



Strategic Communication: A case of Ugandan Health Sector Organizations.

Abstract

The turbulent business environment of the 21st century has made the strategic approach to management functions like communication, a requirement for achieving long term organizational goals and objectives (Christensen, 2014; Lee, Park, & Cameron, 2018; Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2011). This is because organizations deal with increasingly fragmented audiences and delivery platforms that require a purposeful, intentional, futuristic and long-term focus on communication in order to achieve the organization's mission (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van-Ruler, Vercic & Srirames, 2007; Mahoney, 2010; Scott, 2018). Based on this context, this study was aimed at designing a model to guide health organizations on communicating strategically to their different audiences. Specifically, we focused on examining the relationship between relational communication, communication behavior predictability, information adequacy, interaction quality and strategic communication.

We used a multi-theoretical approach combining social network theory, uncertainty reduction theory, resource based view and complexity theory to explain strategic communication practices among the health sector organizations of Uganda. The study was cross-sectional in nature sequentially triangulating both quantitative and qualitative research designs as guided by critical realism philosophy. We drew a sample of 223 health organizations spread across all the four regions of Uganda (central, north, east and south). Using Structural Equation Modeling with Analysis of Moment Structures for statistical modeling, the findings in respect to the study objectives indicated that the study variables explained 24% variances in strategic communication. Further, findings revealed that relational communication has a direct contribution towards strategic communication and an indirect contribution through interaction quality.

This implied that health organizations should not just pass on messages to their audiences but focus on building a long lasting relationship with their audiences. This would improve the quality of interaction with the organizations' audiences and motivate audiences to take-up the communicated action points. The findings also revealed that the contribution of communication behavior predictability to strategic communication goes through interaction quality. This meant that in any interaction, the level of participation and involvement of interacting parties is affected by each party's interpretation of own and the other party's communication behaviors of the previous interactions. The findings further indicated that information adequacy has a direct contribution to strategic communication and an indirect contribution through interaction quality.

The implication is that health organizations need to consistently avail the required amount of information which is tailored to the specific communication needs of the different categories of

audiences. It is this that drives audiences to behave in accordance to the information received, enabling health organizations to achieve their missions. Theoretically, the study findings implied that since there is not yet a developed theory on strategic communication, a multi-theoretical approach offers a better explanation of strategic communication. The study contributed to theory development in the discipline by designing a model of strategic communication focusing on the relevance of interaction quality as a channel through which relational communication, informational adequacy and communication behavior predictability lead to strategic communication.

Methodologically, the study findings indicated that any strategic communication phenomenon is better understood by studying both the subjective and objective aspects through xx

collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. This is because communication realities are both structured and unstructured. Since 75% of the disease burden in Uganda is preventable through improved health communication campaigns (Health sector strategic plan of 2014/2015), we recommend policy makers in the health sector to come up with a policy on translating all health IEC materials into local languages because audiences are more inclined to accept any information if it is audience specific. We further recommend health organizations to use direct communication methods and channels like dialogues, face-to-face interactions etc. This is because direct communication builds a relational bond between the interacting parties and influences the audience to voluntarily take up the necessary action points in the message, warranting achievement of organization mission.

In this study we employed a cross-sectional survey design; hence the study was limited to a particular occasion of measurement. Given that perceptions and beliefs of respondents change over time, there is need for a longitudinal study. This will provide a more comprehensive picture to researchers and practitioners to understand when perceptions, beliefs and behaviors have the strongest relationship and the best time to introduce the proposed managerial interventions.