



# **PUBLIC RELATIONS IN NEW ZEALAND**

## **...the missing pieces**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Modern practitioners of public relations in New Zealand work in diverse areas of communication (PRINZ, 2006, 2011) but the different areas of practice and the skills that each area employs have developed from the early years of public relations activity; from its origins in the two separate yet related strands of tikanga Māori and press agency. The press agency strand has been documented by Trenwith (2010) as the occupation emerged from its war time press agency and propaganda practices to that of the more modern public relations practices. But missing from the New Zealand public relations history discourse is representation that addresses and integrates Māori and Pacific Island public relations ontological and epistemological assumptions.

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**DISCUSSION**

A review of historical writing on public relations reveals confining frameworks that have resulted in major gaps in understanding of the role and functions of public relations in New Zealand. Māori public relations has been largely absent from New Zealand research and textbooks. Apart from a paper by Comrie and Kupa (1998) asking whether public relations can become bicultural in New Zealand, little has been written about the subject of indigenous (Māori) public relations. The conflation of Australian and New Zealand public relations has tended to either ignore cultural nuances and audiences (Tymson, 2006) or cover them superficially (Motion et al, 2009). Even though Tymson (and his contributors) titles their texts as Australian and New Zealand public relations manuals, these texts contain no reference to Australian Aboriginal, Māori or Pacific Island audiences.

Written histories of public relations and the resulting typology reflect the dominance and origins of the profession in the United States with little written outside of this socially and culturally dominant perspective (L'Etang, 2004 and 2008; Cropp & Pincus, 2001; Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Although the United States perspective has influenced public relations in New Zealand, other models of public relations practice are revealed when examining the different paths of historical evolution.

The four model typology proposed by Grunig & Hunt (1984; 2001) of public relations development – publicity, public information, two way asymmetry and symmetry - cannot be appropriately applied to the local New Zealand context of public relations development with its different path of social, political, economic and cultural evolution and alternative culturally moderated history. Much literature emanating from the United States promotes their model as being universally applicable and a satisfactory typology to explain professional practice. Motion & Leitch (2001) allude to this in their topography of New Zealand public relations, noting that the different context of the practice needs to be reflected in the theoretical differences. Other cultures have yet to be integrated into the public relations body of knowledge. In fact, very little research has been conducted on the position of minority groups within the public relations profession, despite the increasing diversity among both audiences and practitioners. Much of the literature and scholarship in the area continues to be ethnocentric with a predominantly American, and to a lesser extent British and Western European bias (Toth et al, 2007). Recent published public relations history from other parts of the globe includes the thorough history in the case of Britain (L'Etang, 2004), smaller overviews in the case of Israel (Toledano, 2005), Spain (Rodríguez Salcedo, 2008), Europe (Okay et al, 2013) and the work with a global overview done by Sriramesh & Vercic (2009).

As to the development and knowledge of Māori and Pacific Island public relations, New Zealand and Australian public relations researchers have simply not included indigenous forms of public relations. One of the most powerful mechanisms for excluding other cultures has been the discourse of public relations as a profession, a discourse that espouses a model of public relations wedded to mass media, to industrial society, to democratic political premises and to equality between stakeholders (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2001). This discourse can be seen in the way early New Zealand public relations practitioners describe the development of public relations and the establishment of Public Relations Institute of New Zealand [PRINZ]. Trenwith's 2010 account of the early years of public relations in New Zealand, states that in terms of a source for the body of knowledge for public relations, the main source of professional reading was the practitioners themselves; they wrote to and for each other, with ideas coming out of their own experience and current activities. In the 1940s and 1950s there were a few public relations notes about, and a few handbooks, but these were very small. Basically, the practitioners were the writers, a practice that differed little throughout the country. Occasionally overseas material was available if one practitioner were to travel overseas and bring it back. It would slowly circulate

among the practitioners, but its availability to a given practitioner depended very much on that practitioners public relations network of associates.

The professional body PRINZ came about, in part, as a reaction against the ad hoc nature of the activity in all respects. Enough people got together and espoused the need to have something to bind them together, to have some consolidation of the activity and to create an organisation for lobbying purposes and some element of professional status which would include codes of ethics and business practice (Trenwith, 2010). This early development of public relations from 1945 does not include nor reflect Māori public relations ontological and epistemological assumptions.

In 2001, Motion and Leitch referred to multiculturalism as an emerging trend in New Zealand public relations, with biculturalism (referring to Māori and English) as one of its strands. They suggested that practitioners in New Zealand were becoming increasingly aware of the need to adapt their communication strategies to speak meaningfully to Māori (Motion & Leitch, 2001). Motion, Leitch and Cliffe (2009) commented briefly on Māori and Aboriginal culture in their chapter "Public relations in Australasia" in the Global Handbook of Public Relations (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). Mersham et al (2009) devoted one chapter in Public Relations and Communication Management: An Aotearoa/New Zealand Perspective to examine public relations in a Māori context. The work by Sterne (2011) starts to address and integrate Māori and Pacific Island public relations ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Sterne (2011) in his research indicates, Māori as a collectivist, oral society had protocols for relating to one another and to visitors, persuasive speech making skills, stakeholder relationship management (manaakitanga) and event management. The interaction with British and European settlers involved interaction with the speech-makers (chiefs and specially trained or gifted orators), the advisors (tohunga and missionaries), the women (kuia) who knew the protocols for organising events and the leaders (kaumatua) who engaged in discussions, signed agreements, and gave guidance on how personal, organisational, political, inter-tribal and inter-racial affairs should be conducted (Durie, 2003; Walker, 2004). The kite of knowledge identifies critical concepts such as whakapapa (identity) which involve declaring who you are at the outset; listening to introductions; using introductions for making relational connections; demonstrating respect for those who have passed on; showing respect for the creator God and local deities and expecting/offering public prayers, combined with knowledge of whanaungatanga (relationships) where you bring people with you, introduce your leaders, spend time getting to know people before attempting to do business with them, have people known to the hosts introduce you until you are known in your own right and demonstrate commitment to the welfare of the community. Then you will be warmly embraced. Manaakitanga (hospitality, reciprocation), kaupapa (purpose, reason); mana (respect for iwi, hapu, family) and Tapu (accountability, protection) are all critical principles in Māori public relations.

From this summary of key concepts it can be seen that Māori public relations principles can teach us about the importance of identity and community connectedness, about holism, and reciprocity. It offers insights to a people-centred approach to public relations rather than a systems-orientated or corporate-centred approach. It offers an emphasis on human qualities such as humility, authenticity, integrity, pride, respect and dignity.

According to Sterne's (2008 and 2011) studies, most current public relations practitioners did not know the credible spokespeople for consultation about cultural practice; they did not know how to honour cultural priorities, how to recognise the cultural nuances or context of communication nor did they understand the drivers in these cultures. It would appear that there is a lack of congruence at the level of values or practice. Māori ontological and epistemological assumptions represent a rival rationality in that they espouse different forms of knowledge that are accessed using distinctive methodologies (Cram, 2001; Smith, 2006). The same can also be said for Pacific Island public relations.

Fa'aSamoa (Samoan way of life) is an ordering of society and a bedrock of Samoan identity. It refers to a social, economic, historical and moral order for Samoan people. It includes not only the unwritten traditions, core to the oral culture, but also the social ethics of the day-to-day protocol, responsibilities and values. It involves visible symbols such as the 'ava (kava) ceremony, speechmaking, feasting, gift exchange in the form of food, ie toga (fine mats) and money, births, deaths, marriages, hosting visitors (malaga) and all ceremonial occasions. Connected to this concept are key values around status, prestige, honour and the associated behaviours of fa'aaloalo (respect) and usita'i (obedience). Social honour is based on ascribed social distinctions of age and gender and codified rankings. Like the Māori public relations principles, these values and beliefs give insights to a people-centred approach to public relations rather than a systems-orientated or corporate-centred approach. The emphasis is on human qualities such as relationships, pride, humility, respect and dignity. Public relations practitioners, politicians and academics may say they give high priority to recognising the ontological and epistemological assumptions represented in this rival rationality, in the different forms of knowledge, but in reality did not know how to honour these cultural priorities, nor how to recognise the cultural nuances or context of communication in the distinctive cultural methodologies of Pacific Island public relations. (Tiatia, 1998; Crocombe, 2001)

The early history of public relations and the development of PRINZ (Trenwith, 2010) identifies that the occupation emerged from early European interaction to its war-time press agency and propaganda practices to that of the more modern public relations practices. The emergence of public relations in New Zealand and the establishment of PRINZ fulfilled the need to have something to bind the few practitioners together with certain codes of behaviour, to create an organisation for lobbying purposes, which would have a standing in the country, with the aim

of producing some occupational norms and discourse. PRINZ was established to represent practitioners of public relations, but from the start did not capture all practitioners nor did it represent Māori or Pacific Island practitioners - a feature still evident today, despite the growth in qualified and practising Māori and Pacific Island practitioners.

As Hodges identifies (cited in Okay et al, 2013), doing public relations is an inherently cultural activity as public relations practitioners rely on culturally influenced representations of the societies in which they work; they can be seen as creators of meaning through their roles of cultural gate keeping and mediation as they adapt their communication to culturally diverse target audiences. One of the major considerations for public relations professionals is how to manage the choice of words and images to better represent and honour the Māori and Pacific Island cultural priorities, and how to recognise the cultural nuances and context of communication.

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