I will never allow any of my children to choose it: Ghanaian Bank Managers' views about Public Relations

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Introduction

Tymson & Lazar (2002) argue that all organisations exist with the approval of society (tacit or otherwise), and for that reason organisations need to act in ways that ensure that this approval is always there and not jeopardised in any way; that is, put in danger of being withdrawn. Agreeing with such a proposition means that the way organisations act and how these actions are seen and interpreted by stakeholders and the public, is a matter of importance. This also implies that organisations cannot afford to leave a communication vacuum between themselves and their publics, including the immediate communities in which they operate. This premise makes (organisational) communication one of the key strategic functions of any organisation that not only wants to continue to exist, but also wants to succeed. It also means that the key person in charge of communication in any organisation should be in a position to shape the organisation’s decisions and actions. In this way, organisational strategy will consider stakeholder interests and communication strategy will involve not only what is said, but more importantly what the organisation does.

Research in different settings, including Australia, UK and Canada has revealed that two-way symmetric communication used strategically can improve many dimensions of business performance and give organisations competitive advantage (Balabanis, Phillips & Lyall, 1998; Dozier, Grunig & Hunt, 1995). These competitive advantages include, among others, a friendly business climate, improved national standing, good corporate image, reduced conflict with stakeholders, less or favourable government regulation, increased employee productivity and employee satisfaction (Steiner, 2001, p. 38).

For an organisation to enjoy the benefits mentioned above, however, it must come to terms with the changing meaning of organisational communication and make the effort to embrace two-way symmetric communication between itself and stakeholders, which should be managed by the professional public relations practitioner who would be skilled in the art of communication management. Not only that, it also requires that organisations come to an understanding that the public relations role and the public relations manager are singularly and
jointly crucial to an organisation's strategic management and must therefore be willing to allow the public relations manager to be part of the organisation's dominant coalition. The basis of such an assertion is a move towards participation underpinned by changes in our understanding of communication brought about by the realisation that organisations do not have as much control over their communication as they used to think and that meaning has to be constantly negotiated between an organisation and its publics (Steiner, 2001). One implication of this is that meaning is not always derived only from the overt communication that an organisation engages in; hence the suggestion that professional communicators (public relations practitioners) be involved in decisions that result in actions that send messages to an organisation's publics.

In order for such involvement to be effective, it needs to be at the highest levels of an organisation, meaning, practitioners should be part of the group of people in the organisation who make strategic decisions and are referred to as the 'dominant coalition' (top management). For that to happen however, members of the dominant coalition need to have an adequate understanding of the public relations role and be willing to give practitioners a seat at the management table. Ultimately, the function and role that public relations plays in an organisation depends to a large extent on how it is viewed by the strategic management team or the dominant coalition, and also what members of this group think public relations can do for the organisation (Plowman, 2004; Steiner & Black, 2000). This paper reports findings from a study which looked at the way top managers in one of Ghana's banks viewed and understood the public relations function and their preparedness to admit the public relations practitioner into the bank's dominant coalition.

**PR practitioners, strategic management (and the dominant coalition)**

Our main contention in this paper is that at a broad level, PR is and should be concerned with all actions that have to do with organisational survival, albeit, from a communication standpoint. This means that PR professionals should be involved in decisions that determine all actions and events that communicate messages to an organisation's publics. This also implies participation in management, but whether or not that involvement is achieved, depends on how the public relations role is viewed by the dominant coalition (top management) of an organisation.

In spite of the abundance of public relations definitions and the seeming disparities between some of them, the underlying emphasis in most definitions is the fact that public relations is a management function. Cutlip, Centre & Broom (2006) for example, define public relations as 'the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends' (p. 5). Such a definition implies
that it is essential for public relations practitioners to assume managerial positions in organisations to be able to effectively practice their profession. It can further be deduced from this definition that practitioners should be part of an organisation's dominant coalition and should have a part to play in an organisation's strategic planning and management. This is on the basis that anything that has to do with organisational success or failure is arguably of strategic importance. Therefore establishing and maintaining relationships with publics on whom an organisation's success or failure depends should qualify the one who has responsibility for that role to be part of the strategic management team.

Strategic management as a concept is based on the interpretative perspective of strategy, which is 'primarily concerned with the relationships between an organisation and its key stakeholders' (Plowman, 2004, p. 131; Chaffee, 1985). This perspective is crucial because the success and survival of an organisation depends on the balancing of conflicting stakeholder interests (Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000). The practice of strategic management will allow public relations practitioners to participate in the balancing of organisational goals with influences from its external environment or strategic stakeholders and permit the organisation to match its internal processes with external factors to yield maximum results (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995). The practice of strategic management also allows organisations to 'effectively mobilize their assets in order to address their opportunities and threats and carry out a successful implementation strategy' (Cutlip et al 2006, p. 373). Accordingly, the PR practitioner occupying a managerial position has the ability and influence to aptly communicate the need for, and urgency required of, an organisation to promptly deal with issues before they get out of hand.

Further, public relations practitioners who are well educated and trained are more likely to make use of strategic thinking and planning in order to deal with threats to their organisation, give their organisation a competitive edge, and maintain a positive image for their organisations (Cutlip et al, 2006). Such practitioners have the capacity to contribute viably to the accomplishment of organisational goals as well as finding solutions to the organisation's problems (Plowman, 2004). Ultimately, participation of the public relations practitioner in the strategic management team of an organisation elevates public relations from its typical role of being reactive to events, to a more proactive and responsive role through its ability to anticipate and minimise emerging conflicts in the organisation (Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, Grunig, Repper & White, 1992).

In the long run, having a public relations person in the dominant coalition will ensure that the public relations unit manages the organisation's reputation and good standing with its publics, with the same strategic thinking applied by other managers in the organisation. Furthermore, the inclusion of public relations practitioners in management will ensure that the public relations unit contributes
to strategic management by way of identifying long-term opportunities and threats to the organisation through its environmental scanning function. PR involvement at that level of strategic planning and management affords practitioners the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with other managers towards the ultimate organisational goal of achieving objectives as set out in the mission statement. Veri and Grunig (2000) aptly capture the sentiments expressed in the preceding paragraphs when they note that ‘if public relations practitioners and researchers are to explain and demonstrate the utility of public relations concepts and practices, they have to do it within the home ground of management’ (p. 90). This is even more imperative when considered in the light of the observation by Lauzen & Dozier (1992) that ‘manager role enactment is both the product of and a contributor to a practitioner’s organisational power’ (p. 209).

**PR roles and management decision-making: what the literature says**

Early research into practitioner roles suggested that, theoretically, there were four distinct roles played by the PR practitioner. These were categorised as: (i) Expert Prescriber; (ii) Communication Facilitator; (iii) Problem Solving Process Facilitator; and (iv) Communication Technician (Broom & Smith, 1979; Grunig, 1992). Later research however condensed the first three roles into one, with Grunig (1992) arguing that ‘variance in practitioner roles activities can be parsimoniously accounted for, through two basic organisational roles: managers and technicians’ (p. 335). Accordingly, Cutlip et al (2006) note that ‘two major dominant roles occur in practice: Public relations technician and Public relations manager’ (p. 42). The quote below provides a fitting summary of the differences between the two roles:

Public relations technicians are primarily concerned with writing and disseminating communications ... They tend to be creative, artistic, and technically proficient; see themselves as their organisation’s ‘wordsmith’ and exhibit little inclination or aptitude for strategic planning and research ...The public relations manager role casts practitioners as part of organisational management. This role calls for research skills, aptitude for strategic thinking and a tendency to think in terms of the outcomes or impacts of public relations activities. Practitioners in the public relations manager role do not limit their tactics to communication. (Cutlip et al, 2006, p. 42)

Although, as Creedon (1991) argues, presenting practitioner roles in such a clear dichotomy oversimplifies the variety and complexities of what practitioners do, for our purposes, it ‘provides a parsimonious summary of empirically stable patterns of practitioner role behaviour’ (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992, p. 209) and its utility has been demonstrated in prior studies (Broom & Dozier, 1985, 1986; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). In reality then, organisations utilise PR practitioners either as managers or communication technicians through the kind of roles that
'I will never allow any of my children to choose it: are expected or assigned to them by their employers. It is possible however, that a PR practitioner might practice both roles in varying degrees within an organisation and the practitioner's dominant role is usually decided by the 'role-activity set' most frequently performed (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992, p. 209). The following discussion gives an indication of some of the challenges faced by practitioners in their efforts to enact the managerial role within various organisational settings.

There have been some empirical studies in different settings, which give an indication of the factors that influence the granting of the public relations practitioner a seat at the management table and the contributions that practitioners have made to organisational decision-making. For example, a study by Plowman (2004) into the negotiating strategies employed by PR managers in their bid to become an effective part of the communication process together with membership of the dominant coalition of an organisation, found that membership of the dominant coalition was dependent on the PR practitioner's ability to solve problems. This included the ability to do strategic planning, and demonstrate knowledge and experience in the field and sound judgment. Plowman concluded that public relations practitioners who use their knowledge, experience and ability to do strategic planning were empowered, through finding solutions to problems of the organisation, to become part of the dominant coalition of an organisation.

Moss, Ver_i_, Warnaby & Newman (2000) studied a broad range of organisations in the UK (11 in all) to find out the role played by senior PR practitioners, focusing on their interactions and contributions to the work of management decision makers within their respective organisations. The study revealed some remarkable variations in the pattern of practitioner role enactment within UK organisations and suggested some of the reasons why many practitioners, despite the seniority of their positions, are excluded from participating at the most senior levels of management in organisations in the U.K. The researchers summarised their findings in a number of propositions or hypotheses some of which are presented below.

1. P2: Practitioners are more likely to participate in the operational problem-solving process in organisations where they are able to demonstrate broad business and financial understanding, and where they are able to demonstrate how public relations can contribute to organisational goal attainment.

2. P3: Current conceptualisations of the manager's role in public relations may not explain adequately the variation in types of managerial activities performed by practitioners operating at different levels within public relations and communications departments.
• P5: The pattern of practitioner role enactment within organisations is likely to be strongly influenced by a combination of both internal and external environmental factors, as well as by the practitioner’s relationships and credibility with senior management.

• P7: Variation in practitioner role enactment, particularly in terms of the enactment of managerial roles, is likely to be strongly influenced by the dominant coalition’s perceptions of the professional competence and quality of the members of the public relations team within the organisation.

• P8: Practitioners are more likely to participate in strategic decision making when they are able to demonstrate how public relations can contribute to the achievement of the organisation’s financial and operational goals.

• P9: Practitioners are more likely to contribute to the process of strategic decision making in organisations where strategy making is characterised by a strong stakeholder orientation.

Another study by Preece, Moodley & Graham (1996) to find out whether PR was being used internally to support strategic marketing efforts concluded that:

• Public relations was not generally seen to be taken seriously by the most senior management within construction organisations. This was illustrated by staff cuts, lack of evaluation into the function’s effectiveness and insufficient resources.

• Those charged with public relations often experienced frustration and believed that there was little understanding or appreciation of their role and function.

• The implementation of PR strategies seemed to lack the active involvement and support of senior management within firms.

• There was a lack of understanding, interest or support from senior management and a lack of appreciation for the role of public relations in assisting in building and maintaining internal marketing.

This study showed that there was a genuine enthusiasm on the part of PR practitioners for using their role to support business objectives. However, there was a constant fear that due to economic conditions in the industry, senior management within firms may decide that the function was surplus to requirements (Preece et al, 1996). In a study that investigated how senior
managers in large Australian organisations view and use public relations, Steiner (2001) found that few organisations practiced symmetric public relations. The study revealed that while most of the organisations expected their public relations personnel to do more than corporate writing, they saw the PR role as involving 'outward movement of information rather than inward movement of intelligence about stakeholders' (p. 44). Steiner concluded that this represents strategic opportunities lost. The study also found that in the surveyed organisations PR professionals were part of the strategic planning process (team) but they were considered as not making any significant contribution to it (Steiner, 2001).

In the specific case of Ghana, the only known formal study on the attitude of management towards public relations practice (carried out in 10 different organisations) (Kyere, 1990) found that almost all of the management personnel interviewed (over 80%) were of the view that PR was a management function. However, ironically, the study also found that members of top management were usually not very keen to provide financial and other support for most PR programs (Kyere, 1990, p. 28). This particular finding in the Ghanaian context is similar to that of Grunig et al (1992) who observed that, 'although CEOs and other corporate leaders supported public relations as important to their organisations, they had not connected that support to participation of public relations at the highest levels of their organisations' (cited in Plowman, 2004, pp. 131-132). The implication is that, while CEOs/managers view communication as vital in their organisations' strategic decision-making there remains a disconnection between that view of communication and the role of public relations (Plowman, 2004, p. 132).

The issues that have been outlined here from the literature, are of interest because the research discussed in this paper primarily sought to find out how seriously public relations was being taken by the dominant coalition of the bank in question, bearing in mind that their views and knowledge of public relations would ultimately influence the public relations role in the bank, if any.

Research context: PR practice and the banking sector in Ghana

Many observers of financial institutions such as banks and brokerage houses in Ghana believe that they have an image problem that requires urgent attention. For example, in 2005, no less a personality than Ghana's Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry accused Ghanaian banks of alienating themselves from the majority of the poor people who need their services, describing the situation as 'wrong and unacceptable'. A search through major news stories and articles published on Ghanaweb between July 2005 and July 2006, revealed many unflattering headlines about banks and financial institutions. Examples included: 'Govt disappointed at Non-Bank Financial Institutions'; 'Excessive Exploitation by the Commercial Banks in Ghana'; 'Banks Still Mean to Economy'. Needless
to say, these articles and many more found during the search but not cited here, were uncomplimentary about the banks, to say the least, with one report stating that some banking practices have 'crippled many Ghanaian industries and private sector initiatives'.

Anecdotal and other evidence suggests that patronage of Ghanaian banks is not at the level that they (the banks) desire. Adomako (2006, np) presents a bleak summary of this situation by noting that:

Undue exploitation of customers, unfair and uncompetitive practices by the commercial banks in the country have conjoined to discourage many Ghanaians from patronizing the services of the banks. The last time fire gutted the Kumasi Central Market, cash exceeding billions of cedis got destroyed. Similar incidents have taken place previously at the Makola Market and other markets country wide. This is because the services of the banks in the country lack a human face so traders have no recourse but to keep millions of cedis under market tables.

Indeed, according to a Ghana News Agency story published on 29 December 2005, an estimated 70% of money in Ghana currently circulates outside of the banking system (www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive). One of the reasons for this is, as the Managing Director of Barclays Bank Ghana put it: 'the banks have not been aggressive enough in creating awareness about the benefits of banking among the unbanked segment' of Ghanaian society. A more compelling reason, however, is the image of the banks among Ghanaians and the complaints of those who use their services. According to Adomako (2006), the banking public's complaints include 'irrational minimum initial deposits, punitive deductions for maintaining balances below thresholds, punitive charges for cheque withdrawals, salary processing, use of ATMs, and extremely low interests on savings, salary processing, use of ATMs, and extremely low interests on savings, among others', and this has led to a situation where 'most Ghanaians have little faith in the banks' (np). Accordingly, it is also not unusual to hear some Ghanaians remark that they would prefer to hide their monies in their clothes rather than save them in a bank in order to avoid paying high commissions and charges whenever they carry out transactions in banks.

All the above issues negatively affect the image of Ghanaian banks in the eyes of their existing and potential customers and it is evident that Ghanaian banks need to work hard at redeeming their image and getting more people onto the 'banking train'. In this regard, there is no doubt that PR, employed strategically can do a lot to ensure smooth dialogue between banks in Ghana and their publics. As astute communicators, practitioners can simplify complex trade messages and objectives appropriately to help establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships between the banks and their active publics (their customers). More importantly, practitioners can represent stakeholder interests to the bank so that these can be taken into consideration when decisions are being made and actions are being carried out. PR practitioners, employing two-way symmetric
communication can therefore help to reduce, if not erase completely, the negative impressions that current and would-be publics have about Ghanaian banks as well as expand the customer base of these banks. However, to be able to do this, they need to be employed in managerial capacities as part of the dominant coalition, so that they can be actively involved in strategic planning and be part of that critical decision-making group which formulates policies, and makes suggestions and decisions that ultimately direct and influence the overall operations of these banks. The question to ask however is: do the banks themselves understand the role that PR can play in their strategic planning, and are they willing to let the PR practitioner be part of the decision-making group?

In an attempt to answer these questions, 10 respondents were interviewed over a period of two weeks in September 2005. The respondents were all senior managers occupying various strategic positions in the bank and included one (marketing manager) who had responsibility for PR related issues in the bank. Each interview lasted an average of 40 minutes and was recorded on tape for later transcription and analysis.

The managers occupied the following strategic positions in the bank:

- Executive Director, Operations and Systems
- Executive Director, Risk Management
- Executive Director, Central Management
- Head of Credit Risk and Policy
- Business manager, Personal and Small Businesses
- Business Manager, Domestic Banking
- Head, Human Resource Department
- Business Manager, Corporate
- Manager, Special Projects
- Manager, Marketing and Corporate Affairs (PR)

Interview questions covered a range of issues and themes including: respondents' general knowledge of PR; the expected minimum educational level required for a PR practitioner; the role of PR in the bank and its merger with the marketing function in the bank; and willingness to accept a PR person as part of the bank's top management.

**Research findings**

For clarity and ease of understanding findings are presented here under themes generated from the data. Some of the major findings are supported with direct quotes
from respondents as a way of buttressing points in the use of descriptive data.

**General knowledge of respondents about public relations**

A majority of the respondents (eight out of ten) had some knowledge and understanding of the public relations profession and role which was in line with the technician role discussed earlier. They stressed that it was a very important profession that could play a major role in the bank. Their view was that PR was more about a proactive approach to ‘information dissemination, information organisation and information delivery’. However, two of the respondents believed that although PR was a very important profession, it was not so crucial in the banking sector because it was not germane to a bank’s survival. Also the other respondent admitted that he did not know much about the profession and explained that all he knew about PR professionals was that ‘they are people who basically stand on behalf of companies to explain issues.’ These views reflect a functionalist (technical) view of PR as opposed to a strategic view. Such a view of PR permeates subsequent responses. Indeed, analysis of later responses to other questions suggests that while most of the respondents saw the PR profession as important and the role of the PR practitioner as equally crucial to their organisation, about half of them were not confident in the ability of a PR professional, who is not a professional banker to perform the PR function well in their bank. One respondent put thus:

A PR professional who is not a banker or who does not have adequate knowledge of the banking profession cannot do the job well.

The above view was echoed in different ways by a number of respondents in response to other questions. For example, one respondent answering a question on the expected educational level of practitioners alluded to the need to be well-versed in banking and then stated:

Can you imagine a PR practitioner sitting in management where everybody is a professional? He will feel uncomfortable and he will not be productive. If he is not lucky, the others can say that you are not part of us ... Unless there is parity [in terms of perceived knowledge level], it does not work.

**Educational level of PR practitioners**

In accordance with the importance that respondents attached to the PR profession, almost all the respondents agreed that the minimum level of education of a PR professional should be tertiary level education (university level) with some even indicating that a ‘PR professional should have at least a masters level education’. Respondents were unanimous in their view that professional training is critical for the PR practitioner. They felt strongly that acquiring professional training in addition to university education was a critical requirement in order to afford the PR practitioner a full purview of the profession. One respondent stated it thus:
Formalised instruction in PR would enable PR practitioners to have that broad range of technical knowledge of the profession to allow them look at issues with options. There was also general agreement on the fact that having communication skills was just one of the many tools needed in the PR profession and not enough to make a person an efficient PR practitioner. As one respondent put it:

It is false thinking to assume that once a person is good at something as a result of hobby or enthusiasm, then that person is qualified to practice in that area.

On the other hand, one respondent who felt that professional training was not necessary was also of the view that:

With the right tact and initiative as well as the ability to analyse, a good communicator could practice public relations.

**Public relations and marketing within the bank**

The bank had a ‘Marketing and Corporate Affairs’ department which was responsible for marketing and public relations activities. The department was headed by a professionally trained marketer and all the other people working under him in that department were also trained marketers. There was no professionally trained PR practitioner in that department. Not surprisingly, most of the respondents felt that it was a good idea that the marketing and PR functions of the bank had been put together under one department. They also considered the person in charge of the department who was not a professional PR, to be efficient in handling the bank’s PR activities. The main reasons given by respondents for their preference for the merger of the two departments was that, given the relatively small size of the bank as well as cost considerations, the merger ensured the maximum use of organisational resources. The quote below is illustrative:

We have to consider what is the extra value to us or the extra cost to us before employing a separate person to handle PR in the bank.

In fact three of the respondents even answered in the negative when asked if the bank had a PR department, but further probing revealed that they considered the Marketing department as the main department and considered PR/Corporate affairs as a subset of the Marketing department. This is in spite of the fact that the full name of the department was Marketing and Corporate Affairs.

Two of the respondents felt that when PR is made a separate department, the job description of a PR person for the bank may not be ‘deep’ enough to keep him or her busy throughout the year, ‘unless that person was really a self starter or a very active person’. Yet another respondent strongly believed that the bank did not have a real PR wing because according to him marketing had dwarfed PR
within the Marketing and Corporate Affairs department and the bank has been 'awed by the cost':

In view of the fact that costs to the organisation are real, the organisation has been awed by the cost of hiring really competent people to handle the PR/communications department.

He explained further that there was no substantive PR wing in the bank because PR was generally noted for its intangible benefits rather than its tangible benefits. In other words, the benefits of PR were not easily noticeable to management in terms of direct financial rewards to the organisation. Management was therefore not prepared to spend scarce resources to create a separate department for it in the bank. One respondent believed that senior management was divided on the issue of giving prominence to PR in the bank, adding that 'it is this dichotomous attitude of fellow senior managers towards the whole PR effort that has led to the faceless image of the bank'. He believed that the absence of a strong PR strategy in the bank had led to the situation whereby different managers gave different responses to the same crisis. According to this respondent, this lack of a centralised corporate response meant that people who were not good communicators did a bad job when handling crisis situations in the bank.

**PR accorded a strategic managerial role**

Six out of the ten respondents indicated that they believe PR is a management function and as such a PR practitioner could play a strategic/managerial role in the bank and be part of the dominant coalition. These respondents believed that the PR practitioner’s role in the organisation was essential because the PR practitioner is supposed to be ‘the voice of the organisation as well as the face of the organisation’. However, one of these six respondents also added that a PR practitioner might never command the respect of his fellow managers even when included in the strategic management team because his colleague managers generally look down on the PR profession. He stated therefore:

I will never allow any of my children to choose it as a career in view of the low regard given to the profession by other professionals.

On the other hand, four out of the ten respondents did not think that a PR practitioner should be part of the strategic management team of the organisation. The quote below is illustrative:

I do not think PR practitioners need to be part of the dominant coalition of our bank ... perhaps in some other organisation, but as for us, I do not think that is what we need.

Two out of the four respondents believed that a middle level position for a PR practitioner was an acceptable position in the bank. These respondents believed that the PR practitioner had to report to the marketing manager. The third
respondent in this group also believed that the PR should be an observer when it comes to the making of strategic decisions in the bank. This respondent further stressed that the danger in including the PR person in the dominant coalition is that ‘you may get a maverick in your midst creating problems’. According to this respondent, the role of the PR person is to ‘sit and listen during strategic meetings so that he becomes aware of product development at the strategic level’.

This respondent further suggested that the PR practitioner could be the secretary to the strategic committee of the organisation and report to the strategic director; an indication that he is more in favour of the technical role of the PR practitioner as propounded by Grunig (1992). The fourth respondent in this group felt it was not necessary for the PR person to be part of the dominant coalition of the organisation because according to him in a financial institution like a bank, the role of the PR person is to facilitate and make sure that the professional bankers do their job. This respondent buttressed his point with the following statement:

I have heard some PR practitioners talk about interest rates and the economy and they had made a mess of themselves.

One other issue that came out of the interviews was that most of the respondents, despite their belief in the importance of PR, did not have a high regard for the current crop of PR professionals that they came across. This was reflected in comments such as:

**PR professionals should do more than making donations and appearing in newspapers.**

Among my peers, PR people are people who run errands and not people who prepare a budget or prepare a strategic plan.

If, as Plowman (2004) proposes, the role accorded practitioners is likely to be strongly influenced by the dominant coalition’s perceptions of the professional competence and quality of the members of the public relations team, then with such low regard for PR practitioners, it is little wonder that the bank has no professionally trained PR person in the Marketing and Corporate Affairs department. Lauzen and Dozier (1992) confirm the unfavourable influence that marketing can have on PR when they note that ‘the manager role is negatively related to marketing involvement in public relations activities and to the assignment of individuals from outside public relations to head the public relations unit’ (p. 205).

**Discussion and implications**

The findings reported here raise a number of issues that have implications for the way public relations is and should be practised within the Ghanaian context. The results suggest that the dominant coalition of the bank actually have a
very limited understanding of what PR is. In their view, PR is 'information dissemination, information organisation and information delivery'; a notion that surely influences their perception of what PR can do for the bank. Even when they claim that they believe that PR is a management function, which can play a strategic role in the bank, they limit the function to 'the voice and face of the organisation'; a role which will clearly have compatibility problems with the concept of two-way symmetric communication. Such a myopic view of PR must in part account for why the bank does not have a trained PR person taking care of public relations activities and working towards building a good relationship between the bank and its publics. In addition, because of the limited understanding of the PR role, the dominant coalition's views about a PR practitioner being given a seat at the management table and therefore participating in strategic planning is dichotomous. This means also, that even if in future the bank should actually go ahead and hire a PR practitioner, the person will have a very limited role, if any, to play in the bank's strategic planning and will most likely be employed in the technician role. In other words, the practitioner would be used as someone to communicate corporate views and actions - the voice of the organisation, rather than someone who helps to shape those views and actions (Steiner & Black, 2000) to make them acceptable and amenable to stakeholders.

Viewing practitioners and using them in such role can prove to be precarious for the bank and indeed any organisation that behaves in such a manner. If, as Tymson & Lazar (2002) suggest, organisations exist with the approval of society, then failure or refusal to obtain that consent and approval before they make decisions, adopt positions and proceed to take actions, can 'at best, result in suboptimal corporate performance and, at worst, lead to management by bushfire or a continuing state of crisis' (Steiner & Black, 2000, p. 70). In the specific case of the bank in question, what this means is that such a lapse could cause an image problem ('the faceless image', alluded to by some of the respondents) and also affect business and contribute to the situation of distrust mentioned earlier. This situation might hold true for any other organisations in Ghana that choose to operate along similar lines.

If this bank and indeed any other organisations in Ghana want an improvement in their performance, including their relationship with stakeholders (publics), then they need to act in ways that will help ensure that this happens. They should employ a trained PR professional who can initiate two-way symmetric communication and give this person a seat at the management table; they should involve the professional in their strategic planning processes, not only as an advisor on communication issues, but also as someone who represents and even advocates stakeholder interests (Steiner & Black, 2000). The Excellence study in PR makes a clear case for such a position by noting that:
"[T]he dominant coalition", (the most powerful managers) must be prepared to use their PR professionals as advisors rather than merely as sales people for messages and actions over which they have little influence. (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 57)

When the PR professional is allowed such a role, only then can she or he be in a position to have some bearing on what the dominant coalition decides and how they act, before their decisions and actions put the organisation in a position of jeopardy. In this way, the PR professional will move away from contributing only to communication strategic planning, to making a significant contribution to organisational strategic planning (Steiner & Black, 2000). The practitioner operating at such a level, will be performing the PR managerial role and utilising research and strategic thinking skills as described by Cutlip et al (2006).

Another interesting observation to be made from the findings is the dichotomy between the respondents' view of the PR function and role, and the Institute of Public Relations' (IPR, Ghana) conceptualisation of the same. The IPR, defines public relations as 'the distinctive management art and science function based on understanding of human behaviour that identifies issues of critical relevance, analyses future trends and predicts their consequences and establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation or group and its publics based on truth, full information and responsible performance' (IPR News, July 2004, p. 22). From this definition, it is very clear that the institute, like many other PR bodies and enthusiasts, considers the public relations role to be a managerial one. On the other hand, as the findings indicate, the respondents see the PR function and role mainly in terms of communication, and more importantly, communicating what has been decided by others. What this means is that there is a conceptual gap between respondents' knowledge of the PR function and role and what the IPR (Ghana) conceives of as the function and role of the practitioner. This gap can and needs to be bridged through education of the dominant coalition in organisations and also by shifting practitioner performance towards what is actually required of one enacting the managerial role. In other words, PR practitioners' performance should be at par with that of other members of the dominant coalition. For this to happen there should be a meeting of minds (from both sides) regarding the conceptualisation and understanding of the PR function and role.

A further aspect of the findings worth noting is the incongruity of respondents' claims that PR is a very important profession that could play an important role in the bank with what actually happens in practice. One would expect that if the 'dominant coalition' of the bank held such views about the importance of PR and the role it can play in the bank, such views would be translated into action since it (the dominant coalition) made the strategic decisions for the bank. What we find here then, is a clear disparity between rhetoric and empirical reality. This anomaly was captured vividly at a point in one of the interviews when...
one respondent, after speaking at length about the importance of a PR person in every organisation, laughed heartily and answered in the negative when asked if the bank had a professionally trained PR practitioner in the Marketing and Corporate Affairs Department. Such an atypical situation however, is not limited to the current case. Grunig et al (1992), for example, found that while many CEOs and corporate leaders saw public relations as important to their organisation, they in reality, not allowing practitioners to participate in decision-making at the highest levels of their organisations. By the same token, Falconi (2004) notes that in Italy, ‘although PR seems to be living its major moment of economic and professional success, it is at the same time suffering its peak historical moment of social de-legitimacy’ (p.2).

**Looking to the future: issues of concern to PR practice in Ghana**

The results presented here, suggest that, at least the bank in question, and maybe many Ghanaian organisations, see at best, only a limited role for PR in organisational strategic planning, and at worst, no role at all. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that, for the most part, in Ghana’s corporate world, PR practitioners are not considered as part of management and they struggle for recognition, as aptly captured in the sentiments expressed in the first part of this paper’s title – ‘I will never allow any of my children to choose it’. In this regard, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) Ghana rightly observes:

Public Relations practice continues to suffer from its position in the organisation structure and role in the management of information and customer care in several establishments in Ghana.

The quizzical situation faced by the Ghanaian PR practitioner is captured aptly by Longdon (2004) who notes that ‘the challenges facing PR practitioners within the corporate setting normally take their root in the level of recognition accorded practitioners by management in the organisation’. Longdon makes the point further, that, if the practitioner is placed at a level where he or she has the opportunity to rub shoulders with the top brass of the institution, half of the challenges are taken care of. This is because according to him, it is within such a bracket that the practitioner derives an actual sense of being part of a corps of responsible officers into whose hands the destiny of the institution has been trusted.

The question that arises then is: what can PR practitioners in Ghana do to earn a seat at the management table and also to improve the image of the profession generally? The following paragraphs provide a few pointers as to what can be done both by individuals and the professional body to help turn things around.

First, the IPR should do a bit of PR for itself. For the most part, employers and the general public do not have an adequate understanding of what the public relations function is all about and practitioners have not helped the situation
I will never allow any of my children to choose it;

by accepting the very limiting roles that have been given to them by people with jaundiced views of the profession. Being a young profession that is still struggling for recognition, even in the Western developed world, what PR needs in the Ghanaian setting is an aggressive multi-faceted campaign to draw the attention of all key stakeholders to the actual contribution that well-trained PR practitioners can make to organisational survival and progress. But this can not be done in a vacuum. The evidence suggests that in many cases, practitioners themselves are not well-equipped to participate at the anticipated highest levels of their organisations. In other words, their education (or lack of it) prevents them from playing more strategically significant roles in their organisations (Steiner & Black, 2001). This goes to the heart of PR training and education.

This issue of how PR professionals are trained is also crucial in determining the kind of role that PR professionals will be given in organisations in the future. Without appropriate training, PR professionals will never be able to rub shoulders with other professionals who have gone through the mill of passing rigorous professional examinations in addition to their tertiary education. Another issue in relation to education is how to equip PR graduates with a necessary business orientation. In Ghana, most PR courses are taught within a communication/journalism framework, providing mainly an arts/social science perspective. Consequently, there is usually little or no attempt at all to situate courses within a business context or framework. Yet, many PR graduates find themselves working in business environments. As a possible solution, we borrow from Steiner & Black (2000) who point out that:

If PR professionals are to contribute meaningfully to corporate strategic planning, they need to develop greater familiarity with the realities and values of business and a more positive, or at least a more tolerant attitude toward business aims and values (p. 71).

Management, and strategic management for that matter, is a specialised task within organisations, and so it is a necessary though not a sufficient condition, that public relations practitioners are properly educated; that is, given a holistic education that helps them to look at issues from all perspectives, including a strategic business/management perspective. This is the way to fully equip practitioners to perform the managerial function envisaged for them in order to contribute meaningfully towards the achievement of organisational strategic goals through the practice of strategic management. This position is corroborated by Cutlip et al. (2006) who point out that excellence in public relations is largely dependent on the extent to which top public relations executives in organisations perform the managerial role as opposed to the technician role. Their stance is based on evidence from empirical research carried out in 321 organisations in the US, Canada and the UK. It behoves the IPR therefore, to ensure that practitioners are provided with the necessary skills and acumen to enable them
to effectively perform those managerial functions. One way of doing this is through the development of accredited training courses, which the IPR is doing to a limited extent.

Public relations practitioners who are employed within organisational settings should be able to convey to senior managers within their organisations the importance of maintaining public relations as an integral part of corporate and project level strategies. They should work hard at becoming a recognised presence in their organisations by being: forward looking; creative; able to anticipate change; truthful; able to exhibit in-depth knowledge of organisational business issues; and sensitive to differing attitudes and beliefs. In addition to all these, they should be self-reflective about their own practice—constantly applying analytic and critical skills to their own practice—to see how improvements can be made to better achieve strategic organisational goals, and for the betterment of the profession generally. When practitioners exhibit these characteristics within their organisations, they will be able to demonstrate how PR can contribute to organisational goal attainment and thereby be allowed to participate in the operational problem-solving of their organisations as proposed by Moss et al (2000).

**Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper has been to present research findings that show how the key decision-makers in one of Ghana’s banks view the public relations function and their willingness to accept a PR practitioner into the fold of the dominant coalition. An examination of the literature revealed that for the most part PR effectiveness is directly related to the effective enactment of a managerial role as opposed to the role of a technician. The literature also shows that whether or not PR practitioners would be admitted to participate in decision making at the highest level of their organisations is dependent on the dominant coalition’s perceptions of the professional competence and quality of the members of the public relations team, and the team’s ability to demonstrate how public relations can contribute to organisational goal attainment. In this regard, the findings have shown that although in theory the respondents believed in the importance of the PR function to any organisation, in practice they did not even have a PR practitioner working in the bank for the person to demonstrate how PR can contribute to the attainment of organisational goals. This situation is an anomaly which clearly represents the dichotomy between rhetoric and empirical reality.

Linked to this anomalous situation is the fact that most of the respondents do not have an adequate understanding of the PR function; they all see and place public relations within the narrow confines of ‘information dissemination, information organisation and information delivery’. In other words, their view of public relations is the same as that found by Steiner (2001) amongst Australian managers; they see it as ‘outward movement of information rather than inward movement of intelligence about stakeholders’ (p. 44). On that basis
then, we have argued that the bank in question runs the risk of jeopardising its very survival. This is based on the premise of Tymson and Lazar’s assertion that all organisations exist on the approval and goodwill of the public. Our argument is that because organisations communicate through both what they do and say, PR practitioners who have the responsibility for building and nurturing organisational relationships with publics must be allowed to have a say in organisational decisions and actions, and not be called upon just to communicate these decisions and actions after they have been made by others.

This research has shown that there is a mismatch between respondents’ knowledge of the PR function and role and what the IPR (Ghana) conceives of as the function and role of the practitioner. This disparity, in part accounts for the unwillingness of at least some respondents to admit a PR practitioner into the bank’s dominant coalition. What this shows, taken together with the other findings, is that within the bank in question, and by extension within the larger Ghanaian setting, there is a lot to be done to make acceptable the idea of granting public relations a role in organisational strategic planning. However, this needs to be done in order for Ghanaian organisations to reap the benefits of communication excellence, such as a friendly business climate, improved national standing, good corporate image, and reduced conflict with stakeholders, amongst others (Balabanis et al, 1998; Dozier, et al, 1995; Steiner, 2001). The bank in question, and all Ghanaian organisations for that matter, should move beyond using their PR practitioners just as communication advisors, and involve them in the overall strategic planning of their organisations. They should invite them to, and give them a seat at, the management table. That is the surest way to maintain the consent that Tymson and Lazar (2002) talk about, and also to make good use of the strategic opportunities presented by the public relations role.

The task of bringing this about however cannot be left to organisations and their dominant coalitions alone; the Institute of Public Relations (Ghana) and PR practitioners also have a part to play. In view of that, this paper has made some suggestions as to how the IPR and PR practitioners can work individually and jointly to redeem the negative image of public relations practice and practitioners in Ghana. This can be done in part through education of both PR practitioners and key stakeholders such as employers and company executives, and assertiveness on the part of practitioners, which includes self-reflection with a view to improving performance.

While the findings discussed here are valid, the strength of the conclusions drawn is reduced because respondents for the study were chosen from a single bank. It might well be that, a study involving a larger number of respondents across a variety of banks or organisations might yield different results from those presented here. Nevertheless, as earlier discussion suggests, there seems to be a general image problem for PR within Ghanaian banks, and the general view of
the PR profession and practitioners in Ghana is not flattering. What this research has done is to provide some empirical backing to these observations within a general body of academic literature. Ultimately, the insights gained from these limited findings can help in our understanding of the dynamics between the roles enacted by PR practitioners in Ghana and the dominant coalitions’ views of the profession on the one hand, and how these interact with other organisational and societal factors, to determine whether or not the Ghanaian PR practitioner gets a seat at the management table and becomes part of the organisational strategic planning process.

Reference list
I will never allow any of my children to choose it.


