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Communication management research in South Africa: An exploratory study of the current state of affairs

ABSTRACT

Since the notion of strategic communication management¹ had become popular in literature and as a result of the Excellence study (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995), many practitioners and communication management departments have attempted to implement all or some of the elements of the Excellence theory in order to change the negative reputation of communication management research. Improving the theoretical and practical knowledge within the communication management department is one way of rectifying the aforementioned situation. The new knowledge base would include a far better understanding of the strategic management process as well as basic and advanced research practices.

This exploratory study is aimed at describing the nature of communication management research and its function within the communication management department, as well as the value thereof within the greater organisation. Communication management research theory forms the basis of this project, while exploratory qualitative research was conducted within the South African corporate context in order to supplement these theoretical perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, communication management research was associated with the evaluation of communication intervention effects and the analysis of publicity. While many practitioners were only equipped to conduct publicity and effects research, the potential of the communication management department to make contributions to the strategic management process, through strategic research, had been ignored or misunderstood by many technician practitioners, communication managers and top managers alike.

Communication management research had also been criticised for the inferior quality thereof and the limited number of techniques that were used in the process. Practitioners' poor understanding of the importance of this element in the communication management process, as well as their inferior level of research expertise often contributed to the poor credibility of the communication management department in many organisations.

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the important role of research in the strategic communication management processes, the types of research available, the theoretical underpinnings of such research, and the strategic role of research in the holistic management of an organisation. A qualitative exploratory research project in the form of multiple case study design was used to get an idea of trends in research used by communication managers in South African organisations.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

It seems appropriate to describe the concept of communication management research in relation to both its role within the management process, scientific research as well as the most important objectives and techniques associated with this process.

According to Puth, (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:111), the word "*research*" had traditionally been associated with the process of systematic enquiry or investigation into a subject. This conceptualisation originated in the physical sciences, but has since been applied in "*virtually every field of study in the social sciences, including the fields of communication*

1. The term ***communication management*** will be used throughout as a synonym for ***public relations***. J. Grunig, (in Grunig, 1992:4), contends that the terms public relations and communication management are broader than (1) specialised public relations programmes and (2) communication techniques, thus equating the term public relations with communication management: "*Public relations and communication management describe the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organisation's communication with both internal and external publics – groups that affect the ability of the organisation to meet its goals.*"

and public relations". Broom and Dozier's (in Wilcox, Ault & Agee, 1995:158) definition is similar to that of the previously mentioned authors since research is viewed as *"the controlled, objective, and systematic gathering of information for the purpose of describing and understanding"*.

Communication management research as a management function

According to Gill and Johnson (1991:2) management research is concerned with the process of finding out how to approach a task to be accomplished. They contend that all management research approaches have a problem-solving nature and serve as a systematic check when undertaking research. Cooper and Schindler's (1998:14) definition also describes the application of this process in business:

"Research is a systematic inquiry aimed at providing information to solve managerial problems ... a systematic inquiry that provides information for management decision-making".

Based on the aforementioned definitions, Mersham, Rensburg and Skinner (1994:118) define communication management research as *"a systematic enquiry aimed at providing information to solve public relations problems"*. This definition seems to be the most appropriate when the value of such research, as an integral part of communication management, is considered. Mersham *et al.* (1994:118) describe the potential of such research in the following manner:

"The information gained through careful research can be used to guide planning, pre-test messages, evaluate results and guide follow-up efforts."

The research process provides managers with a systematic and disciplined way of solving managerial problems. Not only does research advance knowledge but it contributes to the manager's self-development as a manager and problem-solver. From this perspective the importance of research expertise within any communication management department is self-evident.

Communication management research as a scientific process

There are basic types of scientific research that also apply to communication management. McElreath (1997) firstly distinguishes between **exploratory** and **confirmatory** research where the first kind refers to research most often conducted by public relations specialists because it discovers and describes significant variables and possible relationships. Such exploratory descriptive research is usually conducted before campaigns in order to plan and evaluate effectiveness. Confirmatory research,

on the other hand, is used to test relationships such as those between components of the public relations campaign and the public's reactions. It is theory based and tests the validity of predictions.

Both exploratory and confirmatory research can be **qualitative** or **quantitative** (McElreath, 1997:203). Qualitative research is usually confirmatory, involves the researcher's participation and is mostly used in exploratory research. A further distinction between different types of research is that it can be **formal** or **informal**. (*Specific techniques that are associated with the aforementioned types of research are briefly described elsewhere.*)

Objectives of communication management research

No definition of communication management research would be complete without also differentiating between the main objectives of such research. (*The theoretical underpinnings of these objectives are discussed in greater detail elsewhere.*)

Formative research

Puth, (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:111), as well as Skinner and Von Essen (1999) and Mersham *et al.* (1994), refer to **formative research** as the process of gathering of initial information for planning. Such research is pivotal to any strategy or programme formulation.

Evaluative research

Evaluation / measurement research is the type of research that many practitioners (both technicians and managers) are familiar with and which is also described by authors such as Skinner and Von Essen (1999), Newsom, VanSlyke Turk and Kruckeberg (1996), Steyn (1998), Puth, (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994), Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1995), Mersham *et al.* (1994), Baron (1997) and Cole (1997). The objective of such research implies the measurement of communication management intervention effects, messages and the adjustment of communication management programmes.

Dozier and Repper, (in Grunig, 1992:186–200), Wilcox *et al.* (1995:158–159) and Skinner and Von Essen (1999) contend that the scope of evaluative research is determined by the objectives of planning, monitoring and final evaluation within the process of communication management. There is much confusion about the meaning of 'evaluation' and covers such explanations such as 'contributing to the bottom-line', justification of time, effort and resources to be invested in public relations, as well as the effectiveness issue (Kitchen, 1997:284). Kitchen thus sees evaluation research to

fall into three categories: commercial which justifies the budget spent; simple-effectiveness which asks the output effectiveness of programme; and objective-effectiveness which measures whether a programme has reached its objectives and created the set out desired effects.

McElreath (1997) and Pavlik (1987) further distinguish between *formative* evaluative research and *summative* evaluative research. Formative research refers to research conducted to assist managers to better formulate plans for implementation and serves as a tool for improving future application. It is normally conducted before a campaign but is better used throughout a campaign to monitor effectiveness and progress. Research designed to measure whether goals and objectives were met is called summative research and is best used throughout the life of a project but mostly to summarise the results of a PR campaign or programme.

Several models have been suggested to evaluate research (Kitchen, 1997:290). Cutlip, Center and Broom developed a seven-step model in 1985 that divides the programme impact of communication management into seven categories. These include measures of opinion change, measures of behaviour change and the number of people who learn message content. The steps of this model are increasingly difficult to achieve. Each step contributes to increased understanding and adds information for assessing effectiveness. The bottom three steps are preparation evaluation, assessing the information and strategic planning; the next four steps are implementation, evaluation and assessing tactics and effort; and the last six steps evaluate impact and provides feedback on outcome. MacNamara (in Kitchen, 1997:29) developed a similar model, called *macro communication*, in a pyramidal form which rises from a broad base of inputs to public relations programmes and campaigns, through outputs to results where the top represents *objectives achieved*.

Noble and Lindenmann suggested two other lesser known models (in Kitchen, 1997:290) based on dimensions of evaluating media relations (Noble) and a yardstick model (Lindenmann) evaluating different stages in a campaign. But these models have all been criticised for seeing communication as an ending process where a company would *stop all activities to measure results and attitudes*.

Two more dynamic models have been proposed (Watson in Kitchen, 1997:295) that cover both short term goals as well as long-term activities. The short term model is closely related to the press agency and public information models of Grunig as it does not depend on feedback and is often of a more technical nature such as measuring media coverage or number of sales responses to surveys. The judgement of success is made according to whether targets are met.

The second model suggested by Watson (in Kitchen, 1997:296) has been designed to meet more dynamic needs and to cope with ever-changing conditions. It includes an interactive loop and takes feedback into account in the further planning of the research. Because monitoring is continuous and effects-based planning is used, a more disciplined approach with validity and reliability is provided by this model. Elements in the continuing model are the initial research stage followed by the set of objectives and desired effects that lead to the strategy selection and tactical choices. Throughout the programme multiple levels of formal and informal analysis can be conducted to monitor progress in terms of whether the project is succeeding or *staying alive*. The results are fed back to each of the elements during the progress of the programme, contributing to the validation of initial research and adding data, realigning objectives and strategy. Thereby the whole process can constantly be adjusted to create the desired effects.

Strategic research

Strategic communication management research is described as inherently part of the perspective that the communication management department can and ought to contribute to the strategic management process through research, since such a department is ideally positioned within the organisation to fulfil this role. This includes such methods such as intelligence tracking that involves the monitoring of key sources of industry information for new developments that may influence the organisation, and is widely labelled as being of greater value to the organisation. Authors, including Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994), Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995), Geddie (1996), Kornegay and Grunig (1998), Baron (1997), Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994), Pearce and Robinson (1997), Steyn (1998), Ströh (1998), Venter (in Kroon, 1995) and White and Mazur (1995) support this view.

Traditional research approaches

The above mentioned are not the only reasons for research by the communication management department. Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:116–118) adds five other reasons for research in communication management. Public opinion research is aimed at describing what different publics' (be they general or very specific) attitudes and perceptions are about an organisation's actions or messages. Public issues research can be used as a tool by the communication management department if the organisation wants to participate in the process of influencing public and political thought. Image surveys, which are unfortunately often still seen as the only form of communication management research, are conducted to determine the institutional profile of the organisation *in the public mind*. The assessment of communication needs and perceptions is conducted by means of audits and surveys of several publics, e.g. employees, investors

and the media.

Although it may seem as if the objectives of evaluative or strategic communication management research are described as direct opposites, it is not the case. Knowledge of, and skills to conduct both evaluative research (the traditional conceptualisation thereof) and more strategic research (such as environmental scanning) are important to the communication management practitioner of today. The inclusion of a brief overview of some of the techniques that are most often used in communication management research would thus be appropriate.

Formal and informal research techniques

When trying to summarise the techniques that are regularly used in communication management research, it seems appropriate to categorise these according to their specific objectives. The literature study suggests that two general research objectives can be differentiated. Skinner and Von Essen (1999), McElreath (1997), Mersham *et al.* (1994), Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994), Wilcox *et al.* (1995), Newsom *et al.* (1996), Pavlik (1987) differentiate between *informal* and *formal* research. Informal research is based on non-formal methods while formal research is dictated by rules for scientific research, including the requirements of validity and reliability.

Specific techniques that are traditionally associated with communication management research contexts include informal research techniques such as archival organisational materials, library sources such as reference books, government documents, scholarly publications and other journals, on-line databases and internet, content analysis, and interviews. Wilcox *et al.* (1995:167-169) cite focus groups and copy testing (e.g. Flesch's readability formula) as other techniques that are regularly used in communication management research.

According to Mersham *et al.* (1994), Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994) and Dozier *et al.* (1995), the aforementioned techniques are widely used by communication management practitioners, but not often enough supported by scientific methods, since practitioners often do not understand the latter well enough to use them.

Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994), Wilcox *et al.* (1994), Mersham *et al.* (1994) and Newsom *et al.* (1996) briefly refer to the process of scientific research in order to differentiate between formal and informal communication management research and techniques. This process is also at the heart of informal research, but is more strictly followed in the formal context.

The first step is the identification and description of the problem, whereafter a

measurable portion of the initial problem is selected. The description or formulation of definitions that will be used throughout the research project is then completed in order to set the boundaries for measurement of these. An overview of literature related to the specific research problem is conducted to find possible similar studies or valuable insight about the most appropriate research approach. Depending on the type of research, propositions or hypotheses are then formulated. Thereafter the entire research design has to be described – this would include elements like the methods of sampling, data collection and data analysis. The next steps would be the collection of data, the analysis of data and the interpretation of data in order to make inferences and generalisations. The final step would be the communication of these findings to any party to whom such information would be of any significance and making judgements based on results (McElreath, 1997:205 and Newsom *et al.*, 1996:109).

Techniques traditionally associated with formal management research are historiography (which is the result of combining information from primary and secondary sources); case studies; diaries or field studies; and in-depth interviews on the qualitative side.

Newsom *et al.* (1996:114–115) describe survey research within the context of communication management research, as *“an attempt to measure the practices and preferences of a specified public by tabulating responses to a standardised series of questions.”* In addition to this definition, these authors also refer to the two types of statistics that are usually used for the analysis of data that was gathered by means of surveys. Descriptive statistics break down the results in ways that help the researcher (or practitioner) manage the amount of information, while inferential statistics are used to draw conclusions about the data – interpreting what the data from the sample means in relation to the wider population. Against this background, the view of Dozier *et al.* (1995) about the need for knowledge of more sophisticated research practices (including statistical analysis) among communication management practitioners, must be supported.

The value of both types of research becomes apparent when one considers the theoretical foundation of these processes, i.e. the open systems and strategic management theories of communication management.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

When comparing theoretical perspectives on communication management with the specific purpose of understanding the place and value of research, two main perspectives seem to be of importance. The first perspective stems from the open systems theory of communication management and the second from strategic management theory.

The open systems theory and communication management research

A brief overview of the origins of systems theory should be considered before the relevance of this theory to communication research is discussed. According to Littlejohn (1993:41) and Angelopulo (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:41), systems theory, as we know it today, was best explained by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist. General systems theory deals with the notion that *the whole equals the sum of its parts*. Within the context of this theory, *wholes* consist of interdependent parts. The theory focuses on the relationship between these parts as well as on the relationship between the parts and their environments (Rensburg in Rensburg 1996:51).

According to Angelopulo (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:41), this theory underwent development and found application in many disciplines, including communication science. This author contends that systems theory should not be labelled as a pure theory, but rather as an approach. This is also the perspective from which this paper will use systems theory.

The main reason for supporting the above-mentioned perspective is the fact that this approach describes any system (inorganic, social or cognitive) as *a set of objects or entities that interrelate with each other to form a whole*. This description is appropriate when describing the nature of organisations, and how these behave/operate within the wider environment. Cutlip *et al.* (1994) describe systems in the following way: "A system is a set of interacting units that endures through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to change pressures from the environment to achieve and maintain goal states."

Littlejohn (1993:41) distinguishes between two types of systems, i.e. *open* and *closed* systems. A closed system does not interact with its environment and moves toward entropy (internal chaos), disintegration and will ultimately die. This type of system has no life-sustaining qualities, e.g. physical systems like stars. An open system, on the other hand, is able to both receive matter and energy from its environment and to pass matter and energy to its environment. From this distinction it is clear that open systems are orientated toward life and growth.

Deviation and change occur and can be tolerated by an open system, but only for a limited period of time. Adaptability often means self-maintenance or counteracting outside forces. The open systems approach to communication management is based on continuous adaptation to the environment. Spicer (1997:71) says that this communication and interdependency between organisations and stakeholders are also ultimately concerned with ethical interaction, as the organisation also has to alter and adapt to survive. The organisation does not only pressure the environment to

change through persuasion but a more two-way symmetrical approach is implied.

When applied to the evaluative communication management research, the systems theory provides a systematic explanation for the process. If the communication management department wants to plan programmes, it has to investigate elements in some of its external environments and then use that information to ensure that the publics are correctly identified and the correct messages (in whatever form) are formulated. In order to maintain the successful communication relationship with such publics, this department should continuously check whether any element in this relationship has changed (or will change) and whether this had influenced the relationship. Adapting a new or altered approach in order to achieve the initial communication management objectives, thus is a result of research and also extremely important for the survival of the relationship. Some public relations campaigns are predetermined and applied without adjusting to environmental changes, which could prove such a closed system to fail. The value of especially summative evaluative research is self evident for open systems (Grunig & White in Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994):

“The open systems model of public relations calls for research skills to monitor publics and other environmental forces, as well as forces within organisations.”

The role of the communication management department in an open system

The relevance (normatively conceptualised) of both the open systems theory and the two-way symmetrical model of communication management in this study is quite clear. The communication management department could play the role of detecting the emergence of socio-political trends or ideologies that would later either influence or become government legislation and share this knowledge with the rest of the dominant coalition. This department could also council the *top* management about management of the implementation of new management philosophies or organisational policies, as well as contributing on a tactical level during the planning and execution of corporate communication campaigns aimed at facilitating the aforementioned process (White & Mazur, 1995:27).

Because of the open systems perspective in organisations, the role of public relations can be seen as assisting to develop relationships between the organisation and various groups or publics that can have an influence on the organisation or be influenced by it. In this context the practitioner is often referred to as the *boundary spanner*.

The boundary spanning role of the communication manager

According to White and Dozier (1992:93) management needs information from the

environment to make decisions accordingly and this type of information is often provided by boundary spanners - *"individuals within the organisation who frequently interact with the organisation's environment and who gather, select, and relay information from the environment to decision makers in the dominant coalition"*. Communication managers are responsible for managing communication between an organisation's subsystems and various relevant publics and in this way assists different subsystems in staying in contact with their publics (Kitchen, 1997:12). This boundary spanning function further keeps the organisation aware of changes in the environment so that it can adapt and adjust accordingly. The more turbulent the environment the more prevalent this function becomes because decision-makers are less sure of what information to use in managing the organisation's responses to the environment (White & Dozier, 1992:93).

Because of all the changes in the environment, organisations' boundaries become blurred and external factors and stakeholders define the parameters of dynamics and change (Ströh, 1998:27). Structures change, instability occurs that is necessary for systems to respond to the environment and boundaries become blurred because interaction over boundaries increases. Because of the fact that communication managers facilitate interaction between citizens, customers, clients and the communities affected by an organisation, the borders of the organisation become open and relationships become more important than structures. Definite lines cannot be distinguished any longer and this paradoxically leads to greater freedom from influences from the environment. An organisation has more information to adjust and respond much faster to opportunities and threats from the environment.

The boundary-spanning role of the communication manager includes information processing in the form of filtering relevant information into the organisation (Kitchen, 1997:14). It further implies facilitating networking by providing relevant channels, creating more fluid structures, fulfilling the bridging function by providing an environment of sharing knowledge and making knowledge more productive (Ströh, 1998:30).

Because of the fact that boundary spanners have access to information and thus possess an influencing role, they can potentially perform a strategic role in the organisation (Kitchen, 1997:16). They can act in an intelligence capacity, gather strategic information and feedback from the environment, advise management on the implications thereof, assist the communication and explanation of decisions, and thereby win acceptance and support from all constituencies involved.

This is only possible when the communication management department is regarded as part of the management decision-making team / dominant coalition, and when the

senior communication practitioner (manager) has the ability to interpret trends in the environment prior and during the strategic decision making process (White & Mazur, 1995:27, Cutlip *et al.*, 1994, Grunig (in Grunig, 1992), Newsom *et al.* 1996 and Dozier *et al.*, 1995). This would allow the communication management department to contribute directly to the formulation of the organisation's strategic planning, based on the information about the external environment that has been gathered through various research methods (both formal and informal).

Strategic management theory

Du Toit (in Kroon, 1995:46) defines this process in terms of the systems approach to management. This view on management focuses on the organisation as a whole, which is directed in the long term at viability and adaptation to the changing environment through strategic planning. *"The underlying principle of this process is the management of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses and placing the latter in a position to utilise its opportunities and to overcome threats"* (Du Toit in Kroon, 1995).

Another dimension of strategic management is a description of the qualities of strategic decisions. Strategic decisions require consideration by the top management team, require large amounts of resources, often affect the organisation's long-term prosperity, are future oriented, have multifunctional or multi-business consequences and finally, require consideration of the organisation's external environment (Pearce & Robinson, 1997:4-5).

According to Pearce and Robinson (1997:3) the strategic management process depends on nine critical tasks, i.e. the formulation of the company's mission (philosophy and goals), the development of a company profile, assessment of the company's external environment, analysis of the company's options by matching its resources with the external environment, identifying the most desirable options by evaluating each option in light of the company's mission, selecting a set of long-term objectives and grand strategies, developing annual objectives and short-term strategies which are compatible with the selected long-term objectives and grand strategies, the implementation of these strategic choices and evaluating the success of the strategic process as an input for future decision-making.

The importance of research in the strategic management process is clear when Pearce and Robinson's (1997:3) statement about the requirement for successful strategic management is considered:

"To deal effectively with everything that affects the growth and profitability of a firm, executives employ management processes that they feel will position it optimally in its

competitive environment by maximising the anticipation of environmental changes and of unexpected internal and competitive demands”.

This planning process has been complicated by the increasingly turbulent nature of the organisation's external environment (Steyn, 1998 & Ströh, 1998). Changes and trends that may affect an industry, and thus the single organisation, seem to develop at such a rapid pace that it is difficult to keep track of these. Ströh (1998) articulates this notion in the following way:

“If we manage according to the chaos theory, we will not be able to predict accurately. The answer could thus be to look at possibilities of what could happen in future and plan for those possibilities.”

This view of strategic management implies that organisations must develop several techniques through which trends and other elements that may affect the organisation's attempts to achieve its objectives, can be detected or anticipated. The success of this approach to management, does however depend on the organisation's degree of sensitivity to, ability and willingness to change its initial goals in order to survive as a system.

This process is also explained by the general cybernetics model, as described by Cutlip *et al.* 1994, which represents the input-output self-regulation process that has been described in the aforementioned description of the strategic management process. The cybernetic model consists of five elements, i.e. the goals of an organisation that are formulated by the control center (dominant coalition/central decision making body), outputs (organisational actions/behaviour) that are directly related to the achievement of organisational goals, feedback to the control center about the organisation's behaviour, a comparison of the new system state to the initial goal state and the control center that determines whether the organisation's behaviour/ actions should be altered (Cutlip *et al.*, 1994).

A critical question therefor, is which techniques or tools organisations ought to develop or utilise in order to become aware of reactions to their behaviour and to detect other trends that may influence the organisation's ability to achieve its goals.

Although a discussion of specific techniques would be most appropriate at this point, it will follow elsewhere, as the organisation's orientation towards the communication management department should first be considered.

The influence of organisational factors on the strategic potential of the communication management department

Ever since the completion of the Excellence study early in this decade, the organisational factors that often have a negative influence on the potential and real contribution of the communication management department have been widely criticised by theorists and practitioners alike. White and Mazur (1995:22-23) summarised the key elements of excellent communication management.

Firstly, this department should be managed strategically – everything that is done by this department should be directly related to the strategic objectives of the organisation. Secondly, this department should be allowed to pursue its core philosophy of building and maintaining sound relationships between the organisation and internal or external stakeholders, and specifically those that pose the greatest threat to the organisation's ability to achieve its objectives. This element is closely related to the requirement that the communication management department should contribute to the bottom line by preventing internal or external stakeholders from acting in direct opposition to the organisation. Finally, excellent communication management can help the organisation to *"make money"* as an indirect result of the relationships that had been nurtured between the organisation and its various internal and external stakeholders (White & Mazur, 1995:22-23).

As was referred to earlier, the communication management department often cannot simply achieve such excellence. The argument from many a CEO is that this department is a *nice to have*, that has no relation to the bottom line. Thus the process of improving the status of the department is described by many authors, including Dozier *et al.* (1995), White and Mazur (1995:26–27) and Steyn (1998) as a process of educating the dominant coalition about this department's potential under certain conditions.

Dozier *et al.* (1995) and White and Mazur (1995) contend that the communication management department and dominant coalition should have shared expectations about each other's roles. *"It is important that, in working with public relations advisors, senior managers are clear about the contribution they expect these advisors to make. If they expect a comprehensive analysis of the external environment from the practitioner's perspective, then this needs to be made explicit. Experienced practitioners will earn their credibility by providing this kind of analysis, whether asked for or not, but it is more likely to be used, and to be effective, if it has been asked for by senior management"* (White & Mazur 1995:26).

These views concur with earlier statements about the need for communication management practitioners (technicians and especially managers) to broaden their

knowledge of the strategic management process, as well as research techniques and opportunities. Thus a description of environmental scanning within communication management is appropriate.

Environmental scanning

The process of gathering strategic intelligence is referred to as environmental scanning (Grunig in Grunig, 1992:101). The purpose of environmental scanning would be to identify *specifically defined* publics that are or will be affected by or involved in organisational policies or actions. Cutlip *et al.* (1994) describes this process in the following way:

“If observations of external and internal environments indicate that a policy or practice is detrimental to the best interests of the organisation (and, increasingly, society) management can be encouraged to adjust.”

The value of this approach to the management of communication management is the amount of time, effort and money that is saved through pro-active planning, compared to the “*trauma*” that is associated with a reactive approach. The latter is also referred to as the “*crisis mode*” of communication management.

Kornegay and Grunig (1998), Baron (1997:33) and Steyn (1998) not only contend that the status of the communication management department can improve when these results are used and communicated by the top management teams in organisations. These authors also describe specific techniques for the execution of this role.

The first technique is technology-driven, and meant to literally build a bridge between the dominant coalition and the communication management department. Kornegay and Grunig (1998) refer to the use of computer-mediated communication to gather strategic intelligence and then presenting this to the dominant coalition. This process is labelled *cyberbridging* and is formally defined as “*the process whereby communication managers can use electronic communication technologies, e.g. the Internet, WWW and on-line databases, to conduct environmental scanning and informal or formal evaluation research*” (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:141).

Though the use of on-line information sources for communication management research purposes is not entirely unique or restricted to environmental scanning, it does provide a clear conceptual framework for the value of such research in the communication management’s quest for greater credibility as well as direct participation in the strategic management process.

Steyn (1998), also refers to specific techniques through which the communication management department can conduct environmental scanning research. The importance of this kind of research is underlined by the view that environmental uncertainty leads to increased information processing within organisations. This simply means that senior managers seek information more actively and rely on more sources for the latter. In this situation the communication management department could use a variety of techniques to fulfil this need, e.g. picking up on new industry or related trends through articles in various publications and then sharing this information with the appropriate members of the dominant coalition.

Other techniques that are normally associated with effective environmental scanning include trends analyses, econometric models, Delphi technique, strategic issue analyses, cross-impact analyses, scenario analyses, system simulations, brainstorming and SWOT matrices (Venter in Kroon, 1995; Pearce & Robinson 1997). Some of these techniques are not entirely unique to the context of environmental scanning research and should thus not be interpreted as such.

Since too many communication management departments still have to struggle for either recognition or credibility in their organisations, suggestions to improve this situation should not be ignored. In order to fully understand the current status of communication management research, the factors that influence the development thereof should also be considered.

CHANGING THE STATUS OF COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

"Communication management research has a negative reputation" (Geddie, 1996:24). In order to understand and evaluate this statement, one has to consider some of the views about practitioners' and organisations' misunderstanding of the value and true nature of communication management research.

Reasons for the negative reputation of communication management research

Baron (1997:32-34) contends that very few practitioners integrate measurement research into communication programmes and initiatives. This situation is in part a result of the fact that too many organisations still lack a formal communication plan, which implies that this organisational process occurs haphazardly and thus would not need to be evaluated in any manner.

Baron (1997:32) also contends that measurement research should be an integral part of communication programmes, but points to excuses that are often used to defend the lack of research. The first is that the organisation does not allocate enough funds

to the communication management department to enable practitioners to conduct such research. Secondly, the true effect of a communication programme cannot be distinguished easily from the other variables that could have influenced a particular situation. Thirdly, practitioners are viewed as being *“uncomfortable with research methodologies”*. The fourth reason is related to practitioners' insecurity about the impact of research results on the top management team's perception of the organisation and the communication management department. Finally, many practitioners do not understand the need for measurement. The following statement by Johnston (in Baron, 1997:33) illustrates these realities:

“Given how unsure communicators seem, we're afraid that the results will be bad news. After all, they (the bosses) keep us from doing a good job and they (the audiences) won't understand how hard it is and what a good job we're doing in spite of the others. Or we're waiting to measure something we think is good, so we can get brownie points, or keep our jobs, or make our point, or address our agenda.”

Watson (in Kitchen, 1997:287) also conducted a survey and reported excuses for the lack of research as time, budget and the knowledge of methods to undertake evaluation. His research findings further support the view that practitioners fear that evaluation could challenge their logic and methods and at the same time they realise that the profession suffers because of the inability to predict and measure effects.

This situation limits the communication management department to operate according to the rules for functionary communication management – not adjusting to unique situations and on a strategic level (Grunig, in Grunig, 1992). Dozier's research on evaluation (in Kitchen, 1997:286) consistently showed that evaluation of programmes increases as the practitioners' management function develops and that it is almost never present as the practitioners takes on a technical role. Geddie (1996:26) also adds that many organisations that allow their communication management departments to conduct measurement research are often not *“open”* to the results. Whoever conducted the research on behalf of the communication management department would be hesitant to share these results.

Geddie (1996:24–26) concurs with the statement that too many organisations actually do not want to use the results from their communication management research. According to this author, this situation perpetuates the notion that such research is a waste of time and money, especially when this had been outsourced to either specialised research firms or communication management consultancies. Not only top management teams are to blame for this waste of resources. If the decision-makers in the communication management department have no clear objectives for the use/implementation of such results, such ventures should be avoided altogether (Geddie 1996).

Another dimension of communication management research results that often leads to conflict between the communication management department and the top management team is the question of how these results will be published or used. According to Geddie (1996) a large number of organisations still want to wait until the communication management problems, that have been identified through research, had been fixed before they want to share this information with the organisations' different stakeholders.

Often such a management decision causes more harm to stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation and organisational issues. Geddie (1996) cites one example where the negative results had not been communicated for more than a year after the communication audit had been conducted. The follow-up survey yielded even more negative responses since various stakeholders had lost their trust in the organisation. However, exactly the opposite effect has been recorded in many organisations where research results have been used in the planning of communication programmes or long-term planning by the communication management department (Geddie 1996:26):

"We can demonstrate that our results have paid off. When we finish, we know what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how to trace it directly to corporate objectives. It gives everyone a clear vision and helps eliminate ambiguity" (Gusich, in Geddie, 1996:25).

Dozier *et al.* (1995:33-34) contend that communication management research is still conducted inappropriately – old-fashioned techniques are used. Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:109-123) also criticises communication management research. He contends that this research still too often is informal and unscientific, thus not carrying the weight or credibility of other types of organisational research. The lack of research knowledge on the part of practitioners also contributes to the inferior quality of such research. This has obvious implications for organisational communication management research, but also implies that the research results of projects that are conducted by research companies cannot be interpreted correctly.

Having identified some of the most important factors that often limit the potential contribution of communication management research, it should be noted that more and more academics and practitioners are moving towards the realisation that this organisational function can and ought to be managed strategically. A critical question that needs to be answered is related to how the status, quality and strategic value of research conducted by the communication management department can be improved.

Changing the reputation of communication management research

Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:111) is of the opinion that a new mindset about this type of research is required before any other strategy would be successful:

“The research process does not begin when we sit down to conduct a data search, analyse clippings, or design a questionnaire. It begins with a frame of mind, a disciplined way of looking at public relations with a public relations research mindset.”

Newsom *et al.* (1996:90-103) and Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994:109-110), suggest that the communication management practitioners' (both technicians and managers) knowledge-base should be broadened to empower such individuals to conduct advanced scientific research and to interpret results in order to communicate these to management. Secondly, this knowledge will enable practitioners to evaluate the work that had been done by research firms – an issue that is closely related to the validation of expenditure on budget of the communication management department. Finally, this should improve the awareness, within the communication management department, and understanding of the importance of research.

Dozier *et al.* (1995:33) contend that (confirming the relevance and importance of the cybernetics model) research should be used to help the organisation reposition in relation to an issue, to identify or suggest new solutions and to gather intelligence on behalf of the organisation. They also argue that practitioners should clearly distinguish between strategic evaluation of communication programmes and tactical programme evaluation (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:34-35):

“The first step in linking communication to the bottom line is planning programmes that focus on outcomes (relationships), and then evaluating by measuring the maintenance or change in relationships”.

The improved quality of research is viewed by Dozier *et al.* (1995) as one of the avenues that ought to be followed if communication management is seeking greater credibility. According to these authors the first step in trying to achieve a more credible status for the communication management department within an organisation, is to make research an integral part of the efforts to bring the dominant coalition in closer contact with the strategic publics. These authors cite crisis communication management as one of the most important examples where the value of this practice led to greater credibility of the aforementioned department.

Other authors, including Puth (in Lubbe & Puth, 1994), Steyn (1998) and Ströh (1998), also describe the changing role of communication management in terms of this organisational function's ability to gather strategic intelligence and to negotiate conflict between the organisation and different publics / external forces.

Research knowledge as the key to strategic decision-making

The literature review refers the growing importance of communication management research in a number of ways, including the change in labels for this departmental function from that of *"optional extra"* to *"strategic asset"*.

Based on the findings of the Excellence study, Dozier *et al.* (1995) contend that such knowledge will enhance the quality of the contribution that the communication management department can make to the overall effectiveness of the organisation. Ideally this knowledge should also be complimented by a thorough understanding of the strategic management process, budgeting, two-way communication practices and competence in traditional communication craft skills. McElreath (1997:203) also stresses that knowledge in conducting research is essential to career growth in communication management.

The level of sophistication of research techniques that are most often used in achieving different communication management research objectives is not the only reason for the negative reputation of this process. Communication management technicians and managers cannot always control other factors, but should be aware of these in an attempt to counteract their debilitating effect on the communication management department. *(Some of the organisational factors that contribute to the quality of the contribution of this department, to the organisation as a whole, have been described elsewhere.)*

In order to get a better idea of the state of affairs concerning research in communication management in South Africa it was decided to conduct an exploratory research project. The motivation, research objectives and methodology, followed by the research results will subsequently be discussed.

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

Motivation for exploratory research

As the specialised field of strategic communication management research is still vague and it is not clear how practitioners in South Africa actually use and apply research, it was decided to investigate the status of research through exploration. Exploration research *"develop concepts more clearly, establish priorities, develop operational definitions, and improve the final research design"* (Cooper & Schindler, 1998:134). Research in this field is needed and some exploratory investigations can assist researchers to identify issues that need attention and define variables or formulate research questions (Cooper & Schindler, 1998). Exploration research relies more heavily on qualitative methods,

and the specific method chosen for this study is multiple case study design. According to Yin (1989) case study design consists of research questions, propositions if applicable, units of analysis, logically linking data to the propositions and criteria for interpreting findings. This study used ten telephone interviews conducted by two researchers. The details of these qualitative interviews as well as the criteria for evaluation will subsequently be discussed.

Research question

What is the nature of research done by the communication management department?

Sub-questions

What types of research does the communication management department conduct?

What is the estimated strategic value of research conducted by the communication management department?

Which organisational factors enable the communication management department to contribute to the overall effectiveness of the organisation through research?

Research design

Sample

Organisations included in this study were Telkom, University of Pretoria, Technikon of Pretoria, Barlows Limited, Boland PKS, CSIR, Eskom, Technikon Witwatersrand, South African Breweries and an organisation in the mining industry. The organisations were mostly chosen on the basis of availability and they are large, established organisations with active communication departments.

In terms of the number of years as the most senior communication management person in an organisation, the respondents in this study varied from one to eight years (1 with one year, one with two years, two with three years, four with 4 years, one with five years and one with eight years experience). The qualifications of the respondents were a B.Tech degree in Public Relations, B.A. Languages, B. Com LL.B, B.A. Honours Communication, M. Journalism, M. Com Economics, M.B.A, M.A. Communication and a D.B.A. There were three males and seven females in the group. The ages of the respondents were between 30 and 58.

Case study design

Yin (1989) as well as Cooper and Schindler (1998) place emphasis on a full contextual analysis where fewer events and their interrelationships are studied. Emphasis is placed on greater detail that is normally provided by multiple sources of information. Case studies can provide sources of new hypotheses and constructs although it cannot be used to generalise or predict. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995) a case study can be used for exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory purposes. Especially useful for exploratory research is the use of multiple case study design where phenomena and relationships are studied that have heuristic value in terms of identifying issues to take note of in future research.

As very little research exists on the state of communication management research in South Africa, this study can be considered explanatory. Because multiple case study allows different situations to be compared, the findings can be generalised to theoretical proposition but not to populations (Yin 1989). The method of logic of replication is used as a method of analytical generalisation, which implies that similar results might be found in organisations that function in similar ways. Replication logic further implies similarities and differences when cases are compared. Replication would confirm ideas that could be reported as results. In this study a holistic design was used, which implies that no organisation was studied in great depth, but that only one person per organisation was interviewed.

Sample size

Ten organisations were used in this study as it exceeded what is required for the logic of replication to be used. Yin (1989) recommended an average of three to six cases where theoretical replication is used and there are not two contending theories concerned. More cases would provide a higher degree of certainty and six was closer to the number required for qualitative studies. McCracken (1988) also recommended eight interviews in order to study the complete scope of a phenomenon.

Mintzberg (in Gill & Johnson 1991), a well known and very experienced influential researcher in the field of organisational behaviour, further recommends that small samples, especially in exploratory research should be encouraged rather than being preoccupied with rigour in choice of methodology. He feels that simpler methodologies have produced more useful results in the field of organisational research than those that have been significant in only the statistical sense. He also recommends *inductive* research where the researcher looks for patterns of similarities and syntheses of elements into groups or categories.

Interviews

The main data collection method used in this study was loosely/semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured in-depth interview is described as a conversation with a specific purpose (Marshall & Rossman 1995:80). The researcher explores a few general topics with the purpose of gaining insights into the perspectives of the respondents but at the same time gives the participants a lot of freedom to frame and structure the answers in their own way. Although open-ended questions were used, a degree of systematisation is necessary especially in the case of multiple case study design. For this reason a specific set of 13 questions were used throughout. Telephone interviews were chosen because of obvious time and travelling savings implied.

The researchers in this study were very aware of the methodological deficiencies and limitations of generalisation from a few cases and tried to compensate for this by using two interviewers and comparing the cases with one another. Each researcher conducted five interviews and then discussed them in detail. The researchers were open about their purposes of seeking knowledge about the issue at hand and publishing the general findings. After organisations were selected, appointments were made for telephone interviews with the participants at appropriate times.

The questions covered in the telephone interviews included:

- Whether research is conducted in the particular organisations and if so, why?
- What types of research is conducted in the organisations and how?
- How the respondents describe environmental scanning, whether they are involved in environmental scanning and how?
- What factors enable the communication department to perform the environmental scanning function?
- Does the department receive feedback from the organisation's top management on research that has been completed by the department and in what form?
- How does top management use the research results in their strategic planning?
- How does research contribute to the overall effectiveness of the organisation?
- Who conducts this research and what is their research background?

Each interviewer wrote down the responses immediately after the interviews and then faxed the responses to the interviewees to check and confirm to make sure that the responses were interpreted correctly and recorded accurately. The consent to publish the results was also obtained from each participant. The companies agreed to be referred to in the list of participants but the specific assurance was given that no response will be connected to any particular participant or organisation.

Criteria for soundness

Specific criteria for soundness of qualitative research were followed in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide four criteria to measure the soundness. The first is credibility, which measures the truth value seen through the eyes of the respondent, was assured by sending the respondent's responses, as recorded by the researcher, to the respondent for review.

Transferability suggests that findings cannot be generalised to the broader population. In this study general findings were only reported from the population from which samples were drawn and generalisations were only made about the organisations studied. It is very likely though that new cases might show the same patterns as those found in this study.

Dependability implies that researchers should provide enough room for changes that might occur in terms of the phenomena studied, as well as in the context surrounding it. In this study the questions were adjusted to the specific situations of the organisations studied although not much adjustment were found to be necessary as the contextual surroundings of the communication managers seemed to be very similar.

Confirmability means that the logic of the research process should be confirmed by others and understood by all concerned. For this reason a complete discussion of the reasons that lead to this study, a detailed description of the methodology applied, logic behind the research questions, data and findings, are provided. All of these were also explained and presented to the respondents for their understanding.

Limitations of this study include multiple methods of data collection not used because of limitations regarding time and the exploratory nature of the study. Although Yin (1989) recommends this in case study design, the use of multiple case study design, where many cases are compared and patterns are established, could compensate for this limitation. The aspect of social desirability always is a difficult factor to eliminate. The use of telephone interviews also limits the depth of information required.

Results

Reasons for research

Two of the ten respondents indicated that they do not conduct communication research, but as the interviews progressed it was clear that they do conduct research and were thus included in the group.

The reasons why research is generally conducted seem to be varied. One respondent put it shortly: *"If you can't measure it, you can't manage it"* - this seems to be the underlying motive for communication management research in most of these organisations. The specific aspects that are measured include publication effectiveness (as medium), levels of awareness of messages, message understanding, effectiveness of messages, the department's ability to identify the publics correctly, and communication needs. Interesting aspects also mentioned were service excellence, perceptions, current issues for the department and the organisation as a whole, as well as advertising issues. The interviewees made a distinction between measuring internally and externally.

One respondent mentioned that research is an integral part of the communication process: *"Our aim is always to be objective and this [research] is the only way to control communication and its effectiveness."*

It is interesting to note that it seems as if the distinction between marketing communication and communication management is still vague in the eyes of the respondents as they often mentioned marketing research concepts when asked about communication management research. Examples mentioned were brand loyalty and -image, service excellence, advertising, and market competitive advantage.

Types of research

When asked about the types of research performed the following were mentioned:

- *Broad based public opinion surveys.* This would include the testing of perceptions through focus groups, interviews and questionnaires. This is conducted both formally and informally.
- *Internal research:* Communication audits, publication effectiveness research, channels research, and communication needs.
- Market research
- Pulse surveys
- Sensitising of employees for environmental issues and trends
- Pure scientific research
- Networks
- Action research

The respondents were asked about specific types of communication research. The first was research for planning purposes. Three respondents mentioned that they do not do research for planning purposes. A reason for this could be that they outsource the research and could imply that the results are not integrated into the process of communication as an outside organisation mostly do project based research and is

mostly not involved in the implementation or further planning. As mentioned earlier, research should form part of the whole communication effort.

Research ought to be the starting and ending part of any public relations process (Mersham *et al.* 1995). Most of the interviewees indicated that research for planning is formal and informal, using techniques such as structured or semi-structured questionnaires, focus groups, meetings, informal conversations, telephonic interviews and **dipstick research** (ad hoc, superficial, spur-of-the-moment surveys to get a general impression of a communication effort). The results from planning research are mainly used to improve future programmes and cost effectiveness.

Monitoring or tracking throughout the communication process was mentioned as a research type used by all of the respondents, especially on an informal basis. This would refer to techniques such as personal conversations, phone calls to staff or members of the publics who are involved, short questionnaires, e-mail memos, and even a cross word puzzle to test message reception was mentioned by one. Monitoring is used to ascertain whether the most basic objectives are achieved and to make instant changes if efforts are seen as ineffectiveness.

The respondents generally do not use evaluation of communication interventions, because it is seen as too expensive and time consuming to research each intervention. *"The big problem with research in our department is the fact that we must try and fit it into our schedules which are already very full"* one respondent said.

Questionnaire surveys, conversations and telephone interviews are techniques used for public opinion research. Outside research firms are often used. One respondent made the comment that their department would buy in organisational behaviour study results, and adapt their planning or efforts accordingly.

The respondents of this study generally do not conduct segmentation of publics through research. The reason seems to be that segmentation is still associated with markets and done demographically. Traditional marketing conceptualisation still seems to be dominant and the marketing intelligence departments of two organisations are responsible for this research function.

All the respondents of this study reported that they conducted publicity measurement either by looking at exposure or by means of content analysis. In general this is of tactical value and does not contribute strategically to communication management. One respondent mentioned that it was one of the few credible sources validating their contribution in the organisation.

It would appear that research determining needs and opportunities of publics are used

to identify needs of external publics, to check channels, to be able to plan effectively, and to track programme success. It is interesting to note that the respondents did not actually see this as applicable to internal publics and mostly used it externally.

Environmental scanning

When asked to describe environmental scanning, the interviewees responded by mentioning the following associations to the concept:

- Trends and issues from our direct environment
- A process through which the organisation looks both inside and outside - we try to look at how others perceive us
- To determine the circumstances under which we function as well as perceptions concerning the organisation/ department
- ...somebody has to be aware of the forces that might influence the organisation in future. These forces usually are social, political and economical.
- Constant process of being aware of the organisation's environment.

Respondents generally reported that they were involved in the environmental scanning efforts of the organisation. Factors that contributed to their involvement, included *"an open mind and willingness and appreciation of the stakeholders that matter to the organisation"* and whether the specific departments traditionally responsible for environmental scanning and strategic planning still held that status. It further seems that the credibility of the communication manager, in terms of their participation in environmental scanning, is directly related to their competence and research background. One respondent noted that their department assumed the responsibility of looking outward: *"We can suggest things to the rest of the organisation through this process but the implementation of these ideas is another story"*.

Methods of environmental scanning used most by the respondents were the SWOT matrix and brainstorming techniques. Brainstorming seems to be particularly popular as this stimulates creative thinking as well as provides an opportunity to air conflicting views. Trend analysis and strategic issue analysis were both used by five out of the ten organisations respectively. Top management very often is involved and it is likely that the communication department will be responsible for communicating with relevant publics about these issues. These techniques are mostly performed informally through conversations, networks, scanning the media, and informal interviews.

Other environmental scanning techniques such as Delphi technique, econometric models, cross impact analysis, system simulation, and scenario analysis (Venter, in Kroon, 1995:79-80) were used to a lesser degree by the respondents of this survey because they were very often not aware of this technique or they considered it the responsibility

of another department or top management.

Feedback from top management and strategic value of research

Only one of the interviewees reported that they do not receive any feedback from top management regarding research that was completed by their department. The other respondents recounted that they generally reported research results to top management and received oral feedback, often in the form of open discussions. (Only one respondent said that he received written feedback). They usually are responsible for communicating results and the impact thereof to the rest of the organisation and publics involved.

According to interviewees, the validity and credibility of the communication management department, as seen from the perspective of top management, is still very dependent on the level of research conducted. The level of research sophistication and the strategic value of this research further contribute to the perceived professionalism of the communication department. Respondents with a higher educational background and implied deeper understanding of research methodology reported a higher credibility and involvement in the strategic management process. One respondent with a post-graduate degree in business even reported that he was part of strategic management and that implied that his research outcomes were directly implemented for strategic planning purposes.

It seems, from the responses of the interviewees, that the more strategic research is conducted, the greater the perceived contribution of the research to the overall effectiveness of the organisation. One respondent reacted by saying that: *"It is essential. We can quantitatively assess whether we are managing relationships with our stakeholders effectively and whether we are managing our image correctly"*.

General comments on the strategic value of communication management research represent two different approaches. One group of respondents commented on organisational factors that limit communication managers to contribute in this regard. Factors such as funding, limited human resources, time constraints, limited research expertise, and less involvement in strategic management were mentioned. The other group provided another perspective, commenting that: *"What you do with research is more important than what you find" and "you have to make research understandable and you have to translate and adapt according to their (top management) needs. But it still has to be scientific to be accepted - the people are not stupid. It must be credible. If you do not make it acceptable they will write it off as theory or will look for mistakes in your methodology"*.

A further belief expressed was that the more strategically the communication department functioned, including strategic research, the more they were perceived as part of the

strategic process. One respondent used the following analogy: *"If you act like a frog, look like a frog and feel like a frog, you probably are one. If you function strategically, think and talk strategically, you probably belong within the strategic apex"*.

CONCLUSION

McElreath (1997:237) reports the findings of a study conducted in order to establish public relations research activities of 100 practitioners in the USA. The practitioners were asked how they were included in the dominant coalition. The results showed that the more public relations practitioners are associated with the dominant coalition and the more organisations are faced with great uncertainty, the more often formal research is performed. This finding was confirmed by the general trend in the South African organisations in the sample of this study. This finding is especially relevant in the fast changing environments of South Africa. But it can also be argued that the corporate communication department should prove their value in order to be considered part of the strategic management processes on top level in the organisation. This can only be achieved if communication managers function on a strategic level. Research could be their key into the boardrooms.

A further relevant and important trend of the organisations studied is that communication managers with a higher education have a better understanding, and use formal research more often. This corresponds with results from the Excellence study conducted under the auspices of the IABC (Dozier *et al.* 1995:30, 65) where research knowledge was one of the prerequisites for practising strategic public relations. These findings stress the importance of the pressure on communication managers to be sophisticated and knowledgeable users of research. In this way communication managers will be seen as credible and professional and they will be recognised as important contributors to the attaining of the strategic goals of the organisation. It is important for communication managers to get involved in continuous learning, especially improving their research skills and knowledge.

Although it is important for communication managers to use evaluative research to measure effectiveness of their operations in an organisation, it is even more important for them to be involved in strategic decision making through strategic research. It was noticeable that the communication managers in the sample of this study more often made use of tactical or evaluative research than strategic research techniques such as environmental scanning techniques. Probably as a result, they were less involved in the strategic decision making processes of the organisations. Those who were involved, generally showed more skill and use of strategic as well as evaluative research techniques.

From the responses of this study it is interesting to note that it seems as if the concepts of communication management and marketing management were often confused or used interrelatedly. They were not distinguished from each other either through use of the concepts or by the functions of these two disciplines. Often respondents reported that the marketing department performed the communication research function. If this is the case, it is worrying in the sense that communication research, especially on a strategic level, is a specialised field closely related to the strategic function of the communication manager in terms of boundary spanning and environmental scanning.

Another relevant issue concerning research is the fact that research results must be used and understood - communication managers must give full disclosure of research objectives and methodology (McElreath 1997:240). They should further report accurately and distribute research results freely and widely and in such a way that results can be applied by management and all parties concerned.

The sooner communication managers start functioning on a strategic level and take up their full strategic responsibilities, the sooner they will be recognised as valuable and part of the decision making processes of top management. This can be achieved through professional and ethical research and the effective communication of research results to all constituencies concerned.

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