



## Responding to Activism

I wrote the essay below for a quiz in Foundations of Strategic Communication Management with Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. The prompt for this essay was to explain why two-way symmetrical public relations is the most effective model (compared to the public information model, persuasive communication model, and traditional press agency model) in the face of activism. This essay provided me with an opportunity to think critically about how to engage external stakeholders, especially difficult-to-address groups like activists, trolls, and angry customers.

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A two-way symmetrical response is most effective in the face of activism because, when successful, it produces the following relational outcomes that are essential to resolving or even preventing power struggles with activist groups:

1. Control mutuality, or the balance of decision-making influence between organizations and activists,
2. Activists' commitment to maintaining a long-term relationship with the organization,
3. Activists' satisfaction in the relationship with the organization, and
4. Activists' trust in the organization's words and actions.

These relational outcomes are very much in line with the modern emergence of new power values like collaboration, sharing, participation, and radical transparency. They're also consistent with the new power model that transfers significant amounts of power and control from players "inside" the organization to stakeholders "outside" of it (e.g., activist groups).

When considering why two-way symmetrical communication is most effective in the face of activism, it's important to begin by examining the goals of activists. Grunig posits that "[t]he activist group's intent is to improve the functioning of the organization from outside" (p. 504). An activist group may target an organization in the hopes of changing a single business practice, or they may take aim at one leading organization with the goal of effecting some industry-wide change. In either case, activists are characterized by "motivation, fervor, and enthusiasm" and "will persevere until they achieve their goal" (Grunig, p. 504). It should come as no surprise then that "all activist groups studied [by Grunig] had disrupted the target organization. ... No case represented a clear victory for the organization" (Grunig, p. 523). Clearly, activist groups that prove salient must be dealt with.

Organizations can neutralize the threat posed by activist groups by engaging in two-way symmetrical communication that helps activists reach their goals. Hopefully, organizations engage in this work proactively by "constantly monitoring the organization's relevant publics, especially those that are active and antagonistic" (Grunig, p. 505). However, even if organizations respond reactively, their goals should focus on promoting understanding and cooperation, not a desire to persuade and control (Grunig, pp. 512-513).

Two-way symmetrical communication accomplishes those precise goals. It is authentic, inside-out dialogue. Using strategies like disclosure, task-sharing, and integrative negotiation, organizations that follow this model of public relations succeed in the face of activism because, according to Grunig, they:

1. Learn the negative and/or undesirable consequences of their words and actions,
2. Tell the public what they're doing about those consequences,
3. Communicate with activists continuously to navigate shifts in position,
4. Acknowledge activists' legitimacy without regard for their size,
5. Employ communication practitioners who possess the education and experience to do the work, and
6. Measure their effectiveness in terms of complex, long-term outcomes.

There are at least a few instances, however, in which other models of public relations become necessary, at least in addition to a two-way symmetrical model. For example, organizations may want to pursue a traditional press agency model if an activist group has utilized news media to escalate a controversy to a dangerously wide audience. In this case, it would behoove an organization to focus not just on long-term outcomes with the activist group, but on short-term outcomes (i.e., damage control) with a much larger, yet less engaged public. Similarly, organizations may want to utilize both a public information model (one way asymmetrical) and a persuasive communication model (two-way asymmetrical) if an activist group is completely refusing to engage with the organization. In this case, the organization is left with no other choice. Use of these other models of public relations should not be made lightly, though, because research indicates they are least effective in the face of activism.