David's vs. Goliath: The Self Promotion of Public Relations Boutiques Online

A Thesis submitted to Southern Utah University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Professional Communication

December 2014

by

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Abstract

The internet is a tool public relations practitioners have used in their work as the newest medium. The ease of distributing information online allows more work to be done in less time. This research project focused on the self-presentational strategies and impression management tactics small public relations boutiques use in their online “About Me” narrative sections and the messages they are portraying. The researcher evaluated narratives using a basic qualitative thematic analysis, 30 small PR boutiques around the United States utilizing websites to promote their business. For this research, Jones and Pittman’s taxonomy of self-presentation, developed from Goffman’s theory of Impression Management, was used to categorize rhetoric that emerges on each website. This taxonomy includes five tactics used during self-presentation including: ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication. Based on the conclusion, the researcher coded and evaluated the strategies most used by successful public relations boutique companies to advertise themselves to potential future clients.

Acknowledgements

There is no possible way I could have finished this thesis as well as my Master’s degree without the support of many influential people in my life. Finishing this research was the hardest thing I have done in my educational journey so far, but also the most rewarding.

I would like to thank my committee, first and foremost, Art Challis, for being supportive throughout all my crazy ideas and continual support and patience. Reading, rereading, and revising my paper was painful at some points I’m sure, but I truly appreciate it. It was a long process, but it was worth it. You gave me the confidence to push through all of the struggles I came across in this research.

Next, Ellen Treanor, for always pushing me throughout my entire time at SUU to focus on my PR niche and stick to it. She was the person who helped develop my love for the world of PR, and gave me the confidence to pursue what I am passionate about. I struggled with the assignment you gave me years ago to pick a company I would personally want to work for and develop a PR package for them throughout the semester. This assignment helped me see what I am truly passionate about. You helped me more than you will ever know.

Last but not least, Matt Barton, for all of your confidence and believing in me. You pushed me to get my Master’s degree and I am ever grateful for that. Also for giving me the opportunity to teach a class, regardless of my age. I had experiences in the department I would have never had without you. I appreciate all of your feedback and constantly pushing me to be better.

I would also like to thank my parents, Bruce and Diane Zylks, for their constant support of my education beginning when I was a little girl. You continually helped me throughout my life and taught me to be successful and strive for the best. I wouldn't be who I am today without you both.

I would like to thank my amazing husband, Clifford Peterson, for his continual support of gaining my degree and finishing this paper. It was quite the challenge for me, but he was there for me through all the highs and lows. Thanks for listening to me talk about communication theories and PR constantly, and for pushing me when I felt like giving up.

I would also like to thank God for his grace and love. Without him, I would be nothing.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

David vs. Goliath: The Self Promotion of Public Relations Boutiques Online

When contemplating ideas for a capstone, I knew I wanted to do something that would directly affect my future. I have always been intrigued by Public Relations and in particular the small companies I have studied and learned about throughout my undergrad and graduate studies. By far, the most intriguing PR Company I have come across was called 'Small Girls PR'. Two "small" or short girls began this company combining "new media with old-fashioned charm to craft meaningful dialogues between brand and consumer" ("Small girls big", 2013) The small dynamic of only 8 unique team members allows for eclectic work and strategies to be produced for top companies around the country. From the moment I laid eyes on the website I knew this is what I wanted to do with my life. I want to be one of those short girls who created this enthusiastic and energetic PR Company with less than 10 people on the payroll. So maybe I can never be short, but I can create a similar company with parallel values to Small Girls PR.

Small PR does more with less. They have the least amount of resources, but can blow large companies out of the water with their personal approach to the client and creative minds. Understanding just how their mindset works gives insight and guidance to anyone who wants to create and grow their own small PR boutique. Since this small but mighty "David" company is winning in a battle against the giant "Goliath", there must be a secret to their success. Rather than corner every owner of each boutique and ask them their secrets, I opted for a different approach. What better way to gain insights than reading an "About Me" section each PR boutique wrote about themselves? Since image is everything in the PR world, and these PR companies should know that by now, their own personal image should give clues to their perceived strengths.

Introduction

The field of Public relations has been around for quite a while, dating back to the early 20th century quite some time gaining good and bad publicity around the world (PRSA, 2009). The creation of large PR firms and more recently the influx of small PR boutiques, leaves room for research on each type of company and their strengths and weaknesses. With the addition of recent technology, it is easier than ever for PR companies to deliver information about themselves and their clients on websites and social media. How each of these companies displays themselves online could lead to a better understanding of what makes them flourish and what they believe their greatest strengths are.

The literature review gives an overview of the history of public relations, as well as defining it and explaining the sudden increase of small PR boutiques. The development of the Theory of Impression Management (IM) is explained and discussed. In addition, the Taxonomy of Self-Presentational Strategies developed from IM is presented and each taxonomy is defined. The Theory of Narrative Paradigm is also explored and explained.

This research will include an evaluation using a basic qualitative thematic analysis of self-presentation of small public relations companies or PR boutiques (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). The study looks at the narratives or information present in the "About Me" sections of multiple PR boutique websites. The coding for these websites was done with the taxonomy discussed above. Much research has been done regarding impression management strategies such as Gardner & Martinko (1988), Allen & Caillouet, (1994), Connolly-Ahern & Broadway (2007), Bolino & Turnley (1999). Never has the Taxonomy of Self-Presentational Strategies been used to analyze narratives generated by companies, including small PR boutiques. This type of analysis is critical in understanding what small PR boutiques believe and display as their most important attributes and skills. There were 30 companies evaluated by viewing their website. Each of these boutiques are currently successful in the US, mainly residing in large cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is a compilation of theories and history that explain how the field of public relations has arrived where it is today. The sections included in order are:

- Evolution of PR
- Definition of Public Relations
- Current Shift in Size
- Impression Management Theory
- Taxonomy of Self-Presentational Strategies
- Narrative Paradigm

Each of the theories and descriptions lay a foundation for this research project. How they all coincide with one another will be discussed. The evolution of PR and brief overview gives insight to the past trends and developments that have occurred. Understanding the past helps to better understand current trends and projected growth of the field of PR. The literature review does not intend to cover the vast history of PR, but merely tries to express the high and low points in the evolution of Public Relations.

Evolution of Public Relations

One of the pioneers of Public Relations, Edward Bernays (1952), writes that "the three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people" (p. 12). Public Relations dates back to some of the earliest times when people began to follow leaders. Throughout history, PR was used, even before the term "Public Relations" was created. Plato and Aristotle discussed 'sophists' who used persuasive communication to alter opinions, and Caesar used text to promote his military success for political gain (Perloff, 2010).

The origination of public relations is hard to trace, but in the US, it is agreed that corporate public relations began to boom during the Industrial Revolution with the rise of the railroad around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Logan (2014) states that "the need for public relations was precipitated by the needs of big business: to sell a product, respond to a crisis, avoid unfavorable legislations, or shape public opinion in some way" (p. 1).

Public Relations corporations have evolved over the years in technique, size and strategy. Ewen (1996) argues that the actual history of PR is a history of a battle for what reality is and how people will see and understand reality. Not only does PR adjust the medium it presents its messages through, but it deals with constant criticism from an audience perspective as a "corrupter of the channels of communication" (Henderson, 1998, p. 48). The evolution of this practice has been noted and studied alongside with the newest influence of social media and technology again changing PR.

Today it seems that public relations practitioners "skip traditional media relations" (Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011). The evolution of public relations and the work that is done by practitioners seems to be changing completely. The study of the effectiveness of the mediums used by PR companies has been researched, including the internet and social media and their impact (Watson, 2012). Although there are new mediums used to diffuse information, Watson argues that the "area of public relations is adopting whole-of-organization approaches to organizational communication similar to those promoted in the 1920s and 1930s" (2012). The public relation trend is repeating old tactics to gain back credibility in today's critical society.

Definition of Public Relations

A solid definition of the action of Public Relations has been heavily debated. Hutton describes it as “managing strategic relationships” (1999) while Grunig argues that it is “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” with an implication on the management part (1990). A more modern definition of PR is given by Brian Smith (2012):

> Of course, it could be argued that relationships already *are* the centralizing concept of the field of public relations. However, alongside the expansion of digital communication technology, social media, and competition from marketing, the public relations spotlight has been on the activities of relationship management, and these activities—which include engendering trust and commitment—often overlap with marketing (p. 838).

No matter the medium PR uses to present the message, it has a strong power to influence. Bernays (1928) believed the field of public relations to be one of the strongest powers anyone has to lead:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate the unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is true ruling power. We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested largely by men we have never heard of... In almost every act of our lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind. (p. 37)

Since there are multiple definitions that change according to the time period and communicator, it can be concluded that public relations is an ever-changing field that is adapted to individual organizations or people. The PRSA's widely accepted definition found on their website states, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (2009).

Public relations as a whole has completely immersed itself in technology allowing messages to be readily available to the consumer day or night. Since PR professionals are message creators and branders, it is interesting to question how they display their own messages and brand themselves on their websites. The narratives they strategically place on their websites lead to what impressions they want to portray.

Current Shift in Size

Not only have the mediums Public Relations practitioners use changed with time, but the size in companies has altered as well. The turn from large PR firms dominating the field, to small boutique public relations firms is evident. "The PR boutique model continues to grow in popularity as companies realize the value delivered by experienced, hands-on communication experts" (PR Boutiques, 2014).

Dietrich (2014) discusses the future of the field:

> The trend among communications firms is to focus on more than just earned media—so clients can hire one organization, get them ingrained into the business as deeply as if they are employed there, and give them the keys to the customer-facing doors. It used to be PR professionals were hired for their relationships with the media. Today they are hired for their skills in communicating with customers, prospects, critics, and shareholders.

> There is not a deficiency in Fortune 500 PR companies, but recently there has been a boom in small PR "boutiques" (p. 139).

Prosek argues "we and other small firms such as ours have a unique advantage—something our sizeable competitors cannot provide… We can go places and do things that are just not practical for a firm with greater heft" (Prosek, 2002, p. 46). It is evident that the ease of technology and social media has made the field of PR easier. Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) write that most public relations professionals say that "the use of communication technology has made their job easier by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences" (p. 412).

With a growth in small PR, there comes growth in the dissemination of information. Along with the information they display, lies the impressions small companies give to their clients, consumers, and the world. How these small companies plan to make their first impressions can make or break them.

Impression Management Theory

Defining Impression Management

Impression management, or self-presentation, is the "process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34). Further explained, IM is "concerned with the behaviors people direct toward others to create and maintain desired perceptions of themselves" (Gardner & Martinko, 1988, p. 321). Goffman argues that "when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him" (p. 120). In this task to seek out information of others, "they can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is" (Goffman, 1959, p. 120). The two different ways we gain impressions from others allow for two different actions including "the expression that he gives and the expression that he gives off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 120). The individual giving information about his or herself has full control of the message they want to present. Goffman argues that a person can express themselves in such a way that will lead others to act voluntarily in accordance with their own plan. Leary and Kowalski (1990) write "because of the impressions people make on others have implications for how others perceive, evaluate, and treat them, as well as for their own views of themselves, people sometimes behave in ways that will create certain impressions in others' eyes" (p. 34). Ultimately, impression management is how individuals form, sustain, defend, and enhance their social identities.

Impressions and Performances

Originally, Goffman explained IM in a metaphor to the complexity of an actor in a play presenting his character to an audience. Comparing strategic interpersonal behavior to acting has been noted back to Plato when he argued that the universe is the stage of human life (Carone, 2005, p. 184). Shakespeare built upon this ideology with a monologue that argues "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (1599, 2.7). Goffman's theory builds upon Plato and Shakespeare by comparing impression management to a theatrical performance in front of an audience explaining each part of a show to the presentation of self. His connection of the "performance" to impression management is "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1959, p. 123).

It is noted that most "performers" or individuals will offer impressions of themselves in an idealized view. Depending on the situation, an individual will express information about themselves to reflect their best self. A justification for this is Cooley's (1992) view:

> If we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or "train ourselves from the outside inward?" And the same impulse to show the world a better or idealized aspect of ourselves finds an organized expression in the various professions and classes, each of which has to some extent a cant or pose, which its members assume unconsciously, for the most part, but which has the effect of a conspiracy to work upon the credulity of the rest of the world (p. 352).

Overall, the "selves that are presented to others are consistent with the self-concepts that individuals privately hold of themselves or perhaps slightly exaggerated in favorable directions" (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005, p. 470).

History of Impression Management

Goffman's theory of Impression Management was originated in 1959 in his book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Many frameworks and theories have branched off of the idea of self-presentation. Schlenker and Leary (1982) made it clear that self-presentation does not have to be deceptive. They argue "self-presentation involves bringing actual attributes or accomplishments to the attention of others, perhaps by performing meritorious deeds in their presence and presenting vertical information in ways that could generate optimal effects" (1982, p. 644).

There are several theories and frameworks based on Goffman's theory of IM, but "Jones and Pittman (1982) taxonomy has remained as the popular theoretical model that has been empirically validated” (Chen, 2014, p. 3). This framework will be used in this particular study and will be further discussed below.

Impressions and Public Relations

Although this theory originated with the idea of presenting the self, public relations has coined the term to describe the process of how they form a public image. Allen and Cailouet (1994) argue that organizations, like individuals, are “actors” engaging in “performances” in various ‘settings’ before ‘audiences’. Studying and understanding the impressions PR companies are important since “these messages potentially build and shape public perceptions of legitimacy” (Johansson, 2007, p. 278).

Previous studies note that interpersonal communication helps a PR campaign, but it is suggested to further research the “relationship dimensions of each major category of stakeholder; and to analyze interaction patterns in order to understand how organization and stakeholder words and actions affect the development of their relationship” (Johansson, 2007, p. 278). Johansson (2007) demonstrates the importance for studying the impressions PR companies give off, and suggests future research questions what impressions public relations practitioners and individual managers consciously and unconsciously create and communicate in different settings. It is vital to understand the institutions people work for in order to improve them.

Taxonomy of Self-Presentational Strategies

Defining Strategic Self-Presentation

Jones and Pittman’s (1982) work relies on Goffman’s “label of self-presentation” but proclaims to give a more clear identity of it due to a lack of knowledge in previous research. Formally, they define strategic self-presentation as “those features of behavior affected by power augmentation motives designed to elicit or shape others' attributions of the actor's dispositions" (p. 233). One major point Jones and Pittman accentuate is that "it is also by no means implied that strategic self-presentational features are necessarily false, distorted, or seriously discrepant from the phenomenal self" (1982, p. 233).

Five Classes of Self-Presentational Strategies

Jones and Pittman (1982) offer a taxonomy of the five classes of self-presentational strategies. It is noted that the five rubrics are not entirely exhaustive, but they do "encompass most instances of strategic presentation" (p. 235). These include: ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication which will be further discussed below.

Ingratiation

Ingratiation, or the attribution of likeability, is the first class of behavior Jones and Pittman offer in their taxonomy of self-presentational strategies. Most individuals present themselves in a way to get others to like them or to "attribute to us such characteristics as warmth, humor, reliability, charm, and physical attractiveness" (1982, p. 235). It is noted that this class is universal and "undoubtedly the most ubiquitous of all self-presentational phenomena" (1982, p. 235). Formally defined in Jones and Pittman's original work, ingratiation is "a class of strategic behaviors illicitly designed to influence a particular other person concerning the attractiveness of one's personal qualities" (1982, p. 235). It is argued that ingratiation can be accomplished by favors or the use of flattery to "elicit an attribution of likability from observers" (Bolino & Turnley, 1999).

The general process of ingratiation is outlined by three main determinants. These include incentive value or "the importance of being liked by a particular target" (Jones & Pittman, 1982,

p. 236). The next is subjective probability or the probability of success of credibility. The last being perceived legitimacy or "the extent to which one's presentations of self are consistent with the phenomenal self and with the norms governing acceptable departures from candor" (1982, p. 236). Jones and Pittman argue that "ingratiation is likely to be perceived as legitimate in settings where self-salesmanship is sanctioned by the individualistic norms of the business world" such as during a job interview (1982, p. 238).

Intimidation

In contrast to ingratiation, intimidation is where someone convinces the audience they are dangerous. Jones and Pittman (1982) describe this rubric as a person who "has the resources to inflict pain and stress and the inclination to do so if he does not get his way" (p. 238). Overall, intimidation uses fear tactics to get the desired end result. Jones and Pittman argue that "interpersonal power may be exerted by credible threats that create fears of negative consequences for a target person" (1982, p. 240).

Self-Promotion

Self-promotion is when an individual "seeks the attribution of competence, whether with reference to general ability level… or to a specific skill" (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 241). Resech conducted by Lewis and Neighbors (2005) expresses that self-promotion occurs when "individuals call attention to their accomplishments to be perceived as capable by others" (p. 470).

Exemplification

Similar to self-promotion, is the exemplification process. The individual wants to be respected and admired. The difference lies within the way they are admired. Exemplification "seeks to project integrity and moral worthiness" (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 245). Not only does this process include viewing the individual as morally worthy, but also honest, generous, and self-sacrificing (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Supplication

Jones and Pittman's (1982) last rubric in their taxonomy is supplication or "the strategy of advertising one's dependence to solicit help" (p. 247). This strategy is argued to be used when there is a lack of any of the other self-presentation tactics. Overall, it occurs when "individuals present their weaknesses or deficiencies to receive compassion and assistance from others" (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005, p. 470). This strategy is demonstrated when someone advertises their incompetence about something.

Taxonomy and Public Relations

Taxonomy and public relations research has been done on the information companies present online. One example includes Ahern and Broadway's (2007) study of the impressions large PR corporations were displaying on their websites featuring Jones and Pittman's taxonomy. Their quantitative findings suggest that corporation's websites focus mainly on competence and exemplification. Although they studied PR, their limitations suggested the need to generalize smaller corporations, since they used the Fortune 500 list as their sampling frame. There was a lack of information presented on PR boutiques and the information they present on their websites.

Narrative Paradigm

Defining Narrative Paradigm

Fisher originated the narrative paradigm in 1984 after he came to the realization that humans are rhetorical beings. Simply put, this paradigm argues that "humans are essentially story tellers" (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). Fisher further elaborates that stories or rather narratives are the "basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions" (1984, p. 2). These narratives enable us to understand one another because "we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives" (Fisher, 1984, p. 8) Fisher makes it clear that "if the narrative paradigm celebrates anything, it celebrates human beings, and it does this by reaffirming their nature as storytellers. It affirms narration as individuated form and as a genre" (1989, p. 56). Although this paradigm focuses on stories, it "does not deny the utility of drawing distinctions regarding macroforms of discourse—philosophy, rhetoric, poetic, and so on—or microforms of discourse—myths, metaphors, arguments, and so on" (Fisher, 1985, p. 347). Fisher (1985) further argues:

> There is no genre, including technical communication that is not an episode in the story of life and is not itself constituted by logos and mythos. Put another way: Technical discourse is imbued with myth and metaphor, and aesthetic discourse has cognitive capacity and import. The narrative paradigm is designed, in part, to draw attention to these facts and provide a way of thinking that fully takes them into account (p. 347).

The narrative paradigm is used to recognize stories used in everyday life whether it be in a speech, writing, online blogs, or other forms of communication. The idea is that everyone uses stories since everyone understands stories.

Fisher (1985) notes in his elaboration of the paradigm it's comparison to Goffman's theory of impression management. He states that the goal of Goffman's theory is "effectiveness and success." He continues by stating that not only is knowledge power of things in this situation, but that Goffman's theory is that "knowledge is also power over people" (p. 349).

Goffman's (1974) theory of Impression Management explains that humans tell stories to present themselves in a particular way:

> I am suggesting that often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows. And observe this theatricality is not based on mere displays of feelings or faked exhibitions of spontaneity or anything else by way of the huffing and puffing we might derogate by calling theatrical. The parallel between state and conversation is much, much deeper than that. The point is that ordinarily when an individual says something, he is not saying it as a bold statement of fact on his own behalf. He is recounting. He is running through a strip of already determined events for the engagement of his listeners (p. 508).

History of Narrative Paradigm

As discussed above, Fisher created the narrative paradigm in 1984. He was interested in the comparison of narratives to the rational paradigm, which dates back to Aristotle's time. He suggested that both paradigms "represent and inform the various ways humans recount and account for human choice and action" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 144).

Narratives and Public Relations

Public relations is a field where perception is important. It is of utmost importance to tell a client's story, but in order to gain a clientele; they need to tell their own story first. The current yellow pages, aka google, allow each company to create its own webpage to stay in the game. How they word what they are all about, tells their story that may make or break future business. It is also noted that how a company sees itself is usually correlated with how they are in reality (Cooley, 1992).

The narrative paradigm does not necessarily have a strong connection to PR in past research. For this study, the narrative paradigm is used to explain the texts evaluated and in what form they are presented. The narrative paradigm doesn't need to focus on the connection to PR, but rather the narratives presented on a PR website.

Rationale

People who need information turn to the internet for fast results. As of March 2014, over 87% of American adults use the internet (Fox & Rainie, 2014). It is easy to type in a specific idea on a search engine and in return hundreds of websites pop up. Businesses understand the need to have a website since 47% of people rely most on the internet for information (Rampton, 2011). A Forbes magazine contributor (Anderson, 2013) elaborated:

> I know that when I'm looking for a local business to deal with – from a handyman to a florist, a restaurant to a seamstress – the first place I look is online. And if I find that the store or restaurant or service provider doesn't have a website – or has one that clearly

> hasn't been updated since 2003, or doesn't provide an email address or phone number on the home page – I discount it immediately. I assume (rightly or wrongly) that the enterprise is unprofessional and low quality.

The way consumers make judgments about a website can vary from the design, color, and most importantly text. Websites have the opportunity to describe their business in their own words using narratives. The "About Me" section of a business website can use a variety of tactics to describe what they believe they do best, what they stand for, and how they fit with the consumer. These self-presentational strategies can either help or hinder each business, but ultimately the information portrayed will most likely contain truths about the company. These businesses choose what impressions they want to convey and how they want to convey them. There has been an influx of research concerning impression management, self-presentational strategies, and the narrative paradigm, but never together have they analyzed online stories businesses tell about themselves. The connection between impression management and self-presentational strategies is understood easily since one is based upon the other. The connection of these two theories and the narrative paradigm leaves room for explanation. For this research project, understanding the narratives or stories PR boutiques are telling on their websites is crucial to how these boutiques want to be perceived. Each boutique uses stories to portray their strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 3: Proposed Research Method

PR Sample

The sample for this research included 30 PR boutiques that specialize in brand and product development in the health, beauty, fashion, and consumer product industries. These can be seen in the Appendix. Many of these boutiques feature all of the specializations listed. This industry of public relations was selected to reduce the vast genre of public relations to a small sample which is of interest to the researcher. A small PR company or "boutique" for this study can be understood as one who employs fewer than 20 people. Each of the boutiques "About Me" sections of PR websites were analyzed.

Analysis

The methodology for this research project is a basic qualitative thematic analysis. According to Attride-Stirling (2001), there are three stages of analysis of thematic networks to break down the text. These include coding materials, identifying themes, and constructing thematic networks. The first step includes devising a coding framework and breaking up the text into segments using the coding framework. Step two for most qualitative analysis includes abstracting themes from coded text segments and refining them. For this research, no themes were abstracted and refined. This research "integrates existing theory with patterns identified in the data" (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). The themes used to sort the text segments were the five strategies found in Jones and Pittman's (1982) self-presentational taxonomy that cover most instances of strategic presentation. The following basic definitions of each tactic were used to sort the segments.

Tactics	Definitions
Ingratiation	Website provides speech that displays flattery to the audience or displays attractiveness to gain likeability. Examples could include speaking highly of potential clients, or speaking about themselves with humor, charm and attractiveness.
Intimidation	Website issues a warning as a threat using fear tactics and stress. Examples could include threatening the experience a person may have or have had with another company.
Self-promotion	Website calls attention to the boutiques accomplishments. Examples could include previous work they are proud of, or awards they have obtained.
Exemplification	Website expresses the integrity of the boutiques. Examples could include honesty, generosity, self-sacrifice, etc.
Supplication	Website promotes incompetence in particular areas. Examples could include lacking certain attributes larger firms may have.

As noted above, these rubrics are not entirely exhaustive, so they were divided into subsections for this research. Some of the selected text may ended up in more than one category. This is discussed further in the limitations section. Each of the six taxonomy structures will be defined in detail, illustrated with examples found on the PR websites, and interpreted. Each website may use multiple structures from the taxonomy so each will be evaluated separately.

Chapter 4: Results

As discussed above, Jones and Pittman's (1982) self-presentational strategies were categorized and studied in multiple communication settings. The five classes in the taxonomy include ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication. In contrast to most qualitative studies, these categories are not entirely exhaustive or exclusive. The illustrations of each class did fit into more than one category, or a new category or subcategory could be formed to further understand the self-presentational strategies used. Each of the categories are discussed below, as well as how each company presented itself online through narratives.

Ingratiation

As discussed earlier, Jones and Pittman define ingratiation as "a class of strategic behaviors illicitly designed to influence a particular other person concerning the attractiveness of one's personal qualities" (1982, p. 235). This theme is very similar to "self-promotion" and even led to some overlap between the two themes. When analyzing the websites, the definition used was that the website provides speech that displays flattery to the audience or displayed attractiveness to gain likeability. Examples could include speaking highly of potential clients, or speaking about themselves with humor, charm, and attractiveness.

Every website I read contained ingratiation within the narrative. The descriptions were usually very similar from website to website since they have similar backbones as a small company. Almost every website tried to get on the same level as the consumer by using rhetoric that made them seem very likeable and fun. *Small Girls PR* expressed its goal by saying, "*Small Girls* aims to build intimate, long lasting relationships with not just media but also clients, allowing ourselves to become an integrated part of your team, saving you a seat at the lunch table and splitting milkshakes on the boardwalk" (2013). This approach to gain likeability is aimed at leveling with the consumer and even becoming friends.

Another strategy used under the umbrella of ingratiation is speaking about attractiveness of the company other clients have noted. *Revolution PR* presents themselves by stating, "Our clients love us for our creative thinking, collaborative style and consistent ability to get amazing results. Our enthusiasm defines us. It is what makes us different. It is the determining factor in who we partner with, clients and vendors alike. The difference between good PR and GREAT PR is working with a firm that genuinely loves, values and identifies with its clients' products or services" (2013). *Ballentines PR* used this same tactic on its page by claiming, "BPR possesses the talent to spot emerging trends in the ever-changing world of the consumer market. Continually recognized for our creativity and expertise, we offer unlimited resources and capabilities. We are known for our high level of service and commitment to our clients, their products and causes" (2013).

Ingratiation also involved boutiques speaking highly of themselves overall. *Bella Public Relations* used this strategy throughout their narrative. They begin by stating, "*Bella Public Relations*, is a hip, stylish NYC based firm with a personal touch, that combines creativity, energy and proactive thinking to deliver clear results for our clients' business" (2009). *Charmed PR* also speaks highly of themselves in their intro by claiming, "We're passionate about who and what we represent and work hard to create results in the media that actually mean something" (2013). Another example of this strategy is demonstrated by *Pitch Public Relations*:

> Plain and simple. *Pitch Public Relations* is about pitching to the media. We get your story, your product, your service, yourself in the news in a big way. We're not talking

> advertisements or commercials here. We get companies featured editorially. So, how do we do it? Hey, we won't give away all our secrets. But we start with a roster of media contacts that are unmatched – from magazine editors to television news reporters and everything in between. Combine that with savvy story placement and an aggressive work ethic and bingo – you have a formula for PR success. (2010)

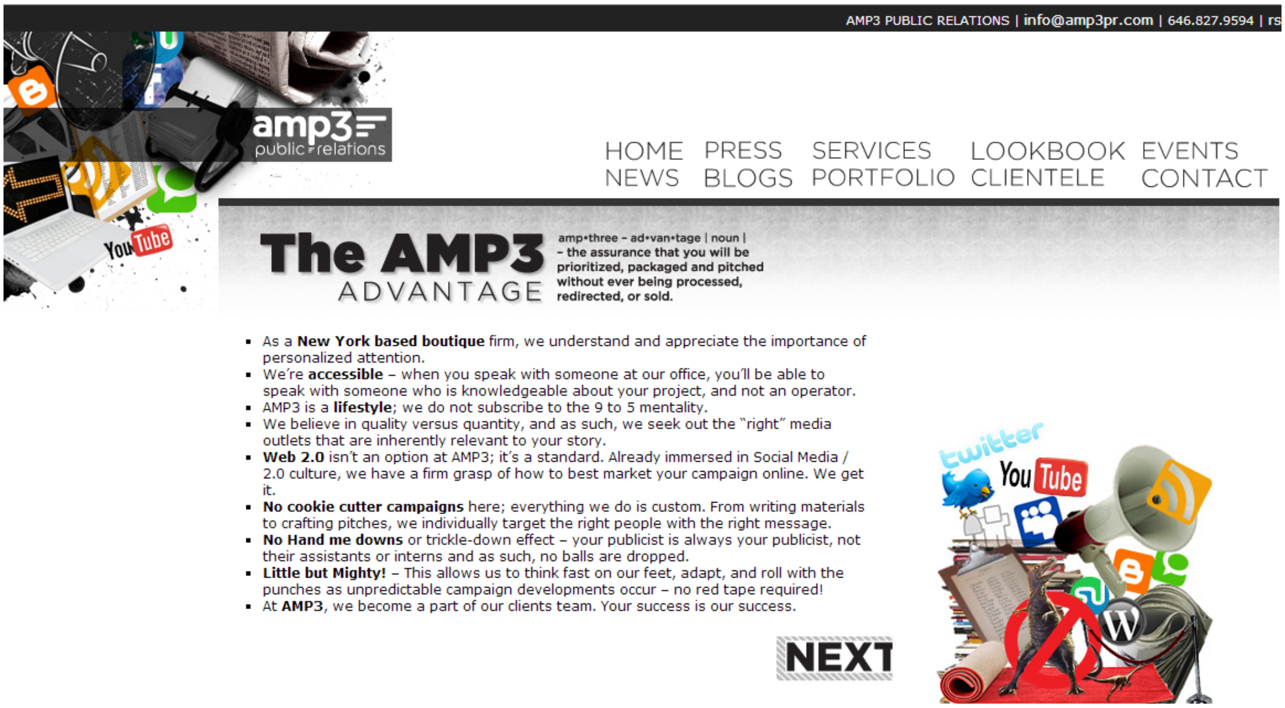
This tactic overall, had very high numbers with 49 instances where the boutiques used ingratiation as a way of talking highly of themselves. This was the second highest next to self-promotion. These two tactics were the most overlapping areas of the two since speaking about one's accomplishments or skills goes hand in hand with pushing attractiveness and speaking highly of oneself. It was noted that three categories seemed to emerge from under the umbrella of ingratiation. These included PR boutiques gaining likeablity through becoming real and suggesting a friendship, expressing why other clients loved their company, and just speaking highly about their talent overall.

Intimidation

In typical intimidation tactics, Jones and Pittman (1982) explain that an individual uses fear to threaten and place fear in others. For this particular study, the definition used is when the website threatens using fear tactics and stress. Examples could include threatening the experience a person may have or have had with another company. This tactic was used especially in the narratives when a boutique would explain the experience one might have with another larger company.

Ballantines PR Agency uses intimidation by stating, "Unlike larger firms, *Ballantines PR Agency Los Angeles* does not take a one-size fits all approach" (2013). The comparison to a potential experience a consumer may obtain from a larger firm is stated quite clearly.

AMP3 PR used bullet points to display the most instances of intimidation found in any of the narratives.



As displayed above in the screen shot, *AMP3*'s six out of the seven bullet points are using intimidation as a self-presentational strategy. They state their availability by claiming, "We're accessible—when you speak with someone at our office, you'll be able to speak with someone who is knowledgeable about your project, and not an operator." They continue to discuss their accessibility by stating "*AMP3* is a lifestyle; we do not subscribe to the 9 to 5 mentality."

AMP3 also threatens with an experience one might have with a larger firm by testifying, "No hand me downs or trickle-down effect- your publicist is always your publicist, not their assistants or interns and as such, no balls are dropped." They also state their beliefs in "quality versus quantity." *Pear Public Relations* makes similar claims upfront stating "[our] partners with motivated businesses seeking media attention regardless of their size or budget"(2013). *Limelight Public Relations* discusses two of their employees experience at national firms and how they realized “a big agency simply could not compete with the personal approach to client service they both preferred” (2013).

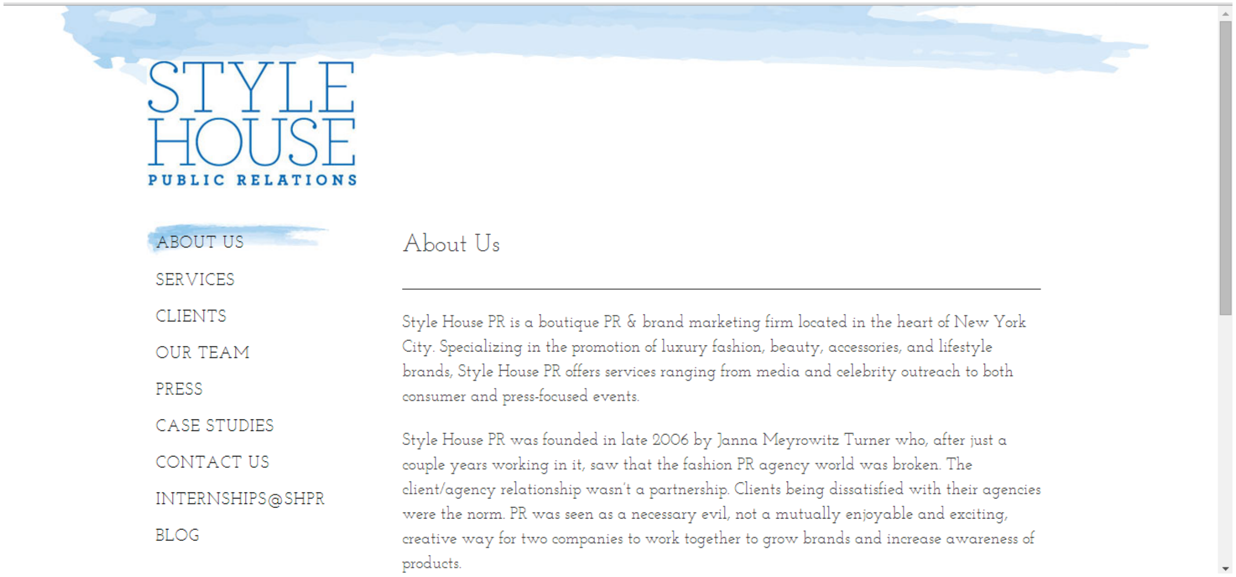
AMP3 also threatens the idea of receiving the same standard work for every client. They claim that there are “no cookie cutter campaigns here; everything we do is custom. From writing materials to crafting pitches, we individually target the right people with the right message.” *Global Media PR* makes the same claim (2014):

> As a small, boutique public relations agency, we believe that our personalized programs hands-on approach and direct involvement set us apart. We go beyond sending out a standard press kit and take no cookie cutter approach to develop campaigns and promotions that get top results.

Style House PR made a unique and bold claim about their founders experience in the field of PR (n.d.):

> *Style House PR* was founded in late 2006 by Janna Meyrowitz Turner who, after just a couple of years working in it, saw that the fashion PR agency world was broken. The client/agency relationship wasn't a partnership. Clients being dissatisfied with their agencies were the norm. PR was seen as a necessary evil, not a mutually enjoyable and exciting, creative way for two companies to work together to grow brands and increase awareness of products.

Style House used most of their “About Me” section on its website to defend this view point as illustrated below.

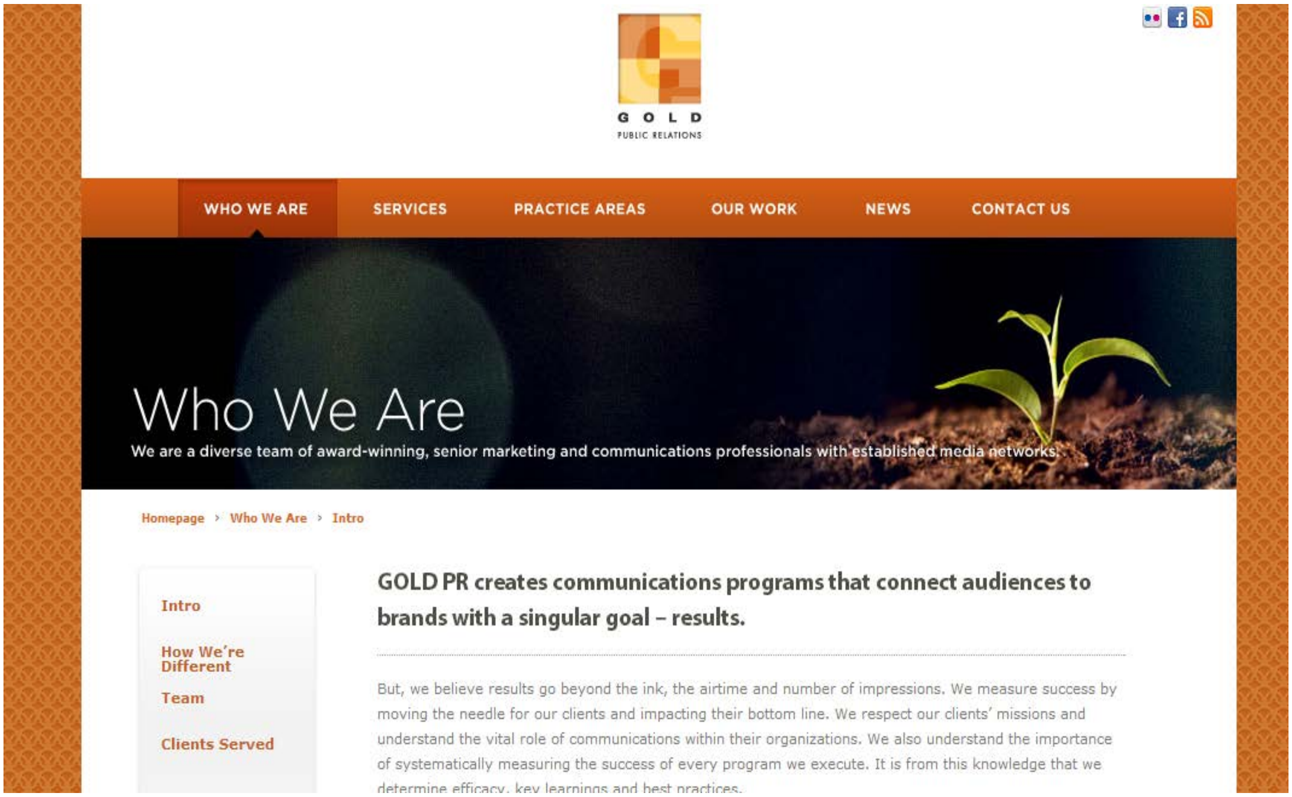


This strategy had the third highest count of examples found in the "about me sections" with 18 different instances. Almost all the examples were threatening experiences one would have with a larger firm as opposed to their small boutique. This suggests that rather than each boutique firm competing with one another, the main concern was competing with the large PR firms. Most of the claims made represented what traditional large firms are generally known for such as an impersonal experience, the 9 to 5 mentality, and cookie cutter work. Jennifer Prosek (2002) a partner in a midsized public relations firm expressed her firsthand experience discussing how they are different than a larger firm in their very first presentation meeting with new clients. She said, "Small firms can address these issues because they set us apart. We have the time and the individual relationships with our clients to do so. Many small firms do this now, and that makes a substantial difference in how they are perceived at the outset" (p. 48). With today's technology, each boutique has the opportunity to express its unique characteristics that set them apart from their largest competitor.

Self-promotion

As previously noted, Jones and Pittman’s (1982) definition of self-promotion is when an individual “seeks the attribution of competence, whether with reference to general ability level… or to a specific skill” (p. 241). For this particular study, the definition used when seeking out examples in the text is the “website calls attention to the company’s accomplishments.” Examples could include previous work they are proud of, awards they have obtained, or other accomplishments noted in the text. There were several subsections that were noted under the genre of self-promotion.

The first is the obvious call to awards earned or obtained. *Gold PR* bluntly says, “We are a diverse team of award-winning, senior marketing and communications professionals with established media networks. We are corporate communications refugees and former large agency executives” (2010). They illustrate the importance of this by placing this information twice on their webpage which follows.



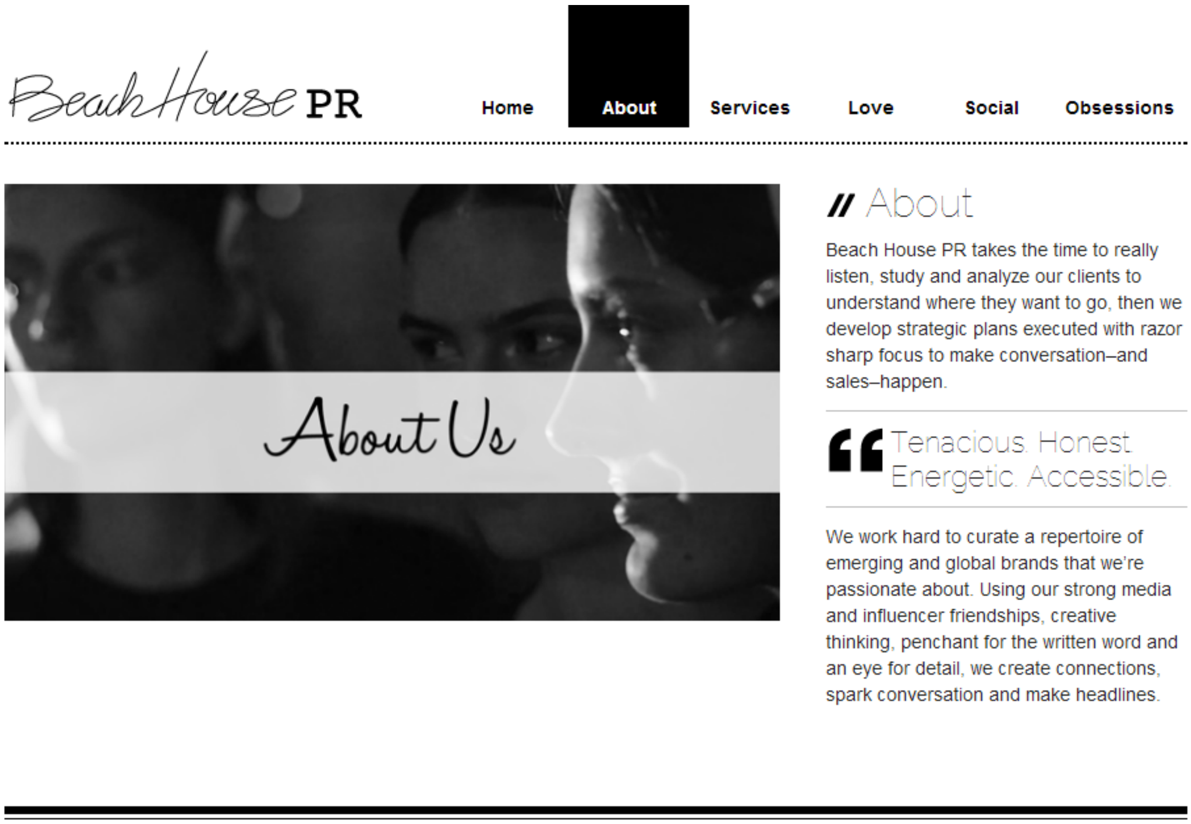
Small Girls PR also makes a claim to fame when they write, "Forbes listed Small Girls as one of the top 15 women-led startups in 2013 and NY Post heralded them "the reigning prom queens of the NY tech scene" (2013). *Limelight Public Relations* discusses their awards in a broad sense in their statement, "As award-winning writers, we know what the media want" (2013). As well as *Global Media PR* discussing, "We have a passion for what we do and offer our clients a dedicated team with an impressive track record in print, broadcast and web media on regional, national and international level" (n.d.). Although it is not clear what awards or "track records" these companies are claiming, it does beef up their perceived credibility as well as express their level of success compared to the other companies. But without the direct example of awards, they may be comparing apples to oranges.

The second theme that emerged under the strategy of self-promotion was speaking about particular brands the boutiques have worked for or fields they do work in. *Style House Public Relations* introduces themselves by discussing their concentration, “Specializing in the promotion of luxury fashion, beauty, accessories, and lifestyle brands, *Style House PR* offers services ranging from media and celebrity outreach to both consumer and press focused events” (n. d.).

Small Girls PR also makes a stab in this category by claiming, “The small firm has come to represent brands as big as Pinkberry, Flavorpill, and GE since opening their doors three years ago” (2013). *Small Girls PR* was very direct on who the big name clients they have done work for, but for the most part, companies stuck to discussing their fields. *Jeneration PR* said, “Our Los Angeles-based boutique public relations and marketing firm specializes in beauty, baby and lifestyle brands. We create strategic campaigns for our clients encompassing press placements, celebrity relations, social media, partnerships and more” (2014). It was quite common for each boutique to directly reference what type of work they do specifically, as well as clients they may have worked for previously.

The third theme noted was accomplishments and services done in a more general sense. *DNA Public Relations* said, “And the proof as they say, is in the pudding, with an extensive roster of digital, print, and on-air placements that we've garnered for our clients” (n.d.).

House PR also uses this approach in their claim that, “using our strong media influencer friendships, creative thinking, penchant for the written word and an eye for detail, we create connections, spark conversation and make headlines” (n.d.). *Beach House* used self-promotion in about half of their text as illustrated below.



Ink PR Group also makes a general claim:

> Our team brings decades of experience having worked across every aspect of the entertainment, lifestyle, consumer and corporate PR spectrum. . . Our proven track record shows how relentless we are when it comes to securing key press hits, creating brand identity with media and consumers, positioning products and services as must-haves, influencing the influential, and providing unmatched client service.

Ballentines PR makes a general self-promoting claim about its firm stating, "We have taken unknown and lesser-known products, destinations, properties, restaurants, technologies, philanthropists, talent/personalities and made millions of consumers aware of them" (2013). This bold statement shows that a general statement not specific to particular awards or brands can still have an influencing impact.

Self-promotion overall as a strategy had the highest of the five categories with 62 examples pulled from the websites. As previously discussed, the categories are not mutually exclusive, so some of the examples used in this area could have been categorized in multiple areas. It was most frequent however, to have a debate between self-promotions and ingratiation. This is explained best when compared to the claim that a square is always a rectangle, but a rectangle is not always a square. Whenever a website used self-promotion they were also using ingratiation, but just because they used ingratiation, it doesn't necessarily mean they used self-promotion. In most cases, these two tactics were used the most frequently, as well as hand-in-hand instances. They would be used in conjunction with one another to make a bold claim about a company's accomplishments as well to use flattering words.

Exemplification

Exemplification is a very similar tactic to ingratiation. The difference is how the individual or firm wants to come across. If their tactic displays intent to values of morality, it lies in the area of exemplification. For this analysis, the definition used was, "website expresses its own integrity. Examples could include honesty, generosity, self-sacrifice, etc."

Pear Public Relations uses this class of behavior in a simple claim of honesty by stating, "our approach to public relations is honest and fresh" (n. d.). *Lexington PR* claims to honesty and more on their page:

> At the heart of this success is an ability to generate fresh ideas and creative campaigns, a reputation for honesty and hard work, and a strong network of long-established relationships with producers, editors, writers, freelancers and bloggers across traditional print, trade, broadcast and digital media. (2013)

BeachHouse PR also uses honesty to describe themselves. On their site, they have in the middle four words assumed to describe themselves. They are "Tenacious. Honest. Energetic. Accessible. (n.d.). Although the word "honest" is the only one that fits into this coding category, it is notable that 'honest' was one of the only four words used.

Moderne Press discussed sincerity by stating "we feel passionately about working with boutique brands and value the long-term partnerships with our clients, as we assist in nurturing and cultivating their business" (2013).

Marquet Media directly addresses integrity on their website when they say, "As a digital lifestyle PR and marketing agency in New York City, we have developed a client service model based on three core values. They are quality, commitment, and integrity" (2012). They continue to explain their values as they break down the meaning of each one:

> Quality – We strive to provide the best possible strategic public relations and marketing counsel to our clients to ensure objectives are met. Commitment – Our clients always come first. We work with them 24/7 to ensure all of their objectives are met, both on time and on budget. Because we are passionate about what we do, we make sure our clients get the best return on their investment. Integrity – We believe that transparency, honesty, and humility are essential to building long-lasting relationships with clients and the media.

It was interesting to notice the lack of exemplification on each of the webpages. There were less than 17 instances of exemplification, and most were indirect in the claims. Many businesses pride themselves in their honesty and generosity, and display it to their consumers. It could be considered that honesty is implied already since a company is small that they are going to be upfront in honest since they are dealing directly with their clients. The distrust someone might have with a larger company could be solved without directly telling a person they are honest, but simply because they are less complex. It could also be inferred that there is no reason to not trust small boutique firms, where larger corporations have greedy histories thanks to Madoff and others of the like. Overall, the research shows a lack in PR boutiques directly stating their morality to the public. Whether this is harming or helping them can't be determined.

Supplication

Supplication is opposite of the four tactics previously discussed. This tactic seems to be a last resort in most instances. Supplication is defined as "the website promotes incompetence in particular areas." Examples could include lacking certain attributes larger firms may have. This tactic is used to advertise incompetence as discussed above. It seems this would be a weakness, rather than a tactic to gain a positive light on self-presentation, but in a roundabout way it gains pity from another person to elicit the desire to help them.

This tactic was used in only three instances in the sample text from the 30 websites. Most instances used spin to talk about negatives and make them seem positive. *AMP3 PR* uses the word "little" to describe themselves. They develop this into a positive by stating they are "mighty" and that their size "allows us to think fast on our feet, adapt, and roll with the punches as unpredictable campaign developments occur- no red tape required" (n.d.).

Pear Public Relations also discussed their lack of size as a negative. They then explained they didn't necessarily want to be the biggest when stating, "our desire is to be the BEST PR firm, not the biggest!" (n.d.). *Marquet Media* uses the same tactic as well explaining their small company, and then delivering more information to spin the idea of a small company may be better after all.

Supplication was used the least amount of times in this study with only 3 examples coded. It seems for good reason too. Stating only weaknesses about a company doesn't display confidence or give any reason to choose them. The instances where supplication was used always were spun in a positive way. Overall, supplication seems like a last resort tactic an individual may use to gain pity or help from someone else. In the business world however, it didn't play out to be a sound tactic to use on a regular basis like ingratiation or self-promotion do.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Limitations

This study gives a brief glance into the viewpoints of 30 boutiques and their narratives that they share online. This start in the field of PR boutique research in the realm of impression management is needed, but there were many research limitations for this study.

Although there was a significant amount of text analyzed from a population, the sample is still small compared to the number of boutiques in the US. The boutiques used in this study were conveniently found using key term searches on google. There are many sites that may not have shown up in the searches on the first few page hits.

This study dipped its toe into the giant pool of PR boutiques currently in business. This study also limited itself to the field of health, beauty, fashion, and consumer product industries to reduce the population. This section is just one small area of Public Relations boutiques that was studied. Although this study can be used as a guide for future research, it cannot be generalized to all PR boutiques as of yet. This information can only be generalized to the population of health, beauty, and fashion PR boutiques.

Although there was much rigor used while analyzing the text with the taxonomy, it can still be argued that each example coded could be placed in multiple categories since each one was not mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The researchers background or experience could have altered or affected the research results and which category each section of text was placed. A refined coding system could be generated for future research allowing less room for error.

As with any study using data found online, the study provides a brief description of the information seen during the study. Each website may be adjusted multiple times in the following years or even removed. The content on each page may be different today than when it was originally studied, so an exact replication of this study is not an option.

Another limitation is the information on each website may not represent the actual beliefs of each boutique. One individual could have written the text to be placed online, with only a few other members of the team briefly looking at it and giving it the green light to go on its site. All the researcher can learn is what the website is saying, which may contradict what the company itself believes is its greatest strength. Ideally, the belief that the text displayed online is synchronous with actual beliefs of the company, but it very well could be lacking on either end.

Future Research

To further study the websites of boutique companies, a new taxonomy that is exhaustive could be created in order to eliminate any potential error. In doing so, every website analysis should be the same no matter who is studying them. This is not to say this study is in error, but since the categories were not mutually exclusive or exhaustive, each coded text could have potentially been placed in multiple areas. For qualitative research, the quality of the text is of utmost importance. It is evident in this study how prominent the text needs to be through multiple examples of it in order to understand and analyze the sample and generalize on the population.

By conducting this study, future research can be done and compared to this study to see the changes in the small PR world. If small PR continues to grow, they may not have the ability to claim their status as "small" if that becomes the new norm. A study could then be done on how the larger firms are keeping up with the status quo.

Reviewing the changes each website has over the years may also give insight on the impressions each boutique wants to portray over time. Analyzing the website over many years could ultimately snapshot the growth of small PR and what their biggest strengths and competitions are. This study focused on one year in the influx of small PR, but the study of the evolution and growth of boutiques could give immeasurable guidance to individuals wanting to start their own small PR branch.

As previously discussed, there could be a gap between actual beliefs of what is the biggest strength and the views presented online. An in-depth interview with some employees compared to the online data collected could further the research and give insight on what is believed to be the biggest strength in person as opposed to online. There is much research done in the world of corporations and the lack of connection between perceived beliefs online and mission statements and the opinions of the employees, especially in large corporations.

Daniels, Spiker, and Papa (1997) discuss organizational communication downward, “One possible conclusion is that organization members receive too much of the wrong information. This does not mean that the information itself is in error. It means that much of the information that members receive may not be relevant to their personal job and organizational concerns” (p. 114). The advantages small PR boutiques have is the lack of a hierarchy. Daniels, Spiker, Papa express the horizontal communication strategy, “reliance on horizontal communication for decision making and problem solving does not mean that the process is more efficient than simple downward communication of decisions made at top levels of the organization, but horizontal communication may be more effective” (p. 118).

Conclusion

The results found in this study opens the doorway for understanding what boutiques believe to be the strengths great enough that they broadcast it to the world. Previous studies in the area of impressions and self-presentation are what guided this research and laid the perfect foundation to fully understand the narratives from a communication research viewpoint. The taxonomy outlined the five different classes individuals use when self-promoting which were directly applied to this study. Although scholars presented much research on self-promotion and impression management, there was little to no research done on PR boutiques and their narratives they display online as an insight to their believed strengths in conjunction with these studies.

Using a basic content analysis on the data found online allowed for an in depth examination of each section in the narratives. Studying 30 different boutiques wasn't a set number in a guidebook for qualitative research, but rather a decision by the researcher. Baker (n.d.) advises researchers to learn "what constitutes excellence rather than adequacy in your field" as well as being "aware of what type of evidence will satisfy their mentors, peers and readers and then making decisions regarding size, diversity and analysis"(p. 6). The narratives used gave a broad scope in the area of small companies representing health, beauty, fashion, and consumer product industries. The results varied enough from each website to give a solid understanding of the strengths of each company and allowed for comparison and evaluation. Using the text found online allowed for a true representation of the beliefs each company felt strong enough about to showcase them.

The results suggest that it is common practice to express negative experiences one might have with a larger company and then explain why that wouldn't happen with a small company. It can be inferred that the small size, as well as the benefits that come along with a boutique business, is one of the main strengths these companies believe to have over a larger firm. An interesting note is that none of these boutiques seem to see each other as a threat to business. They directly address experiences you may have with a larger firm, but not another small company in the PR world. Perhaps these boutiques don't see each other as a threat.

Noting the limitations and future research suggestions, this research gave insight to the impressions boutiques are giving off to the public. The generalized view of how these companies want to be perceived gives clues to how the companies truly run. Capitalizing on the size of these companies as a strength seemed to prove to be a commonality on each website. If the claims of small PR prove to be true, the field will continue to grow and strengthen. Studying small PR gives insight to individuals currently working for these small companies, as well as individuals pursuing jobs in these fields.

The strongest impression the researcher notes is the battle over large PR firms. It is obvious, any PR website's 'About Me' page would have Ingratiation and Self-Promotion, but after careful analysis, it is the Intimidation category that is of utmost importance for the boutiques. The largest competitor in more than one way is PR Firms that are established and well known. The choice most people don't have to think twice about is picking a well-known large company. Each PR boutique is fighting the battle as an underdog no one has heard of. It was evident that most of these boutiques understood that through their narratives presented online. Their claims that they don't do "cookie cutter work" or "no hand me down effect" or even discussing their availability all seemed to be aimed at the larger PR firms. This is where the idea of the David vs. Goliath effect comes in. David may be small, but he knows what tools to use to effectively win the battle against Goliath.

Many scholars and storytellers have referenced David and Goliath, but a modern take on the story is done by Malcom Gladwell. He tells *The Unheard Story of David and Goliath,* "So the Israelites up on the mountain ridge looking down on him [Goliath] though he was this extraordinary powerful foe. What they didn't understand was that the very thing that was the source of his apparent strength was also the source of his greatest weakness. And there is, I think, in that, a very important lesson for all of us. Giants are not as strong and powerful as they seem. And sometimes the shepherd boy has a sling in his pocket" (Gladwell, 2013). It is the same in the PR world. Boutiques know they don't have the size, but they don't necessarily need it to produce top quality work and customer service to their clients. Their strength lies in their dedication to their work, their pride in their size, and their drive to succeed. But overall, this isn't really a battle between 2 companies, but rather between hundreds of David's against the giant in a fight to create better service.

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Appendix

Public Relations boutiques and their respective websites analyzed using Jones and Pittman's (1982) taxonomy:

Boutique Name	Website
Small Girls PR	http://www.smallgirlspr.com/#!about_us/c161y
Melrose PR	http://melrosepr.com/about
Revolution Public Relations	http://www.revolutionpr.com/#about
Ballantines PR	http://ballantinespr.com/
Bella Public Relations	http://www.bellapr.com/
DNA Public Relations	http://www.dnapublicity.com/about-1/
AMP3 PR	http://amp3pr.com/
Victory Public Relations	http://www.victorypublicrelations.com/about/
Charmed PR	www.charmedpr.com
B Communications	http://bcommunications.ca/
Pear Public Relations	http://www.pearpr.com/
Lynn PR Mentality	http://www.lynnprmentality.com/who-we-are/
Limelight Public Relations	http://thelimelightpr.com/home-2/who-we-are-2/
Pitch Public Relations	http://www.pitchpublicrelations.com/
Blink PR	http://www.blinkpr.com/aboutblink.php
The Hip Event	http://thehipevent.com/about/
LaRue PR	http://www.laruepr.com/
Lexington PR	http://lexingtonpr.com/about/

Roz May Public Relations	http://www.rozmaypr.com/index.html
Moderne Press	http://modernepress.com/about-us/
Jane Owen PR	http://www.janeowenpr.net/#!who_are_we/c1vzv
Ink PR Group	http://www.inkprgroup.com/
Marquet Media	http://www.marquet-media.com/company/
Gold PR	http://www.goldpr.com/who-we-are.html
Jeneration PR	http://www.jenerationpr.com/about/
Global Media PR	http://www.globalmediapr.com/
Beach House PR	http://beachhousepr.com/
Patterns of Movement	http://patternsofmovement.com/
Gorgeous PR	http://www.gorgeouspr.com/contact.html
Style House Public Relations	http://www.stylehousepr.com/about-us/