Evaluating the customer service provided by public relations agencies using event history analysis

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Strategic Marketing (MM SM)

by

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DECLARATION

I, Hanleigh Joe Daniels, declare that this research proposal is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Signed at ....

On the .... day of .... 2021................

ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, the delivery of excellent customer service and its consequences, retaining current clients and gaining new business has become much more vital as the rapid onset of digital transformation has resulted in increasing customer expectations and demands, as well as competition in the market. This has become even more important recently with the global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the resulting lockdown to help curb the spread of the virus, that has resulted in cost-cutting measures within many businesses, the reduction of budgets and loss of business for many PR agencies across the country.

This research study set out to investigate the role and benefits that the use of event history analysis can play with regards to the analysis of the quality of customer service PR agencies delivers to their clients. The analysis therein, was therefore based on 12 interviews with PR and Communications managers, who are the clients of 7 predominantly Gauteng-based PR agencies. This was a convenient sample of representative industry players and it was possible for the researcher to draw tentative inferences from the research.

The research set out to ascertain if and to what extent critical service encounters related to customer service, as well as to what degree do critical service encounters reflect the value of the rendered service by the PR agency. Amongst other findings, the study showed that Critical Incident Theory can be a useful tool through which to investigate the customer service quality delivered by PR agencies to their clients. It can also provide actionable insights for these agencies to enhance their service to their clients.

DEDICATION

This thesis report is dedicated to my wife, Jennifer Daniels, who has been a constant source of encouragement over the course of my studies, as well as my two daughters Anna and Alexandra, who are a great source of inspiration for me, enabling me to do more and achieve more in order to provide them with more in life. This study is also dedicated to the Daniels family, in particular my grandmother, Johanna Daniels and mother Vasti Daniels, who have taught me what unconditional love is and whose lives are examples that attest to the value of hard work, and dedication to uplifting one's family and also for striving for the things that one wishes and aspires to achieve.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Vieira and Grantham (2014), there are five roles that public relations (PR) professionals perform, namely media relations facilitator, negotiator, policy advisor, brand custodian, and internal communicator.

Aspects, such as the latter, are often overlooked when it comes to defining success in the profession, because PR managers (as well as PR agencies to whom the public relation function is outsourced within many businesses) are normally evaluated in terms of the company's relationships with its external stakeholders (Smith, 2012).

In fact, within many organisations, the PR function is perceived to be of less business value compared to marketing and advertising for instance, largely due to the lack of a suitable and commonly agreed upon measurement and assessment of the value of public relations (Michaelson & Stacks 2014).

According to the CEO of global communications consultancy Ketchum, David Rockland, the value of public relations has in the past been mostly measured and evaluated in terms of advertising, through the measurement known as the Advertising Value Equivalence (AVE) (Ketchum 2016).

The clientele of PR agencies requires a way of measuring public relations campaigns and activities to gauge their return on investment, as well as to obtain insights into how they, together with their agency, use experience to make adjustments that refine and improve the efficacy of campaigns and events.

A common model for utilising AVE to evaluate and measure the performance of PR activities consists of multiplying the advertising rate card of a given publication or platform by a factor of three in order to ascertain the PR value (Goodwin, 2017). PR practitioners within companies or external service providers such as agencies, employ the AVE model to measure and evaluate the success of their PR campaigns, and thereby, justify their value to the business through an industry accepted business measurement.

While there has always been doubts about the reliability and validity of AVEs as a measurement of PR, Jeffries (2003) asserts that business customers (employing the PR services of agencies) and some industry professionals remain invested in its use because AVEs, at least on a surface level, appear to assign a monetary value to coverage obtained in the media through PR activities. Therefore, by extension, it allows PR professionals and their clients to compare the results of their campaigns with the performance of other marketing and communications campaigns, such as advertising or paid social media campaigns.

Kim and Rhee (2011) assert that this misses a lot of value added by the PR professional (or agencies) as the digital transformation of modern society has turned a company's employees into one of the most vital stakeholders and crucial brand advocates, both online and offline, for instance. Therefore, internal PR can play a role in cultivating better external relations and defending a business' invisible assets like its reputation (Berger, 2008).

Furthermore, as PR professionals increasingly employ modern communication channels to communicate with stakeholders such as social media networking sites, they need to be in a position to measure and evaluate the use of these in order to demonstrate their added value for the business or clients and how these support the goals and objectives of the business (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014).

1.1 Purpose of the study

The critical incident technique (CIT), also referred to as service encounters and the moments of truth model, utilises occasions of contact between a brand or business and a client (or employee as the internal stakeholder) that emanates in the client having the chance to formulate an impression of the brand.

Within a business-supplier context, the relationship is constituted from a range of service encounters (moments of truth) between supplier like the Client Relationship Manager (CRM) of the PR agency servicing the business and the employee (PR manager) of the organisation (Bitner, 1990). Moran, Muzellec, and Nolan (2014) add to this by stating that during these vital moments in time, the service provider can either delight the customer, disappoint the client, or can manage to capture their interest.

According to Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990), as well as Bitner (1995), clients make judgement calls about the quality of the service provided, their overall satisfaction with said service, as well as whether or not they are likely to continue partnering with this service provider, during these service encounters.

Every interaction and engagement holds the potential to become a moment of truth that either destroys the likelihood for a long-term relationship or augments the PR manager's chances of cementing a long-term partnership. However, not all customer interactions and engagements result in service encounters (Bitner, 1995).

Ultimately, the CIT is used to evaluate a company's service delivery or in this case, perform a communication audit on the level of PR service that a PR agency provides. Zwijze-Koning, De

Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 46) utilised CIT to evaluate internal PR practices used within three Dutch high schools and found that CIT has the potential to be used to “assess the quality of internal communication”.

As a result, the purpose of this research study is to firstly, determine whether those findings are replicable within a South African context, as well as within different industries other than education, such as a technology company or sportswear business, for example. Therefore, this paper evaluates the delivery of PR and strategic communications services by PR practitioners by using the event history analysis, which is a more scientific form of CIT.

Secondly, the research study provides recommendations for PR practitioners working within PR agencies, around practices as well as internal interactions that will help them deliver an enhanced level of customer services to their clients.

1.2 Context of the study

During the last few decades, the pace of technological innovation has rapidly increased and dramatically impacted the productivity of people, as well as the way in which they collaborate, communicate and work. Technology trends like mobility, cloud computing, machine learning, social networking, virtual- and augmented reality, as well as artificial intelligence are changing the operating environment for organisations of all sizes and businesses within every industry and sector (Schwab, 2016).

This includes the public relations (PR) industry, as new technological developments have enabled the PR agencies to communicate with many more people simultaneously. In addition, the style of communication has also changed from broadcasting messages to large audiences by using mass communication channels, such as television and newspapers, to interacting and engaging with communities and stakeholders on new communications platforms, such as Facebook pages and YouTube channels (Kent, 2013).

Moreover, as people become acquainted with new technologies and the benefits these unlock within their personal and professional lives, their expectations around products, services and customer experience changes dramatically (Forrester, 2017). This can be highly beneficial but also detrimental as customer service gaps may appear between expectations and the reality of the service being offered.

According to Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 47), communication audit techniques, particularly qualitative ones, the likes of service encounters and critical incident techniques, may become invaluable resources for detecting communication issues as well as developing solutions to these, as it enables staff to voice their opinions.

Adding to this, market analytics firm Gartner (Ray, 2016) asserts that customer experience will have a bigger effect on customer loyalty than price by 2020. Moreover, Klaus and Maklan (2013, p. 1) state that “experience is replacing quality as the competitive battleground for marketing”.

About two decades ago, Pine and Gilmore (1998) presented a four-stage model for the development of economic value, adding experiences as the fourth stage, following the mining or extraction of commodities, the manufacturing of goods, and the provision of services.

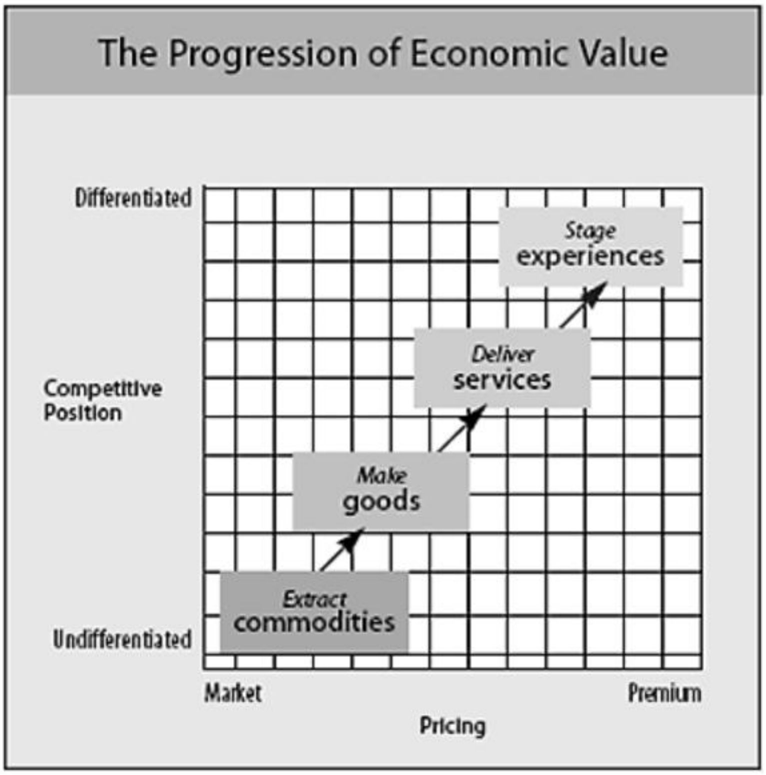

Figure 1: The Progression of Economic Value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

Pine and Gilmore (1998, p 98) defined experiences as, the intentional use of “services as the stage and good as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event”, and asserted that experiences will be the competitive advantage for companies going forward.

Today, superior customer experiences have become a differentiator for businesses (Linkner, 2014). In fact, Noble (2016) asserts that businesses that are good at delivering excellent customer experiences will boost customer acquisition and retention.

Value and experience have become much more relevant selling factors for businesses to not only survive, but thrive in the ‘experience era’ (Hyken, 2017).

The PR industry is not immune to this higher level of customer expectation. PR professionals are now expected to be active on their clients' social networking channels like Twitter and LinkedIn, while fulfilling content marketing needs through channels such as corporate blogs. At the same time, they need to be responsive to stakeholders, like the media, within timeframes that are becoming shorter and shorter, while being available to generate corporate communication narratives that result in news coverage, and help safeguard the client's brand (Waters, Tindal & Morton, 2011; Zerfass, Schwalbach, Bentele, & Sherzada, 2014).

Moreover, the PR industry traditionally (and still has to) fulfil a range of functions, with the main goal of protecting their clients from legitimacy gaps and reputational threats (Sethi, 1979).

According to Olkkonen (2014), these can be arranged into four main areas of expertise (or approaches) that broadly define the industry expectations clients have with regard to their PR agency. These are: relationship management, managing issues, managing a client's reputation and handling of crisis communication scenarios. See figure 2 below:

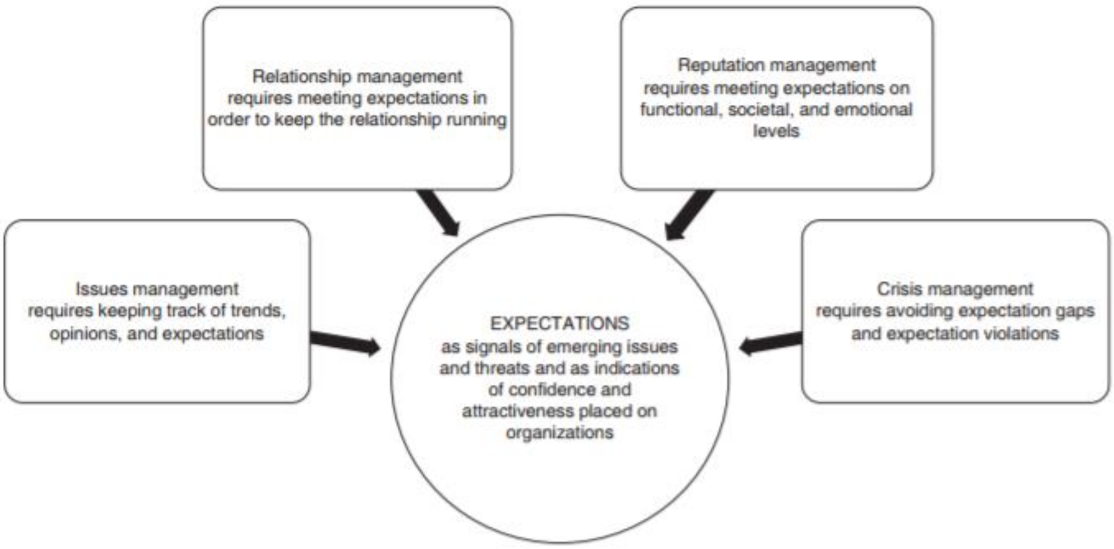

Figure 2: The role played by expectations in the four major PR approaches (Olkkonen, 2014)

Watts (2017) asserts that clients are more demanding than ever. To be in a position to meet those demands, businesses and brands must know what customers want and deliver on those expectations, in the manner that clients want these met.

This had led to many reforms within the industry, including reforms or at least attempted reforms in the way PR gets evaluated and measured. As early as 2010, there have been attempts by the industry to modernise measurement and get rid of the AVE model in favour of more modern alternatives such as the Barcelona Principles, whereby "PR practitioners from thirty-three countries gathered in Barcelona and agreed on seven principles of measurement, including the abolishment of AVE's" (Ketchum, 2016).

These principles were even updated five years later in September 2015, with the launch of the Barcelona Principles 2.0, which allowed for certain revisions to make the principles better encompass the practice of communications more holistically, by incorporating elements like earned-, paid-, and shared media across modern communications channels, such as social media (AMEC, 2015).

Employees also have higher expectations and demand greater levels of customer service and experiences from the CRM and their internal communication.

Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) categorise the major or critical incidents that typically produce service encounters or moments of truth. The first of these is the CRM's response to service delivery failure, with the second being the CRM's response to the needs, demands and service requests from the PR Manager (client).

The final critical incident occurs during moments of impulsive and spontaneous actions by the CRM. Going above and beyond what is required, showing initiative, and demonstrating to the client that their PR agency views their working relationship as a partnership that co-creates value for the business, is likely to culminate in a positive moment of truth.

1.3 Problem statement

According to Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 42), communication assessments tools are very useful for identifying communication issues and finding solutions for these. Consequently, researchers and practitioners must thoroughly examine the validity of communication audit instruments, as various tools may deliver different insights into communication problems and deliver additional solutions.

Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 51) also state that the ongoing and multifaceted nature of PR work can potentially make it difficult for clients to identify demarcated events (critical incidents or service encounters) that illustrate quality customer service.

Many of the functions of PR managers overlap with a lot of functions of other company professionals including marketing managers, brand managers, and corporate communication managers. This breadth of roles as well as functions, coupled with the indistinctness of said roles leads Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 51) to question if employees can even recount critical incidents, which reflect the structure and nature of the organisational communication work and tasks being performed by PR professionals, as opposed to the relational aspects of the customer service provided by the customer relationship manager of the PR agency or unique encounters that will never happen again.

Evardsson and Strandvik's (2001) research found that service encounters were discussed with others within the company (storytelling), especially if these encounters countered the perceptual framework (sensemaking) of typical organisational communication. These critical incidents are discussed by customers with around four to five other people. Employees utilise both official as well as unofficial stories in order to derive meaning from corporate events and incidents (Chen, 2012).

Spear and Roper (2016) found that dissident storytelling occurred frequently within the operational areas of a business, particularly by lower level employees. These stories were subversive in that they recollected critical incidents that opposed the company's goals as well as its values.

1.3.1 Main Problem

Can event history analysis be used to evaluate the customer service delivered by PR agencies to their clients?

1.3.2 Sub-problem 1

What recommendations can be made for PR agencies to augment their customer service?

1.4 Research questions

1.4.1 Sub-problem 1: Research questions

i. To what extent does critical service encounters relate to customer service?

ii. To what degree do critical service encounters reflect the value of the rendered service by the PR agency?

1.5 Research gap and justification of the study

A wide literature search shows that a lot of research has indeed been conducted on how technology is transforming the PR industry, as well as the effect that this process of digital transformation in the PR industry has on client expectations. For instance, Olkkonen (2014) found that expectation types and gaps can be identified by utilising systematic expectation mapping.

Her researched focused on the strategic influence that expectation management can have on communication management, by looking at the management of client and stakeholder expectations, and how these can heighten the company's responsiveness to stakeholder concerns.

Zerfass et al. (2014) looked at corporate communications and investigated how the expectations along with the experiences of top management and corporate communications professionals (including PR practitioners) align with or differ from each other. Their research found that there is often a misalignment between the perspectives of top management and the managers in charge of the strategic communication function, with the study recommending that attention should be paid to re-aligning those perspectives.

Klaus and Maklan (2013) focused on what impact customer experience had on crucial outcomes of marketing activities and tactics, such as the degree to which clients were satisfaction, customer loyalty, as well as clients were inspired to provide word-of-mouth recommendations.

However, there has been little research done on the changing client expectations with regard to the customer service that they receive from their PR agencies. Moreover, very few studies exist that look at CIT or event history analysis and whether it is an effective measure of the value of PR, its methodological strengths and weaknesses, or its ability to bring light to customer service-related problems or even the perceived value of PR activities to a client or business.

Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015) were amongst the first researchers to investigate the potential of using CIT to evaluate organisational communication, specifically with regard to internal PR. This paper attempts to do so for PR services provided by a PR agency.

1.6 Significance of the study

The research should determine whether CIT can be used to evaluate the customer service of PR agencies and provide recommendations to PR agencies around how to improve their customer experiences and service.

This makes it highly relevant for PR- and strategic communications managers at companies as well as customer relationship managers and the senior management teams of PR agencies, who serve clients. More often than not, their clients are usually represented by a designated employee with the title of PR manager, external communication lead or head of corporate communications for example. PR agencies in particular can utilise the study to improve their performance measurement systems as well as the service that they render to their clients, while clients (the PR or communications managers) can use it to better evaluate the services being offered to them by their agency.

According to Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015), CIT is the most appropriate communication assessment tool for investigating the sensemaking process of employees. This, as the audit mechanism encourages staff to reflect upon and attach their subjective meaning on critical communication encounters. It also addresses shared sensemaking experiences (storytelling) so is not only limited to individual sensemaking.

Unlike the research paper of Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015), this study looks at clients from within a range of industries, rather than focusing on those within educational institutions (high schools) alone.

1.7 Limitations of the study

The customer experience context of this research study is PR agencies and their clients and excludes all other types of businesses.

In addition, this thesis only discusses data from the South African market, but the findings should be applicable across other Southern African countries and internationally as well, in which cultural differences are limited.

The study is geographically bound to PR agencies and their clients that are based in South Africa.

The study is limited to the use of customer experience in the strategic communication or PR industry. It relates to how PR agencies can utilise customer experiences to deliver superior customer service to clients.

1.8 Definition of terms

Public Relations - Public relations is defined as (PRISA, 2017) “the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders.”

Customer experience – According to Klaus and Maklan (2013, p. 227) Customer “experience is generated through a longer process of company-customer interaction across multiple channels and is generated through both functional and emotional clues.”

Service encounter - According to Voorhees et al. (2017, p 270) a service encounter is “any discrete interaction between the customer and the service provider [that is] relevant to a core service offering, including the interaction involving provision of the core service offering itself.”

Internal PR/communications - Internal communication involves all official organisational as well as management communication to the employees of a company (Melewar et al., 2006). Spear and Roper (2016) expand this definition to include informal conversation amongst staff, office gossip and rumours (storytelling).

1.9 Assumptions

According to Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 46) the validity of using CIT to perform a PR communication audit is dependent upon three assumptions:

- Firstly, that participants are able to describe standout communication events.
- Secondly, that these moments of truth encounters have structural connotations.
- Finally, that these service encounters are linked to sensemaking.

For the purposes of this research study, the assumptions were:

- Respondents had to agree to answer the posed interview questions as honestly and as accurately as possible
- Respondents revealed normal perspectives
- Respondents possessed adequate service experience with PR agencies to address the questions posed.

In addition, another assumption by the researcher is that the formulation of problems or issues does not occur in a vacuum or a very neatly laid out manner. Instead, the majority of customer service issues or problems emerge over time during the agency-client relationship, and according to the evolving needs of both the agency as well as its clients.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to investigate whether CIT can be used to evaluate customer service between PR agencies and their clients. Furthermore, the research study provides recommendations around how PR agencies can improve their customer service, especially through customer experiences.

The literature review first focuses on the main theoretical grounding for the paper, namely CIT - its origin and use as an organisational communication audit tool. Then, the paper discusses internal PR, before looking at customer experience and the management thereof.

2.2 Theoretical framework - Critical incident technique

According to Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015), a communication audit is done with the purpose of delivering data and insights to a company, which showcases what it is good at and still needs to work on regarding its communication system.

Flanagan (1954) first established the idea of CIT as a way of perceiving human behaviour, with the aim of providing a list of competencies that will make employees in a specific professional field more proficient.

Goldhaber and Rogers (1979) adapted this method in order to incorporate it as an International Communication Association (ICA) communication audit tool. Since that time, various researchers have utilised CIT in their summaries of communication audit techniques including Booth (1986); Downs and Adrian (2004); Hamilton (1987).

Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015) state that CIT sheds light on distinct positive or negative communication incidents, which uncovers various communicative behaviours towards which staff have absolute positive or adverse feelings about.

Koning and de Jong (2007) builds on this, adding that the justification for this method stems from the fact that the staff’s feelings of being satisfied or of being dissatisfied emanate from these experiences (incidents or encounters) that occur frequently in the real world. Moreover, their overall level of satisfaction regarding communication is in fact, determined by these service encounters that happen throughout the course of day-to-day organisational life.

The staff have to describe each experience in detail and pay particular attention to what happened, who the people were who are involved in this particular incident, along with the consequences of this interaction. Amongst other benefits highlighted by previous research papers about CIT include that this method delivers valuable insight into the communication processes of businesses. These insights include whether information is sufficiently exchanged, how choices around communication are arrived at, and which channels of communication are employed to relay pivotal messages and issues to staff (Downs & Adrian, 2004; Goldhaber & Rogers, 1979).

According to Clark-Fookes (2021, 106), "CIT acknowledges the unique understanding generated through experience and attempts to capture this by unpacking critical incidents."

According to Koning and de Jong (2007), CIT is an effective method of analysing organisational communication because it provides rich, qualitative data that allows for the in-depth study of issues surrounding communication within a business.

Additionally, the open-ended character of CIT enables researchers to investigate crucial new or unanticipated causes of communication satisfaction (Meyer, 2002).

Research Proposition #1: PR agencies who learn from their past experiences and adopt innovative approaches to become more agile and responsive to changes, will be more successful at retaining and satisfying clients

The modern operating environment for PR agencies is complex, ever-changing, especially when it comes to technology developments and platforms of communication, and requires agencies to be more agile and responsive to both environmental changes and changing customer needs.

Van Ruler (2015) even suggests that agencies, along with their clients, are active within the public arena that is subject to constant constructions of meanings, necessitating the need to revamp traditional planning methods used by PR agencies, as these are impeding the delivery of predefined results (strategic communications objectives/PR goals).

In order for PR Agencies (or internal PR managers of businesses) to achieve success within this complex environment, novel approaches to public relations planning such as scrum must be adopted to make this process more agile and adaptive (Van Ruler, 2015).

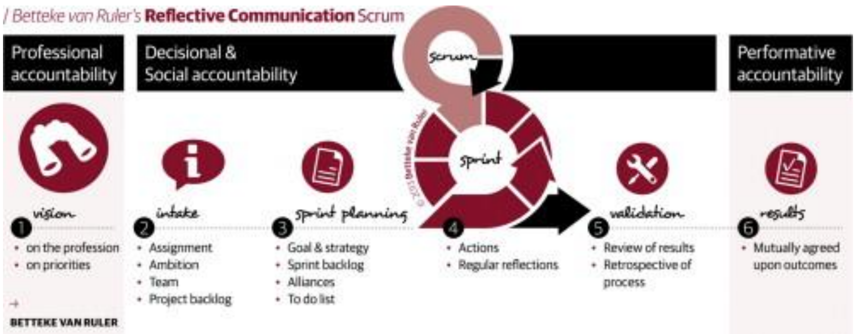

Figure 3: Reflective Communication Scrum (Van Ruler, 2015)

Osswald (2019) analyses PR through the lens of decision-making by employing Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. Here, choices around PR are seen as a specific form of communication which is selective in that specific PR tactics are used, and the communication is also attributable to a decision-maker (the PR manager), and is strategic in that it aims to bring about PR goals. Moreover, this process of strategic communication engages both the past and future in a definite way by for instance, trying to change the past image of a business to a future state in which the public perceives it in a more positive light.

Revell and Bryan (2018) employ the phrase liquid professionalism, which sees activities and decisions taken within the field of PR being based on a professional body of knowledge and a range of skillsets that are inherently unstable or phrased differently, within a constant state of flux.

Bowman and Hendy (2019) elaborate on this point, stating that this instability has to be embraced by PR agencies since it results in the rapid and constantly expanding knowledge base and skillsets for the players within the industry.

This builds on Kantola (2016), who says that liquid professionalism is quite positive as it enables the employees and companies active within an industry to remain open to new opportunities that become available as a result of the constant developments and changing face of work.

Therefore, agile and responsive agencies can always add skillsets and knowledge to their repertoire, based on changing customer needs and developments within the industry based on external forces, such as the need for novel approaches to internal communications as working from home proliferates in the era of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

2.3 Public Relations and strategic communication

According to Mazzei (2014), effective internal communication is able to assist staff in making sense of knowledge as well as information. Iglesias and Bonet (2012), as well as Auvinen et al. (2013), expand upon this, by stating that the communication of corporate strategy to staff is vital for a business, because it enables companies to drive organisational behaviour and guide company-wide performance. The stories conveyed by management are able to augment the staff's comprehension of a business's vision, mission, aims, along with its organisational values.

Communication amongst all of the employees of a company contributes towards the growth of the business via the process of shared sensemaking, according to Christensen and Cornelissen (2011). By communicating the vision and values of a business through corporate stories, employees gain a sense of having a mission (Baker & Boyle, 2009). Furthermore, internal communication can assist staff in comprehending their role in achieving the company's strategic goals.

From a top-down perspective, a company's managers must constantly reiterate and act upon values so that staff can understand the kind of behaviour which the business deems desirable within the organisation (Michailova & Minbaeva, 2012).

According to Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati (2021, 163), "As stakeholders have an interest in the activities undertaken by the organization, they analogously bear an interest in the communicative events and texts related to those activities, hence the term text stakeholder. Shareholders are interested in the content of quarterly earnings reports because they are interested in how their investment has been administered; citizens are interested in political news because, for instance, they wish to know how to vote at the next general elections; and so on".

Frandsen and Johansen (2011) earlier stated that the role of staff within an internal PR perspective can be either as senders of information or receivers of communication within a business. As senders of communication, employees possess the capability to act as positive ambassadors of the business, however, staff are also able to share undesirable, harmful or rebellious or non-conformist communication.

Harris and Ogbonna (2012) found that negative word-of-mouth communication from staff holds the potential to do damage to the company's performance. Staff can act as advocates of the business by sharing goings-on or accomplishments during their exchanges and engagements with third parties, but employees are also able to become organisational rivals by conveying issues and organisational shortcomings. The latter may have an effect on a company's relationships as well as its reputation with external groups (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

In contrast, corporate stories can support the execution of a company's strategy through the reinforcement of behaviour which is in line with the business' values, while discouraging behaviour deemed to be unacceptable by staff (Gill, 2011; Chen, 2012; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012).

Research Proposition #2: PR agencies that reach the level of advisory status to provide strategic consultation to clients and thereby add more value, will see the highest levels of customer satisfaction

PR agencies offer a range of technical skills to their clients including internal communications, digital marketing, paid social media marketing, PR campaigns creation and execution, media relations, events management and stakeholder relations. However, to really become indispensable to clients, these agencies have to become PR consultancies that add additional value through strategic consultation to their clientele that has a real and positive impact on the business.

Preciado-Hoyos (2020) asserts that while consultancy should not be the focus of the services provided by PR agencies, many Colombian PR agencies now offer services such as these, in and above to their traditional technical services. This is in response to these types of consultation services becoming requested more and more, as well as these services being increasingly more important when it comes to the acquisition of new business contracts within the country's communication sector.

According to Lounasmeri (2018), politicians, government officials and political aides within Finland are becoming communication experts, campaigners or lobbyists, whilst an increasing number of media professionals are moving into the public relations business, and making the most of their knowledge and skillsets along with their established relationships with the media and influencers. Even within Sweden, these kinds of career movement between politics, strategic PR consultants and journalism has become the ‘revolving doors’ norm.

According to Jugo and Milas' (2019) research, businesses often appoint PR agencies to provide strategic counsel during times of crisis, such as post suffering some form of reputational damage. Their findings recommend that at these times when the PR firm–client relationship is still being cemented, PR agencies have to strike a balance between openly expressing their opinion especially if this will be perceived as unfavourable by their client, and delivering the best counsel in order to achieve a sustainable and workable model of business with the customers to whom they are consulting.

Kim, Krishna and Plowman (2019) found that in South Korea and Singapore, legal professionals of corporations have begun to realise the significance of developing co-narratives with their companies’ PR agencies during times of crisis. At these times, they are formulating crisis communications strategies, in order for the PR agency to shape the public narrative and for legal to win in the court of public opinion.

2.4 Customer experience

According to Klaus and Maklan (2013, p. 1), customer experience is the “customer’s cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect encounters with the firm relating to their purchasing behaviour”.

Meyer and Schwager (2007, p. 2) assert that customer experience is “encompassing every aspect of a company’s offering - the quality of customer care, of course, but also advertising, packaging, product and service features, ease of use, and reliability. It is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company”.

Wibowo et al (2021: 3) states that, "Recent literature defines customer experience (CX) as a multidimensional construct that reflects on the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social responses of the consumer to the enterprise's products or services during the customer's buying journey".

Customer experience may be interpreted and studied in terms of its design, delivery, and management from a range of viewpoints including from the business’ point of view (Stuart & Tax, 2004). It can also be investigated from the customer’s perspective (Schmitt, 2011) or from a point of view in which value for both customer and the business is co-created by the interaction between both parties (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). For this research study, customer experience is investigated from the perspective of the client (at least from the perspective of the internal employees of the PR agency’s clients).

Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello (2015) also provide an all-encompassing definition for customer experience, which states that every kind of service exchange may emanate in a customer experience, no matter its nature or form.

This expansive perspective makes customer experience management more challenging as a result of the high rate in increase of the potential customer touch points, along with the very limited control that a brand is able to exercise over the experience a customer has. Consequently, it is becoming very difficult for businesses to fashion, manage, and attempt to control the customer experience and customer journey (Edelman 2010; Singer 2015; Rawson, Duncan, & Jones 2013).

Despite the challenge, customer experience is an important business consideration for companies within every sector, in fact in a recent study by Accenture (2015) that was done in co-operation with Forrester, executives list the improvement of customer experience as their most important area of focus over the short term.

Wibowo et al (2021: 3) states that, "CX [customer experience] is one of the essential frameworks that should be considered by the manager to identify and act on opportunities that improve the enterprise's competitive position."

When it comes to customer experience management, Schmitt (2003, p. 17) defines this as the process of strategically managing the entire experience of a customer with a product, service or business.

According to Schmitt's (2003) framework of customer experience management, there are five steps to this process. Firstly, analysing the customer's experiential world, and secondly, creating an experiential platform. Next, one has to design the brand experience, before structuring the customer experience, and finally, engaging in a process of continual innovation.

This framework is broadly echoed within Homburg et al.'s (2017, p. 8) definition of customer experience management as "the cultural mindsets toward customer experiences, strategic directions for designing customer experiences, and firm capabilities for continually renewing customer experiences, with the goals of achieving and sustaining long-term customer loyalty".

Wibowo et al (2021, 4) asserts that the, "Relationship quality [between a company and its customer] is conceptualized as a composite or multidimensional construct and three distinct yet related components have been identified, trust, satisfaction, and commitment.

Furthermore, Homburg et al. (2017) assert that customer experience management is different to customer relationship management (CRM), in that CRM focuses mainly on value extraction while CEM highlights value creation.

In order to design and tailor customer experiences to individual customers, Verhoef, Kooge, and Walk (2016) highlight the assistance of technology, in particular utilising big data analytics tools, which can help with understanding the customer better and personalising their buying journey.

Research Proposition #3: PR agencies that tap into the power of technology and constantly look for ways to innovate in terms of their offerings, will see the highest client satisfaction levels

According to Coombs and Holladay (2018), the digital era is enabling PR agencies to utilise innovative approaches when it comes to their communication tactics and strategy that reflects important trends emerging in this field such as the use of digital media, storytelling, community engagement and the co-creation of meaning. These include transmedia storytelling and narrative transportation theory being combined and synthesised to form the transmedia narrative transportation approach to public relations.

Coombs (2019) asserts that transmedia storytelling is useful for corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, with the central idea being that the engagement through this medium allows for more emotive communications and avoids any backlash from alternative communication avenues such as advertising for this purpose. Transmedia storytelling enables PR agencies to guide their clients around how the employ their social networking channels and the dispersal of CSR communication.

According to Galloway and Swiatek (2018), PR agencies have already begun to employ technologies like machine learning, and AI in their communications-related tactics and applications. In order to stay abreast of technological trends and their usefulness for the field, Galloway and Swiatek (2018) suggest that practitioners need to know about these technologies and how to incorporate them in their work, not to the point of becoming AI experts for instance, but enough to be able to offer informed counsel to their clients about their benefits for PR and strategic communications purposes.

Corbett and Docherty (2016) assert that Big Data Analytics will transform the PR industry along with the methods that PR professionals utilise in their daily tasks for their clients. PR agencies within European agencies are already hiring experts in big data analytics to advise on the importance and use of this technology and educate the business about it.

Other technology trends include artificial intelligence and machine learning: at Morgan Stanley, for instance, robo-advisers that are developed based upon machine learning programmes are tasked with automating routine tasks, enabling their human counterparts to spend the majority of their time with clients who require higher level advice and a more personalised service experience (Son 2017).

2.5 Conclusion of the literature review

Within the modern operating environment for companies characterised by digital transformation, PR managers are facing a range of new challenges such as stakeholders having the ability to broadcast their service-related issues on various online and offline channels (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Shirky, 2011).

This transformation is also affecting consumers in terms of how they consume and subscribe to services. For instance, clients crave experiential value that has to deliver hedonic fulfilment (pleasure), or instrumental fulfillment (address a problem or fulfill a need), or has to provide a combination of both (Lofman, 1991).

These types of experiences occur at various touchpoints (moments of truth or service encounters), which are basically various ways through which a client comes into contact with a business and formulates an impression of that business and the quality of its services (Sharma, 2017).

Going forward, these three propositions are used to interpret the research results and measure the findings.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, the methodological process, along with the application that the researcher undertook to address the research questions, is discussed.

The methodology chapter of this study discusses the research paradigm; the research design; the population and sample; as well as the research instrument. Then, the data collection procedure is detailed; followed by data analysis and interpretation; and the probable limitations of the research procedure and methods. In conclusion, the reliability and validity measures that were applied to assess and establish the quality of the research are detailed.

3.2 Research strategy

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research strategy was utilised. This research study explored the service encounters (moments of truth) between PR agency staff and their clients that result in enhanced customer experience.

Personalised experiences, insights and accounts are key to addressing the research questions and according to Schurink and Schurink (2008), qualitative research involves the use and collection of a variety of empirical tools that includes case studies, personal accounts of experiences, and life stories. The goal of qualitative research is to better comprehend the subject matter at hand, with each of these tools making the world more visible in another way.

3.3 Research design

The researcher employed a qualitative design to address the research question, which entailed conducting semi-structured interviews. The findings of the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to conduct a text analysis of what had been uncovered through searching for common themes/codes among the interview transcripts.

Participatory action research was the research design that this qualitative research study adopted. According to Creswell and Poth (2017, p. 25), participatory action research contains "an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants."

Within the context of this study, this framework allowed for the gathering of research participants' viewpoints which could be translated to inform recommendations on how PR agencies could increase the quality of their customer experiences and consequently, customer service. This gave research participants an active role on how to positively influence their environment for their own learning and benefits, i.e. drawing on their customer experiences to enhance their customer services.

The goal of this research study was to gather and analyse qualitative data, by making use of interviews, and generating recommendations for PR practitioners to enhance their customer experience to their clients. As a result, the research aimed to bring about change in participants, by making them more aware of service encounters and how to maximise these to drive greater customer experiences.

3.4 Research procedure and methods

3.4.1 Data collection instrument

A discussion guide was administered to respondents by face-to-face interviews, because Flanagan (1954) recommends individual interviews, since this instrument allowed for in-depth questioning with the end-result being richness of information and insights.

This detailed form of inquiry suited the purposes of this research study quite well, in that the respondents had to provide personalised (but hopefully also generalisable) accounts of their customer service encounters (moments of truth) that defined their customer experiences.

These interviews were semi-structured in that there was an interview guide and schedule, but the interviewer had the freedom not to be bound by predetermined questions, or by having to put the same questions to interviewees in the same order every time.

For this research study, the fieldwork consisted of fifteen interviews with fifteen PR managers (clients) randomly selected from the client list of a PR agency (service provider) in Gauteng. This agency is a large full-service PR and strategic communications firm that offers the full range of PR agency services ranging from PR, events management, and digital communications, through to media relations, and crisis communications.

In order to assess how well CIT functions as a communication audit instrument, the researcher conducted a study in which this tool was utilised to collect critical communication events of PR managers (clients) in fifteen different clients (businesses).

3.4.2 Target population

For the purposes of this research study, the target population adhered to the following conditions:

- Interviewees had to be adults (18 and older)
- Interviewees had to be working in South Africa
- Interviewees had to be PR managers or at least be in charge of the PR function at their company
- Interviewees should have obtained services from a service provider – their PR agency

- Interviewees should not have been junior employees and must have possessed at least two or more years applicable working experience (including years spent working with PR agencies)

3.4.3 Sampling

For this research study, the sample consisted of 12 PR and communications managers from a range of all the clients of seven PR and Strategic Communications agencies. This was a convenient sample of representative industry players and it was possible for the researcher to draw tentative inferences from the research.

3.4.4 Ethical considerations regarding data collection

The ethical conduct of the researcher involved in this study was guided and informed by the Ethical Code of the University of Witwatersrand. Amongst other considerations was that the actions involved in collecting the data and doing the research study, may not intrude on the rights of others, or threaten their safety, security, health, or wellbeing.

Additional considerations involved the avoidance of any and all improper financial dealings and inappropriate conflicts of interest, and that the participation of the interviewees was voluntary, and should they wished to withdraw from the interviews, they were able to do so.

Furthermore, the researcher had to ensure that all interviewees participating in the study completed an informed consent form, which the researcher compiled with the assistance of her supervisor. Permission must also have been obtained from each PR manager being interviewed, so that the interview could be recorded.

3.4.5 Data collection and storage

Invitation letters in the form of emails were sent to PR managers (clients) that had been randomly selected from the purposive list. The caveat being that the names on the list met the minimum requirements detailed in the target population section of this research.

All of the emails were personalised to each respondent, however, each email contained a basic outline of the research study, the aim of the research study, context of the research study, as well as why the respondent’s input was necessary and important.

The estimated length of the interviews was a minimum of 30 minutes to around a maximum of one hour. These interviews were held in pre-booked meeting rooms within various locations at the interviewee’s respective businesses. All of these were located in a noiseless environment and no other staff members were present in the room while the interview took place.

Recordings of the interviews were saved, using an application called Recorder on the researcher's Hisense smartphone. The recordings were saved on the smartphone, and also backed up on a notebook PC as well as in the cloud, using Microsoft's OneDrive cloud-based storage service.

Both the device as well as the cloud storage portal are password protected to ensure that the data was secured. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and stored in a safe in order to ensure the safe-keeping of the information and details of the respondents.

To put the interviewee at ease from the start of the interview, interviewees were asked how long they had worked for the company and what their role encompassed there. By doing this, the interviewee quickly became comfortable and started to feel more confident thanks to the ice-breaker question.

Following the ice-breaker question, the researcher asked the interviewee whether he or she is able to recollect and describe a noteworthy communication event, which he or she recently experienced.

The interviewee was asked to describe that positive or negative event in the greatest level of detail, with the researcher/interviewer then prompting for more information by way of a few follow-up questions (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong & Van Vuuren, 2015).

The aim of these questions was to detail all of the pertinent facets of the service encounter and talk back to the following topics:

- When did this interaction occur?
- What specific set of conditions culminated in this situation?
- Precisely what was said and what were the actions taken?
- How does the end-result of that interaction make it satisfying/dissatisfying?

3.4.6 Data processing and thematic analysis

Text analysis

The coding scheme of Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015, p. 54) was used. The initial coding involved the discreteness of the service encounters, whereby the researcher differentiated between demarcated service encounters that are unique incidents, recurring service encounters (which are events that reoccur), and situations (that refers to circumstances that are more or less stable). Situations includes the general perception about the quality of service provided by or relationship with a PR agency, within the business being serviced.

To be able to do this effectively and disseminate the information properly, the CRM was used to assist in coding the data. They were involved in sorting between demarcated events to more accurately ascertain whether these events had structural connotations, whereby the research differentiated between random occurrences and structural service encounters.

The third coding involved the nature of the consequences that clients linked back to the events, whereby the researchers differentiated between nonsense making, sense making, and storytelling for instance. Here, the PR managers (client) was involved in the coding process in order to more accurately sort between non-sensemaking, sensemaking and storytelling events.

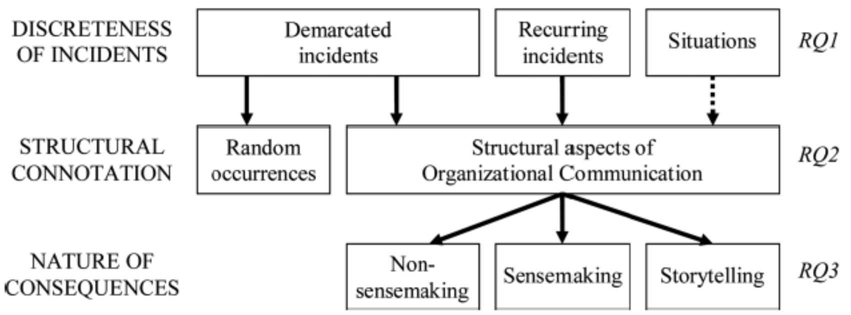

Figure 4: Coding scheme (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong & Van Vuuren, 2015)

Once the researcher had used coding and thematic analysis to construct themes, common concepts, behaviour and beliefs, these could then be linked in order to construct a conceptual model (Meyer 2013, p. 168).

The researcher derived the event history analysis, based on the findings of the thematic analysis conducted, based on the interview transcripts.

According to Vermunt and Moors (2005, p. 1) when doing an analysis of event histories, the process begins with defining the states or dependent variables one wishes to distinguish between. In the case of this study, the states of customer satisfaction were defined as per Biljana and Jusuf (2011, p. 252), namely highly satisfied, satisfied, neutral, unsatisfied, and highly unsatisfied.

Vermunt and Moors (2005, p. 1) define events as the shift from one state (original) to a different state (destination). In this context, a possible event was poor customer service or excessive fees being charged which might have resulted in the cancellation of services (shift from customer to non-customer).

Another significant concept is risk period, which Vermunt and Moors (2005, p. 2) define as "the origin state [the *respondent* occupies] defining the event [that the researcher is analysing]". For instance, when analysing the event of a new business pitch, a respondent is only at risk of experiencing the event if s/he is a prospective client (original state) who might become the customer (destination state).

The final element crucial in the event history analysis is duration which Vermunt and Moors (2005, p. 2) define as the time period "of the non-occurrence of an event [being analysed] during the risk period". Therefore, if the researcher is investigating the event of service termination, the duration would refer to the total period of time during which the service provider is at risk of being fired, before the event (the actual cancelling of the contract with the PR agency).

3.4.7 Description of respondents

The researcher conducted a total of 12 semi-structured interviews with public relations managers or communications professionals at businesses charged with the PR function.

Interviews were conducted in person, unless the particular interviewee was located in a province other than Gauteng or was based overseas.

These were recorded and transcribed with the ultimate goal of obtaining rich, descriptive data using a thematic analysis method.

3.4.8 Sample

Twelve clients from seven prominent South African-based PR agencies were interviewed. Permission was obtained from the Managing Director of both PR and strategic communications agencies to interview their clients that had been selected at random. Letters were sent to the companies to set the scene for the research study, obtain permission for the interviews and set a date and time for the interviews.

The level of subject being interviewed in the majority of cases was the PR and Communications lead at the business, who managed the client service relationship with the agency. In some instances, the interviews were conducted with the Chief Marketing Officer of the company, under whose jurisdiction and management, the PR function of the business resided and to whom the PR and Communications lead reported. Ultimately, this was also the person to whom the agency delivering the service must show value in order to retain the business. These 15 interviewees were active in a range of industries ranging from the automotive sector, luxury goods, recycling industry, as well as the fast-moving consumer goods businesses.

3.5 Research validity and reliability

As mentioned previously, CIT was created as a method to study human behaviour and ultimately, has become a tool to compile the aptitudes and capabilities required to be proficient within a specific occupation or field. The reliability and validity of using CIT for this aim (occupational analysis) has already been established by Andersson and Nilsson (1964).

3.5.1 Reliability

Within the field of industrial and organisational psychology, CIT is used in order to investigate moments of truth that are vital components to job performance with regards to a specific profession. These encounters are used to assess and then boost job performance within that given field (Lount & Hargie, 1997; Whetzel & Wheaton, 1997).

When it comes to reliability in qualitative research, the reliability of a study refers to its replicability in terms of both the processes followed during the study as well as the results obtained (Leung, 2015).

Consequently, the crux of reliability for qualitative research resides in consistency (Carcary, 2009).

According to Lewis and Ritchie (2003), the researcher is able to improve reliability by being transparent and honest about the procedures that resulted in the research findings, as well as through conducting their fieldwork in a consistent manner. Furthermore, Lewis and Ritchie (2003) recommend that the researcher must check his/her interpretations by supporting it with evidence and make sure that all interviewees receive sufficient opportunity to discuss their experiences, systematically analysing their data, and by providing a balanced and unbiased perspective.

Moana-Filho et al. (2017) found that reliability of sensory testing is evaluated in an enhanced way, if measuring multiple sources of error at the same time as opposed to concentrating on a singular source at a time. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2017), have analysed the systematic and random errors in a lot of detail which often arise when doing qualitative research.

According to Campbell et al. (2013), during the majority of qualitative research projects, a single coder will code most of the data. They assert that in these kinds of situations, reliability can be enhanced by recruiting another researcher to code a sample of the data. Once satisfactory reliability is then established, the designated primary researcher is able to proceed with the coding of the remaining data by themself.

3.5.2 *Validity*

Validity in qualitative research denotes to the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data (Leung, 2015).

According to Leung (2015), this translates to, ‘is the research question valid’ in order to obtain the anticipated outcome, whether the chosen methodology is appropriate in order to address the research question, whether the research design is valid for the methodology, and if the results obtained and conclusions drawn are valid for the sample as well as the context.

De Massis and Kotlar (2014) make the assertion that qualitative research has to be evaluated based upon construct validity, internal validity, and external validity.

Lewis and Ritchie (2003) assert that it is handy to look at both internal and external validity when it comes to a qualitative research study. In this regard, internal validity emanates from employing a constant comparative method as well as from recognising the importance of divergent or abhorrent cases for the purposes of gaining a greater understanding for theory development. External validity is enhanced, however, by using triangulation as well as respondent validation.

In order to assist in ensuring that this research study was as reliable and valid as possible, the following actions were taken:

- All of the interviews were conducted by the researcher and author of the research report
- The coding and analysis of the research data was double-checked and reviewed by other researchers.
- Social good research practice procedures were employed
- Respondents validated their own responses, after the researcher provided them with an account of their interview

Some research states that the concept of validity within the context of qualitative research is underdeveloped (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010), however, systematic procedures that enable researchers to assess validity have been thoroughly gathered in quantitative research.

One of these includes member checking that sees the researcher sharing (anonymous) collected data, which is often shared in the form of a draft report, with the research participants and then obtaining their feedback around the process. This feedback includes “opportunities for the researcher to test her findings, interpretations, and explanations within the culture she is studying” (Davis & Lachlan, 2017, p. 179).

Another is triangulation, which involves recognising multiplicity as well as simultaneity of cultural frames of reference (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008), and therefore allowing for a variety of techniques that will help ensure accurate description along with the presentation of a given situation. The primary objective is to more easily and accurately 'locate' a phenomenon by addressing it from multiple directions.

Researchers have used an image of a crystal for thinking about a researcher's hidden assumptions while conducting a study, stating that these are reflected and refracted during the process of the research similar to the ways in which a crystal reflects light (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 1997; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). In fact, Richardson (1997, p. 92) asserts that crystals are "prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves", while criticising the rigidness of triangulation.

Rose and Johnson (2020) add to this by stating that the validity of the overall research may be reinforced through the considerate and perceptive articulation of the different ways in which the researchers' subjective positionalities all have an effect on the aspects of the research process, from subject matter to the various methods of analysis and even to the representation of his/her findings.

Researchers must also actively seek out other explanations for the manner in which their research frames as well as understand the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). When a study presents data and evidence (i.e., negative cases) which supports and contradicts general perspectives of the theme, then the researchers have managed to increase the validity of their claims that they make throughout their research.

3.6 Research limitations

As with other qualitative research studies, the results are limited to their context and this consequently, hampers their generalisability.

Data collection was limited to a period of two months, so this time constraint needed to be managed very well, by applying meticulous time management and rigorous project management skills.

Within this research study, the sample was limited to a South African context, PR managers, as well as CRMs at PR agencies.

To summarise, the aim of the research study was to determine whether CIT could be used to evaluate customer service between PR agencies and their clients, specifically with regard to the quality of their internal PR services.

Taken from a theoretical viewpoint, are the findings of Zwijze-Koning, De Jong and Van Vuuren (2015) replicable within a South African context, as well as within different industries to education?

From a practical perspective, can the communication auditing tool - CIT - be used to measure the quality of customer service?

And finally, from a marketing perspective, the results of this research study may provide insights for PR managers to improve the customer experiences, internal PR practices and overall customer service.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to uncover whether critical incidents of PR service delivery were distinctive and to what extend these reflected the level of service (or perceived service quality) that a business received from their PR agency. The research indicated that all but one of the 12 respondents could think of distinctive events in critical service delivery that directly influenced their perception of the level/quality of service delivery they were receiving from their agencies. Whereas only a single respondent could not think of a distinctive critical incident of service delivery, either good or bad service delivery, that stuck out in their mind.

This research was meant to ascertain whether critical service delivery incidents demonstrated the quality of service (or perceived service) that business received from their agencies. The majority of respondents agreed that the critical incidents of service delivery they experienced reflected directly to (at least some extend) the quality of service delivery they received/are receiving.

Table 1: Description of respondents:

Respondent	Title	Years of experience	Sector
Respondent 1	PR Manager	10.5 years	Automotive
Respondent 2	PR & National Dealer Support Manager	9 years	Automotive
Respondent 3	Corporate Affairs Director	15 years	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
Respondent 4	Head of Communications – Sub-Saharan Africa	12 years	Technology
Respondent 5	Head of Public Relations	10 years	Technology
Respondent 6	Head of Social, Content & PR	15 years	Digital Marketing
Respondent 7	Corporate Communications Manager, South Africa and Sub Saharan Africa	15 years	Technology
Respondent 8	PR Manager	20 years	Automotive
Respondent 9	CEO	14 years	Recycling
Respondent 10	Manager: Media Liaison	24 years	Automotive
Respondent 11	Corporate Communications Manager	9 years	Automotive
Respondent 12	Communications & Employee Engagement Manager	12 years	Fast Moving Consumer Goods

PR agencies who learn from their past experiences and adopt innovative approaches to become more agile and responsive to changes, will be more successful at retaining and satisfying clients

Respondent 4 noted that when she was going through the pitching process to find her company's PR agency more than five years ago (a situation): "I knew what I wanted, because I come from an agency background myself and had owned my own digital marketing and communications agency. What I wanted was creativity, responsiveness, and I also wanted an agency whose directors (leadership) did not feel they were too distant from its account managers (implementors of the work, runs the account). Because too often I have seen that you've meet with the directors and they would have all of these great ideas and they would pitch you this wonderful campaign. And then you'd be stuck with account executives who can't actually make decisions – upwards or downwards – on your account, and that was something that I did not want.

So, I wanted a bespoke agency that operated in the same way as we did as a business. What immediately stood out for me about my PR agency was that they were extremely responsive on email. Their comeback time on briefed in work was also quite impressive, especially for a technology company like ourselves, who need to move fast. We could not have an agency that would take a week to write a press release or two weeks to come back to us on a strategy. I also got extreme value for money in terms of hours spent on the work and the results. They are responsive to the way in which we work as a business, to my ideas of how I wanted to shape and transform the communications function of the company and responsive when I needed something done. They deliver on time and at a level that's expected when you have a client like us."

Respondent 5 notes a recurring incident over the past two years that the PR agency has been servicing her business, "That is one area that I feel that the expertise can improve would be that from a business perspective, our firm is very on the go. You can see that there are three different projects that can be running at the same time. They (the agency) are not that quick. You need to be very responsive to the client as they are busy and requires action and input in a timely manner. Sometimes I have to phone people and be like hey, you are not answering my phone. I do understand that I do not have them on retainer, but work with them on a project basis, but it takes a special relationship with a designated account manager, who will own your business and the relationship with client."

This view was shared by two respondents, respondent 9 and respondent 1, with the former noting a recurring incident over the course of the past six years that the PR agency has serviced his business: "It's not just the agencies, it is down to the people handling your account. I’ve noticed that certain individuals will not want to understand your business enough and if they don't understand your business and they are not keen on understanding your business, then they can't do a good job for you. When they are not passionate about your business - you are just another client. Every business is different and faces unique challenges. The team needs to understand those challenges, the client, the industry they operate in and the nuances involved, otherwise they will just deliver work, content and campaigns for you that are off the mark or recycle ones that they have had success with in the past with other clients which will not work for your unique circumstances. Off-centre/off target or simply not in line with your overall strategy. Then documents and work needs to be changed and revaluated by me as the client and this goes through multiple iterations which is frustrating for me and time consuming."

The latter (respondent 1) built upon this stating the following regarding a recurring incident she noticed over the three years that the PR agency has been working with her: “I think that the customer service is reliant on the people. The agency is just as good as the people that they have on your account. For me, I think that you can work with a number of different agencies who are coming up and offering boutique services. But when you have a team that you have a great relationship with, who show passion and enthusiasm for your brand, that is all that matters. For me it’s less about who the agency is and more about who the team is who are supporting the work: Your account team. [Delivering upon their] Key Performance Indicators are almost a secondary thing, because hitting those targets are reliant on the collaboration between us and the agency as well as our corporate communications team plus other stakeholders. In terms of service, it is definitely reliant on your account team the people that you work with on a daily basis.”’

The same respondent also highlighted the importance of their PR agencies’ responsiveness and adaptability, particularly in terms of administrative tasks, by stating: “What impressed me also with regards to their account management was that when they are client-facing, they are really good and highly responsive when it comes to the administration of the account. They follow up, they put the order in the organisation of the relationship really well and they are adaptable when they need to collaborate across teams from both a public relations and an advertising task point of view.”

Respondent 2 (also in the automotive sector) noted the importance of a PR agency that is adaptable and flexible, in terms of their response to customer demands. She says, “Their scope of work was above the line and below the line advertising, digital marketing, and social media community management. However, when we started distributing, there was quite a big issue with parts and service, because we were busy rebuilding our own dealer network while also assuming responsibility for another brand's parts and servicing business [which had exited the country]. So, there was lots of customer complaints in the beginning because of that. Our agency helped us set up a customer centre – 24-hour call in and email – and the guys on the phone would take care of complaints – the agency would manage that – refer the feedback back to the specific dealership or specific department. Then they would follow with the customer if the issue was resolved to their satisfaction. They did this until the complaints basically calmed down. Today, their scope of work has grown tremendously, and they even manage the backend of our website – with the oversight of our corporate global headquarters."

Like her counterparts, respondent 12 also rates flexibility and responsiveness highly, noting: "Speed of turnaround is important – the agency is very flexible and accommodating when I have 'last minute' requests, driven by the nature of our business which is fast-moving and dynamic."

She did however, bring attention to a drawback that slightly negated the positive impact of that level of responsiveness, stating: "A bad experience though relates to their thoroughness with checking copy – I had requested an invitation to be designed, I received it and distributed it to employees – the day was wrong. My expectation is that the agency should have checked this and raised any inconsistencies with me. This was last year [2019], when I had just launched a series of breakfast sessions between the Management Team and employees. The team apologised and quickly offered an amended invitation, but it was too late. My generally positive experience with them wasn't hampered, but I had since undertaken to do my own double checking."

Beyond timeous response to mails, and requests, respondent 3 stressed the importance of creating realistic expectations around deadlines, which is an element that influences how responsive an agency is to their client needs. She highlighted a recurring negative incident (from the perspective that they were not doing this) that she experienced with her company's PR agency over the last two years, saying: "When I work as a client, I don't understand how an agency works. So, it's always good as well to inform a client as to how your systems and processes work. So that for example I don't ask for an animated video to be delivered in two days' time. If I understand how you work and the time high-level tasks take to complete. But on the other hand, PR agencies should be geared towards capacitating: Don't assume the client knows how to write a brief. If they do bad briefs, educate them around what a brief should contain and build in those competencies, in order to eliminate the back and forth and misalignment."

Being flexible, adaptive and responsive can have a big impact on an agency, as respondent 4 notes, "We needed to launch within a number of African markets, three within the space of a short period. With the limited timeframe, we used our South African agency to drive our communications within these nations as well as the launch events. It's very unusual for a business to have an agency work across all these regions. Corporate agencies usually assign a regional agency of choice within the region in which they operate. There were a lot of internal questions around whether they would be able to cope with that. How they are going to issue press releases and support launches in other markets outside South Africa. We took a very optimistic view and decided to launch in three countries within a period of three weeks during 2017. Our agency facilitated those launches brilliantly, from South Africa, finding the venues, booking the venues and getting media to those press conferences. Not a lot of people know but it is incredibly hard to get media to something within an African country without paying for them to attend – brown envelope – which is something we will not do as a business. They managed to get us a full house within each country so upwards of 25 media at each launch event. They created and sent out the press releases and profiled the media pre- and post-event. They facilitated one on one interviews and facilitated everything from branding through to presentations. And this was in three countries, three weeks in a row. We started in Ghana, then we did Uganda then Tanzania. Which was fantastic. And from there, what they've done now being launched in various other launches such as Cote D'Ivoire recently. We also have summits we've started doing within Africa recently. We did this in Kenya last year and within South Africa this year. Now, our agency is used for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. They take care of our markets in West and East Africa."

She went on to say that this flexibility should extend to processes that in the past might have been sacrosanct for agencies: "For an agency to go to work with a company effectively, you need to work as a team. You can't keep client to set hours, you can't say that you're only going to work on Mondays and Wednesday between 10am and 2pm for instance. You can't not share information or strategies; you have to have a sense of openness and open communication. Share your press list between yourself and your client. Your client has a press release list as well and it's important that you amalgamate those pieces of information. Agencies usually refuse to do this or would share a partial list of names with no contact details on, because they see it as their IP and fear that clients would leave once they have that information and have built their own relationships with those media. However, in today's digitally empowered workspaces, one can easily access this kind of information, so having your agency work with you around these kind of aspects means a lot."

Respondent 11 highlighted the role debriefing sessions can play after events, when it comes to helping to make service providers (agencies) more responsive to client needs. Should any of the shortcomings recur, it does limit the agency's chances of a contract renewal. Therefore, debriefing sessions are paramount to keep mistakes from being repeated. Shortcomings over the years are not necessarily negative, but they do contribute to a negative perception of the company. For example, a situation I can recall occurred at one of the media adventures in 2017, was when our agency booked mini buses to transfer guests from the hotel to the main function venue. The mini-buses resembled local taxis and the drivers resembled taxi drivers. When I approached them as to why they did not hire a proper coach with a formally dressed chauffeur as per our brief to them, their response was that the transport hire was too expensive. At our debrief meeting our agency were told not to compromise on quality for the sake of costs and they never made that particular mistake again.

PR agencies that reach the level of advisory status to provide strategic consultation to clients and thereby add more value, will see the highest levels of customer satisfaction

The majority of the respondents placed a value on strategic counsel. Respondent 1 captured the value agencies could add through their strategic council or input through her recollection of a recurring event: "We did a campaign two or three years ago, where we launched a new product into the market. It was a completely new car. The personality of the car cannot be defined in the segment that competes in. It's not a Sportback or hatch, or a cabriolet or SUV, but this vehicle is a mix between crossover SUV and a hatchback. So, it wasn't purely defined. And the brand personality of the car was centred around this indefinability. Our agency did not just support our PR and strategic communications around the campaign we came up with but actually came up with the idea themselves to partner a personality with the car. A lady that was pretty unconventional herself, as a model, social activist and lawyer living with albinism. She wears many different hats. Through our consultation with the agency we were able to position a really cool person with the car and put together a really nice ad which was really nicely received publicly. And PR stepped in to leverage the ad – arranged a lot of interviews for her, and her career progressed a lot. This was such a good marriage for both parties and our PR AVE value was ridiculous and to this day, we still get speaking opportunities for our marketing director to speak about this campaign as a case study."

Respondent 7 noted what the lack of consultation leads to by recalling recurring events not just with her current agency, but her company's last three PR agencies [of which there has been three over that period]: "I think there has been, not only with our current agency, but with the agency we've used before, this underlying trend amongst agencies for ticking boxes. I think there is a lack of consultants in my current agency specifically. And I think that the overall experience that we are having with agencies, not just related to them, is a lack of understanding of our industry. A lack of understanding of how to make complex topics simple and that overall experience, is making us consider doing things in house or with freelance, projects-based people. And I think it's also very different when the client comes from an agency, because my expectations are very different for my agency. There's been incidents in this year where I fully understand why clients become difficult, why they become their PR agency's worst nightmare, because agencies drive you that way. They are not delivering. They are not providing great service. I think they sugar-coat their industry award-winning entries (to win those and impress future clients, but the reality does not live up to that). They sugar-coat how they present themselves. They are a PR agency, so they are very good at PR-ing themselves. But when push comes to shove, it comes down to the people on the account, who need to deliver. And those people are not what you've signed up for. It's like going into Woollies, making a purchase and you get Checkers quality or like a spaza quality end-product. You still buy into the marketing of the brand, because they tell you everything is great but the quality (of service) that you are getting is sub-par. And I think that, that's what we're seeing across the board."

Respondent 9 also highlighted his appreciation for strategic consultation delivered by his agency by recalling a recurring event, and stating: "The handling of our annual general meeting which takes the form of a conference with our partners, employees, the media, and other stakeholders, is always stellar – our agency do a pretty good job of counselling us around how to differentiate it every year to keep things fresh, and how to make it worth it for media to attend, and then they also organise that annual event. I also appreciate their consult during situations that involve crisis communications. Sometimes it is not a major crisis but it does have some social media fallout and turn into some king of incident that requires crisis communications and some PR interventions as well. They are really good in these cases, especially in terms of consulting the business around what approaches to take, platforms to use and constructing the messaging we'll be using in addressing the issue, protecting our business and our image. For eThekwini Municipality which is based in Durban, there were articles in the media around that created highly negative perceptions of the business. They provided lots of consultation around how best to address these misconceptions and showcase the good work we do as a business and NGO."

Respondent 8 also highlighted the value of consultation through her recollection of a situation, saying: "The role of our agency includes supporting the public relations and strategic communication objectives such as driving positive stories about the business amidst the negative news and social media. We had a crisis involving the announcement of various dealer closures across the country, which led to fears that we would be leaving the country. Through consultation, our agency provided a PR solution to alleviate these fears by our customers and the public at large. We would directly educate the media about our business (along with clearing rumours of closure), by facilitating intimate breakfast sessions with the press within Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. Extensive and wide-reaching publicity around these events followed and new team members were announced and profiled to demonstrate its commitment in South Africa. We managed to build extensive relationships with the media, not only motoring and business media, but across the board. Additionally, our agency helped create content and social media responses that were posed by our internal community manager to address inaccurate statements on social media or alleviate customer concerns on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They helped us turn that crisis into an opportunity to profile our leaders, our products, and highlight our commitment to staying in South Africa."

Also noting the value that strategic consultation can bring was respondent 6, who recalled some recurring events over the course of the last two years, noting: "In terms of our good experiences with our agency – they have impressed me with regards to the content generation they provide us with. There have been quite a number of stellar pieces produced. They also provide value adds due to their relationships with the media – they can get us a lot of interviews and some free publicity opportunities. But even more impressive was when we were onboarding a new client who required services beyond our traditional service offering and expertise. They needed public relations services as well. And our agency had no issues providing us with some strategic counsel around PR campaigns, content generation, and media relations to help us build out our offerings for this client."

PR agencies that tap into the power of technology and constantly look for ways to innovate in terms of their offerings, will see the highest client satisfaction levels

Respondent 1 lamented her agency's lack of innovation (as well as the general lack of innovation in the industry – recurring event over the last three years), stating: "We often see innovative ideas that our competitor brands are implementing or other companies are coming up with and then we have to make those suggestions to our agency. They are quite slow when it comes to being innovative or coming up with a new way of doing the same thing."

Respondent 5 who noted lack of innovation as a recurring event over the last three years and one of the aspects of client service she was very disappointed with, stating: "The agency needs to immerse themselves in the client's business and the industry in which they operate. This must be done to provide them with an understanding of the competitors, challenges the business faces, along with the innovative approaches to doing things gained from that knowledge. Even if they assign someone from the team to work on site at our offices. This will give them a better sense of what's happening. They should do this as a suggestion and not a way to bill more on extra hours."

Respondent 7 who has been using her agency since July 2019 noted a recurring event with them: "As a technology company, we encourage our service providers to even make the odd mistake, because there is no learning otherwise – always opting for safe options and not taking any risks. You get into the mindset of not wanting to do stuff that other companies in this space are not doing, because you do not want to take on the risk of failure. If you have a PR agency that is very set in their ways and can't think outside of the box or from my perspective, it makes innovation and coming up with innovative campaigns or content ideas very challenging. You get serviced by teams that follow cookie cutter recipes. What you cookie cut from our main competitors doesn't necessarily work for us and that's what we seem to be seeing across the board, regardless of which agency you are dealing with. I have had three agencies in the last three years that I've been in this role at the business over the course of that time. We have high standards because a lot of our people come from an agency background. My boss comes from an agency, two bosses in the UK both come from PR agencies. In fact, 90% of the people [in the communications divisions] within our EMEA council comes from agencies. So, we have an agency mentality. But we are fast, agile and nimble, but we don't find that from our agencies – even globally. Even in the UK from an EMEA perspective, there was a pitch that went out in February-May of this year [2019]. An agency that have had the business for years ended up losing it to a much smaller agency. This agency does work in the UK, Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands – quite a few regions, but the smaller agency won the account, because they told us something that we did not know. We are the leaders in cloud computing, database technology, AI and analytics so, we know a lot of stuff. The way to impress me is by telling me something that I don't know, guide me on something that I don't know. That is not happening [in South Africa] – we are not being challenged as clients, we're being fed the cool aid and agencies just think that if I deliver X amount of content (which is their main deliverable), then that is great. Where is the quality in that quantity of coverage? Where's BusinessDay? Where is Financial Mail. Where's the de-positioning piece for our competitor? Those high-level things that you would need a very senior journalist or a writer or an industry expert to do is what we're starting to expect from our agencies. We're seeing it globally, but we're not seeing it locally or regionally [across Middle East and Africa] though. They don't understand it. They don't know how to do it. They don't know how to deposition the competition. They're too nice. In the US, they get that right because that's their attitude – I think that has to do a lot with culture. As South Africans also, I think there's something to explore from a cultural perspective – people-pleasing. South Africans love keeping people happy. And I think that, that is what we're seeing with our agencies – just trying to keep the light on and clients happy, but they're delivering what they said they would deliver, without going above and beyond."

She added that PR agencies might be more inclined to adopt innovative ways of doing things if their payment were tied to their deliverables instead of the hours that they spend working on the account, saying: "I believe that our business is built to it [hitting targets rather than delighting clients] because they want to charge you by the hour – it makes sense. For me, I would almost have a set fee on a monthly basis for example $1000 for which my agency needs to deliver four things – whether that is four major news articles or four tier 1 business interviews – whatever that is – you get paid on a scale of what you deliver. Because why must I pay if you are not providing the return on my investment? When you pay me according to hours spent on the account, then you can b*lls!t your way around this. Say it has taken me 15 hours to build out the story, reach the publication and journalist – pitch the story, and get the coverage, so I have delivered two articles and not four. Plus, by the way it was a long-lead publication so the article will only run in two months' time, so I have in actual fact only delivered one article. This doesn't work as I want to see what I am paying for. But I don't think for our industry in South Africa, that that is feasible. Delivering a hundred pieces of crap instead of four articles in tier 1 publications also doesn't work. I would rather have four quality pieces in tier 1 publications that take the same amount of time compared to forty articles in fly-by-night, irrelevant platforms who do not reach the type and size of audience we require. That is where we are starting to get to. We will rather have Financial Mail, BusinessDay, IT Web Brainstorm, then the rest of the crap, because who is reading the rest of the crap. I also think that I would pay you more if you showed me more. If you showed me audience insights – analytics into where the piece landed – who read it – did it generate any leads. For example, if you're running a BusinessDay piece, and BusinessDay shared the article on their LinkedIn profile, and you go back to them and say you want some of the analytics showcasing who read it, commented on it etc. And you come back to me and say that that BusinessDay piece - the CEO of MTN for instance read it - that to me has a lot more power than not having that insight. We're taking things in house to ensure that those kinds of big hits happen because our agencies seem incapable of doing so or providing us with the insights that they are happening. If there aren't these kinds of platforms to provide these insights then they should be building these – I think that innovation in the PR industry has stifled. You have tools like Crimson Hexagon and all these snazzy things that they want you to pay for and I think that they should be a value add to your customer. You should show them the value of where your coverage is hitting. Why do I need to pay for a fee for you to do your work? I also think that there is a lack of partnership in the space. I have better relationships with the media that my agency does, because I've been in an agency. That lack of relationship with the media over the last few years has deteriorated. I question whether today's agency people can pick up a phone comfortable and pitch a story on a difficult topic to Rob Rose. I even question whether they even know Rob or whether they have worked in the newsroom with Rob as a former journalist for instance. I think that is a critical part of the failing of agencies – there is no relationship and if there is – you are not bringing the benefits of those relationships to me that's for sure."

Her views were shared by respondent 5 who added to this, stating: "It is always like we're pushing them [the agency], because we have certain KPIs we have to meet, especially around product launches such as 20 articles per week for example. We have a lot of paid content, but the earned content needs to be pushed. All the media relationships, especially the higher levels ones sit with me. Your Arthur Goldstuck and Toby Shapshak sit with me. But it's not like the agency has those kinds of relationships. For example, we did the our flagship smartphone launch and our KPI was to get 60 media there. So, they [the agency] got bodies there, but these were like tier 4 people, media that I've never heard of. It was supposed to be a premium event that is not for knock and drops that I've never heard of and people that are just here for the alcohol, food, and media gifts. They didn't have quality control, so I had to crap on them. For me, it's all about output, because I get measured on the execution of these launches. If they could not get 60, but they were able to get 40 key - tier one, tier two and tier three - quality media there, then that must be the reality of the situation. This is our capacity for the country! Then, we put that forward to our global HQ so that they understand the situation, and the results within context."

Respondent 3 was pleased with her agency's innovative approaches and way of adding additional value to her briefed in work, noting a recurring event: "Where they have really impressed us is where they've gone beyond the scope of work, typically. Or where the agency will apply its creativity on an ask and pitching it at a high-level. Especially around content, assisting with the PowerPoint presentations and reporting. I've always felt that it is beyond what we briefed into them – beyond that level. And with some of the activations on which they supported and helped us co-create."

Her views were echoed by respondent 4, who noted some recurring event over the last five years, saying: “And then the ideas – creative ideas and great ideas that the agency comes up with to get our message across to the local and regional media. They are also open and transparent around the way in which they operate. There’s this weird thing about PR agencies, where they will not give away their database of journalists or press contacts, because they view it as their IP. As a client they would usually send you a media list with just the names of the journalists and the publication and no contact details. We also required those for sharing of things like credits to enable media to get lifts to and from events or test some of our offerings for instance.”

Respondent 9 highlighted a negative recurring event over the last six years, stating: "There are times when they have disappointed me – sometimes agencies including ours – get comfortable and complacent when they are on retainer. Their inputs and suggestions get stale. So, you really have to push them and make sure you get a return on your investment. When there's always good results and good service, it does give me that level of comfort that my money is being spent properly and that I am getting a good return on my investment in PR services."

These views were shared by respondent 5, who shed light on her negative recurring event over the course of the last two years, stating: "Our relationship with our agency started off really well and then their service delivery dwindled off, because I think that, when the agency gets too comfortable with the client, then they kind of stop…there's no attention to detail, there's no insight or proactiveness in terms of – this is what is happening in the industry – let's change it up. It's always me saying, can we do video content, can we do infographics, can we change things up…look at our competitors – who are they speaking to? What are we doing wrong? How can we improve? Maybe we look at bloggers. Maybe we look at YouTubers. Stuff like that. So, I give more input and show a lot more proactiveness from my end compared to the agency who is supposed to be counselling me as the expert service providers. In terms off where is the industry going – they never provide me with these kinds of insights around what's happening or research around what rival brands are doing. I think that after like a two-year period, most agencies simply get too comfortable with the client and the account – like it is a given that the relationship will continue."

Respondent 5 went on to say that: "You need an agency that is agile who can move and do these things. The deliverables are difficult. Like now, I am being challenged by the headlines for instance. The content needs to be positioned really well and we need those key relationships with media to prevent these overly negative headings around the business. Journalists require the context and information to be truly informed – to understand the business, its strategy and where we are going. Like with our current global crisis with being a Chinese company and the situation and tensions between the US and China. How are we going to get positive headlines? How are we going to build the trust around our services and products with consumers? The answer is that it’s through the media, but how do we do that? What are the relevant topics? I need the agency to provide me with this. This is not happening. Instead, I sit here and tell them what to do. They need to start thinking out of the box, because I always tell them traditional PR is dead. It's more about communication on different platforms and how you communicate in different environments. Transmitting the same messaging from an article into a tweet with highly limit characters. How do we get these headlines? How do we sway these industry insiders? I don't have the capacity to do all that and all the required research. So, I need that guidance from them and that is what I find is lacking from agencies in general. They are not proactive. They only react once I crap on them. For me, it’s I have you as my agency for a reason – it’s to help me. You are supposed to provide me with insights every month, supposed to send me stuff that you see, but I generally don't get any of it. The situation now is like I do want to change agencies but it's like a whole procurement process. And then, which agency do I get, because all agencies have their respective pros and cons. Some also have competitor brands and some are not allowed to work with us from a US perspective, so it's like plenty of considerations."

She noted a time when the opposite was true, when their agency were the ones who were innovative and helped tackle challenges through their innovative input: "For our flagship smartphone launch, when we first started using our agency, we had to do a lot of education for consumers around the product, its competitive advantages and main features. They were really good at helping us with positioning, thought leadership content generation, so that was really very good and helpful as a demonstration of the value they were adding. We even won an industry award – a SABRE Award."

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

With this study, the researcher set out to look at whether event history analysis can be used to provide insights around the quality of service that a PR agency delivers for their clients. This began with a deductive analysis of the literature around definitions of CIT theory, its possible applications, and customer service.

To build on this, the researcher developed a qualitative study designed to interpret the views and gather the insights from PR and Communications managers who work with and utilise PR agencies for part or all of their PR, stakeholder relations and strategic communication functions.

The research proposals identified in the literature review were confirmed during the interviews and the study was structured according to these three proposals, namely PR agencies who learn from their past experiences and adopt innovative approaches to become more agile and responsive to changes, will be more successful at retaining and satisfying clients; PR agencies that reach the level of advisory status to provide strategic consultation to clients and thereby add more value, will see the highest levels of customer satisfaction; and PR agencies that tap into the power of technology and constantly look for ways to innovate in terms of their offerings, will see the highest client satisfaction levels.

This research was meant to discover whether critical service delivery incidents demonstrated the quality of service (or perceived service) that business received from their agencies. This is indeed the case since the majority of respondents found that the critical incidents of service delivery they experienced did indeed correspond directly to (at least some extend) the quality of service delivery they received/are receiving.

The study also set out to ascertain if CIT would be a useful method of providing or at least alluding to recommendations that can be made for PR agencies to augment their customer service. Again, based on the feedback and insights delivered by the interviewees, this is indeed the case as the majority of them could reflect upon mistakes made by their respective agencies, as well as how these can be addressed or avoided in future.

Ultimately, event history analysis has been found to be a useful audit tool that is capable of delivering rich qualitative results which PR agencies and researchers can use to diagnose its customer service practices.

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

Inferring from the findings, the study concluded that there is a strong indication that critical incidents of PR service delivery may be used as a barometer of customer service delivery and may provide valuable insights into ways in which PR agencies can augment their service delivery in order to meet or in fact, exceed customer expectations.

PR agencies who learn from their past experiences and adopt innovative approaches to become more agile and responsive to changes, will be more successful at retaining and satisfying clients

In line with the findings, the recommendations that can be made with regards to the first research proposal include structuring teams according to the needs of the client, with a respondent noting: “Package your team as an agency specific to your client. It’s not just about winning a client and then servicing them. Once you’ve onboarded a new client know exactly what their business needs are. Their objectives and structure your team accordingly. If agencies spend more time and their needs and structuring the team accordingly – then, they would be more efficient. Drive innovation and provide insight around industry trends and new campaign ideas and platforms/tactics to use.”

This need to be adaptable, flexible and responsive to change or phrased another way, to instill dynamic capabilities in a business, is not a unique business challenge of today, but its prevalence has been made universal in the fourth industrial era, as a result of the pace of the technology trends in effect today such as big data analytics and cloud computing, which quickly and continuously reshape the operating landscape for companies, increase market competition and customer expectations.

Dynamic capabilities are “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen 1997, p. 516).

Dynamic capabilities often involve learning from past experiences and building on one’s existing capabilities, but sometimes also necessitate the scrapping of outdated practices for novel or modern ones. Furthermore, the implementation of dynamic capabilities may involve resource deployment or changing, supplementing, and rewriting a business’s core capability platform. All of this culminates in the fact that the dynamic capability of a business does not refer to ad hoc solutions or responses to some temporary issue, but to an on-going and embedded set of skills as well as knowledge, that a company exercised through a process (Kozlenkova, Samaha, & Palmatier 2014).

There are not many studies investigating dynamic capabilities in detail, in fact "very few studies have focused on exploring higher-level, dynamic marketing capabilities" (Morgan, Feng, & Whitler 2018, p. 81).

What we do know about dynamic capabilities includes the fact that it is both the responsibility of individual managers and the leadership team of the business (Helfat & Peteraf 2003). Additionally, for dynamic capabilities to be implemented, company-wide change procedures also need to be adopted (Galunic & Eisenhardt 2001).

Businesses therefore, need to align their organisational design, which consists of various aspects that includes its structure, corporate culture, employees, and corporate processes, with rapidly changing digital disruptions, if they want to sustain higher levels of success (Kane et al. 2016).

PR agencies that reach the level of advisory status to provide strategic consultation to clients and thereby add more value, will see the highest levels of customer satisfaction

A recommendation for helping PR agencies benefit from the insight of research proposal 2 is to build a relationship with their clients. One respondent noted: "When you have a team that you have a great relationship with, who show passion and enthusiasm for your brand, that is all that matters. For me it's less about who the agency is and more about who the team is who are supporting the work. Your account team. KPIs are almost a secondary thing, because delivery of those are reliant on the collaboration between us and the agency and our corporate comms team plus other stakeholders. In terms of service it is definitely reliant on your account team, the people that you work with on a daily basis."

According to Wirtz (2018: 9), the route to success involves "targeting, acquiring, and retaining the 'right' customers. There are many components to creating long-term customer relationships, but Wirtz asserts that loyalty management kicks off with the step of segmenting the market in order to match your company's offerings better with your customer needs, because not all customers will be a match for your business's capabilities, service offering, strategic direction and technological platforms.

Wirtz (2018) also stated that a complementary approach to enhancing loyalty is to understand the key drivers behind customer churn and then working on those by eliminating problem areas and minimising those factors, driving it through proactive and reactive measures. This can be done by conducting churn diagnostic and monitoring client churn.

Interestingly a respondent noted, "It is important to do regular [at least quarterly] customer feedback sessions and use these to track things like billable hours as well as customer satisfaction surveys or ratings. How are we [as the PR agency] delivering on the contract [from the point of view of the client]? Cause the last thing you want is that at the end of a contract, the client says that they were never happy with your services and then you say to yourself, never happy, how come? You've never said anything. Now all of a sudden, we're getting this feedback that is contrary to what we thought of was the relationship. Constant feedback, constant checking, but also building the relationship and being intentional about building the relationship with your clients."

Another recommendation that has an effect on the level of trust a PR agency is able to build with their client even from the very beginning – before they even win the business – is to not overpromise during the pitch process, with a respondent elaborated on this as follows: "I've worked with a lot of agencies in the past and with a number of different agencies in different facets of the business (beyond PR agencies such as ad agencies, design agencies, and marketing agencies). One thing that I can say that agencies do wrong all the time is they overpromise in their pitches and they underdeliver in their execution. You'll get directors or heads of departments coming in and giving you this pitch. It's an amazing pitch. They make promises about coverage targets and working within (your) budget. And then you get started on the actual project and either, you get stuck with an account executive who can't make decisions or actually doesn't fundamentally understand your business or two, the execution is poor because the overpromised in the pitch."

PR agencies that tap into the power of technology and constantly look for ways to innovate in terms of their offerings, will see the highest client satisfaction levels

In order to ensure that PR agencies impress their clients regularly with new ways of doing things, new technology that can deliver better results or allow for clients to communicate with stakeholder more efficiently and effectively, agencies must stay abreast of the latest technology trends, and debrief on their campaigns in order to discover what worked and how to improve even further.

Service innovation is a vital component of a company's business sustainable development strategy (Zhang et al, 2018).

According to Yang, Li and Su (2018), service innovation for the most part involves alterations in the characteristics of the service offering itself.

Tidd et al (2001) assert that the main aspect of a company's sustainable development involves its innovative behaviours or the creation of value from the business's assets, which is achieved through redesigning or enhancing its products, services, or other methods in innovation. Consequently, a business has to generate and sustain its competitive advantages through the process of integrating its resources and abilities.

Moreover, service innovation allows a business to turn change into opportunities for new business, upselling, and enhance its service offerings (Huse et al., 2005; Hsieh & Chou, 2018).

Service innovation refers to novel services and new customer service experiences (Tseng et al., 2018). Drejer (2004) elaborated on this earlier, stating that service innovation is not simply about creating new products or services, but also involves innovative activities that result in the improvement of current products, services, as well as delivery systems.

Chen and Tsou (2007) assert that to establish new markets, companies have to implement specific service innovation practices in order to deliver managerial process innovations, create scalar business models, and manage customer experiences.

Service innovation may be categorised into fundamental, incremental, as well as process innovations (Halliday & Trott, 2010; Snyder et al., 2016).

According to Den Hertog, van der Aa and de Jong (2010), there are six dynamic service innovation capabilities that may enable companies to outpace their rivals in terms of their service offerings. These are signalling client needs and technological options, conceptualising, (un-)bundling, co-producing and orchestrating, scaling and stretching, as well as learning and adapting.

In terms of recommendations for future studies, it may be well worth looking into whether CIT or event history analysis can be integrated as a tool within a customer service enhancement model. This study was limited geographically to South Africa and it will be interesting to see if the results would be the same or similar within other regions as well as whether it will still be the same within different sectors outside of PR and strategic communications and for service providers who are not PR agencies including marketing agencies, digital or social media agencies.

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ADDENDUM A: RESEARCH PLANNING

ADDENDUM B: CONSISTENCY MATRIX

Evaluating the customer service provided by public relations agencies using CIT				
Sub-problems	**Literature Review**	**Research questions**	**Source of data**	**Analysis**
What recommendations can be made for PR agencies to augment their customer service?	Zwijze-Koning, De Jong & Van Vuuren (2015); Klaus and Maklan (2013); Chandler and Lusch (2015); Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello (2015); Singer 2015; Rawson, Duncan, and Jones (2013); Homburg et al.'s (2017); Verhoef, Kooge, and Walk (2016); (Sharma, 2017)	1. To what extent do critical incidents talk back to distinctive events?	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with PR managers (clients)	Thematic analysis: Read & annotate transcripts Identify the themes Apply coding scheme Code information
	Iglesias and Bonet (2012); Mazzei (2014); Auvinen et al. (2013)	2. To what extent do critical incidents reflect the structural aspects of the work of the PR agency?		
	Christensen & Cornelissen (2011); Baker and Boyle (2009); Michailova and Minbaeva (2012); Frandsen and Johansen (2011); Harris and Ogbonna (2012); Kim & Rhee (2011); Gill (2011; Chen (2012)	3. To what extent does storytelling and sensemaking activities impact on critical incidents?		

ADDENDUM C: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Facilitator's welcome, introduction and instructions to participants

Welcome and thank you for volunteering to take part in this study and interview. You have been asked to participate as your point of view is important. I realise you are busy, and I appreciate your time.

Introduction: The practical goal of this study is to determine the level of customer service experienced by businesses from their service provider - the PR agency - through event history analysis. The academic goal is to evaluate the use of event history analysis as a research method for studying customer service.

During the interviews, participants are only to be made aware of the study's practical aim.

I explain that they were randomly selected based on their job position, their relationship with their service provider – in this case PR agency - and physical location (all companies have multiple locations, based within Gauteng from which the sample was drawn).

Anonymity: Despite being recorded, I would like to assure you that the discussion will be anonymous. The recordings will be kept safely until they are transcribed word for word, then they will be transferred to a memory stick and stored safely away. The transcribed notes of the interview will contain no information that would allow individual subjects to be linked to specific statements.

Please attempt to answer and comment as accurately and truthfully as possible. If there are any questions that you do not wish to answer, you do not have to do so; however please try to answer and be as involved as possible.

Warm up

To start with, participants are asked to detail the particulars of their job and how the duration of their employment at the business, in order to allow them to converse around a familiar subject and encourage them to become more confident.

Following these introductory questions, the participants are asked with which agency they have had the longest or the shortest relationship, as well as the starting date and ending date of said working relationship.

Next, they are asked if they can recollect and then detail a remarkable service encounter that they had experienced with said agency and to which they attached either very positive or highly negative feelings to.

Participants are encouraged to detail this event/events in the most specific way possible, whereafter numerous follow-up questions might be posed to them in order to further explore the event/s thoroughly. These questions are posed with the goal of exposing all relevant aspects of the incident/s and addressed the following topics:

What happened?

Who were the people involved?

What are the main factors that triggered or caused the event?

What were the outcomes or consequences of the event?

Is the event typical/a-typical of the way that the service provider delivered their services?

How did this encounter/events inform your perception of the value of the services of the agency?

While the interviewees are talking about these events, non-directive probing questions will be asked in order to encourage more detailed descriptions.

Following the conclusion of the discussion of each incident, I will summarise the incident/ service encounter and ask for confirmation that my summary is an accurate reflection thereof.

I will then also ask whether the participants are aware of any other communication events/service encounters/incidents that they would like to mention involving this particular agency and period being discussed, and if there are, I will follow this question up with the same standard series of questions as before (with regards to the new incident).

This exchange will be continued until such time as the interviewee is unable to provide any new incidents/service encounters.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking part in the research study. This has been a highly enlightening and informative conversation.

Your observations, insights and sentiments will be of great value to the study

I hope you also found this engagement insightful and of value as well

I would like to once again bring to your attention that any inputs from you during this interview will remain anonymous.