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Abstract

This case study explores how a charitable organization, World Vision Canada, engages publics of various ideological backgrounds and moves them to donate based on a number of contingency factors, as well as the community-building and co-creational theories of public relations. How the organization is identifying, communicating, listening, and responding to core audiences of various denominations and faith backgrounds was studied. Three salient points emerged from interviews, documentation, and archival records: First, the organization is able to identify and communicate with its broad base of core audiences, and it has been able to do so thus far by striking the right balance. Second, it has mechanisms in place that allow it to listen and engage with these audiences deeply and regularly. Finally, the organization needs to further articulate its Christian identity, to better communicate how development work is carried out in the context of its faith motivations, and to tailor communications uniquely for current and future audiences.

Keywords: charity, non-governmental organization, NGO, community-building, co-creational theory, audience engagement

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Background

The nonprofit and charitable sector is in one of its most competitive environments ever. Pullen summarized it well in her 2009 case study, saying organizations are in "pitched battles with similar organizations that are vying for attention and support in a crowded marketplace of worthy causes" (p. 103). A Google search with the key words "build your own NGO" yields a myriad of links detailing how one can do just that, and traditional media such as *The Guardian* are featuring this information on their pages (Griffin, 2015). Pop-up NGOs, the ability for anyone to raise money through more transparent and controlled crowdfunding initiatives (Carvajal, García-Avilés, & González, 2012), and the expansion of social media have all increased competition and have made it a challenge for the nonprofit and charitable sector to find and hold on to a piece of the public's proverbial charity pie.

Furthermore, the 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer report also confirms that trust of NGOs is waning. Edelman has been measuring trust levels for business, media, government, and NGOs for 15 years, and Richard Edelman, president and CEO of the Edelman public relations firm, said, "what we're seeing now is the evaporation of trust in all institutions…we're at the same level of trust we were back in 2009" (Edelman, 2015). Thirty-three thousand respondents among 27 countries were surveyed, and two-thirds of the countries were found to be "distrusters" (Loeb, 2015), meaning their respective populations were losing faith in their institutions overall. Reports showed that NGOs had the largest decline in trust, losing 3% from the prior year. This drop in trust was larger than the decline in trust seen for business (2%) and media (2%). While NGOs are still the most trusted institutions in the world, Edelman predicted a flattening of this trust five years ago, and today, the evidence supports this notion.

Also, the Muttart Foundation, a private foundation based in Edmonton, published its fifth edition of the *Talking about Charities* public opinion poll in 2013. It reported that at that time, Canadian charities had high levels of trust, but warning signs were on the horizon (The Muttart Foundation, 2013). It was also noted that there were significant drops in the trust levels of some types of charities since 2008, the last time the survey was conducted (The Muttart Foundation, 2013). Trust in international development agencies dropped 9%. Trust in charity leaders also decreased. Canadians continued to give charities low ratings for their inadequate reporting of how donations were used, the impact of programs, and charities' fundraising costs (The Muttart Foundation, 2013).

In recent years, there has been a spate of Canadian and international charities accused of misspending and inaccurate financial reporting. *MoneySense* magazine captured the sentiment this way: "No one likes feeling that their money is being squandered on lush offices, expensive fundraising dinners or frittered away due to poor management" (Froats & Ephron, 2011). A quick Facebook or Twitter post by a disgruntled donor that suddenly goes viral can cause a well-intentioned charity to have to defend its reputation in the public sphere for months and years to come. Questions such as "How much does the CEO make?" or "How much of the money raised goes to fundraising or administration?" are common. Reports from the *Toronto Star* (Aulakh & Dempsey, 2011; Porter, 2014) and *The Globe and Mail* (Friesen & Waldie, 2006; Wente, 2014) illustrate donors' desires to have more say in how their money is spent, and they demand tangible results. Hughes (2014) says that media coverage is of utmost importance to NGOs because the quantity and prominence of newspaper coverage is likely to influence readers on the importance of these issues. She suggests that NGOs should pay close attention to how often they use terms like "accountability" and "legitimacy" and the way they shape discussion (p. 1029).

The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) is trying to bring accountability and best practices forward to strengthen the sector in Canada. By providing a searchable list of registered charities on its website, it provides the public with an easy way to research a charity's status, activities, and financial information (CRA, 2015). There are more than 86,000 registered charities in Canada (CRA, 2016), 170,000 if nonprofits are included (Imagine Canada, 2015b). Canada's charitable and nonprofit sector is the second largest in the world, just after the Netherlands' (Imagine Canada, 2015b). Canadians gave as much as $10.6 billion dollars to charity in 2010 (Brownell, 2014), and the charitable sector in Canada currently represents $106 billion or 8.1% of the GDP, which is larger than the automotive and manufacturing industries (Imagine Canada, 2015b).

The emergence of charitable "watchdogs" and sector-strengthening organizations in the last 10 years also illustrates the public's need for good information. Charity Intelligence rates Canadian charities to help donors make better giving decisions (Charity Intelligence, 2014), while Imagine Canada supports the sector through the development and sharing of best practices and research (Imagine Canada, 2015a). Charitable organizations that want to stay competitive must collect their "gold stars:" independent auditors' sign-offs on financial reports, approvals from the Better Business Bureau, and stamps of approval from the aforementioned sector-strengthening organizations.

The role of public relations professionals in managing an organization's reputation amidst this climate is paramount; as Grunig (1992) aptly said, excellent public relations practice is about balancing the interests of the organization with the interests of the public.

There are also faith-based organizations (FBOs) that operate within the charitable sector. Global Affairs Canada (GAC) uses the umbrella term "civil society organization" to encompass FBOs, environmental groups, farmers' associations, and others (GAC, 2016). However, an FBO most commonly refers to religious organizations or affiliated charitable organizations (Fritz, 2016). It would be advantageous for an organization to engage in dialogic relationships with donors of all "stripes" or ideological views and publicly position itself around shared values. Organizations should remember, though, that publics are not just a means to an end. Botan and Taylor (2004) said publics "are not instrumentalized but instead are partners in the meaning-making process" (p. 652).

Overall, a charitable organization with the ability to shape messages once it's aware of the views held by its donor base will be in a more secure position. This case study examines this area of scholarship by examining how a Christian charity best communicates with a donor base of varying ideological views and influences it to donate. Through the lens of one of Canada's largest charitable organizations, World Vision Canada, this case study highlights if and how core audiences are identified and engaged and if the organization is communicating with them successfully.

Definition of Concepts

Public Relations

The Canadian Public Relations Society defines public relations as "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest," as put forth by Flynn, Gregory, and Valin in 2008 (CPRS, 2014). This case study will underscore the responsibility of public relations professionals to establish and build on relationships and how this aim is contingent upon their ability to identify and express views that resonate with the public's values.

Trust must also be present in some form before a relationship can be established and mutual understanding, goal realization, and social good are possible. Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) indicate that how an individual perceives similarity or dissimilarity with another individual influences the development of trust – a fundamental element in building and maintaining relationships of any type. The relationship management approach is also centered on the notion of mutual benefit, thus maintaining equilibrium between organizational and public interests (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004). The public relations practice can best increase overall organizational effectiveness "when it builds long-term relationships of trust and understanding with strategic publics of the organization" (Grunig, 2001, p. 21).

Furthermore, communication used to achieve mutual understanding between an organization and diverse publics takes place through negotiation, listening, and conflict management rather than persuasion and manipulation (Grunig, 1992).

Contingency Theory

The contingency theory is one accommodation of publics by organizations on a continuum of pure advocacy to pure accommodation. It recognizes that the organizational stance toward a given public can shift either way along this continuum at any given time (Cancel, Mitrook, Cameron, & Sallot, 1997). The focus for public relations practitioners is on the current need at any given moment in light of a combination of 86 internal and external contingency factors (Cancel et al., 1997). These include factors such as the organization's age, economic stability, corporate culture, reputation within a community, competitive landscape, and political support (Cancel et al., 1997). These contingency factors impact organizational decision-making as it relates to the degree of advocacy or accommodation that is needed to reach goals (Cancel et al., 1997). For this case study, a charitable organization's communication practices were examined against these factors.

Community-Building Theory

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) have described the community-building theory as normative, both a process and an outcome; Hallahan (2004) describes it as "the integration of people and the organizations they create into a functional collectivity that strives toward common or compatible goals" (p.46). The role of public relations practitioners is to encourage and to promote an understanding of its organizational goals through interaction with citizens (Valentini et al., 2012).

Coombs and Holladay (2012) have defined public relations "as the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of constituency relationships" (p. 348). This interconnected "web" makes the role of public relations practitioners one of helping both organizations and publics build a community where dialogue and mutual understanding can take place (Valentini et al., 2012). Valentini et al. (2012) have also said organizations are better off when publics are part of this community, as the unwieldy character of publics means they cannot be controlled, and by joining the community they may become more receptive to an organization's ideas.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) described a community as “a group with a common problem or interest, regardless of geographic location" (p. 286). This case study examined a charitable organization with a donor base that spans an entire country, so for the purposes of this study the nongeographic definition will be used.

Co-Creational Theory

The co-creational theory sees publics as co-creators of meaning. According to co-creational theory, communication is a tool that makes it possible for an organization and the public to share interpretations and goals. The theory has a long-term orientation and looks at the relationship between publics and organizations and how communication changes in these relationships (Botan & Taylor, 2004). In their definition of public relations, Flynn et al. (2008) highlighted the value of the relationship between an organization and diverse publics; these publics are not merely viewed as “instruments” to achieve an organizational goal (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Co-creational theory is deeply rooted in Grunig’s (1992) symmetrical-excellence theory, and over time it has evolved into community theory, co-orientation theory, accommodation theory, and dialogue theory (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Public relations scholars have revisited these theories and built upon them, looking at interpersonal communication and how it helps enhance relationship building between publics and organizations. In this case study, the degree to which the public is valued by a charitable organization and plays a role in creating common goals will be examined.

Research Problem

Since there is little information available concerning how faith-based charitable organizations communicate with stakeholders who hold various ideological views, the research problem for this case study was as follows: how can faith-based charities communicate with publics of various ideological backgrounds and move them to donate? This question was examined through an exploratory single-case study (Yin, 2014) to gain insight and shed empirical light on how contingency, community-building, and co-creational theories of public relations applied to a Christian charity. The hope is that results from this study will help public relations professionals working in a similar context strengthen their position amidst their donor community and provide their organizations with "strategic intelligence," such as expectations, concerns, and values from the public (Steyn & Niemann, 2014, p. 173). This will then give them a platform on which to illustrate their value – they can create stronger strategic communications plans, have better penetration with the supporter base, and help their organizations survive in a very competitive environment.

Research Questions and Justification

RQ1: How and to what extent does World Vision Canada identify the publics with whom it intends to communicate?

The purpose of this question was to get a sense of the organization's current state of affairs and to find out how the organization identified and approached the audiences they were engaging. It is anticipated that the answers to this question will shed light on whether audiences were clearly identified before engaging in community-building or co-creational theories of public relations.

RQ2: What tools are in use or what steps are taken in the effort to communicate with these publics?

The purpose of this question was to find out whether there was an overarching thought process or set of guiding principles used by the organization to engage with external publics and to find out if and what challenges had surfaced. If the organization was using an informal approach or set of tools that were common and effective, this question would identify them. This question would also help the researcher find out whether the contingency theory of public relations was employed.

RQ3: How does World Vision Canada know it is communicating effectively with these publics?

The purpose of this question was to find out if the organization had a sense of whether it was reaching the donors and connecting with them in the best possible way. Did it conduct environmental scans? How did it monitor what publics were saying? How was success measured? It was also important to find out whether there was a clash of values projected from the organization, or whether keeping a "fine balance" – a middle ground – was the most effective way to communicate. The questions were meant to tease out answers to help the researcher find out whether the organization was carrying out the contingency, community-building, and co-creational theories of public relations.

Overall, the interviews helped determine how and to what extent World Vision Canada identified and engaged with core audiences and if it was doing so effectively. All questions focused on the first two levels outlined by Yin (2014): Level One questions, "those asked of specific interviewees" (See Appendix A); and Level Two questions, "asked of the individual case even when the single case is part of a larger, multiple-case study" (p. 90).

Organization to be Studied

World Vision Canada is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization that is known for disaster relief and its child sponsorship program, whereby Canadians give a monthly donation that helps a child and community in the developing world (World Vision Canada, 2014c). Almost half a million Canadians support World Vision Canada. Its revenue in 2014 was $413 million (in Canadian funds) – $222 million from the sponsorship program alone (World Vision Canada, 2014a). World Vision is an international partnership with offices in over 100 countries; its Canadian offices are in Mississauga, Ottawa, and Montreal. Its supporters are comprised of various ideological backgrounds: Christian denominations, other faiths, and the secular public.

Case Study Method

While the case study as a research method has been criticized for being limited to the exploratory phase of social science investigation (Yin, 2014) and has been pegged as "fieldwork" (p. 15), these criticisms no longer apply to this research method, because it is now more holistic and comprehensive, having evolved over the last 30 years as an essential form of social science inquiry and providing researchers the ability to review material that would otherwise not be accessible or appropriate for other research methodologies. For instance, the case study is a preferred method of research when examining contemporary events where relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated. It includes "direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events" (Yin, 2014, p. 12), but it also deals with a variety of evidence, such as documents, interviews, and observations beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study. Furthermore, case studies lend themselves well to areas of study that seek to answer "how" or "why" questions (Yin, 2014, p. 11) suitable for this particular research study, as it investigated how World Vision Canada communicates with publics of various ideologies.

This research also used an explanatory methodology to explain how this is currently done and what decisions are made in doing so (Yin, 2014). Each interview gauged the extent to which leaders within the organization identified, understood, and engaged in mutually beneficial relationships with core audiences. This case study explored how contingency, community-building, and co-creational theories of public relations were applied and if they contributed to the overall success of this charitable organization.

Data Collection Procedure

This single case study relied on the following data collection methods: interviews, documentation, and archival records. This case study was strengthened by the overall quality, credibility, and accuracy of the information collected.

Interviews took place with three individuals at senior levels of management at World Vision Canada because "well-informed interviews can provide important insights into human affairs or actions" (Yin, 2014, p. 113).

A reasonable approach is to "corroborate interview data with information from other sources" (Yin, 2014, p. 113), so documentation and archival data were also used. Documentary evidence included World Vision Canada's print and online annual report, newspaper clippings and online articles on the charitable sector in Canada, customer service responses, and website research on the organization's core values, mission, and history. A systematic search for relevant documents was conducted, and documentation was either attained in person or via e-mail as needed.

Archival records were also used in the data collection for this case study. They included donor data, social and traditional media tracking reports, customer service monthly and year-end reports, surveys, a brand strategy framework, communications strategies, and identity guides.

These sources of data helped illuminate how diverse publics were identified and engaged by the organization.

Data Analysis Technique

This case study used the explanation-building method to analyze the data and explain how or why a phenomenon was taking place by examining a presumed set of causal links (Yin, 2014). This was useful in studying the way World Vision Canada currently identified and engaged with target audiences and assessing if improvements to the donor experience should be made to move the organization toward mutually beneficial relationships.

This case study relied on theoretical propositions related to contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997), community-building theory (Valentini et al., 2012), and co-creational theory (Botan & Taylor, 2004). By looking closely at the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations, which outlines several factors that influence the degree to which an organization will advocate to or accommodate its publics, data was analyzed to understand how strongly World Vision Canada was accommodating, as well as any influencing factors. Data was also analyzed through the community-building theory to understand whether World Vision Canada clearly identified its core publics, whether the organization was engaging in dialogue with them to reach mutual understanding, and whether the two sides were forging positive change together. Lastly, the data gathered from this case study was analyzed through the co-creational theory, where publics are co-creators of meaning. Whether shared interpretations and goals had been articulated and reached was also examined.

Results

Interviewees for this case study were senior level staff from World Vision Canada: Dave Toycen, President and CEO; Michael Messenger, Executive Vice- President; and Janet Johnson, Vice-President of Donor Development and Church Engagement. The results gleaned from these interviews as well as the research and data collected are presented through an integrated, theme-driven approach.

RQ1: How and to what extent does World Vision Canada identify the various publics with whom it intends to communicate?

World Vision Canada has many core audiences. All three interviewees spoke of a broad base of supporters, and both Mr. Toycen and Ms. Johnson said the core audience was "all of Canada" (D. Toycen, personal communication, year; J. Johnson, personal communication, January 2015). Each of the interviewees highlighted the financial supporter base as an important core audience and further sub-divided the audiences into government, media, Christian churches and church leaders, corporations, major donors, volunteers, other NGOs, celebrities, youth, small businesses, the education community, and people of other faith backgrounds.

Ms. Johnson said that in the last two to three years, the amount of research and time spent by the organization to better understand these audiences and hear "the voice of the donor" had been considerable (personal communication, January 2015). She said there was an intentional move away from the "one size fits all, blast out to a mass audience and see what sticks" (personal communication, January 2015) approach toward a more thoughtful, customized one for each of the diverse audiences. While the organization currently uses many channels to communicate, including the website, magazine, newsletters, blogs, and mailing, the intent is to create treatments that resonate with various types of donors. Other research showed detailed information. For example, 37% of donors visited the website homepage in the last 12 months, and email and mail were their most-preferred methods of communication.

While donor reports indicated that 76% of donors self-designated as Christian, the organization has engaged in interfaith dialogue on a smaller scale in regions internationally, where the organization has non-Christian staff working in non-Christian contexts. Ms. Johnson added that World Vision Canada has also been exploring ethnic communities to partner with in the future.

Mr. Toycen also said that while the organization was doing an adequate job reaching the Christian community and the broader public, more could be done to reach publics of other faith and ideological backgrounds.

RQ2: What tools are in use or what steps are taken in the effort to communicate with these publics?

In communicating to the broad-based core audiences mentioned above, Mr. Messenger said the organization always tries to communicate the organization's mission, vision, and values, but how this is done varies depending on the level of detail required by each audience. Mr. Messenger gave an analogy in reference to the organization's Christian identity:

> The question about our faith is like an onion. If someone wants a general understanding of who we are, the whole onion may be enough. Others may want to peel back the layers. Our job is to give a message that recognizes the different levels of depth that folks want to engage in with us but to ensure it's all onion, not an orange. (M. Messenger, personal communication, January 2015)

Mr. Messenger also spoke of the need to be "multilingual," meaning the organization needs to learn to give the same message in different "languages" based on audience needs, all while ensuring there is consistency and integrity (M. Messenger, personal communication, January 2015).

All interviewees said that there was improvement to be made in communicating with external audiences, and none of them spoke of current tools, processes, or guidelines that helped the organization carry out what Mr. Messenger described above. There is some documentary evidence that speaks to the umbrella organization's identity, motivation, mission, vision, core values, and faith expression, but all of these elements could be revisited and adapted to be more appropriate for the Canadian context and more useful for World Vision Canada.

Mr. Messenger added that the organization needed to rethink and better articulate its views on being a Christian development organization and that it needed a non-defensive, clearer, simpler way of defining its Christian identity. He spoke of a rough rubric he was working on: MAST or "Motivation, Affinity, Spirituality, and Transformation." This was to help address the "why" and "how" questions of the organization's operations. It has not yet been widely known or used in the organization, as the groundwork is still being laid out.

Ms. Johnson echoed the idea that the organization needed to articulate its identity more clearly. "We're fragmented across all mediums in how the public experiences us," she said (personal communication, January 2015), speaking of World Vision Canada's television spots, radio ads, and other communication channels. She mentioned that the organization needed to improve its familiarity and trust with the public. To overcome this, the organization had just finalized and approved a strategic brand framework that Ms. Johnson said would address some of these issues. She recognized that the brand strategy would have to allow communicators to "flex" where needed for various audiences while still operating in a way that didn't compromise the overall brand.

All interviewees agreed that the primary message to continue to communicate is "shared impact," or the tangible results achieved by the support given by donors. This is evident in the print and online versions of the organization's annual report, where stories, numeric results, and the "President's Letter" all focus on impact.

Beyond this, Mr. Toycen also said that the organization needs to be *memorable* in its messaging:

> I'm not sure what we're saying is powerful enough. It's very difficult; we can't just say

> we're going to come up with something compelling. The quality and impact of our communication should leave an image or phrase the public won't forget – that is the big prize. How do we appeal to people's minds and hearts, engage their imaginations? (D. Toycen, personal communication, January 2015)

RQ3: How does World Vision Canada know it is communicating effectively with these publics?

According to Mr. Messenger, the organization is able to know whether it is communicating effectively with audiences based on its achievement of overarching fundraising and awareness goals. Leading and lagging indicators, metrics, proxies, donation reports – all of these help the organization know if it's on track.

All interviewees said the organization knows if it's communicating effectively because it engages in a fair amount of public listening, or as Mr. Toycen called it, "objective monitoring" (D. Toycen, personal communication, January 2015). Mr. Toycen also talked about the difficulty in making business decisions based on all the public input the organization receives. He said:

> The problem is how to weight all the feedback coming in. We need to make room for assumptions. You can't fully trust a survey. We need to be constantly verifying. It's both a science and an art. (D. Toycen, personal communication, January 2015)

The organization conducts focus groups, consults panels, engages in consortiums such as the Canadian Council of International Cooperation (CCIC), hears the "voice of the customer" through customer service reports, monitors media and share of voice, engages actively on social media, and meets one-on-one with corporations, major donors, and church leaders. Ms. Johnson said all of this is done with the intent of "listening to learn" (J. Johnson, personal communication, January 2015) and using the insight to inform business decisions.

Over the last three years, the organization has seen, as is common in the sector, an upward trend in the number of accountability-related complaints, supporting the research done by the Muttart Foundation (2013) and the Edelman PR firm (2015) that indicated trust is waning among charities and NGOs. Because of this, Mr. Messenger talked about the importance of listening:

> We have to think about who [our partners] are and what they care about – from our donors right through to the beneficiaries we serve at the field level. Everything we do is about communication: telling stories, communicating impact, understanding gaps and opportunities. Communication in our world is about convincing. (M. Messenger, personal communication, January 2015)

Ms. Johnson also said engaging is not only about confirming for current donors that their money is making an impact but also hearing the "voice of the *potential* customer" (J. Johnson, personal communication, January 2015), such as young men. She said that since the economic downturn, demographic shifts and a change in the public's values have altered the charitable landscape.

Discussion

This case study examined how World Vision Canada engages with publics of various ideologies and moves them to donate. From the evidence, a few key insights emerged:

First, the organization has spent time and money in identifying its core audience, and results have shown that it is made up of a wide and diverse base. Two of the three senior leaders interviewed spoke of the need to talk to these audiences in a manner that resonates with them. It could be that in being so diverse, the organization is dividing its energies between too many places, and it may not be possible to speak in a unified voice. Mr. Toycen highlighted the challenge of being able to "weight" all the data and research in an appropriate way.

Who in the organization will decide what's more important: time spent cultivating and finessing language in a grant application to the federal government, or time spent creating a tailored treatment for the 45-year-old multi-sponsor who can spread awareness to her friends? Based on the case study evidence, there may be a need to prioritize the core audiences into a top tier. Then the organization can focus energy on communicating and engaging them.

Another theme that emerged was the lack of definition around the organization's Christian identity and the absence of concrete tools and usable guidelines to help staff articulate this for their unique audiences. All interviewees agreed there were gaps in this area and more work to be done in clearly explaining for the public how identity plays out in a development context. In any case, the fact that the executive vice-president, Mr. Messenger, had made an effort to define this identity through a rubric showed that this is an area of priority for the organization, and more results will likely be seen in the near future.

Finally, the study revealed that the organization prioritizes effective communication and measures its success against its financial and awareness goals. It knowingly engages and listens to the public through a large number of channels, and it is at a point in its lifecycle where important decisions will have to be made. Over the next five years, the organization should be able to assess whether business decisions made based on research and the new brand framework will, in truth, help the organization gain ground in terms of familiarity and trust.

After looking closely at the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations against the results of this study, it is evident that World Vision Canada engages in a high degree of accommodation towards publics. The organization invests in significant constituency research to help inform its business objectives, with many internal and external factors coming into play.

The most dominant internal contingency factor is the threat of economic loss and how the public contributes to the economic stability of the organization. Ms. Johnson spoke of the economic downturn affecting the charitable landscape, and all interviewees spoke of the need to let current and future donors know that their support is having a positive impact on development work. Mr. Messenger pointed out that communication is about giving proof that the overseas work is having a positive effect on the communities the organization serves.

Other important internal contingency factors were the level of trust between the organization and the external public as well as the ideological barriers that exist between the two. The interviewees spoke in detail about the need for the organization to articulate its Christian identity clearly and to explain how this affects its work in alleviating poverty for children – to various Christian denominations as well as to those who hold other ideological beliefs.

The most dominant external contingency factor was the threat of having the organization's reputation in the general public scarred by misinformation about what the Christian identity means to its operations. Another external contingency factor influencing how the organization was accommodating its publics is the level of competition in the environment. As Ms. Johnson mentioned, the environment is changing, the public is more suspicious, and the organization's environmental scans and share of voice reports help it assess its position against its competitors.

The community-building theory of public relations also applies to how World Vision Canada communicates. The public and the organization are coming together as they move toward a common goal: alleviating poverty for children in the developing world. Ms. Johnson said the organization's church engagement was also focused on how to meet churches' needs through building the capacity of its leaders and deepening their understanding of social justice. The results of this case study also showed how the organization was reaching out to many core audiences, including a number of smaller communities. Again, whether this is the most effective way to operate is uncertain.

Lastly, the data gathered from this case study can be analyzed through the co-creational theory of public relations, where publics are co-creators of meaning in the long-term. Mr. Messenger summarized it well when he stated the importance of hearing what the organization's partners want – from donors to field beneficiaries – and meeting their needs.

Conclusion and Limitations

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of how World Vision Canada communicates with publics of various ideological backgrounds and motivates them to donate. The intent was to find out how the organization was currently operating and to assess where it could improve in its communications.

A cursory look at the organization may indicate that it is doing quite well; up to now, it has been able to establish a fine balance in speaking to a wide range of supporters inside and outside the Christian constituency. It has remained one of the largest charitable organizations in Canada, still able to secure over $400 million in revenue in a year.

This balance, however, will shift over time if the organization does not better articulate its Christian identity and strengthen its overall brand. These gaps are starting to be addressed.

The opportunity to study and document World Vision Canada's experience as an established charity as it identifies and engages with the public can set a benchmark for other Canadian charities. While this case study offered some insights into how World Vision Canada's operations and future direction, there are opportunities for future research.

From an evolutionary perspective, it could be interesting to follow this organization into the next phase of its lifecycle. With the brand framework approved just this year, it would be prudent to revisit this research project in five to ten years to see if the organization's trust and familiarity among the public has improved and if the overall brand was strengthened. Furthermore, a broader exploratory cross-case study that compared and contrasted the experience of other charities in the Christian and faith-based sector might unearth some common practices and approaches that can be formalized across the sector and be valuable in a business context.

In addition, using the evidence collected in this case study as a foundation, a researcher could perform additional studies on the contingency, community-building, and co-creational theories. Researchers may choose to examine whether donor giving is affected in a profound way by one theory more than another and whether the factors that precipitate giving could be studied. Any of the suggested research topics above would be a significant contribution to both theory and practice of public relations in Canada.

While every effort was made to remain objective in the development and execution of this case study research, limitations do exist. Because this is a small study conducted over just a few months, the conclusions drawn cannot and should not be generalized to other organizations that share one or more of the same variables. Also, a generalization about how the organization identifies and engages the public cannot be solely built on the ideas of three senior leaders, though they do have broad knowledge of how the organization operates. More staff at varying levels of seniority should be interviewed to contribute richer data.

Lastly, it should be disclosed that the researcher has spent the last eight years employed at the organization being studied, the last three of which were spent in a senior communications position. She has knowledge of how the organization operates, and this may have created bias. In an effort to be objective, she collected a wide variety of data and documentation from various parties within the organization to corroborate the research. It should also be noted that the researcher was likely granted greater access to this data and may have been able to elicit more candid interviews from the interviewees thanks to her experience in the organization.

Despite these limitations, this case study serves as an important springboard for future research in an environment where charities are finding it harder to operate.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Who are the external core audiences World Vision Canada should be speaking to? Why? (Donors? Media? Public? Government? Churches? Other NGOs? Other key stakeholders?)

2. How does the organization communicate with supporters of various backgrounds (e.g. faith backgrounds)? Does it do it well?

3. Is the organization currently doing a good job in communicating to a) the core audiences and b) those of various faith backgrounds? Please explain.

4. Is there consistency across the communication platforms in the organization in speaking to core external audiences? If not, where are the gaps?

5. How should various departments approach their communications with core external audiences?

6. What kind of information should the organization communicate to its external audiences?

7. How do you know whether the organization is being effective in communicating with core external audiences?

8. How much "public listening" does your organization do? Please explain.

9. With respect to strategic decisions and plans, how much of these are built with core audiences' opinions and thoughts in mind?

10. What can the organization do to improve its communication with external audiences?