Virtual Companies; Real Communication

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Virtual Companies; Real Communication

According to *Money* magazine, approximately 30 percent of America’s workforce consists of “independent contractors, part-time or temporary staffers, and the self-employed” (Revell, Bigda and Rosato 2009). I am part of this statistic. As noted at the end of my first paper, “Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Social Exchange Theory: An Evolution in Professional Communication,” I was laid off from my position as head of communications for a nationwide lender in 2008. Since then, I have worked as an independent public relations and marketing consultant. The career path leading to my current position entailed joining and succeeding within established organizations. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) yielded to Social Exchange Theory (SET) in governing my interactions as I grew in knowledge, confidence and reputation.

Today, I do not work for a traditional company with a designated workforce. Nevertheless, I function within an organizational setting: a series of virtual companies defined through consistent and identifiable communication schemas. Three contexts exemplify my personal position, professional relationships, and working environment. A specific communication theory shapes each context, three new theories that jointly portray my professional existence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Communication Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>Defining myself as a professional amid the changes and uncertainties in my industry and the economy overall</td>
<td>Narrative Paradigm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Detection of similarities among disparate and/or unfamiliar groups, fostering unity and claiming a shared tradition</td>
<td>Communication Accommodation Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Asserting and operating an organization when none exists in the traditional sense</td>
<td>Weick’s Organizing Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Self-Concept**

I am a storyteller. I declared myself as much in my personal statement when applying to the University of Denver (Karpf 2009a), citing my beginnings as a screenwriter, transformation as a real estate agent, and eventual profession as a public relations and marketing specialist. Beyond being a deliberate vocation, storytelling also constitutes a theory of persuasive communication known the narrative paradigm (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 120). As an independent practitioner, I must persuade clients to hire me, which I accomplish through this paradigm.

The narrative paradigm works from the assumptions that human beings are natural storytellers and in turn are receptive to stories that align with their values, emotions and preferences (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 121). In promoting myself as an independent practitioner, I convey a narrative about my proficiencies through interpersonal communications, published articles, and marketing such as my Web site and blog (Karpf 2009b).
I adopt the storyteller’s approach, creating “good reasons” to hire me by appealing to prospective clients’ subjective decision making. I do not rely on fact-laden, rational arguments to win client commitments, which is the essence of elaboration likelihood model (ELM), a communication theory antithetical to narrative paradigm (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 120). I have found from personal experience that the ELM approach is off-putting to many prospective clients. The narrative paradigm is not only more successful in persuading clients; it resonates with me personally as an accurate and desirable expression of my skills and values. My self-concept—and my image with clients and colleagues—emanates from this theory of persuasive communication.

**Culture**

When performing my services, I am frequently working with clients whom I have never met personally, who are often spread across the country. In turn, I may become a member of a virtual marketing team of other professionals (e.g., graphic designers, Web developers, marketing managers) with whom I have had little to no contact. A sense of organizational culture would seem to be absent, a lack of shared values and experiences needed to unify and motivate the given team.

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) provides an “instant culture” in these settings. I form “in-groups” with my new clients and virtual team partners through the use of language and terminology that quickly
establish our common backgrounds and goals (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 83). Professional jargon creates a code of understanding that “gives precision to words” and “helps to create and maintain a distinct in-group” (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 84).

When speaking to clients, I can discuss “return on investment” and “cost of capture,” terms they are already using to assess their marketing programs. My talks with graphic designers might center on “word count” and “white space.” My planning with Web developers is likely to emphasize “keywords” and “stickiness.” All participants use CAT to create affinities and accelerate productive relationships.

**Organizational Structure**

Despite “the rise of freelance nation” (Revell, Bigda and Rosato 2009) and the growing acceptance of virtual teams and companies, it can be difficult to detect an organizational structure in the working relationships I cultivate. Per Schein’s model, there are no “artifacts” as seen in traditional companies, no architecture, employee guidebooks, or dress codes (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 178). Yet organizational structure exists in my current professional life, manifested in a non-physical (virtual) world.

Weick’s organizing theory of 1969—created contemporaneously with McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” the classified dawn of the Internet, and Alvin Toffler’s futurism—defines the organizational structure I work in today: communication is the organization (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 187).
Such an organization is housed in an “information environment,” not a physical building (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 188).

Weick considers “double interacts” the structure of an information environment organization. This communication dynamic comprises an act, a response and an adjustment, with the act being an initial communication triggering a reaction and a new mutual awareness between the communicating parties (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 188, 189). The ability to transmit, receive and adjust to communication is critical in my working relationships, which lack “artifacts” to convey meaning or establish pre-determined understandings.

Such double interacts invoke Baxter and Montgomery’s dialectic perspective, which asserts that relationships develop through the management of “necessary” tensions and contradictions (Dainton and Zelley 2005, 66). I find that collaboration and creativity, which are integral to my work, thrive in the “give and take” illustrated by Weick, Baxter and Montgomery. This is my organization, my information environment, a virtual but nevertheless tangible structure.

**Conclusion**

While many aspects of my career have changed recently with my shift to independent consulting, certain ones have not—namely the use of communication schema to establish relationships and structure. I maintain a positive and marketable self-concept with the storytelling techniques of the
narrative paradigm. Through communication accommodation theory, I create a productive and reassuring culture with far-flung clients and colleagues via common terminology, experience and goals. Lacking physical artifacts to define an organizational structure, I find my organization within communication itself per Weick’s organizing theory. I work in a series of virtual companies driven by real communication, the basis of my professional life today.

Technology will continue to improve the communication matrix I have identified, as clients and colleagues become more adept with communication tools such as social media and Web presentations to bridge distances. Time is another enhancement as more hiring parties accept the “freelance nation” and increase productive and profitable opportunities for me and other marketing and public relations consultants. Behind the economic changes and the technological developments, long-recognized communication theories—some dating back decades—are guiding forces in my new workplace. Studying and using these theories is essential.
References


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