



Integrating Theory and Practice

Introduction

Why should a student interested in public relations care about theory? Why not just learn how to *do* PR?

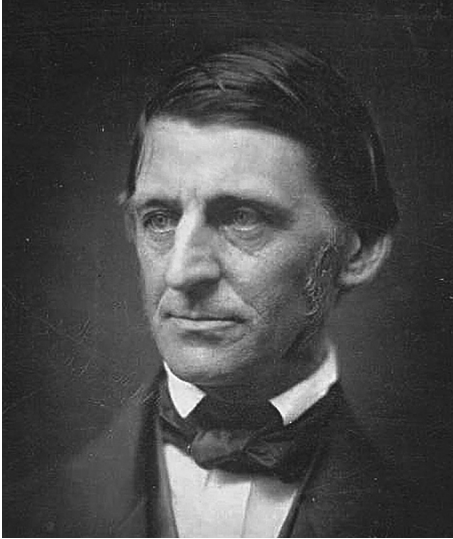
The short answer is that the theory and practice are not as far apart as you might think. In fact, they are inextricably intertwined. And the more practical answer is that theory knowledge can have a direct impact on your career progression in public relations.

Kurt Lewin, the pioneering social psychologist, famously said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Lewin, who contributed to the theoretical development of multiple disciplines, recognized that progress in any field requires the creation, testing, and refinement of a solid base of theoretical concepts. He understood that theory need not be abstract and can be completely applicable to practice.

Theory provides context and makes connections that might not be obvious, both of which increase the effectiveness of the practitioner. As Erica Weintraub Austin and Bruce E. Pinkleton note:

Theories . . . help determine appropriate goals and objectives for a public relations program. Scientifically tested theories also help public relations programmers develop effective strategies to achieve those goals and objectives. (p. 267)

Lewin’s maxim is mirrored by another from American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who found that “The man who knows how will always have a job. The man who knows why will always be the boss.” Emerson’s observation can serve you well as you progress in your public relations career. Entry level positions in public relations are often clerical: monitoring traffic, fact checking, and so forth. Gradually the practitioner advances to more creative activity—writing press releases, organizing media events, drafting speeches, and contacting the media. With enough experience, the



Ralph Waldo
Emerson

communications professional can advance to the strategic stage, helping to determine what projects get approved, when they are implemented, and how to best allocate resources. At each of these steps, it is helpful to know the answer to the why questions along with the how questions, so that you not only understand what you are doing but the reasons behind your actions. “As a public relations practitioner, you will need to be able to explain why and how your plans and proposals work,” Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2012) note. “Your supervisor and your co-workers will be more convinced to support your opinions if you have theories and evidence to back them up” (Lattimore et al., 2012). Ultimately, understanding theory can help you in your career.

Corporate communications consultant Reginald Watts (2006) summarized the importance of theory in legitimizing a profession:

In studying how the more established professions operated it became obvious that with no theoretical base to fall back on it was one person’s word against another. Even if we did use the phrase “in my experience” it was not enough to ensure acceptance of advice. Professionalism meant possession of a body of knowledge greater than that of the recipients. What is more, that knowledge needed to be based on research. (p. 103)

Here is a third quote that can help you to appreciate how theory works and why it is important. In 1675, Sir Isaac Newton wrote “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Despite his enormous contributions to astronomy and mathematics, Newton remained humble enough to understand that his theory-building—even his most influential and pioneering work—originated from the work of others who had come before him. Public relations theory works the same way—it is the product of accumulated knowledge building upon itself as current theorists advance the work of earlier thinkers, extending what is already known and applying it to what is happening now. Public relations theory has borrowed heavily from the ground-breaking work of theorists who have increased our understanding of everything from rhetoric and persuasion to mass media and sociology. And as theoreticians develop new models for the emerging phenomena from our own time (social media, international communication, etc.), public relations researchers will benefit from theoretical development in these emerging areas as well.

A group of theories represent the combined efforts of different people in different eras, all focusing on the same subject matter, all working together to improve our understanding of a particular topic. Theory needn’t be stuffy, abstract, or too difficult to understand. As Austin and Pinkleton (2001) note, “good theories usually can be boiled down into sensible language that is fairly simple to apply” (p. 267). This should reassure you as you approach this text that, with sufficient study and focus, you can not only grasp the

theories that are presented but you can find ways to make them part of your everyday public relations work.

Lewin teaches us that theory is practical. Emerson tells us that theory helps us progress in our careers. And Newton shows us that, in different ways, we can all contribute to theory when we work together to extend our knowledge base.

Defining Theory

The starting point for understanding complex systems is the definition of key terms. And the place to begin is by defining the centerpiece of the text: Theory.

A theory is a coherent group of assumptions and/or agreed-upon facts that provides a rational explanation of causal relationships among observed phenomena. Theories consist of a combination of laws, hypotheses, models, and facts.

Theories can be used to view the world from different perspectives. First, they can look backward by being explanatory—helping us to understand what has already happened. The explanation can be descriptive or causal—it can help us to understand what a phenomenon is or it can assist in understanding relationships among phenomena. Second, theories can be predictive, allowing us to look forward by using an understanding of what has occurred to reasonably forecast what will occur. These two views are interrelated: The more clearly we can comprehend the past, the more likely we are to accurately predict the future.

Not all theories are created equal. Some are better than others based on specific criteria:

- A theory should accurately reflect the phenomenon it addresses. This seems obvious, but it is nonetheless important. The theory should be supported by the data it is describing and fit what is experimentally observed.
- A theory should be as simple as possible—but no simpler. The clearest, most concise theories are the easiest for users to grasp, yet, at the same time, they must be sufficiently complex to reflect what they are describing. Simpler is better until it becomes too simple to be accurate.
- A good theory can be applied as widely as possible, but no wider. The theorist should be able to describe the extent—and limitations—of any claim.
- Theories should be falsifiable. If a theory can't be tested, then it is impossible to determine whether or not it is correct. Therefore, theories should be phrased in a way that makes it possible to apply them in the current environment to determine if they are true.



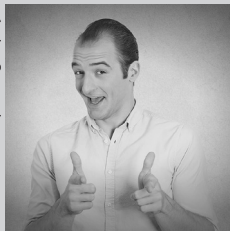
ArtMechanic, via Wikimedia Commons

Sir Isaac Newton

- A theory should be predictive. Even if it is describing what has happened in the past, practitioners should be able to use the theory to determine what will happen next.
- Theorists should be open to challenges and to change. In a perfect theoretical world, a theory introduced today would transcend change and account for any differences going forward. As circumstances change, theorists must retest existing theory to determine whether it still reflects each of these criteria. If it does not, they must revise it according to whatever the new circumstances are that weaken or invalidate it.

DOES PUBLIC RELATIONS NEED . . . PUBLIC RELATIONS?

iStock.com/S1photography



Is this your idea of a PR guy?

It is no small irony that a profession that spends so much time focused on reputation should have a reputation problem itself, but that is the reality for public relations. In their journal article “Public Perceptions of Public Relations,” Candace White and Joosuk Park point out that media presentation of public relations has been consistently negative and that that depiction has negatively impacted public perceptions of the industry.

Among the most common complaints about PR (and the public relations response to them):

- Public relations is all about lying.

This may be the easiest to refute. A critical component of modern public relations is the maintenance of a relationship with key media outlets, and this relationship is built on trust. The easiest way to poison any relationship is for one side to lie to the other, sowing distrust and negativity. Do public relations practitioners lie? They occasionally do—to their detriment. They may create an incorrect perception that’s beneficial to their client for a short time but, in the long term, liars damage

their credibility with the media and harm their clients. Once burned, media members will understandably be more cynical and critical toward a lying source. Furthermore, there are always more sources than channels, so if a reporter thinks she has been lied to, she can simply bypass that source and find another. A public relations practitioner with an antagonistic relationship with key media outlets is of little use to any client. Not only is lying unethical but, in the long term, it doesn’t work.

- Public relations practitioners only tell their side of the story.

True! And there’s nothing wrong with that. Practitioners are paid to promote their organization, not the industry as a whole or anything else beyond the objectives of their client. Not to be too Darwinian about it, but if someone is complaining because their opponent is better at PR than they are, the answer is not to punish the practitioner; it’s that your organization should be better at public relations.

- Public relations dominates the media.

If only! Public relations practitioners would love to dictate the news cycle and media content—but they don’t. Any public relations

practitioner is in competition for media attention with every other public relations practitioner . . . and anybody else trying to pitch their story to the press. The Department of Labor estimates that there are six public relations practitioners for every reporter. Clearly, if there is any leverage, it is on the side of the media, which ultimately determine what story goes in and what stories get rejected. Sometimes public relations wins; oftentimes it does not. Practitioners may wish they controlled the media, but the best efforts of a public relations professional are only one component in a complex set of decisions, mostly made by members of the media, beyond PR control. Furthermore, while many public relations professionals continue to focus on news media relations, more professionals than ever before are bypassing news media altogether to deliver their message directly

to their audience through digital, social, and emerging technologies such as augmented and virtual realities. Undeniably, practitioners have some impact on the media, but they by no means dominate the process.

Despite these realities of the industry, the profession is often misunderstood and public relations does, indeed, need to do more public relations. Educating clients, audiences, and even members of the press about the roles and responsibilities of public relations in modern society would benefit all stakeholders. The promotion of the theoretical constructs and ethical codes of the profession can help everyone to appreciate the role of public relations in society. With sufficient understanding, perhaps someday cynics will finally stop responding to professional communications by complaining “Ah, that’s just PR. . . .”

Defining Public Relations

The definition and components of theory are relatively well established. The definition and components of public relations, far less so.

“There is no accepted definition of public relations nor is there only one way to practice it,” note Coombs and Holladay (2018). “This makes it difficult to identify the precise orthodoxy that governs public relations” (p. 382).

James Hutton (1999) shares their concern and explains the danger in lack of specificity:

From its modern beginnings . . . public relations has suffered from an identify crisis – largely of its own making. In terms of both theory and practice, public relations has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself, in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its score or its underlying dimensions. (p. 199)

The failure to produce an agreed-upon definition for the profession is no simple academic exercise; it has real ramifications. If the field is poorly defined, Hutton argued, others will step in to define it for themselves, and this definition will often be negative. Definitions wrapped in pejoratives (“spin doctors,” “professional mouth-pieces,” “flacks,” etc.) denigrate the profession and contribute nothing to our understanding of the field.

If the field is not thoroughly defined, it’s not for lack of trying. Edward L. Bernays (1955), one of the pioneers of the field who helped legitimize and systematize the

PR process, defined public relations as “the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution” (p. 4). Bernay’s oft-quoted definition is a significant contribution to describing the methods and objectives of public relations, but modern practitioners have found it too restrictive since it assumes a linear process and asymmetrical relationship between the organization and its publics.

Two world wars in the first half of the 20th century led many people to conflate public relations and propaganda, a confusing and damaging assumption that further demonized the profession. As propaganda led to antisocial outcomes (xenophobia, hostility between nations, demonization of “the other”), the association did not help the reputation or understanding of the public relations industry.

In the latter half of the century, theorists and practitioners offered additional definitions that moved further away from a political orientation and more toward a business and organizational perspective. These definitions began to stress mutually agreed upon values between groups and their audiences and began framing public relations as a nonlinear, more symmetrical process. Many of these more modern definitions framed public relations as a management (as opposed to clerical) function, recognizing the necessity for strategic thinking and measurable objectives. They also added the idea of strategic relationship-building and relationship-maintenance as opposed to simple behavioral change to the objectives in the definitions.

In the late 1970s, public relations scholar Rex Harlow (1976) attempted to address the definition question by collecting nearly 500 definitions of the profession, then synthesized them into a cohesive and comprehensive definition:

Public relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its tools principal. (p. 36)

At the beginning of the 21st century, public relations leaders began to argue for definitions that reflected a more symmetrical process where the public relations function was one of many that contributed to shared meaning. They argued that this approach not only reflected the reality of public communication but its direction as well—public relations processes no longer happened *to* audiences, but *with* them.

In recent years, Lattimore et al. (2012) have offered a working definition that encompasses the new realities of modern communication and changing public relations objectives:

Public relations is a leadership and management function that helps achieve organizational objectives, define philosophy, and facilitate organizational change. Public relations practitioners communicate with all relevant internal and external publics to develop positive relationships and to create

consistency between organizational goals and societal expectations. Public relations practitioners develop, execute and evaluate organizational programs that promote the exchange of influence and understanding among an organizations' constituent parts and publics. (p. 51)

Glen Broom (2009), who authored one of the primary texts in the field, attempted to distill more recent definitions down to a succinct summary when he defined public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends”. (p. 7)

The definitions seem to be growing closer to one another, but unanimity remains elusive. The permanent state of flux in defining the profession continues today, so it is worth considering why the definitions have always been so dynamic and seem so unresolvable. Part of the explanation may be that the profession itself has always been changing—it is a constantly moving target, responding to ever-evolving conditions (shifting audiences, dynamic media systems, etc.) around it. Part of the explanation may be the number of perspectives that shaped its origins and continue to influence it today—academic disciplines like sociology, management theory and, more recently, intercultural theory and digital media theory—have varying degrees of influence over the field at different times. But Hutton (1999) warns that

A major consequence of the semantic confusion surrounding public relations is that, contrary to much talk about “integrated” communications, the public relations field is generally *disintegrating*. Particularly the higher-end functions (i.e. those that are best paid and closest to top management), such as investor relations and government relations, are being lost to other functional areas within organizations. (p. 199)

Regardless of the changes and the challenges, it is essential for the profession to continue work toward its own clear, usable definition of the profession. This definition should address methods as well as objectives. These definitions will help to clarify the field and take back control of the terminology from external groups. These new definitions, like the old ones, may not withstand the test of time, as new circumstances may demand revisions, but it is better to self-define, even temporarily, than allow external groups to define the industry. Even if it is subject to change, public relations professionals should define public relations.

The Only Thing Constant Is Change

If you are considering a career in public relations, you are thinking about joining an exceptionally dynamic profession. The most obvious area of change is in technology—consider how many different communication technologies (smart phones, apps, websites, downloads, music platforms, news sources, ways of communicating with your friends and family) you have already experienced and think about how fast the rate of change has been in each of these areas. Clearly, technological innovation is bringing enormous changes to the way we communicate and, therefore, to the

public relations profession. But technology is only one area of change that impacts the PR process. Audiences are in a constant state of transformation, expanding and contracting, changing the way they interact with organizations and other audiences. Economic fluctuations constantly impact the public relations industry: Times when unemployment is low, salaries are high and disposable income is plentiful are different for public relations than when economies are stressed and audience members are underemployed and fearful. There are also changes in government policy and law that have a significant impact on the public relations field. When federal and state governments change tax rules, broadcast and cable regulation, libel laws, and so forth, each of these impacts the public relations industry.

Practitioners need to recognize and internalize all of these changes and understand how they work together to influence the public relations profession. A public relations professional familiar with the fundamental theories of the field is anchored by important, transcendent theories that guide their industry. At the same time, the well-versed professional applies these theories to new developments in PR and revises them to reflect new realities. Successful public relations professionals don't fear change; in fact, they don't even begrudgingly accept it—they welcome it because change creates new opportunities for them to achieve their objectives.

Understanding public relations theory allows practitioners to thrive in times of change, but it is essential for them to separate what remains universal from what requires revision. Successful theorists must embrace the same approach to change—theories are only useful if they are accurate—and as situations change, theoreticians must be prepared to reexamine earlier assumptions, casting off ideas that are no longer valid, tweaking those that remain fundamentally true but require updating, and developing entirely new theories that reflect new realities.

Unfortunately, the field—both theoretical and applied—does not always keep up with these rapid changes. Broom (2009) noted that “the body of knowledge serving the field, as documented in scholarly and trade publications, often reflects a gap between the immediate information needs of practitioners and the theory-building research conducted by scholars” (p. 7). And W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay (2018) warned in a recent summary of the state of public relations theory,

We feel that public relations, as a field, too often seeks cautious, incremental change when faced with new developments and pressures rather than pursuing true innovation. Consider how US introductory textbooks for public relations simply add chapters or a few lines to accommodate significant changes in the field such as digital communication. . . . In spite of fresh insights, we believe the core of public relations, the orthodoxy, is still constructed around the old planning model and a sender-view of public relations. There is vast room for true innovation in public relations. (p. 383)

Coombs and Holladay identified four important trends in the public relations industry that must be addressed in reconceptualizing our understanding of the profession: digital channels, storytelling, stakeholder engagement, and cocreation of meaning with stakeholders. All four of these trends reinforce each other and reflect the greater transformation of modern media. The increasingly widespread use of digital

platforms, for example, has altered the way organizations present themselves to audiences while simultaneously reinforcing the concept of cocreation—public communication has evolved from a one-way transmission of information to a two- (or three-, or fifty-) way approach to defining reality and creating meaning. Consider, for example, the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements. Stakeholder organizations had some impact on their development, but, ultimately, the public at large created the shared meaning of the movements and decided for themselves whether and how they would respond to them.

Practitioners have to not only recognize the increasing opportunities for communication but also understand how these new channels have changed the power dynamic in creating meaning. The traditional model of public relations functioning as one-way disseminators of information has morphed into a more complex model where organizations participate in, but by no means dominate, the creation of meaning. The power structure in the communication process has been fundamentally altered, as audience members should no longer be viewed as information consumers and must be acknowledged as participants in the meaning creation process. Prior measures of public relations success (number of impressions, changes in attitude and behavior, etc.) must be recalibrated to include new metrics (likes, retweets, thought leader conversions, etc.).

TELEVISION NEWS

A SYMBOL OF NEW MEDIA REALITY

How quickly are media changing?

Consider television news, an industry that grew steadily from the earliest broadcasts of John Cameron Swayze's ten-minute summaries in the late 1940s to the nightly competition for America's viewers among the Big Three networks in the 1960s. Through their regular broadcasts, long-term anchors such as Edward R. Murrow, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, and Walter Cronkite were among the most recognized figures in America.

They were also among the most trusted. ABC, NBC, and CBS delivered high-quality, in-depth, unbiased reporting on an ongoing basis. There were small differences in story emphasis and presentation styles but, in general, the news was the news: Few Americans doubted the integrity or intentions of the men (it was almost always men)

who told them what was happening in the world around them.

Compare television news from those decades with what is available today. The three major networks still broadcast nightly 30-minute summaries of the day's events based on well-researched, unbiased, and fact-based stories related to U.S. and international affairs. Then, these programs are followed by thirty to sixty minutes of celebrity and entertainment news programs. But a significant portion of their audience no longer prefers this standard of objectivity, opting for cable options that present perspectives that reflect their values and worldviews. Furthermore, these worldviews are increasingly divergent: There is less room for the center. On the left, MSNBC slants its coverage to promote a liberal agenda and, on the right, FOX News pushes stories that reflect a far-right

[Continued]

(Continued)

world view steeped in neoconservative jargon. In the center are traditional news outlets, but their audiences are shrinking.

Content analyses of Big Three network news broadcasts show an ongoing consistency about what stories are most important and how they should be presented. Most of the time, the major networks cover a lot of the same subjects from similar perspectives. Content analysis of the values-driven networks finds a very different result—there are times when it seems the fringe networks are not even reporting on the same day’s news. And almost every year, the market share for the less objective networks increases at the cost of the centrist, less-biased news programs.

These viewing preferences do not just demonstrate the divided politics of the nation; they demonstrate the personalization of media—information consumers increasingly prefer media that reflect their own worldviews, and news stations are happy to deliver it to them, 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

This change shows a number of important trends in media. There are more options for getting

information than there have ever been. These options are more readily available across multiple platforms than ever before (as many Americans now get their news online instead of via television, with younger viewers leading the way). Consumers are selecting media that reflect their own worldviews. Media companies can build profitable businesses serving smaller, niche audiences that allow them to offer more homogenized groups to potential advertisers. These changes in content and viewing patterns require public relations strategists to eliminate one-size-fits-all message strategies, creating new content that conforms with audiences’ preexisting values. It has become increasingly difficult to reach—no less change the minds of—disparate groups of information consumers.

Questions and Exercises

1. Do these trends make it easier or harder for PR practitioners to do their jobs?
2. What other media trends can you identify that will impact the public relations industry in the next decade?

Public Relations Works With Other Communication Functions

In seeking to understand what public relations is, it is helpful to understand what it is not.

Different organizations use different structures for addressing their communications needs. Sometimes, the communications function falls under the sales and marketing department and sometimes it stands alone. In some companies, the digital communications employees report to the public relations manager; in others they do not. It is essential for the public relations practitioner to understand each of the communication functions in an organization and to see how the public relations process fits in to the organization’s larger communication goals and organization.

The communications manager uses public relations in conjunction with a wider set of tools to achieve communication objectives. These include marketing, advertising, and digital media. These tools are related and often share the same objectives, but are different in very important ways. Each is also in a period of significant transition. As Cheney and Christensen (2006) note, “Today we find ourselves at a juncture where advertising, PR, and marketing have all reinvented themselves – more than once, in fact – and they are often integrated in the practices of organizations and in academic treatises” (p. 101).

Here are the primary communication tools and how they differ from similar functions. Keep in mind that these are basic definitions. You may find that your organization blends techniques from several areas and lumps them under a single department. For example, your branding expert may use digital storytelling and report to the head of marketing. Your external communication expert may be solely focused on the company's social media platforms. Different organizations prefer different structures.

Marketing — The marketing team helps the organization shape the products or services that it offers, determining what the product will be, how it will be packaged, where and how it will be distributed, and how it will be priced. Basically, the marketing function gathers information to determine what the organization will offer. Introducing a new product, cutting prices to stimulate trial, changing the sizes of the boxes the product comes in, and offering a greater tier of services—all of these are marketing decisions. Marketing does not communicate the product; it helps to create and perfect it.

Advertising — Once the marketing function has determined the key product details, the communications manager turns to other tools to ensure that important audience members are exposed to essential messages about the product or service. Advertising is used to communicate the product qualities to selected, influential audiences in order to stimulate sales. Advertising uses paid placement through the media to achieve these goals. A quarter-page ad in a magazine, a 60-second spot on a radio station, and a billboard are all examples of paid placements through traditional media.

Public Relations — Like advertising, public relations is designed to deliver key messages to important audiences. The difference between the two, however, is that advertising requires a paid placement to the media and public relations does not. Public relations uses other methods to attract media attention to report on an organization's products or services in ways that are beneficial to the organization. A press release distributed to newspapers, a VNR (video news release) sent to local television stations, and a speech delivered by a company president that is reported on in the press are all examples of public relations.

Digital Media — Since advertising and public relations use media platforms to reach their audiences, it makes some sense to place digital media activity underneath one management function or the other. Some organizations do this, but others perceive the digital space as so fundamentally different that it requires its own place in the organizational hierarchy. Digital includes all of the activity transmitted via the Internet, phone, and so forth. This includes an organization's web presence, social media, Facebook postings, Google advertising, and various apps.

The use and combination of these communications tools wax and wane depending on the communications manager, the communication objectives, and changes in the composition of audiences and the relationships those audiences have with

the organization. But they are also operating in relation to other, less-communication-focused organizational functions that have, at times, tread into the area normally reserved for PR. Watts (2006) noted,

Already the territory once dominated by the discipline of public relations is being invaded. Sometimes the invasion is from advertising agencies, sometimes from marketing consultants, and more frequently by specialists such as lawyers, accountants, management consultants, and, of course, defeated parliamentarians! (p. 104)

Conclusion

This chapter is designed to lay the groundwork for your understanding of both theory and public relations. With this understanding, you are now prepared to explore the groups of theories that form the basis of our understanding of the public relations process. While each group of theories represents a discipline unto itself, all of these groups are interrelated and combine to offer a foundation for the body of knowledge that makes up the public relations profession. Like pioneering psychologist Kurt Lewin, you can now appreciate the utilitarianism of a solid theory. Like philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, you can see how understanding the “why” in a situation will help you as much as understanding the “how.” And finally, like astronomer Sir Isaac Newton, you can now “stand on the shoulders of giants” to see where the theories of today create a foundation for the theories of the future.

Review Questions

1. As the chapter points out, public relations has been defined a number of different ways since it was first introduced and continues to be defined differently by different practitioners. Which do you think is the most useful and accurate definition for public relations?
2. Which tools in the communication toolbox (marketing, public relations, advertising, digital media) are the most effective in distributing information to key audiences?
3. Which tools in the communication toolbox are most effective in changing perceptions and attitudes?
4. Which tools in the communication toolbox are most effective in getting audience members to take action?