutions is practiced differently, a museum’s unique position of guarding artifacts in a physical and cultural sense makes its communication goals different. When the main objective of a non-profit organization is not advocacy or fundraising but guardianship the role of communication is fundamentally changed. The organization is no longer the first priority but instead the object being guarded. A second rate status for the institution when compared to the inventory then changes how the museum communicates with its audience.

Museum PR professionals use the same tools, tactics and principles as other PR professionals but have an exclusive place within their community to effectively utilize *other* institutions’ public relations as well. Appropriately called “PR piggybacking,” a museum’s public relations department can create a “piggyback” exhibit with another event in the community. By utilizing a planned event in your community and creating a new museum exhibit around it, a piggybacking occurs. An example of piggybacking is seen through the
Memphis’s Pink Palace Museum and Planetarium’s *Mummies in Ancient Egypt* exhibit in conjunction with the city of Memphis’s *Ramesses the Great* exhibition. Both entities used an Egyptian theme to promote both exhibits in relation to the other. Once the museum found out that the city had commissioned an Egyptian exhibition it decided to use the buzz and marketing surrounding the city’s event to create its own special museum exhibit about the religious aspects of mummification (Noble, 1990). By partnering with another event and planning special or unique activities/exhibits to supplement the main event, a museum effectively utilizes PR and marketing at a lower cost. An approved partnership not only helps a museum indirectly benefit from another event’s marketing but also draws in a bigger and hopefully more diverse audience (Noble, 1990).

With so many special considerations and tactics, museum PR is a growing subset of public relations. PR professionals working in the museum industry, while small in number, often have the most to accomplish in order to satisfy their publics, colleagues and employers. In the next section these professionals are evaluated.

**Who are Museum PR Professionals?**

There is no typical museum PR professional. The size, location, and funding of a museum usually dictates how large or small the communication staff will be. A smaller regional museum may have one full-time communication staff member or just a volunteer. A larger museum benefitting from both status and endowments may have a communication team with media relations, social media, and publicity specialists along with a plethora of interns. There is no estimate of how many people actually work in museum PR. However, with almost 18,000 museums nationwide the number people working or volunteering in the
communication department could be approaching as many as 20,000 (American Association of Museums, 2010).

Museum professionals encompass all sectors of the museum industry from development to the curatorial staff. But in general, assigning these professionals to just one sector of the museum, with no overlap, has yet to happen. One reason for the slow process of segmentation could be the cooperative nature of staff members in museums. All the museum PR professionals interviewed for this paper cited the cooperative nature of all museum staff members in achieving not only their department’s goals but also the overall museum’s goals. Museum PR professionals interact with visitors, the development department, the curatorial staff, and media in order to streamline messaging *inside* and effectively communicate *outside* the museum. The interdependent nature of museum departments can be seen through annual museum conventions like *Communicating the Museum* and *Museums and the Web*. Both of these annual conventions are multifaceted and speak to all museum professionals about a range of topics. However, the general theme always relates back to successful and innovative communication strategies used in museums trying to reach an audience. *Museums and the Web* focuses on innovative Web 2.0 strategies that can be used within museums to educate, entertain, inform and engage its publics (Museums and the Web, 2011). *Communicating the Museum* changes focus every year but ultimately provides public relations and communication content for cultural institutions by gathering professionals to discuss and evaluate best practices within their museums and institutions. ICOM recently endorsed *Communicating the Museum* as the reference conference for art communication and marketing (Communicating the Museum, 2011).
With both conferences and professionals engaging in museum communication strategies, the importance of public relations within the organization becomes clear. By incorporating PR strategies and actively seeking two-way communication with publics, a museum’s ability to generate PR should be a top priority in the digital age. Successful museum PR has benefits across departments, communities and publics and is an integral part of a museum’s operations.

**Methods**

PR professionals from museums across the United States were interviewed and asked about common PR practices. The interviews were conducted over the phone after initial contact was made through an email pitch to more than 20 museums. Museums were picked based on location and size of the city it was in. Specific types of museum were not targeted but art museums were the most common interviewed. Three of the six museum professionals interviewed were from art museums. The qualitative data gathered from these professionals was then evaluated for similarities and differences to traditional PR practices.

The interview data was gathered over a four-week period in February 2011. Initial email pitches were sent out to museum communication departments in the top 20 largest American cities and asked for an interview for a master student’s thesis project. All respondents had backgrounds in PR and were working in the museum communication field. The museum could specialize in any field and were from across the country in order to not focus on one section of the U.S. In the end five PR professionals from museums accredited by American Association of Museums (AAM) were interviewed. One museum PR professional interviewed was from a non-accredited and for-profit museum.
Discussion

Analysis of the qualitative data compiled for this paper showed similarities and differences between PR professionals working in different museums’ communication departments. Two main themes emerged during all the interviews: the use of social media and proactive public relations strategies. All the museums were actively engaged in these two concepts and considered them to be important in effective museum communication. Before these results are discussed, however, a little background is needed about each museum’s mission and structure.

Three of the six museums that responded to the interview request are art museums. One reason for this is the abundance of art museums in large cultural centers like cities. One museum is unaccredited but has significant prestige within the museum community for its innovative techniques in museum communication. Therefore it was included in the data. Below are short informational summaries of the museums.


Founded by a nonpartisan foundation called the Freedom Forum this museum focuses on the past, present and future of journalism. The Newseum’s mission statement aims to educate, “the public about the value of a free press in a free society and to tell the stories of the world's important events in unique and engaging ways” (Newseum, 2010). Only three years old at its downtown location, the museum focuses on the history of news and the First Amendment while providing interactive experiences to its visitors (Newseum, 2010).
2. The National Building Museum - Washington, D.C.

Congress created the National Building Museum in 1980 in an effort to advance, “the quality of the built environment by educating people about its impact on their lives.” As the museum’s mission continues, it also wants to be used as a place for debate and discussion about the built environment and its impact. The built environment includes subjects like development, architecture, construction and engineering, interior design, landscape architecture, and urban planning. As a non-profit organization the museum accepts support from individuals, corporations, foundations and partnerships (National Building Museum, 2010).

3. The Getty Museum - Los Angeles

Opened in 1954 by J. Paul Getty in his home, the museum housed ancient Mediterranean artifacts of personal interest to Getty. After his death, his fortune was established in a trust in order to continue the museum’s mission to diffuse “artistic and general knowledge” (The Getty Museum, 2011). This large trust was then used to expand the museum as well as create other research and centers in the Getty name. The Getty Trust is the museum’s main source of income making this museum atypical as it does not have the non-profit financial structure of the other museums (The Getty Museum, 2011).

4. Art Institute Museum - Chicago

Founded as both a museum and a school in 1879 the museum began with a hope to both exhibit diverse forms of art as well as be a partner in arts education (The Chicago Art Institute, 2011). The museum’s mission to “collect, preserve and interpret works of art of the highest quality, representing the world's diverse artistic traditions, for the inspiration and
education of the public,” helps carry its 132-year legacy forward as a leading American Arts Institution (The Chicago Art Institute, 2011).

5. Museum of Modern Contemporary Art - San Diego

After being founded in 1941 in La Jolla, California, in the home of philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps, the museum expanded in 1993 to include a downtown San Diego location. The two locations share the same mission and work to, “serve diverse audiences through the exhibition, interpretation, collection, and preservation of art created since 1950” (The Modern Museum of Art San Diego, 2011). The museums also aim to provide, “public access to contemporary art, artists, and the creative process; a forum for the exploration and understanding of contemporary art and ideas; and a laboratory for artists to experiment with new forms of creative expression (The Modern Museum of Art San Diego, 2011).

6. The City Museum - St Louis

A unique “museum” of sorts, the City Museum was founded in 1997 by sculptor Bob Cassilly as a place to explore the different aspects of St. Louis through the materials that make up the city. The space is described as an, “eclectic mixture of children's playground, funhouse, surrealist pavilion, and architectural marvel made out of unique, found objects” (The City Museum, 2011). The interactive and ever-changing exhibits of different found objects displayed through an artist’s vision make this a nontraditional museum. It is not accredited by the AAM since it is a for-profit institution and lacks certain educational standards. However, it is regarded in the industry as being innovative and in the same genre with other museums because of its artistic mission and interactive qualities aimed at the public. This museum will
be used as an outlier for the traditional museums in terms of its unique communication strategies.

**Social Media**

The use of social media by museum communication departments helps the museum to generate interest, foster community and connect with past and potential visitors. All the museums interviewed are engaged in multiple social media platforms with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr among the most popular. However, there are differences in the extent to which social media is being used to further a museum’s message. One example of innovative social media use can be seen through the City Museum in St. Louis. Rick Erwin, director of the City Museum, says social media is the most important tool his museum uses to interact with the public. The City Museum does not use traditional advertising and besides its website and cites social media as its *only* communication outlet. When traditional advertising was not showing a return on investment, the museum updated and concentrated its efforts online as a more practical and cost efficient way to stay in touch with its audience. Facebook and Twitter are especially used to promote, inform and entertain while hopefully helping to bring in visitors through word of mouth. By increasing its social media presence the museum found more people were actually visiting the museum and becoming active on its social media. As of February 2011, the museum had already thrown one social media party for its Facebook friends or fans and is planning more in order to keep people interested and engaged online and in person. Erwin says he believes the personal nature of social media allows the public to feel closer to the museum and in turn become more invested in its uniqueness (Erwin, 2011). While social media is not a new tactic for non-profits with small budgets, it is interesting to see a for-profit institution like The City Museum limiting its exposure but seeing good results.
Erwin says that the museum has not suffered since focusing its communication efforts online and that now the money usually reserved for other communications can be used elsewhere (Erwin, 2011). The museum’s unique mission and word of mouth status in the community accounts for the success and is considered an unusual case study within the museum community.

Another example of social media being used in a different way can be seen through the Newseum in Washington, D.C. At this museum social media is controlled and updated through the web department instead of the communication department. The Newseum sees social media as an extension of the web and in turn designated it to the web department. The communication department, as well as other departments, has input into what is said over its social media channels but ultimately the web department has oversight. This technical approach to social media as a function of the Internet is very different from the City Museum’s communication approach that emphasizes the message over the technology (Thompson, 2011). According to the Newseum’s Media Relations Coordinator Jonathan Thomas, this is an issue in many museum communication departments. Social media is inherently technical because of its functions as an Internet based web application. But it is also increasingly being viewed as a communication tool because it is easy to update and can disseminate a message quickly and cost effectively. The Newseum’s struggle with where to house social media is not unique to the museum industry and can be seen across multiple disciplines. As social media becomes easier to use and more widespread, all businesses will be forced to consider just where social media fits into their organizations. However, with small budgets and even smaller staffs, museum communication departments need to use social media to its fullest effects in order to see results in visitor attendance and general awareness.
Other museums seem to fit into the gray area between the previous examples. Many museums, such as the Chicago Art Institute, employ a social media coordinator to oversee social media efforts within the communication department (Shalom, 2011). The National Building Museum uses working professionals on its social media platforms to help answer technical questions about engineering or architecture (Abrams, 2011). The ways in which a museum can use social media are endless and constantly changing in order to fit the museum’s mission and audience. A common thread among social media use is building the museum’s overall voice through these services. A museum has a wide range of activities, voices and concerns that need to be heard in order to best serve its public. And social media allows this to happen. Social media helps get the word out about a museum while engaging visitors with information and allowing them to create content. A museum’s organizational structure and mission allow it to utilize social media to its fullest extent. Museums have the ability to reach out to past, present and future visitors by updating relevant information about exhibits and projects. Museums have the ability to engage their audiences with new content made by the museum, artists or the audience. And museums also have the ability to have a conversation with publics about their wants, needs and interests. All these responsibilities are easily addressed through social media.

Other types of PR use social media to promote or sell a product, engage in customer relations and monitor media environments. A museum’s take on these activities is slightly different because of its cultural and community oriented position. Museums want to promote the institution in order to gain visitors but not at the expense of the audience’s patience. The National Building Museum uses its Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote upcoming exhibits, events and festivals but changes the message constantly in order to get the attention
of users. Their aim is not only to promote an event or exhibit but inform and educate the audience while doing so (Abrams, 2011). This kind of awareness and goodwill toward its audience is important in museum PR.

Another way museums use social media differently is when it comes to environmental monitoring. All the museum PR professionals say they welcome conversation about the museum but found they rarely had to come to the defense of a museum, artist or exhibit. In their experience, other users have come to the defense of the museum to explain, defend or rationalize an exhibit or artist. The City Museum, Chicago Art Institute and San Diego Contemporary Museum of Art all had instances of users or fans coming to the institution’s defense when negative remarks were made. While monitoring and facilitating the conversation through social media is a major function of public relations practice in organizations, it plays a smaller part in museum PR because of the users’ loyalty to the institution. The overall idea of connecting with a museum’s audience to create goodwill and conversation is what ties all the uses of social media together in museum PR. Its diverse uses and ideas about social media make museum PR unique.

Public Relation Strategies

A proactive approach to public relations is the best fit for museum PR because institutions are constantly pushing for coverage and exposure due to small operational budgets. The National Building Museum’s vice president of marketing and communications, Carol Abrams, sees this as a major difference between PR for a museum when compared to PR for other organizations. In her previous experience in the government sector of PR she found her actions and tactics to be more reactive to situations. In a museum setting proactive
tactics are more effective to get people engaged and involved with the museum: a goal of all museums (Abrams, 2011). Proactive tactics used across all interviewees include press previews of new exhibits, a strong social media presence, relationships with local and national media and constant communication with publics of donors, visitors, fans and educators. A key consideration for museum communication is gaining and maintaining interest before, during and after an exhibit. This kind of timeline for promoting and sustaining a message then forces the museum PR practitioners to constantly be changing the focus of the message despite the institution remaining the same. Therefore pitching stories for earned media becomes one of the most common aspects of museum PR. A museum has an advantage, however, if it has strong community ties with a hand in a diverse range of topics and subjects. Strong community ties allow for opportunities to piggyback the museum on other community happenings, projects or conventions. But it is up to the PR professional on staff to create these opportunities for earned media across diverse subjects to elevate their museum’s exposure. Other organizations also strive for earned media but few can stake a claim in such a range of topics like a museum can. The fluidity of a museum’s definition allows it to interact with audiences interested in education, conservation, research, culture, history or entertainment.

Budget constraints on all museums typically force the communication department to try to do a lot with very little. Jocelin Shalom, the social media coordinator at the Chicago Art Institute, says that many people don’t understand how the budget works at a museum. They assume that an impressive (and often expensive) exhibit means that the museum must have the funds to finance all its departments. This is not the case. According to Shalom, money is typically allocated to specific projects or exhibits, not departments. So if the museum receives a million dollar endowment for an exhibit, other departments can use none of that money for
operation costs. This misconception often makes it hard to raise money for more well-known museums with significant funding for their exhibits (Shalom, 2011). This is another unique concern for museum PR because as a fundraising non-profit they have a different set of concerns on how to raise money both for the museum and its operations. Museums like the Getty, however, with a trust to fund its operations, still works with a relatively small budget. The museum’s first obligation is to the cultural artifacts it houses (Jaskol, 2011). Shalom defined PR’s role in a museum as one of a guardian. She says a museum’s goal is to protect and guard its artifacts for the benefit of the public (Shalom, 2011). This idea holds the tactics and strategies used in museum PR to a higher standard since they are conducted in the public’s best interest. A lot of non-profits see their call to action through a cause or situation that needs to be remedied. Museums have an ongoing goal to guard their artifacts and keep operating while being of service to the public.

Therefore a museum’s public relations strategy can be seen in a different light in comparison to other organizations. Most public relations departments are committed to defining their unique communication problems and then making a plan of action to resolve them (Ehling, White, & Grunig, 1992). Museum communication efforts tend to be less centered on problems and more focused on outreach and visibility. This is what makes their proactive strategies stand out when compared to other organizations that react to problems as they arise.

**Conclusions / Further Research**

Public relations in a museum has a unique set of standards and communication goals. Museum PR is a relatively new area in both public relations and museology, with little being
published on it in the past 30 years. As museums grow and enhance the visitor experience, public relations will be a more important tool to connect to their publics on a local, national and international level. When considering the historical models of public relations, museums are moving from a public information model to a more two-way symmetric model. This is because as the museum has become more engaged in communication efforts with its publics a two-way conversation has begun. Museums are no longer a hands off experience. They are becoming more interactive with an audience that wants a physical experience that combines artifacts, information and history.

The evolution of the museum can best be addressed with good communication practices that allow the audience to see the changes and become involved. The use of social media outreach and proactive PR strategies are just a few examples of how museum PR is differentiating itself from other PR specialties. The industry is still small but should have a niche in the realm of public relations.

Despite its size, museum PR would benefit from more scholarly research and review in order to become a more legitimate PR subset. The scope of this paper’s research is small and would have benefited from a larger sample of museums from every region of the US. However, this kind of research should be conducted by an industry association like the AAM because of its professional status in the museum community. In-depth case studies into successful public relation departments in museums would also add value and information to this area of PR. It would also help to identify common goals and strategies used at large museums that could be implemented in other institutions. It is important though to remember that smaller museums often have cost efficient and creative ways to communicate with its
publics that should also be recognized. Overall, museum PR still has a long way to go before being recognized as a PR subset but has shown significant growth in the past decade.

Appendix

Email Pitch

Hello_________,

My name is Julie Black and I am a public relations graduate student at American University in Washington DC. I am currently working on my master’s thesis that focuses on public relations/communication in the world of museums.

I am interested in exploring how museums conduct public relations throughout the country. My main goal is to investigate museum PR as a subset of public relations and explore the similarities and differences between the two.

In order to fully understand this topic I am looking to interview public relation professionals currently working in museum PR. If you or someone in your communication department would be willing to be interviewed it would be greatly appreciated. I have attached a PDF detailing my research plan and general topics I would like to discuss. The interviews will be informal and used as qualitative data for my thesis.

Thank you for your consideration!

Julie Black
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Interview Questions

1. How does social media affect your PR strategies? Are you actively using it or have you not seen a real need for it? Examples of social media working or not working?
2. What PR strategies are most useful? Do you combine different aspects like media relations, promotion and event planning?
3. Who do you identify as your audience? How do you reach out to them?
4. Do you feel there are any unique ethical concerns?
5. Is there a separate strategy for donors? Do you consider them a part of your audience?
6. What do you think makes PR in museums different?
As a public communication master’s student I am currently focused on developing my thesis on museum public relations. I feel museum PR can be classified as subset of public relations because of its unique position in the marketplace. While many museums are also non-profits, I think a museum’s core strategies and goals for communicating with their publics should be different from other organizations. My thesis aims to look at the similarities and differences between public relations in museums compared to public relations in other organizations.

In order to gather qualitative data for analysis, I am conducting interviews with PR professionals working in museums across the United States. I intend to use this data to support my claim that museum PR is a growing subset of public relations that should be recognized. The interviews will be informal and conducted over the phone. Topics to be discussed include…

1. How museums are using social media
2. PR strategies used by museums
3. How museums reach multiple publics
4. Ethical considerations for museum PR
5. Donor relations

These general topics are where I want to start the conversation but I welcome any other ideas or topics. I hope to hear from you soon and would greatly appreciate any input you or someone else from the communication department might have on this topic. As a full time student my schedule is very flexible. Feel free to contact me by phone or email to set up an interview at your earliest convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you!
### Table 1

**Table 1 - Public Relations Models**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Press Agency</th>
<th>Public Information</th>
<th>Two Way Asymmetric</th>
<th>Two Way Symmetric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Model</strong></td>
<td>Propaganda</td>
<td>Dissemination of information</td>
<td>Scientific persuasion</td>
<td>Mutual understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source to Public</td>
<td>Source to Public</td>
<td>Source to Public with feedback to Source</td>
<td>Group to group and vice versa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Current Practice</td>
<td>Product promotion, sponsorship, theatre</td>
<td>Government, non-profits and business</td>
<td>Competitive businesses; agencies</td>
<td>Regulated businesses; agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Organizations using it today</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Table 2-1: Characteristics of Four Models Public Relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984)
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