A COMMUNITY OF CONVENIENCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF

NARRATIVE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

A Thesis

by

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Narrative Relationship-Building in Public Relations
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of creative and scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a Thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to gain in-depth understanding of how a convenience store with a nationally recognized reputation of friendliness, creates relationships with its mobile and ever-changing customers and employees through the construction and implementation of their corporate narrative. Using an ethnographic approach, the researcher enacted the role of participant-observer to gather information and rich description of customer and employee experiences in the store. The results of the study reflect this company authentically shared their corporate narrative with their stakeholders – employees and customers. As such, that narrative, successfully passed on from their employees to their customers on a daily basis, serves to create a following, a community and brand loyalty with customers, while simultaneously fostering community among their customers. In addition, this study adds to knowledge in academic literature, as well as for the public relations practitioner. From an academic perspective, it offers a unique view inside an organization's public relations efforts through observation of customer and employee communication. Further, since there are few ethnographic studies in public relations, particularly from the customer perspective, this study provides a unique opportunity to understand the effectiveness of public relations strategies as they build relationships, community and brand loyalty. From a public relations standpoint, the case study provides specific strategies on how to create authentic relationships between employees and customer, while offering customers a uniquely personalized experience within a convenience store model.

Keywords: public relations, narrative, storytelling, relationship-building, community, empathy, brand loyalty, ethnography

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to

my husband, Rick, and my daughter, Madlyn;

to Dr. Michelle Maresh-Fuehrer;

and to the family who founded this

remarkable "Community of Convenience."

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It was 6:00 a.m. Customers were parking, getting out of their cars and heading to the entrance of a South Texas convenience store. The moment the first customer crossed the threshold, the bell dinged announcing someone had entered, and immediately a voice from somewhere within the store called out "*Good morning*," and the customer instinctually responded - to whom he was not sure – with an equally polite "*Good morning.*" Each customer-turned-guest-who entered the store after that was offered the same early morning pleasant greeting, often with an added "*Welcome to our store*," and each guest responded in like manner with an easy, familiar and polite "*Good morning.*"

To the right of the door was a sitting area of three small 3 x 5 foot tables fronting a coffee bar – all neatly aligned in a row with four comfortable, red cushioned chairs per table. Three tables just did not seem like enough for the amount of people coming in and out of the store, but somehow it was plenty. Several people were already sitting at the closely-set tables and most seemed to know each other, calling one another by name, laughing and sharing an early morning moment. They all continued drinking coffee and chatting about family, work, or the day's headlines. Some guests seemed to be waiting for something, and others were just sitting comfortably visiting with no particular place to go or apparent agenda.

Looking across the store, a large group was standing in front of a cooking area waiting patiently for freshly-prepared food from the staff who were all clad in bright yellow shirts with green aprons. Some in line seemed a bit dazed – I guess they had not had their coffee yet - and others were joking and talking sincerely with the food preparers, clerks and each other. The employees were also laughing and sharing stories with each other and with their guests. They all

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had a certain familiarity that only comes from having had the same experience with the same people multiple times. While I was standing in line for a taco, these short, but telling exchanges provided a brief look at the relationships that were being created on a daily basis in this corner convenience store.

"So how's your dad doing?" the food server asked the quiet, diminutive man in Spanish, who was standing a couple of people ahead in the breakfast taco line. Before he could answer, she was already in the process of preparing his "usual" made-to-order breakfast – an egg, bacon and potato taquito. He responded in Spanish as well speaking softly and nodding his head thoughtfully, obviously appreciating her sincere query with *"He's doing much better, thank you."* She completed his order, smiled warmly and said*, "I am so glad for you and your family, see you tomorrow, que te vaya bien"* – a familiar Spanish saying, literally meaning – "(I hope) that it goes well for you."

In a second exchange with a customer who had been waiting quite some time in the breakfast line – a line that seemed to double almost instantly with the early-morning breakfast crowd as it snaked through the store – a busy food preparer, looked up from his work, made eye contact with a middle-aged man who had now reached the front of the line, a man he obviously recognized, and with whom he instantly struck up a familiar banter.

"Hey man, how are you doing today?" In response, the man laughed and said, *"Just great. You are here early today, Joe."* *"Yes, Mr. Williams,"* he quipped, *"I came in early just for you!"* *"Joe,"* Mr. Williams smiled, *"that is so kind of you,"* and added, *"so what do you have that's free for me today, Joe?"* *"Well Mr. Williams, nothing today, but you can try me again tomorrow. You never know, one of these days, I just might have something for you that's free."* They laughed knowingly, Joe handed him his taco, and Mr. Williams moved to the next

counter to make his purchase, joking with the clerk as well and asking if since he came here every day, if today's taco was "on the house." Then he gathered his taco and coffee he had in hand, and made his exit gregariously offering *"goodbye everyone"* to all of the clerks and food preparers in the store, as well as to those he knew sitting at the tables in the coffee area, adding as he opened the door to leave, *"See you all tomorrow."*

There was an unmistakable authenticity in the conversations and in the apparent relationships that seemed to have developed in this unlikely convenience store setting; they were familiar and personal relationships created through regular, momentary interactions in a completely unexpected model. The question becomes how and when did these face-to-face relationships develop? To gain insight into how these authentic public relationships have been created, it is important to first consider the overarching convenience store model.

Convenience Store Modes and Models

Convenience stores, which are growing in service and numbers across the United States – now more than 150,000 strong nationwide – are considered harbingers of immediacy. Typically, customers want to be in-and out, and on their way as quickly as possible. According to the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS), as of September 2015, there were over 152,000 convenience stores in the United States, which breaks down to one convenience store per every 2,100 people (NACS, 2016). The core proposition of convenience stores, as stated by NACS, is convenience and speed for customers. The average time a customer spends at a convenience store from the time they leave their car to the moment they return to their car with a purchase is three minutes and thirty-three seconds. That transaction speed is less than one-tenth of the time patrons spend in grocery stores, where the average in-store experience is 41 minutes (NACS, 2016). NACS also states that the average convenience store has 1,130 transactions per

day: 293 are at the pump and 837 are inside the store. Of those patrons who purchase gas, 35 percent also went inside the store, either to purchase merchandise, go to the restroom or use the ATM. In comparison, the convenience store discussed in the opening paragraph of this case study has over 2,100 transactions per day, with the majority (just under 2000) occurring inside. Based on this comparison, this particular location has more transactions per day than the national average. In the city in which this store is located there are 142 convenience stores, with approximately half being of this particular brand.

In addition to the convenience store's easy access and in-and-out operations, now more than 90 percent of new convenience stores have 24-hour, seven day-a-week operations. They are open when patrons need them, early in the morning and late in the evening and they have become a welcoming beacon for anyone looking for a food, fuel, refreshments or restroom facilities. They are particularly important for the growing number of early morning and late night shift workers in the American culture (NACS, 2016), as more than 15% of all full-time wage earners are considered shift workers, including first responders, police officers, firemen and women, hospital and factory workers and restaurant employees.

In neighborhoods, convenience stores, according to statistics from NACS, have the tightest shopping radius of any retail establishment. Most customers who come to their favorite community of convenience on a consistent basis live within a 2-mile radius of that particular store. That statistic in turn means that this store and its community are a direct reflection of the particular neighborhood or community in which it is located.

Many convenience stores have also interwoven themselves into the community fabric as they support local charities, from the March of Dimes to the local food banks. As such, convenience stores have found success in ensuring that their business practices reflect

community values. As reported by NACS, more than two out of three Americans—69%—believe that convenience stores in their communities share their values. Data also reflect that more than 78% of convenience stores support five or more charities in their communities and 83% have been involved in charitable giving for more than 10 years. The company in this study has and does support a wide range of charities, including a local children's hospital – having raised more than $1.8 million within its stores company-wide; a portion of those funds will go to the local children's hospital in 2016 – a major cancer center, the March of Dimes, a regional scholarship foundation and United Way.

For the present study, the chosen site was one of 67 convenience stores owned and operated for more than 20 years in a large South Texas city. This particular convenience store is located within one mile from the city's downtown area, a lower-income area that is in the process of redevelopment and is experiencing a growth of hospital, medical and professional facilities. The company that owns the convenience store, was developed as a local business, turned into a Fortune 500 public company, and the leadership kept local ties by remaining open and accessible. Convenience store patronage is largely an in-an-out experience and consists of a population who are either living or passing through the area. This particular site was chosen for the study for several specific reasons. Not only is it one of the company's highest rated stores in number of transactions, with more than 2,100 per day, customers live and work within a 2-mile radius. This store is also reflective of the cross-section of diversity and community that exists within the city. Patrons include EMS workers, police, firefighters, doctors and nurses, construction workers, teachers, professional and homeless of all ethnicities and socio-economic levels, offering a rich research opportunity among the diverse populations represented.

The opening paragraphs in this chapter contain descriptions from one of my observations at the South Texas convenience store which is the focus of the present case study. What struck me about this store location was how a convenience store—known for its concept of "in-and-out" traffic—could be the source of a communicative community. Customers were having conversations with one another and with store employees while waiting in line, as opposed to sitting in their cars in a drive-through with their engines running while waiting in relative isolation for a made-to-order breakfast. Other customers were sitting amongst one another at a set of small tables sharing stories and exchanging greetings with store managers and staff as well as other customers whom they had come to know from this part of their daily ritual. Getting "in and out" was not the goal of the participants in this communication community; actually, no one seemed in much of a hurry at all, as everyone stopped to greet each other, share a story or two, and connect—even if only briefly.

How we as human beings create community and relationships within that community, where we find them and to whom we are connected is a phenomenon that shapes and molds our culture in the microcosms in which we each live, and in a much larger sense - over time - in the world as a whole. Those communications, relationships, cultural norms, and human connections created by them are imperative to the human condition. That touch, those moments and the stories that are told and re-told create relationships and define who we are as a culture, as a community and as individual human beings.

The Changing Paradigm of Public Relationships and Communication

Public relations, with its inception in the early 20th century, has had many definitions and interpretations in its relatively short history. In recent years, the definitions have shifted from a publicity and press-agentry focus to much more of an engagement relationship focus (PRSA,

2012). Academics and public relations practitioners began seeing the value and importance of

relationships and relationship-building in the discipline in the mid-'90s. Cutlip, Center, and

Broom (1994) considered public relations to be "a management function that establishes and

maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on which its

success or failure depends" (p. 2). Similarly, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined public

relations as the "state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the

actions of either can impact the economic, social and cultural or political well-being of the other"

(p. 62). Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000), although still focusing on the relationship aspect of

public relations, added a more transactional approach with their definition positing that

"relationships (in public relations) consist of the transactions that involve the exchange of

resources between organizations that lead to mutual benefit, as well as mutual achievement"

(p.91). Ten years later the Public Relations Society of America (2011), in an effort to create a

more modern, succinct definition of public relations, and an overarching perception and purpose

of the profession, tried a new approach: they sought public input. They invited the public—

through a crowdsourcing campaign and public voting—to offer input to aid in creating a new

formal definition of public relations. The result was the adoption of the following definition:

"public relations are a strategic communications process that builds mutually beneficial

relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2012, n.p.).

Along with the definition of public relations, the theoretical and practical parameters of

the discipline and the contexts in which public relations is considered are constantly evolving.

Certainly, there is no doubt that public relations has changed significantly over time along with

the society it serves. However, even with the recognized theoretical and practical changes in

public relations, there remains a recognized disconnect between public relations research and

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practice (Stacks & DiStaso, 2009; Wright, VanSlyke, & Turk, 2007). Several explanations for this disconnect have been identified to explain that gap including the fact there are still few public relations executives who have formally studied public relations in an academic setting. In addition, a large number of entry level positions continue to be filled by those who do not have a university degree (Wright et al., 2007), resulting in a clear lack of understanding of research principles and public relations practices (Michaelson, 2009). Educators also consider that there is a significant lack of understanding by practitioners regarding theory and, therefore, a lack of application of theory in practice, which is exacerbated by the fact that few PR practitioners subscribe to, or read public relations journals. In addition, there is little communication between academicians and practitioners and in turn a lack of any type of agreement about a common public relations research agenda (Stacks & DiStaso, 2010). To bridge the gap, Stacks and DiStaso (2010) considered that "research must continue to demonstrate a relationship between public relations and business outcomes" (p. 336)— outcomes that are strategically and successfully put in place by public relations professionals.

With the shift in the definition of public relations to a more relational approach and the insertion of community relations and corporate social responsibility in the public relations construct, inevitably the role of relationships in public relations would embody a new perspective, as well. Relationships in public relations have historically been considered to be ones of communication – most significantly with the media in media pitches and counting the number of placements of stories, press releases, and press conferences. Ferguson said that the notion of public relations as relational, as opposed to merely communicative had its beginnings in the early 1980s (as cited in Ledingham, 2003). Ferguson proposed that public relations' emphasis should be on relationships rather than on the organization itself (as cited in Ledingham,

2003). In the years following, academic studies concerning public relations relationships have increased substantially. With the development of relationship management theory in public relations relationships and the shifting definition, the new role of public relations began to take hold and be accepted specifically among public relations scholars (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Prior to the relational shift, the relationship had predominately been viewed as asymmetrical, or one way. There was no dialogue, or two-way communication. That has now changed.

As the definition of public relations has evolved, so too have the public's expectations of corporations located within their communities. Community relations (CR) and Corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become an integral part of the public relations landscape between companies and their public stakeholders. In fact, there now exists a type of psychological contract between a company and the community it serves (Burke, 1999). Neff (2005) defined community relations "as largely a public relations responsibility focusing on the management of potential existing communication interactive networks of organizations and publics for the benefit of both groups" (p. 174). Community relations has become part of what creates ongoing, sustainable relationships and community relationships. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has a broad range of definitions across multiple disciplines, but the bottom line, in an over- arching sense, is that CSR translates to companies "doing good." Vogel (2006) actually defined CSR as a verb, claiming that it is the engagement of corporations in virtuous endeavors: Activities associated with corporate virtue typically represent a firm's effort to do more to address a wide variety of social problems than they would have done in their normal pursuit of profits. Kotler and Lee (2005) defined CSR as a "commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contribution of corporate resources" (p. 3). Corporate Social Responsibility is in line with consumer expectations, as research indicates that 88% of

Americans would prefer to do business with corporations perceived to be socially responsible (Barone, Miyazakie, & Taylor, 2000). Porter and Kramer (2006) found that 64% of the 250 largest multi-national companies published CSR reports. There is little doubt that community relations and corporate social responsibility have become intertwined with company stakeholder expectations; they have, as within this convenience store context, become part of the local landscape, as not only are stakeholders aware of their store's CR and CSR, they have also become active participants.

Not only has symmetrical communication become increasingly important, there has been a fundamental change in the function, direction and role of public relations (Ledingham, 2003). Traditional impact measurements including the quantity of communication messages or the numbers of stories place in the media has taken a back seat to public relations initiatives which are focused on the quality of relationships between an organization and the publics and stakeholders with which it interacts.

With the advent of technology, another dramatic shift has also taken place in public relations, regarding the way those relationships between companies and stakeholders are built and managed. Prior to the advent of technology, community relationships developed over time and those relationships often lasted a lifetime. Narratives were created and shared face-to-face through storytelling. With technology, the cultural norm of how life's stories were shared took a dramatic shift, as relationships were created online, rather than in person (Turkle, 2012). The pace of life moved into fast forward, as instantaneous conversations were held in online chat rooms, via email, and text messaging. In light of this cultural communications shift, much of public relations strategy became focused on the importance of creating relationships with public stakeholders using social media (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Online relationship strategies became

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the new norm and the new expectation. Storytelling and relationship-building using technology became part of everyday life. Yet, somehow in the midst the site observed in the present study serves as a unique case where an organization is successfully continuing to creating an authentic, long-term relationship with their community, the old fashioned way: face-to-face.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to gain thorough understanding of how the observed convenience store creates relationships with its mobile and ever-changing customers and employees. To gain insight, ethnographic research with its anthropological roots will serve as a method for this case study. Fieldwork within the ethnographic research framework provides the opportunity to observe people in their natural settings (Adler & Lee, 1994) and, specifically in this case study, as they come-and-go in a convenience store context. Engaging in the ethnographic construct as a participant-observer (Dewalt & DeWalt, 2002) provides the opportunity to garner rich description (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which, in turn, allows the researcher to understand the relationships and community and identity created within the convenience store context.

In this ethnographic case study, as the participant-observer, I observed the narratives that are shared by store employees and customers, as well as the way that the organization uses communication to create relationships with their publics. This study took place in a large convenience store based in South Texas located in an older inner-city neighborhood, with close proximity to the downtown area within a growing medical district, serving nearby residents and business owners, as well as blue collar and professional workers who are passing through on their way to a myriad of destinations. Consideration was given to how authentic public relations,

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community and culture have been created in a particular space within a completely stratified community.

The use of narrative for public relations in this particular context will also be considered. The value of employing narratives and their importance in public relations was recognized decades ago (Heath, 1992), but only recently captured the attention of public relations professionals (Kent, 2015). However, even with the recognition of the value of narrative, there is a glaring absence of ethnographic study and research in the area of public relations (Daymon & Hollaway, 2011; L'Etang, 2011). Few communication scholars (with the exception of Everett, 1990; Everett & Johnston, 2012; Hodges 2006a, 2006b; Palenchar, Heath, & Oberton, 2005; Pieczkza 1997, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Siramesh, 1992, 1992a, 1996) have invested the time to study public relations from an ethnographic perspective. Although public relations practitioners seek to communicate and create relationships with multiple stakeholders and publics simultaneously, understanding of how that is accomplished is limited. Through ethnographic research, I will consider how authentic public relations is created and sustained between customers and employees, between individual customers, and among employees within the retail (convenience store) context. This ethnographic case study will enhance knowledge in the communication discipline – specifically in the context of public relations – by identifying how this organization utilizes narrative and public relations strategy to build authentic relationships with their publics.

Summary

The growing number of convenience stores spanning the United States are serving as harbingers of immediacy, and are known for providing customers with an opportunity for "in-and-out" service. This case study will consider, through ethnographic research, how narrative

and storytelling are used to create authentic public relationships and community within this unlikely model. Stakeholder relationships, specifically among employees, between employees and customers and among customers within a particular convenience store located in South Texas will be considered. To understand the development of these relationships, community, community relations, and corporate social responsibility, as reflected in the company's corporate narrative, and shared with employees are also examined.

The following chapter includes a literature review of community, community relations and corporate social responsibility. In addition, employee and public stakeholder relationships as well as the growing use of narrative and storytelling within the public relations are reviewed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In considering the development of narrative relationship-building in public relations in the context of a convenience store community between organizations and their stakeholders, the review of literature for this ethnographic case study will focus on four areas of relationships within public relations including community relations and its closely-held partner corporate social responsibility, along with consumer and employee relations, as well as narrative storytelling.

Community

To discuss literature in relationship-building through narratives in public relationships it is important to first define community, where narratives are shared and relationships are developed and sustained. Existing research on community reflects that there are as many definitions of community as there are researchers creating those definitions. The first known definition of community had its roots in philosophy and is attributable to Aristotle, who, as a philosopher, espoused a definition of community that was simple but completely inclusive (Boyles, 1996). Aristotle stated that community is a group established by those who have shared values (Boyles, 1996). Certainly that particular definition has, over time, been broadened, enhanced, altered and applied to countless contexts, studies and disciplines.

The definition of community has become completely fluid and amorphic, as it has had the ability to alter itself into the particular construct in which it is found and applied at any given time or space. This concept is particularly evident with the emergence of the Internet and the online creation of shared communities that range from online dating communities to Facebook and LinkedIn. In considering social sciences alone, an early literature review conducted by

Hillery (1955) reflected 94 definitions of community in which two thirds of the definitions cited *social interaction, geographic area* and *common ties* as essential elements in creating community, and almost three fourths of the definitions of the word cited *area* and social *interaction*. In subsequent literature, Willis (1977) reviewed 60 additional definitions of community, and there was little change, with the exception to add that community includes people with common ties residing in a common area.

McKeown, Rubinstein, Kelly, Felner, Jason, Hess, and Moritsugu (1997) analyzed the way community was conceptualized. They noted that there was overall agreement that there are four basic attributes for a community to exist that include *locality, biological and social membership, common institutions and shared actions.* Within those attributes, Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, and Wandersman (1986) concluded that there are four elements serving as community essentials including *membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection.*

According to Chavis et al. (1986) there are five elements that comprise membership in a community. They include *boundaries, emotional safety*, *a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment* and a *common symbol system. Boundaries* are marked by language dress, ritual, indicating who belongs and who does not. *Emotional safety* is considered to be a sense of security and willingness to reveal feelings. A *sense of belonging and identification* considers an expectation faith that you belong or are accepted by the community. *Personal investment* is a way of diminishing any feelings of cognitive dissonance and a *common symbol system* provides an understanding of a particular social world that includes a logo, a name, a landmark, forms of speech, ceremonies and dress. Chavis et al. (1986) considered that a group or community must feel they have influence, and community and group cohesiveness

depends upon the group having some influence over its members. McMillan (1996) discussed

that within this element trust is the main ingredient in influence in a community. *Integration and*

fulfillment is considered to mean that which is desired or valued in a group. *Shared emotional*

connection includes the assertion that it seems to be the definitive element for a true community,

including the role of a shared history in creating community. In other words, McMillan (1986)

noted that shared emotion is the most important element that creates connection and community.

Certainly, we as a society bandy the word community about easily, and in so doing

consciously, or subconsciously it ultimately defines us within the connections we make, social

structures we create and the work we do momentarily and long term. The word and definition of

community seems to have become as mobile, fluid and adaptable as the society which we have

created and in which we live. An example of how fluid and adaptable the definition of

community has become can be seen in considering a single study in which it was stated the

definition of community was developed by participants as the study progressed. According to the

researchers, the final definition of community was "a group of people with diverse characteristics

who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in

geographical locations or settings" (MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger, Kegeles, Strauss, Scotti,

Blanchard, & Trotter II, 2001, p. 1).

Glynn (1986), in a study evaluating the relationships between people's ideal sense of

community and their perception of their actual community, posited that neighborhood

identification was important to the development of people's actual sense of community and

belonging. In addition, most community studies consider resident commonalities. In other

words, residents share some or many demographic elements and social characteristics and

identities which serve as the basis for creating and building a sense of community (Abramson,

1996). Miller (2015) considered, through ethnographic research, the factors that create an inclusive community. She concluded that, although community is created through similarities, some heterogeneous constructs can develop inclusive communities. For example, diverse neighborhoods that attract people to either consume or work within that neighborhood or area fit easily into its fabric and often become a part of the neighborhood community (Miller, 2015).

Within public relations, the term community is considered in two ways: first as "locality – people grouped by geographic location and as a non-geographic community of interest – people with a common interest" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 226). Valentini, Kruckebert, and Starck (2012) argued that a persistent covenant exists between an organization and its community. For the present study, the former term of community based on location will be considered and community will be defined as the social relationships which are created within a specifically defined space (Burgess, 1925/1967; Schmalenbach, 1961; Smith & LeFaivre, 1984).

Community Relations

With the development of a global society and the expansive, ever-changing parameters of what is considered community, it has become imperative that organizations actively engage with their public communities and seek to build and sustain relationships with them through community relations. That imperative has brought the concepts of community relations and corporate social responsibility to the fore once again. Community relations and corporate social responsibility are not new concepts, in fact they have been discussed, analyzed and defined and re-defined in scholarly literature for the past century (Vogel, 2006). However, Vogel (2006) commented that there has been a major resurgence in the notion that companies could, and perhaps should, be virtuous that can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s.

The definitions of community relations (CR) and its companion initiative, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the debate of their value in society are plentiful in the scholarly landscape. Since the majority of community relations programs are developed and implemented for a specific location, Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined community relations as "specialized public relations programs to facilitate communication between organizations and publics in its geographic locality" (p. 267). Peak (1998) discussed that "community relations, as a public relations function, is an institution's planned, active, and continuing participation within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community" (p. 114). Heath and Coombs (2006) considered that "community relations centers on doing what is necessary to improve and strengthen community" (p. 29); whereas Neff (2005) defined community relations as "largely a public relations responsibility focusing on the management of potential and existing communication interactive networks of organizations and publics for the benefit of both groups" (p.174). While Wilcox and Cameron (2009) determined that community relations is a "planned activity with community to maintain an environment that benefits both the organization and the community" (p. 10).

Community relations has, for some time, become central to core public relations programming. How organizations conduct themselves within the community has become critical for their reputation, loyalty and ultimately translates to the bottom line. Leading edge companies are recognizing that to succeed they must be more than a group of preferred shareholders, conducting business from a distance. Companies must engage in the community, as community relations can no longer be an afterthought or a window dressing, it must instead be considered strategic aspect of their business (Googins, 1997).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Initially, the term corporate social responsibility (CSR) originated in a text that was published over 60 years ago (Bowen, 1953). It has grown in scope and application, and has been considered in countless studies (Aguinis & Galvas, 2012). Even so, the definition of CSR remains elusive and lacks consensus (Bartlett & Devin, 2011; Garriga & Mele, 2004; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). It is usually defined to reflect the importance of corporate development and success with ethical, social and environmental aspects, and CSR is most often implemented as an initiative that companies organize in order to improve public relations and contribute to social good (Rodriguez & LeMaster, 2007)

Vogel (2006) defined CSR as a verb, claiming that it is the engagement of corporations in virtuous endeavors, activities associated with corporate virtue typically represent a firm's effort to do more to address a wide variety of social problems than they would have done in their normal pursuit of profits. Brown (2007) considered that CSR is a learned response to our socio-political environment which in turn will move an organization from a negative-defensive pole—which includes isolation, denial and evasion—to a positive-opportunistic pole of community and transparency.

In considering corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its positive affect on corporations doing "good" and its influence in positive public perceptions of an organization, CSR has transformed corporate management thought processes and strategies in recent years (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Zydligopoulous, 2002). CSR has changed the corporate landscape so dramatically that companies now include their corporate social responsibilities information related to ethical values and responsible behaviors in their communication strategies as a matter of course. However, even with the surge in the use of corporate social responsibility, the actual

definition of CSR has not been specifically outlined. Community relations and corporate social

responsibility are connected and convergent in the areas of relationship development, aligned

interests and community risk (Heath & Coombs, 2006) as communities and organizations are

interdependent. Grunig and Hunt (1984) believed that community relations and corporate social

responsibility are inextricably linked and should be considered instrumental rather than merely

expressive corporate community engagement, promoting an organization or company and

showing good will and truly improving a community through overarching community relations.

Despite the rise in acceptance and the corporate implementation of CR and CSR, there

are those, Milton Friedman among them, who believe ardently that it is not the responsibility of a

company to engage in community relations. Friedman (1970) argued that money spent on

philanthropy in business was simply "feel good" money and as such should be considered

unethical. He ardently believed that there was only one responsibility of business and that was to

apply its resources and engage in business activities that would increase profits.

Dunlap (1996) agreed:

> If you're in business, you're in business for one thing – to make money. You must
>
> do everything fiducial, legal and moral to achieve that goal.   And in making
>
> excellent products expertly marked is the primary way of making money. Executives
>
> who run their business to support society causes – such as Ben and Jerry's or the
>
> body Shop – would never get my investment dollars. They funnel a portion of
>
> profits into things like saving whales or Greenpeace. That is not the essence of
>
> business. If you want you to support a social cause, if you have other agendas, join
>
> the Rotary International. (p. 87)

In contrast, Burke (1999) contended that there is a psychological contract…between a

company and its community. He considered that a community must have a viable community relations program that will:

Build sustainable and ongoing relationships with key community individuals, groups and organizations; Institute practices and procedures and anticipate and respond to community expectations, concerns, focus community support programs to build relationships; respond to community concerns, and strengthen the community's quality of life. (p. 28)

Research reflects that scholars and authors view community relations and corporate social responsibility as a key part of engagement for organizations today (Heath & Ni, 2010). Community relations is no longer considered cosmetic or peripheral. But instead, it has become essential and requires public input and dialog on issues, in crisis and infrastructures that are critical to local environments (Neff, 2005).

In considering what makes a company socially responsible, Black and Hartel (2004) determined that there are five areas of responsibility. They include *stakeholder engagement*, *accountability, ethics, value-attuned public relations and dialogue*. With the technologically connected world in which we live, the authors posit that dialogue with stakeholders critical and that it is a conscious, respectful effort to share power in discourse where parties can feel free to co-create and challenge each other (Black & Hartel, 2004). To not engage in true dialogue, they contend, means that the organization's claim of stakeholder engagement is in danger of being seen as merely symbolic with little or no substance and damaging to the company's reputation. Social responsibility (Black & Hartel, 2004) is not a discretionary activity, but arises in the day-to-day interaction in relationships with firms and their stakeholders. Grunig (2001) offered that symbolic relationships that build image alone do not make an organization more effective, or

help an organization achieve its mission. Ferguson argued that relationships between organizations and their public should be the central unit of study for public relations researchers (as cited by Ledingham, 2003). She identified several attributes to define the quality of behavioral relationships with stakeholders including *dynamic vs. static, open vs. closed, the degree to which both organizations and stakeholders are satisfied with the relationship, distribution of power in the relationship and the mutuality of understanding, agreement and consensus.* Grunig (2001) added trust, credibility and reciprocity to the list. All of these elements, it could be argued, could and should be present when organizations consider community relations with their publics or stakeholders.

O'Connor, Shumate, and Meister (2007) argued that CSR - responsible or irresponsible - creates footprints along the line that are judged individually and over time by external stakeholders. Organizations and stakeholders co-construct the bottom line. As part of that co-construction, three subcategories that are connected to CSR include *honesty,* which includes *sincerity, integrity* and *character.* In addition, *longevity* of corporate CSR, *accountabilit*y and *compatibility* were considered. Companies that could not maintain *longevity* or *compatibility* were viewed as opportunistic and therefore not authentically socially responsible (O'Connor, Shumate, & Meister, 2007). Even though CR and CSR are considered to be normative behaviors in corporate structures, the results can sometimes be mixed (Vogel, 2006). Corporations and consumers, Vogel (2006) believes, have come to understand that their desire to "do good" is often irreconcilable with, or undermined by, the company's desire to satisfy pressing needs such as saving money or benefiting stakeholders.

In addition, communicating CSR actions can have complex and sometimes negative results (Elving, 2013). Researchers have also found that CSR has the potential to create general

skepticism among stakeholders (Du, Bhatacharya, & Sen, 2010; Golob, Podnar, Elving, Nielsin, Thomsen, & Schulze, 2013; Illia, Zyglidopoulos, Romenti, Rodriguez-Canovas, & Gonzalez del Valle, 2013; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Schelgemich & Pollach, 2005; Sen & Bhatacharya, 2001; Waddock & Goggins, 2011). To effectively ensure positive outcomes, CSR communication must be considered credible and rest on values that have been integrated into the company which are ultimately expressed in all corporate actions with the public stakeholders (Middlemiss, 2003; Villagra & Lopez, 2013; Waddock, Bodwell, & Graves, 2002). In addition, it is imperative that companies ensure that their CSR actions "resonate personally with stakeholders" (Villagra, Caradaba, & Ruiz, 2016, p. 143).

Heath and Ni (2010) identified three typologies in the community relations context: *the nice neighbor, good neighbor* and *reflective/responsive neighbor.* These typologies consider that kindness can be used to colonize local communities to the interest of the larger organization in its efforts to achieve its mission and vision. The "nice neighbor" works to be helpful and rarely engages in controversy. The outcome can be community benefit, and the organization in turn can benefit by having a higher employee satisfaction/productivity. The point of being a nice neighbor is to work to demonstrate that you add value to the community by participation and contribution. An example for a corporate entity may include announcing their positive safety record, or good will strategies that company provides in tax revenue to a community. This type of CR relies heavily on identification and can easily be seen as one-way. The purpose of this type of community relations (CR) is to be a sort of town crier bringing good news and goodwill engagement to the community.

The "good neighbor" is nice, but with a fuller checkbook. The organization's philanthropy is considered more strategic philanthropy. With this type of philanthropy, Hall

(2006) contends, relationship-building takes place in the process. Community members who

know about company philanthropy exhibit a stronger, positive relationship with the company

than those who do not know about the giving (Hall, 2006) this is mitigated by the community

expectations – how does this help the community, not merely be in the act of giving in and of

itself in a self-serving manner (Heath & Ni, 2010). Strategic philanthropy - being the good

neighbor – may be an important element in company's successful operations. Examples of a

company being a good neighbor might include a company providing academic scholarships for

lower-income families, or sponsorships of cultural, educational or athletic events within a

community.

The process of being a "reflective/responsive neighbor" requires engagement, patience

and empowerment. The goal is a stronger community, not just a more profitable company

(Heath & Ni, 2010).   For community relations to work, and mature into something that is

mutually beneficial, the organization's management must be committed to be reflective and

responsive (Heath & Ni, 2010). Being a reflective and responsive neighbor requires that a

company not only consider its own interests, but how community interests are important to

overall society success. Reflective/responsive corporate strategies may be either pro-active or

reactive. Pro-active strategies may be seen in a company working to set up councils or local

committees to address a community issue, such as hurricane preparedness, or potential pollution

problems, before they happen. Reactive strategies consider how a company will support a

community following a crisis situation, such as a fire or a water contamination issue. If operated

properly, the reflective/responsive typology fosters the opportunity to create and sustain mutually

beneficial interests within a community construct. The goal is to create and maintain processes of

dialogue that achieve concurrence, shared knowledge and meaning if not consensus. The

typologies that Heath and Ni (2010) developed fit well into the community relations and corporate social responsibility context and offer rich opportunities for further studies to enhance public relations.

Although the research indicates that CR and CSR have become normative and expected in public relations behaviors, what has not been considered in public relations literature from the corporate, employee and consumer perspectives is how authentic face-to-face public relationships in a temporal setting, within convenience store, can not only create good will and brand loyalty for the company within a specific community, but also create consumer participation in terms of financial support for the causes in which the company chooses to engage within that community. Thus, in this case study, two guiding questions are initially set forth:

Guiding Question 1: What type of community relations/corporate social responsibility efforts are being communicated by the convenience store to the public?

Guiding Question 2: How is the convenience store communicating their community relations/corporate social responsibility efforts to the public?

Relationship Management

Ferguson first set forth the notion that it is not the company, the organization or the communication process, but rather the relationships themselves between the company and its stakeholders that should be at the core of public relations scholarship (as cited by Ledingham, 2003). Similarly, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1994) argued that public relations was "the management function that identifies establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 6). Grunig (1992) also proposed that public relations should focus on building relationships with

publics that constrain or enhance how an organization can and does meet its stated mission. Ehling agreed (1992) suggesting that the public relations model should be shifting toward a relationship-building, nurturing and relationship maintenance and as such "is an important change in the primary mission of public relations" (p. 662). Grunig, Grunig and Ehling (1992) also considered within an organization's public relationships among stakeholders there were actually seven key elements which included *reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction* and *mutual understanding*.

Center, Jackson, Smith, and Stansberry (2008) also recognized the importance of the relational aspect of public relations, as they put forth that the desired outcome of public relations efforts should be to enhance an organizations public relationships with their stakeholders. Additionally, Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) concluded that "the purpose and direction of an organization - its mission – is affected by relationships with key constituents (publics) in the organizations environment." (p. 85). Businesses are seeking to engage and create relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Gill, 2011a). Successful employee engagement is reliant on effective use of internal communications (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders, & Archee, 2008; Walters, 2010) between employers and employees and among employees. That communication, in turn, is transferred to external stakeholders in the way employees represent the company and share the brand and its values as they interact with the public. A strong sense of internal loyalty and a healthy internal relationship and internal respect for the brand, often translates to a healthy reputation with internal and external stakeholders (Gill, 2011b; Louisot, 2004), and has been shown to be an important strategy in building employer-employee relationships and loyalty (Madlock, 2008).

In the years since the initial shift and recognition of a two-way model, the importance of relationship research in public relations reflected in academic studies, which focused on understanding an organization's stakeholder public relationships, has increased significantly. In an effort to gain a more in-depth understanding of relationships, Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) reviewed literature in multiple disciplines including interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, inter-organizational relationships and systems theory, in which relationships were the central concept. Their conclusion was that, given such a wide range of definitions in various disciplines, to advance a relationship theory in public relations, the concept of relationships needed further clarification. In response, a number of scholars took on the task of further defining the term relationship in public relations theory. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) framed their definition in terms of interpersonal relationship principles stating that an organization's public relationship is defined as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other" (p. 62). Hutton (1999) stated that relationship management "has the power to both define and serve as paradigm" (p. 208), and considered that relationships consist of some combination of *trust, commitment, and the costs of exiting the relationship* and *shared values.*

With the development and scholarly research centered on the relational perspective in public relations, it called into question the "essence of public relations– what it is and does or should do, its function and value within organizational structure and the greater society" (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xiii). Understanding that relationship-centered public relations represents a fundamental shift in the accepted function and direction of public relations, and that the discipline was beginning to distance itself from the primary use of traditional one-way public

relations initiatives, Ledingham (2003) explicated a relationship management theory of public

relations as a general theory of public relations. He suggested that relationship management

involves "effectively managing organization-public relationships around common interests and

shared goals, over time, [which] results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting

organizations and publics" (p. 190).

As relationship management theory gained acceptance, public relations scholars

considered that relationships could still be managed through communication alone. Actually,

that notion had already been considered Grunig (1993), whom argued that effective public

relations relationships must be behavioral as well as symbolic:

> When symbolic (communication-based) relationships are divorced from behavioral
>
> (grounded in actions and events) relationships, public relations practitioners reduce
>
> public relations to the simplistic notion of image building which offers little value to the
>
> organizations they advise because they suggest that problems in relationships with
>
> publics can be solved by using the proper message – disseminated through publicity or
>
> media relations – to change an image of an organization. (p. 136)

In addition, Grunig and Grunig (1992) considered four models in public relations

relationships between and organization and its stakeholders. They advanced that the most

effective model to employ that brings the most value to the organization and its stakeholders is

the two-way symmetrical model which applies communication to negotiate mutual agreements,

to settle conflict and build mutual understanding and respect between organizations. Additional

models include press agentry, public information and two-way asymmetrical model (Grunig &

Hunt, 1984).

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With the development of the internet, so too came a heightened - interest in a dialogic

relationship among organizations and their publics, and the notion of dialogic, two-way

relationships began to enter the into the public relations discipline. In public relations, a dialogic

approach considers that relational communications between organizations and their stakeholders

or publics should include a two-way conversation – a dialogue that is considered to be "any

negotiated exchanged of ideas or opinions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). Kent and Taylor

(2002) discussed that there are five specific features to a dialogic approach in public relations

that include: *mutuality*, a recognition of organization-public relationships: propinquity, the

temporary and spontaneity of interactions with the public; *empathy,* support and confirmation of

public goals and interest; *risk,* the intention to communicate with publics on their own terms; and

commitment, the degree to which an organization engages in dialogue, interpretation and

understanding its interactions with its publics. With the increased use and popularity of the

internet, companies could easily and efficiently communicate with their stakeholders online,

therefore Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed that public relations practitioners should utilize a

dialogic approach in building organization-public relationships because this approach has the

opportunity to build relationships and serve the interests of both organization and its

stakeholders. Kent and Taylor (2002) further argued that organizations should engage in a

dialogic approach when practicing public relations because it "can change the nature of the

organization-public relationship by placing emphasis on the relationship" (p. 24). However,

successfully creating a dialogic approach with stakeholder according to Kent and Taylor (2002)

also requires certain skills that include:

>Listening, empathy, being able to contextualize issues within local, national, and
>
>international frameworks, being able to identify common ground between parties,

thinking about long-term rather than short-term objectives, seeking out

groups/individuals with opposing viewpoints, and soliciting a variety of internal and

external opinions on policy issues. (p. 31)

With the shift in public relations to a relationship-centered proposition, the public

relations discipline has seen a significant increase in literature that demonstrates the importance

of organization- stakeholder relationships, further recognizing the need for relationship creation,

development and the ability to sustain those relationships on an ongoing basis. However, there

continues to be a gap in the recognition of the need for those relationships in scholarship and

how to actually create and sustain them, and a continuing conversation on the difference in

dialogue, conversation and creation of actual relationships. In addition, relationship-building

takes time, and there are limited longitudinal or ethnographic studies in public relations literature

that consider relationship-building and community relations in stakeholder relationships that

include employees as well as consumers.

One way that organizations form relationships with their stakeholders internally and

externally is through corporate storytelling. This is a strategy used to engage more deeply with

employees (Gill, 2011b), and it has an important role to play as a communication strategy (Gill,

2015). Brown, Denning, and Prusak (2004) commented that storytelling was gaining ground and

taking on a powerful role for organizations as a strategy for engaging with their employees and

their public stakeholders. The use of narration via face-to-face stories is considered to be one of

the richest communication media for engaging staff and reinforcing brand values (Sinclair, 2005)

which employees will, in turn, share with public stakeholders. Stories as a strategy have been

successfully used in organizations as ways to create messages that cause people to take action if

there is an identified interest to the listener (Forman, 2013; Kaye, 1996; Prusak, 2001).

In considering the key publics with whom a company is creating a relationship, the first to come to mind would be consumers. They are the ones whose patronage and support ultimately determines the success or failure of a business. However, first, before the relationship with the consumer can be considered, the relationship with the employee, as an ambassador or link between the company and the consumer is essential. The employee is the brand representative for the company through interactions with external stakeholders. Their work practices and attitudes are reflections of what and how they think about their employer and the company as a whole. As such, public relations has and does play a critical role in representing the values for the organization using internal communication strategies to reinforce desired values (L'Etang, 2008). In addition, the interactions that occur between employees and stakeholders establish a company's reputation (Dowling, 2006; Walters, 2010). Through ethnographic research, interactions between employees and customers will be observed within a convenience store construct as well as specific ways in which the organization's values and the internal corporate reputation are shared with customers. Thus, the third guiding questions asks:

Guiding Question 3: How does the convenience store's leadership develop relationships with employees and customers?

Employee Relationships

Public relations scholars have argued for some time that it is critical to create and build relationships with all stakeholders, not just communicate in a one-way conversation with the media or the consumer (Ledingham, 2003). However, frontline employees, the ones who engage with consumers on a daily basis, have been given little consideration to any extent in public relations literature. Employees are considered to be an integral part of an organization's reputation, as they serve as the bridge between the internal organization and the public.

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Therefore, Shuck and Wollard (2009) considered that employee engagement should focus on building engaging relationships between employer and employee. While Mohan et al. (2008) and Waters (2010), suggested that successful employee engagement is dependent on effective internal communication and the shared meaning and understanding between employer and employee. In addition, a key objective of internal public relations – relationships with employees should be to advance employee commitment to the organization through developing the brand's mission and values (L'Etang, 2008). Dowling (2006) and Sinclair (2005) agreed that building a relationship with employees and gaining their trust is critical to building a positive, healthy internal relationships and opening the lines of engagement.

In considering employer-employee relationships, how an organization communicates with its employees, and its success in doing so has become an important indicator of employee satisfaction, and storytelling has been shown to be an important strategy to building employer-employee relationship (Madlock, 2008). Therefore, since employees are the ambassadors of the organization, it would be understandable that scholars would suggest that organizations should spend almost as much time focused on employee loyalty as customer loyalty (Alvesson, 2001; Gallicano, 2009; Pina e Cunha, 2002). Employees take ownership of corporate stories, as they pass on stories among themselves and to external stakeholders, and share the brand and corporate narrative and build relationships (Gill, 2011b). Research reflects that corporate storytelling as a PR strategy has significant benefits for employee engagement, and may result in an improved internal and external reputation by way of making employees, through relationship-building, champions for the organization and its reputation (Gill, 2011b).

However, little is known from a public relations perspective about how exactly individual employees engage in the relationship-building process with public stakeholders. Public relations

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scholars have actually been emphasizing the importance and the need for research that considers

how relationships are created, developed and sustained in actual real life settings (Broom et al.,

2000; Gill, 2011a; Grunig, 2000), hence the need for ethnographic research. In addition, some

marketing scholars such Butcher, Sparks, and Callaghan (2002) asserted that it is not possible to

have relationship with a company, but it is the employees who do in fact build relationships with

the consumer. However, even with the understanding that relationships are built between

employees and public stakeholders, few scholars have given their attention to that relationship.

The notion that those employee – consumer relationships have significance has been discussed

by several scholars (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2001; Wilson, 1994; Wilson,

2000) as well as the need for inclusion of employees to be considered in the agenda for

relationship management research. Gill (2011b) considers that organizations recognize the

importance of employee relationships and engagement, and that effective engagement is

dependent upon strategic, internal communication; sharing meaning between management and

employees and among employees (Monahan et al., 2008; Waters, 2010) and the professional

management of interactions between all stakeholders (Scholes, 1997).

In addition, employees are considered to play a central role in an organization through

stakeholder interactions (Gill, 2011b), as the internal reputation of an organization is the regard

in which it is held by its employees (Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Read, 2003), and that is ultimately

passed on to through the employees to company's external stakeholders. Therefore, employees

play a central role in an organization's reputation and customer loyalty through their interactions

and relationships with stakeholders (Gill, 2011b). However, even with practitioners'

understanding of the importance of engaging employees in with storytelling and narrative

strategies, the review of literature reflects that organizations have little documented evidence that

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they have applied or formally used storytelling as a public relations strategy to engage their employees and their external stakeholders (Gill, 2011b).

There is no doubt that employees are key stakeholders in any organization. They are responsible for carrying the organizations message and brand to the primary stakeholders – the customers. Drucker (1989) described individuals who carry organization knowledge and transmit information and service as a powerful resource. With greater belief in the company and the values it represents, employees will express positive messages about the company and, in so doing, will strengthen their reputation (Louiset, 2004). Organizational or corporate reputation refers to the esteem in which an organization is held by its public and stakeholders (Beder, 2002; L'Etang, 2008). The internal reputation for an organization is the esteem in which it is held by its employees is significantly influenced by the culture within the organization (Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Read, 2003). Fombrun and Shanley (1990) posited that "corporate reputations represent the public cumulative judgements of organizations overtime, which in turn affect the organization's relative success in fulfilling expectations of multiple stakeholders" (p. 235).

Consideration has also been given to the fact that an organization's true wealth is often attributable to intangible assets which are thought to be softer types (Post, 2004) of capital and include *reputation, trust, goodwill, image and relationship* (Post, 2004). These intangibles originate from within the company, delivering value to the company. According to 96% of executives polled in an Accenture Survey, the value and consideration of a company's intangibles as an integral part of its overall value, has grown significantly since 1980, when the book value of a company was thought to comprise 80% of its value (Post, 2004). In 1990 the book value, as compared to intangible asset value, stood at 55% compared to 45%, respectively (Post, 2004). Certainly, an organization's reputation and its intangible assets have become

critical elements in an organization's bottom line and, as such, require nurturing and should be considered for their value along with all of the other assets within the organizational context (Beder, 2002).

In considering organizational relationships in the public relations context, there are three specifically defined relationships: Organization-Public Relationships (OPR); Employee-Organization Relationships (EOR) and Employee-Public Relationships (EPR). Broom et al. (1997) commented that OPR is "represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange and linkage between an organization and its publics" (p. 18). Hon and Grunig (1999) determined that an organization-public relationship occurs when there are organizational behaviors that have consequences on publics or when the public's behaviors have consequences for the organization itself. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) considered OPR to be "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits for all parties involved and is characterized by mutual positive regard" (p. 62).

EOR, is defined as the relationships an organization has with its internal publics, the employees. The importance of internal communications with employees and employees' satisfaction with this communication is essential to an organization's success. Although the importance of EOR has been recognized scholars tend to focus primarily on either internal or external publics separately (Davis, 2001). Grunig and Huang (2000) along with Broom et al. (1997) argued that a coordinated approach which considers and applies relationship management with a two-way approach is not only important, but necessary. Although a coordinated approach is considered to be important, studies applying that approach are conspicuously absent from literature.

EPR refers to the individual, one-on-one relationship that develops between employees and external stakeholders. Those two-way relationships are built over time in specific settings between employees and the customers they serve - such as in a convenience or a restaurant - where a particular customer and a particular employee have regular engagement and conversation. Grunig and Huang (2000) found that the dimensions that are reflected in this type of public relations relationship include *trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment.* An employee-public relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000) is in fact a connection or an association between an employee and a member of the public mainly resulting from interpersonal communication that occurs because of behavior consequences an organization or public has to offer.

There is no doubt that employees play a critical role in the corporate brand through their interactions with public stakeholders through their work practices, and their attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, (Dowling, 2006; Dowling, 2010) suggested that the interactions between employees with stakeholders – including public stakeholders – ordains the long-term reputations. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) agreed considering that "corporate reputations represent the public cumulative judgements of an organization over time, which in turn affect the organizations relative success in fulfilling expectations of multiple stakeholders." (p. 235) This study will contribute to the discussion concerning employee relationship with stakeholders, as it will focus on how employees share their corporate narrative through story-telling to engage consumers to build and sustain authentic public relationships.

Consumer Relationships

Businesses, organizations, non-profits, and governmental entities are constantly working to attract and keep consumers interested in what they have to offer, whether it be a product,

social cause, or political issue. Creating and sustaining relationships, not simply transactional experiences, has developed as an overarching concept in public relations as a way to keep customers engaged and in turn create customer loyalty to the brand, which ultimately drives the success or failure of an organization or company. With the advent of technology, those relationships have created a new avenue for public relations conversations and relationships with public stakeholders. How those relationships are actually created, the sustainability of those relationships, and how organizations and their public relations affect those relationships, remains in question. However, what is known is that there are significant economic, societal and political benefits for relational parties when organizations do "get it right (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Ledingham, 2006). When an organization does get it right the relationship goes beyond mere interactions and transactions for economic benefit. When studying relationships, Heath (2013) commented that public relations has no value without an awareness of the "complexity, multidisciplinary and multiplicity of meaning that derive and result from them" (p. 428).

There has been an ongoing discussion among scholars concerning the influence public relations activities have on consumers. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) determined that there were five variables that influence consumer behavior that include *trust,* or an organization "doing what it says it will do;" *openness,* defined as "sharing the organization's plans for the future with public members;" as well as, *involvement,* or the "organization being involved in the welfare of the community;" *investment,* or *"*the organization investing in the welfare of the community," and *commitment*, defined as "the organization being committed to the welfare of the community. Bruning (2000) further commented that key publics who share a strong relationship or an identity with a particular organization are inclined to be supportive of that organization in the face of market competition. The author concluded that:

to be effective and sustaining, relationships needed to be seen as mutually beneficial,

based on mutual interest between an organization and its significant publics [and] the key

to managing successful relationships is to understand what must be done in order to

initiate, develop and maintain that relationship. (Bruning, 2000, p. 27)

In addition, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) stated that there is a significant link between an

organization's support for a particular community and, in return the public's support for that

particular organization. They determined:

Organizational involvement in support of the community in which it operates can

engender loyalty toward an organization among key publics when that involvement/

support is known by key publics [and] what emerges is a process an organization must

(1) focus on the relationships with their key publics, (2) communicate involvement of

those activities/programs that build the relationship to members of their key public.

(p. 63)

As such, they considered that "the relationships between the key publics should be considered

when developing customer satisfaction initiatives and should be included in future models of

satisfaction" (p. 199). In addition, Bruning, Castle, and Schrepfer (2004) proposed that

organization-public relationships when managed effectively do have a positive effect on

attitudes, evaluations and behaviors of key public members. Building on that research,

Papassapa and Miller (2007) reported the need for and importance of relationship quality with

consumers, which they also posited has a direct impact on customer loyalty. A committed

customer will refuse to give in to information that provokes them to switch behavior, whether it

is negative information about the organization to which they are committed or positive

information about competitors (Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 1999).

Research indicates that public relations has now certainly evolved to the point that it is more about building good relationships with publics than pushing one-way messages through media. As the concept of the two-way dialogic approach to public-public relations has developed, particularly in the online context, there is no doubt that organizations are accountable to the public. Bruning et al. (2008) considered the notion of dialogue and determined it had a positive effect on the public behaviors. They also determined that the attitude of relationship and dialog had a positive impact on evaluations of an organization.

There is no doubt that companies have traditionally been concerned and interested in serving their customers, but customer service now has moved into more of a public relations-relationship mode where companies are often interested in delighting their customers in order to engender a loyalty and repeat business (Center et al., 2008). That delight often extends to how a person is treated within a customer experience. However, as the concept of "delighting" evolved companies had to make a shift as well to meet those needs. They had to consider first how to teach and motivate their employees on how and to delight customers who then become regular, repeat and loyal patrons (Center et al., 2008). The importance of customer service and how it engenders loyalty can be seen in an experience within a specific medical center – Grant Medical Center determined that its emergency room satisfaction rating among its customers was ranked in the third percentile. They ranked 97% lower than their competing hospitals who offered the same services. Their solution: engage their employees to draft and implement a model to create a positive relationship with their customers, and the hospital realized a dramatic shift in customer satisfaction rating. Research indicates that the majority of customers will choose an organization or service, not because of its products or service – which they are well aware they can purchase elsewhere, but because of how they were treated in the experience (Center et al., 2008). In

addition, companies considering stakeholder engagement as part of their public relations agenda

is on the rise (Luoma-aho, 2015). Consumer engagement in the public relations context is

considered an important element in relationship-building with stakeholders that extends beyond

purchases (Luoma-aho, 2015) and engagement is defined as favorable customer behavior as seen

toward an organization, its brand or product which includes cognitive and emotional aspects

(Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pitner, & Verhoef, 2010).

There is little doubt that consumers have historically made buying decisions based on

how companies run their businesses, according to a 1995 survey by public relations firm

Porter/Novelli (Center et al., 2008). Within that survey the five major influences considered

included *product quality, the company's method of handling customer complaints, the way a*

company handles a crisis in which it is at fault, challenges by a government agency about

product safety and accusation of illegal or unethical practices. With such studies,

communication with consumers began moving from a product or service focus to information

about how the organization operates and what values guide its decisions. To further measure an

organizations' public relationships with its stakeholders, Hon and Grunig (1999) created a public

relations measurement scale with six components including control *mutuality, trust satisfaction,*

exchange relationship and communal relationship. Bruning and Ledingham (1999) also

determined that the indicators of relationship quality with organization and their relationship

with public stakeholders cluster into three specific types – *interpersonal, professional and*

community. Those indicators served as the basis for a multi-item, multi-dimensional scale to

measure relationship quality in public relations. While Broom et al. (2000) suggested a model

for organization- public relationships in which transactions in relationships are an integral part of

the process of fulfilling needs. This model considers that communication-centered patterns of

accessing, storing, and using information (a need) as well as communication engagement (social exchange) are seen as indicators of the state of a relationship. More recently, Nielsen (2015) conducted a survey reflecting that consumers remain interested in purchasing products from companies who maintain strong reputations. The survey of 30,000 consumers in 60 countries reflected that 62% of consumers bought from a company they trusted. Sixty-six percent were willing to buy and pay more from companies who offered sustainable goods and 63 to 68% were willing to pay more for products and services from companies who were committed to making positive social and environmental impacts (Nielsen, 2015).

Another consideration in consumer relationships in public relations is empathy. Although much of literature regarding empathy stems from psychology (Yoemans, 2016), it has recently emerged in a public relations construct. Within public relations, empathy is seen as a trait or an interpersonal process, or learned skill (Yoemans, 2016), and is thought to be a key principle in engaging publics as it "provides an atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27), and, in turn, the building of organization-public relationships (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008). Even with empathy's considered importance in building relationships, there have been few attempts to explore it within public relations literature (Yoemans, 2016).

Although there is extensive research on organization-public relationships, there does also exist a theoretical void, as few studies have considered the public's role in public relations (Aldoory, 2001). As such there is a need for more public-centered research to understand how external publics perceive and define organization-public relationships. In addition, there is no significant research in public relations on how the public perceives that authentic sustainable relationships are created in a retail setting.

Creating Relationships Through Narrative

As a society and as human beings we are storytellers, and have been since the beginning

of time. Sharing stories - big or small - on a daily basis, is what we do. How, when, where and

with whom we share those stories, is in constant state of flux. We share stories with those whom

we know well, whom we meet briefly for the first time and often with veritable strangers. Stories

and the telling of them are integral to every part of our lives, as stories shared, told and re-told

are interwoven into the culture and communities in which we live. The oral tradition of

storytelling itself is considered to date back tens of thousands of years, with its roots steeped in

ancient Greek and Roman philosophy when ideology, customs, cultural knowledge beliefs and

traditions were passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions via anecdotes,

stories and speeches (Kent, 2015). Stories have and do inform every aspect of our lives from

conversations on political ideology and social issues to interpersonal relationships with friends

and colleagues, family members, partners, friends and co-workers, even to people we have

known for only a few moments. Stories are powerful and shape how people perceive events and

continue to make sense of the world (Weick, 1995). Often stories told through daily experiences

and interactions create relationships and become part of who we are. According to Wood and

Duck (2005), "it is our routine day-in-day-out interactions that most decisively shape our

identities and the quality and durability of our relationships" (p. xiii). Stories also have the ability

to create relationships and trust. Heath (2000) posited that "people identify with those they trust.

They trust those with whom they identify. They also trust those who enact and advocate

narratives that they accept and enact" (p. 81).

Although stories and narratives exist intrinsically in almost every setting, their use and

the recognition of their value, specifically in the public relations context, has only recently found

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its footing. The significant attention being given to storytelling by public relations practitioners

can easily be seen online by conducting a simple Google search. Inputting the phrase

"storytelling and public relations" returns 1.6 million results. Similarly, the phrase, "narrative

and public relations," returns 1.1 million results. In addition, storytelling was the central theme

for the Edelman 2014 Academic Summit, entitled "Storytelling @ the Speed of Now" (Edelman,

2014), and Boston University for the second year in a row hosted "The Power of Narrative"

Conference that brings together journalists, academics, PR professionals and film makers

worldwide (Kaufman, 2014). Even though narrative and storytelling have recently become an

overarching theme in public relations strategy, the concept of their use in public relations is not

new. Heath (1992) initially recognized their importance within the public relations discipline

years ago saying, "one reason that perspectives become widely believed is because they are

embedded into stories that are told over and over through interpersonal conversation and mass

media" (p. 57). He further considered that "society has a narrative past that gives a sense of what

is good about society and what needs change. Public relations adds value to the narrative society

as it carves out meaning and encourages others to adopt that meaning" (p. 85). In spite of the

rise in attention of storytelling and narrative in public relations and the advice being offered on

the use of narrative in public relations, storytelling does not come intuitively for most public

relations professionals, as seen in the fact that there are fewer well-known organizational stories

than would be expected if stories were told naturally (Kent, 2015). People often seem to quote

the same stories and narratives time and time again including Phil Knight and Nike; Ray Kroc

and McDonalds, Bill Gates and Microsoft; or Steve Jobs and Apple; and Howard Schulz and

Starbucks. Many scholars have discussed the value of corporate storytelling, but there remains

little mention in public relations academic studies regarding the use of storytelling as a strategy to build loyalty to strengthen a company's external reputation (Gill, 2015).

Moxham (2008) discussed that storytelling is considered to have an historical context within the public relations profession, and storytelling and the sharing of corporate narratives is considered to be a powerful public relations tool. Storytelling "is increasingly recognized as central in branding" (Denning, 2006, p. 42). In addition, storytelling easily fits within the public relations construct as it has the opportunity to create connections while building relationships and trust and contributes to the organization's authenticity with stakeholders (Prindle, 2011).

Narrative and storytelling are closely-connected partners, as conceptually they are actually often considered synonymous, or at least interchangeable. Czarniawska (1997) noted simply that "a story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem" (p. 78). "For them to become a narrative they require a plot, that is some way to bring them into a meaningful whole" (Czarinawska, 1997, p. 2). According to Burke (1969), narratives begin with the assumption that human beings are storytellers, and the words have meaning and in turn the ability to influence the actions and reactions of people, referred to as symbolic action.

Storytelling and narratives, although closely connected, are also divergent. Storytelling is not participatory, as stories are shared from one person to another, and stories have a beginning and an end. Hagel (2013) considered that narratives are different from stories in two significant ways. First, narratives are open ended, and second they invite participation. According to Hagel (2013),

> Narratives motivate action. In some cases, they motivate life and death choices. Every powerful movement that has impacted our world has been shaped and energized by a

potent narrative and they are important as they are not simply motivators for employees, but they serve to empower, motivate or inspire entire groups of people. (n.p)

Fisher (1984) proposed, as part of his narrative theory, that narrative is a natural and normal part of our everyday lived experience. In 1985, he further argued that effective stories have three common characteristics "*narrative rationality…narrative probability…* and *narrative fidelity"* (p. 349). In other words, stories have to make sense, should be plausible and should in turn resonate with audiences and their values and beliefs. According to Fisher (1984), the narrative paradigm is all-encompassing which means all communication can be considered through a narrative lens. He considered that life is an ongoing narrative, and that the world is a set of stories from among which we must choose in order to live in a process of continual re-creation, therefore each individual chooses the stories that match his or her beliefs or values. Fisher's (1984) paradigm posited that 'human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons when they satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably as moral inducement" (p. 2).

Stories can fit easily into either a fictional or factual context.   The stories told and shared through organizations internally and externally are based in fact and serve as narrative expressions that are held together by a compelling structure that is relatable and understandable (Fisher, 1984). The stories that organizations tell through their public relations conversations with their stakeholders create realities for themselves, their publics and civil society (Taylor, 2013). With storytelling, there is always the question of whether you are making a connection with the audience. Burke (1969) argued that storytelling and identification are intrinsically

connected. He considered that there are actually three types of identification that exist through storytelling or narrative: *sympathy, antithesis and unawareness.*

Identification by sympathy refers to creating a sense of identification with someone through empathetic language recognizing a similar feeling. *Identification by antithesis* involves referencing a shared in common experience or recognizing a shared enemy. *Identification by unawareness* invokes the use of imagery, symbols and ideas that resonate with an audience, and delineates if they are in sympathy and antithesis. Jasinski (2001) posited that narratives are what serve to shape individual identity as well as a community's identity and culture. Narratives support and bind the facts of our lived experience and provide organization for our existence, establishing relational relationships between or among things over time. Sillers and Gronick (2001) agreed, considering that stories are reflective of values that are important to the social system in which they are told, and successful stories resonate with recipients because they serve to reflect a common lived experience. Heath (2001) considered the importance of narratives to communication and community:

> Through co-authored narratives, each public achieves collective opinions, judgments and actions that govern its behavior and public policy preferences. Organizations can adopt or seek to influence the narratives of society by what they say and do. Co-created meaning leads to a sense of community through shared narratives that supply people with knowable ways in which to act toward organizations and one another. Narratives voice expectations regarding how organizations should act toward one another and the people of society. (p. 42)

Much of the scholarship that has focused on narratives in public relations has previously been to consider narrative from a one-way public relations communication strategy through news

releases, case studies, press releases and annual reports (Gilpin, 2008; Jameson, 2000; Pieczka, 2007; Tjernstrom & Tjernstrom, 2003). Narrative research in public relations has also previously been considered in risk and crisis communication. However, it has all been from the *inside out.* Palenchar and Wright (2007) concluded that a gap in public relations practice and scholarship exists in how publics and stakeholders develop a sense of self and identity with an organization, as there is little research on narratives as they are developed from the outside in, from the view of the public stakeholder - including the consumer. The present study will consider how the use of narratives and storytelling - from the outside in - can initiate, develop and sustain relationships between employee and public stakeholders in a convenience store context. Further consideration will be given to how those stakeholder relationships have evolved and created community among the employees and the customers, between the employees and between the customers.

With the inception of the internet, stories are being told in a completely new way, online, often with a two-way dialogic emphasis using websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc. There is no doubt that, via the internet, companies have extended their reach, their brand and their conversation and connection with consumers. Consumer engagement, as experienced through corporate communication and narrative, has shifted to a completely new paradigm. Publics are shaping rather than simply receiving organizational stories (Dueze, 2005). Blogs have become an increasingly used channel for communication, they are written in a more informal, personal tone (Doostdar, 2004). Companies' use of narration via face-to-face stories is one of the richest and most valuable ways in which to engage staff in reinforcing the brand values (Sinclair, 2005). This form of communication promotes dialogue that allows a greater balance between the organization and its internal stakeholders, therefore, advancing trust (Monhan et al., 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007). In addition, the significance of narration or storytelling regarding an

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organization's values can endure far beyond its initial telling; it has the capacity to become a story in itself as it is shared by employees with other public stakeholders (Prusak, 2011).

Through storytelling and sharing their corporate narratives, managers and employees can foster trust and support for the organization by creating a bond with stakeholders as they explain the organization and its mission (Dowling, 2006; Taliaferro & Ruggiano, 2010). Key stakeholders in organizations are employees, they are the ones who pass on an organization's values and mission with consumers, and co-create a company's reputation (Gill, 2011a). Formbrun and Shanley's (1990) seminal model "hypothesizes that corporate reputation represent the public cumulative judgements of organizations over time, which in turn affect the organization's relative success in fulfilling expectation of multiple stakeholders" (p. 235). Thus, the final guiding question for this case study asks:

Guiding Question 4: Does the company's corporate narrative match the participant's experiences?

There is certainly recognition of the importance of narrative and storytelling in public relations as it relates to internal and external stakeholders – specifically internally with employees and externally with customers. However, there is little academic research, or corporate documentation in the public relations discipline that reflects how authentic, long-term relationships are created with employees and public stakeholders and sustained using narratives and storytelling. This case study, through ethnographic research, will provide knowledge in scholarship and practice to close the gap.

Narratives and storytelling in public relations have taken a prominent position in the discipline recently for two significant reasons. First, although ever present and available – narratives have been propelled into popularity by the internet and its global technological

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capabilities, as communication has become easy and accessible. Second, the shift from a one-way communication to a two-way relational perspective in public relations scholarship and practice has given narratives and storytelling lives of their own as a public relations strategy now considers the importance of engaging organizations, management, employees, consumers and volunteers within public relations relationships. There is no doubt a transactional public relationship between organizations and their public stakeholders, specifically consumers, has been created online through narratives. However, whether all of the elements are available or even possible to create and sustain relationships including *trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment* between employees and consumers and ultimately the organization, remains to be seen.

Although there is little research available on the immediacy of face-to-face relationships as it relates to the consumer- employee relations in public relations, a line could easily be drawn from research in organization-employee face-to-face relationships and their value and the importance in creating, developing and sustaining relationships between employees and consumers, specifically in a retail context. In addition, although the review of literature in public relations relationships recognizes the importance of face-to-face engagement, as well as developing online relationships with consumers and storytelling, little research on relationship-building or attention has been focused on authentic relationship creation, development or sustainability and the opportunity to create community and customer loyalty through storytelling or narrative. Also there is a dearth of literature in public relations which discusses organizations' reputations from the outside in, particularly from a consumer perspective.

Summary

The review of literature reflects a considerable amount of research in public relations in the areas of community relations and corporate social responsibility relations, employee and customer relationships and narrative and storytelling. Although there is a recognized need for ethnographic research on how public relations relationships are created and sustained from an ethnographic perspective, there is little research using that methodology in the public relations discipline. In addition, within public relations, the use of narrative and storytelling has become an overarching theme and much conversation in the discipline consists of online relationships and conversations between organizations and their publics. However, there is little research on how those narrative relationships are built and sustained with those publics, and if they are relational relationships, or merely transactional. There also exists in public relations literature a recognition of the overarching importance of face-to-face relationships internally and externally as one of the most valued forms of communication, but at the same time, few scholars or practitioners have dealt with the relationship of consumers with an organization from the outside looking in - from a consumer perspective, and how connection and relationships are created and sustained and in turn create a community. Consideration within an ethnographic observational perspective will be given within a convenience a store model context focusing on how relationships are created through the experiences of face-to-face narratives between patrons and employees, among patrons and between employees.

In the following chapter, the research methods for this study will be discussed. Participant observation and grounded theory served as frameworks for the study. Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967), refined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and further developed by Charmaz (2000) was employed to identify and understand how

authentic relationships and community have been developed and sustained within a convenience store context through emergent themes. Also discussed and considered in the next chapter will be the consideration of a qualitative, ethnographic approach within this case study to identify themes, communication patterns and rituals through rich description and interviews from a participant-observer perspective.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this case study, conducted through a qualitative approach, will be to consider how authentic public relations relationships are created through narrative. A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study, as it offers the opportunity to for an in-depth, interpretive look at the relationships that have developed and exist within an unexpected, momentary community. An ethnographic method will be applied to identify themes and communication patterns of store patrons and employees within a convenience store model. In this chapter, the research methods for this case study will be discussed. Consideration from an ethnographic observational perspective will be given within a convenience store model context focusing on parameters of specifically defined relationships as they relate to public relations and culture which are serving to create a new cross-cultural community.

Epistemological Assumptions

Qualitative research, considered interpretive research (Creswell, 2007), is used when there is a need for complex, in-depth, detailed understanding within a particular environment which cannot be defined by a specific statistic or numerical analysis. It provides the opportunity to understand communication and patterns within groups and specific cultures, and allows the researcher to become close to the people within the culture being researched. As a result, the researcher is able to understand and interpret reflexively (Bochner & Ellis, 1992) what is taking place within a particular culture. In addition, qualitative research is emergent; it evolves as the study progresses which means data collection, protocols, sampling and analysis may change during the study itself, and it is often characterized by the inclusion of multiple participants (Creswell, 2007) through narratives, interviews, observations and rich descriptions (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). Within qualitative research there are a variety of methods. For this particular case study, an ethnographic approach was applied.

Ethnography

Ethnographic, qualitative methods of study require the researcher to immerse him or herself – for a moment in time-into the culture which they have chosen. This provides the ethnographer, through qualitative research, with the opportunity to gain significant understanding and insight into how cultural members view, interpret and participate in their own cultural context and community. The ethnographer participates in the culture as a participant or as a participant-observer.

Ethnography of Communication (EOC), developed in the 1960s by Gumperz and Hymes, (Keating, 2007) is used to discover and consider "socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns of symbols, meanings, premises and rules" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). Originally, EOC was considered to be the ethnography of language or speaking (Hymes, 1962) and was refined (Hymes, 1964) to accommodate for the non-vocal and non-verbal characteristics of communication. Tenets of EOC (Hymes, 1964) are to "investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situations as to discern patterns proper to speech activity" and to "take as context a community, investigating its communicative habits" (p. 2). Significant, culturally-specific data emerges with EOC and reveals patterns of behaviors and knowledge, systems of social organizations as well as role-relationships, values and beliefs. Researchers suggest that historically these elements - in part or as a whole - are consistently transmitted and woven into the social contextual workings within specific cultures (Carbaugh, 1991; Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992; Goodall, 2000).

With the application of EOC methodology, communicative practices observed within a cultural setting which reveal beliefs and values within that culture and are discernable by a three-step process. The first step within the process involves recording locally experienced activities (Fitch, 1994; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Step two considers narrowing to one or more communicative practices that exist and the third step is reflection, using common understanding based on analysis and insights (Fitch, 1994; Wolcott, 1994).

As a methodological tool, ethnography of communication provides an excellent opportunity for academic researchers to gain insight and understanding within the public relations discipline. However, as noted by L'Etang (2009), even though public relations is a "profoundly cultural activity" there are few public relations studies considered from an ethnographic approach, thereby limiting public relations practitioners, scholars and business professionals in knowledge and understanding of public relations relationships in cultural contexts to which they are profoundly connected. Two British scholars who have contributed to public relations scholarship using ethnography are Hodges (2006a, 2006b) and Pieczka (1997, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). The reasons put forth that few such studies have been considered or completed in the public relations area are the extensive time investment that is required, and the patience needed to accomplish ethnographic studies. The literature that does exist within public relations and culture gained through ethnographic study is dominated by cross-cultural comparisons. That approach (L'Etang, 2010) has been systematic and has not yielded "rich description," resulting in a dearth of in-depth knowledge and understanding.

Within this convenience store case study, it is important to note that EOC allows the researcher, as participant-observer, to capture and discover meaning in specific public relations relationships that exist within this community, its daily life and its culture. This type of public

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relations research has the potential to garner insight and information that could ultimately alter the approach and practices as they now exist within the overall public relations context (L'Etang, 2010).

Participant Observation

Participant observation has been effectively used and is considered a critical tool of qualitative research in sociological and anthropological fieldwork studies as a way of collecting information (Kawulich, 2005). In fact, participant observation has been used as a data collection method for more than a century (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Increasingly applied in ethnographic research, participant observation is defined as "the process of learning through exposure or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting" (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 91). Bernard (1994) further considered that participant observation is the process of establishing a rapport within a community and in turn acting in a certain way to blend into that community to collect the data by way of observation, natural conversations, interviews, checklists, questionnaires and unobtrusive methods. Then, in the end, removing oneself from the observed community to consider and analyze the data collected.

In this particular ethnographic case study the participant-observer method was applied offering the opportunity to observe unobtrusively, take field notes and jottings, and to participate in casual conversations with convenience store patrons and employees on a daily basis as well as conduct casual interviews as patrons came and went on a regular basis and store employees served their customer's needs and worked with one another within a defined, convenience store cultural and community context.

Prior to beginning the research, approval was secured from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a midsized southwestern university to perform the study using human subjects as well as by the vice president of operations for the company. Once IRB and the executive management approved the study, the regional manager was contacted to discuss the study taking place in the store. He in turn set up an in-store meeting with himself, the area manager and the store manager to discuss the study. Each manager was given a copy of a synopsis of the study, the interview questions and the interview consent form. It was explained that, as a participant-observer, I would be an unobtrusive observer and have casual conversations with patrons and employees and jot down notes during the observation periods.

Observations and data collection took place over a six-week period. The in-store observations were completed in 2-hour intervals at various times of day, for a total of 40 hours of in-store participant observation. The hours of observation were broken down in the following intervals: ten hours of observation took place from 6 a.m. – 8 a.m. on week days; ten hours during lunch time from 11:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. on week days; ten hours from 4:30 p.m. – 6: 30 p.m. on week days and five hours from 8 a.m. – 10 a.m. on Saturday and five hours on Sunday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. These times were considered to be the times when the largest number of patrons came into the store and would be optimal to study the existence of community and connection among patrons and employees. As I became a part of the community, employees and regular patrons began to have casual conversations with me. Surprisingly, with some patrons and employees, those casual conversations occurred easily and almost immediately, in some cases the first two hours of in-store observation.

Narrative Research and Narrative Ethnography

As informants emerged within this case study, narrative research and narrative ethnography (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007) was applied. Narrative research is considered to be the study or analysis of the stories told and narrative ethnography or analysis is the methodology applied to consider, write and present the actual study findings. Some studies, (Creswell et al., 2007) use both narrative research and narrative ethnography, as narrative research is important when a researcher is seeking knowledge concerning life experiences or when stories themselves serve as underpinnings to understand the issue, culture and findings being considered. Narratives may be present or occur as the participant-observer is told a story about an experience or, an historical event or a personal life story (Chase, 2005). Those narratives are considered to be part of everyday life encounters and are woven together within each day's cultural experiences in social and organizational settings (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). According to Atkinson and Delamont (2006), those narratives are produced daily and become part of us.

> Narratives are produced and performed in accordance with socially shared conventions, they are embedded in social encounters, they are part and parcel of everyday work; they are amongst the ways in which social organizations and institutions are constituted; they are productive of individual and collective identities; they are constituent features of rituals and ceremonies; they express authority and expertise; they display rhetorical and other aesthetic skills. (p. xxi)

When analyzing narratives and writing the narrative ethnography, the researcher analyzes the stories, vignettes, casual conversations heard and participated in, as well as formal interviews

and short stories or life stories jotted down during field work and uses a narrative, first person, active voice to assist the reader in understanding the culture being considered.

Although ethnographic concepts and research had their beginnings with sociology scholars at the Chicago School of Ethnography between 1917 and 1942, narrative research and narrative ethnography are still considered to be a developing field of inquiry, albeit an important one. Within the use of narrative research, document and artifact analysis as well as in-depth interviews (Creswell et al., 2007) are considered. In addition, researchers analyze narratives through five specific lenses (Chase, 2005). Those lenses include narratives being treated as discourse; narratives being viewed as verbal action; the fact that stories are "enabled and constrained by a range of social circumstances" (Chase, 2005, p. 657); narratives are "socially situated performances" (Chase, 2005, p. 657) and require a narrator and a listener and narrative researchers frequently serve as the narrator relating the stories in a first-person voice.

In the convenience store setting, stories are told, re-told and re-positioned as new participants - patrons and employees- come and go on a daily basis. Since the convenience store experience is momentary, an average of 3-5 minutes per customer (NACS, 2016) those narratives, those stories are often shared on a minute-by-minute basis - one snippet-at-a-time – but serve as an integral part of the cultural structure and community experience considered within this study.

Site Selection and Description

For this present study, the site chosen was one of 67 convenience stores owned and operated for more than 20 years in a large South Texas city. This particular convenience store is located within one mile from the city's downtown area, a lower-income area that is in the process of re-development and is experiencing a growth of hospital, medical and professional

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facilities. The company that owns the convenience store, developed as a local business, turned into a Fortune 500 public company, and the leadership kept local ties, by remaining open and accessible. This particular site was chosen as it is reflective of the cross-section of diversity and community that exists within the city. Convenience store patronage is largely an in-and-out-experience and the population either living or passing through this area including EMS workers, police, firefighters, doctors and nurses, construction workers, teachers, professionals and homeless of all ethnicities and socio-economic levels offering a rich research opportunity among the diverse populations represented.

Interviews

At the conclusion of the six-week period, five in-store employees (one store manager, two assistant managers, and two employees) were presented with a description of the study and a consent form, and volunteered to provide consent to be interviewed. Participants were assured that their identities would not be revealed, and any comments they made would be confidential. They were then asked a series of questions (see Appendix) designed to elicit information about what the company has done to show that they care about their relationship with employees, what employees say to show that they care about their customers, what messages they have received from management about creating authentic relationships with customers. Handwritten notes were taken during these interviews, and were analyzed as data for the study. As a participant-observer, informal conversations also took place with employees and customers during each observation. Considerable information emerged during these informal conversations, so additional formal interviews were not conducted with other employees or customers. Handwritten notes were also taken during these informal conversations with customers and employees and were analyzed as data for the study.

Data Analysis

During my observations, I collected and organized data through the use of field notes. Upon completion of 40 hours of observation, a total of 152 pages of field notes were collected and used for thematic analysis. Themes, patterns, values, assumptions and artifacts that related to the specific case study's guiding questions were determined. Data was further analyzed to identify emergent themes, or patterns within public relations as they relate to narratives that are occurring through communication with employees and customers; the communications strategies that are being used to develop/demonstrate authentic relationships between the organization and its publics and the types of community relations and corporate social responsibility that are being communicated to the public and the methods by which they are communicated. Close reading of the data resulted in sorting the narrative data into themes that fit into theoretical frameworks of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the data was sorted into themes, it was placed in a narrative list which served as an organized listing of categories. Observations, interviews and jottings including quotes, words and shared stories were highlighted and placed in specific categories as well. Once the data was analyzed and categorized, a narrative writing approach was used, considering the emergent themes as they are illustrated through the narratives and storytelling that took place in the store. With particular emergent themes, in vivo coding was applied. In vivo coding offers the researcher the opportunity to code data which is taken verbatim during observation and is placed in quotation marks within the text (Helund-de Witt, 2013). Once the data was analyzed and the themes were developed, member checks (Morse, 1994) were conducted with three company employees (the store manager, assistant manager, and a company vice president) to establish validity for the

study. Each of these members confirmed that my interpretations of their experiences were accurate and that the emergent themes were consistent with their experiences.

Summary

Through ethnographic research, how authentic public relationships are created via narratives in a convenience store model was considered. An in-depth, interpretive look at relationships through a public relations lens, as they have developed and are sustained in an unexpected, momentary construct was the focus of the observations conducted within a grounded theory framework. The next chapter offers rich description of emergent themes as seen from a participant-observer perspective and the relationships that have developed overtime between employees and customers. Also described is how those relationships create community amidst a completely diverse population located within a corner convenience store in a South Texas city.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this chapter, exemplars from my time as a participant-observer in this communication setting will be shared to illustrate the corporate narrative that has been constructed internally, and how the organization is communicatively building relationships with employees and customers using this narrative. The observations and rich descriptions discussed in this chapter serve as the underpinnings for the emergent themes which are grounded within four guiding questions. Those questions include: What type of community relations/corporate social responsibility efforts are being communicated to the public by this convenience store, and how are they being communicated? What communication strategies are being used by management and employees to develop and demonstrate authentic relationships between the organization and its publics? What brand narratives are occurring in management-employee, employee-customer, and customer-customer communication? The results of these guiding questions will be discussed holistically, as they are interwoven together in the experience of the stakeholders.

The Corporate Perspective

"This is who we are internally and externally." During my first meeting with the vice president of the company, and three managers of this convenience store, they portrayed a transparent, relational culture. As we visited in the store where the study would take place and began to discuss the process, the vice president said almost immediately, *"We need to get you our Playbook that we give to every new employee. It tells you, 'This is who we are internally and externally.'"* He then shared, *"Our premise for being open and transparent is simple: authenticity starts at the top and extends through our employees to our customers. It is who we are; it is our narrative."*

As I reviewed the Playbook, I immediately noticed three tenets at the top of the first page which establish that they are a company that is inclusive of their internal and external stakeholders. The first tenet has three parts. First: "*Make our company a great place to work; delight every customer; make money for the entire corporate family.* No stakeholder group is left out of this component to the corporate narrative. The second tenet adds an element of responsibility to the first; it is termed "The Sundown Rule" and places an emphasis on addressing the needs of employees and customers within a timely manner: "*Any team member or customer request must be addressed before sundown.*" The third tenet describes the company's decision making process. They consider their corporate actions in one of two ways, which serve as the litmus tests for their decisions: "*We view decisions through two prisms: Will it be positive for our customers? Will it be positive for our team members, especially those who are closest to the customer?*"

As we continued to visit about the Playbook and the company in general, we gathered around boxes in the back of the store stacked next to a wall of drink coolers, and they began sharing stories about this particular store interwoven with their corporate narrative. They discussed the importance of taking into consideration what is important for the employees as well as the customers. They also emphasized that success is measured in a myriad of forms, since, as in most companies, the bottom line is often a moving target. "*We consider training to be critical for our employees' success,*" one manager shared. Then they all agreed that without their employees trained to meet and engage their customers face-to-face, what is offered for purchase in their stores would more than likely remain "on the shelf" as customers will easily shift to a company where service and their needs as a customer come first. During this initial conversation it was apparent that this convenience store company and its leadership are well

aware of the importance of their employees, their training, and how directly serving their customers' needs not only provides an expected service, but also creates relationships.

"It starts with service and becomes a relationship." *"We sell the same product as every other convenience store,"* explained the store manager. *"It's no secret. Customers can go down the street and get exactly what we sell in our store. It's our people; they make the difference here. Our people are trained, to serve our customers and they know our customers personally. For example,"* he explains, *"we have a group of men who come in the store every Wednesday morning, and sit over there at those tables and have breakfast tacos and coffee. If one of them is not here, or someone does not show up, we start investigating where they are to make sure they are OK. That,"* he shrugs, *"starts with service and becomes a relationship; it is what we do here."*

Another manager shared in the same conversation that an integral part of what they do in hiring in their company is to make sure that they hire the right people for the right job and in turn place them in an appropriate location to be successful for themselves and the company. That, they all agreed, means taking the time to pay attention to the person(s) being hired, and being willing to make changes and adjustments as needed to offer the employee the greatest opportunity for success. This success ultimately translates to the other employees as well as to customers. With this particular convenience store company, individual as well as collective employee interest seems to be reflective not only in word, via their corporate Playbook, and passed on by management in narrative form, but it is also evident on the frontline, at their stores. *"It is the people we choose to hire and where we place them – in which store – that makes the difference,"* explains one of the company's regional managers. *"We make sure that we have the right fit in the right place."*

In addition to being explicitly part of their internal brand narrative, this attitude about matching the right employees to the right location, was evident during one in-store observation in which a manager considered what was best for the employee, his co-workers, as well as store customers.

"She's in the back aisle," the clerk at the counter tells his co-worker who immediately starts walking toward the back of the store and is looking nervously at his watch, painfully aware that he is late, again. He walks back to the corner, where Laura, the assistant manager, is checking a cooler with another employee. She looks up, and quickly glances back down at her watch and says, in a calm, quiet voice, "*Marco you are late, again. You have been late every morning this week. Is everything OK, are you having a problem?"* *"No, Laura,"* he admits honestly, *"I am just not a morning person; I have a hard time getting up."* *"Well, Marco,"* she says, *"that is a problem because we have a team here and everyone counts on each other, and when someone is late it causes issues for everyone else, as well as our customers."* Marco apologizes sincerely and nods acknowledging the situation, obviously concerned about being the source of co-worker and customer problems. *"So,"* Laura says, *"OK, let's do this, since you are not a morning person, I will see if we can adjust your shifts so you arrive later in the day, but before I can do that, you need to arrive here for the rest of the week for the early shift on time, and we will take it from there. Your co-workers and our customers are counting on you."*

In considering employees and corporate narratives, part of management's expectations include that employees will pass on the corporate narrative internally and externally. The notion is that employees will become ambassadors of the brand, and in turn create authentic relationships with their co-workers and customers, ultimately translating brand loyalty.

Act "With a sense of urgency." Understanding and passing on the corporate narrative to other employees or to customers does not occur by happenstance. It is deliberate and serves as a specific imperative. Companies are recognizing the significant role internal narratives play within the company's strategic public relations context. However, before the sharing of the narrative can take place or be effective first the employee has to know, understand and believe in the vision and the values of the company, then they must be willing to authentically pass them on internally and externally. This store's Playbook states that the company's vision is to:

"*Create a culture where every member of the team sincerely cares about meeting the needs of our current customers. Our vision calls for every team member to demonstrate genuine interest in recruiting new customers and new team members to our family. To achieve that vision, we must achieve very high tenure, retention and build an atmosphere of continuous improvement throughout the company. We must be active listeners and implement planned actions with speed and a sense of urgency.*"

An integral part of customer service within the convenience store construct is creating convenience for the customer. Customers are looking for an opportunity to quickly purchase what they need and move on to accomplish the next task at hand. With that in mind, one of their core values they shared with me during conversation, and they pointed out in their Playbook, is a *"sense of urgency"* at all levels, internally and externally. Specifically that particular core value is stated thusly:

"*Good communication practices are what make us successful. One of our core values is to have a sense of urgency to respond to any issue that impacts our business. Speed is our friend and bureaucracy is our enemy…We strive to build our reputation by always communicating in a*

timely, polite and respectful manner. We should be faster in responding… as we are in the business of convenience."

Training, in this particular company is given considerable importance in their corporate narrative, as the category is listed in the Playbook in triplicate with all letters capitalized reading: "TRAIN, TRAIN, and TRAIN," with emphasis on being adept in the operation and use of all systems, highlighting that *"We are selling speed and a sense of urgency, not products."* The fact that their corporate narrative supports the notion of urgency and training was also reflective early on in my initial conversations with the store manager.

"We are all cross-trained here, and everyone must be willing to do any job that needs to be done, including me," smiles the store manager. *"Everyone needs to know how to do everything from making the coffee to running the cash register. We don't have idle time here, we are always moving, as we are either anticipating customer's needs, or serving their needs. We are here for them, but we need to know how to be here for them, and that,"* he nods, *"requires training."*

From the first observation in this convenience store, it was also apparent that training was a primary focus as each person was willing to learn or do any job necessary at any moment, and do it willingly. If someone did not know how to perform a task, another employee was quick to train them at that moment, offer a word of advice, or assist them as soon as a moment was available. Two initial interactions observed regarding training and support at the store were particularly noteworthy.

At the coffee bar across from the food area, a new employee was struggling, having no idea how to make coffee in one of the four, large coffee containers available to customers. There was a significant line forming, as one of the more popular coffee choices was low and the second

of like kind was virtually empty. The new employee was obviously having an anxious moment, as early morning customers were beginning to cluster close around the coffee bar. From across the store, a more experienced employee noticed her co-worker, and recognized his anxiety in the situation. She immediately stopped, came across the store, and said, *"John, looks like you have high-demand for coffee this morning, let's get these coffee makers going and help everyone get to work on time."* They made the coffee together, and she demonstrated with one coffee maker, and he followed her lead with the machine in front of him. Then, one customer queried, *"How long will that take to brew?" "Oh, about thirty seconds,"* the female manager responded. The customer looked a bit incredulous. But in looking at my watch, the employee was exactly right. It took only thirty seconds. The customers were surprised and delighted as they all got their coffee relatively quickly, and walked away happy. Not only had the female employee come to her co-worker's rescue, she trained him on how to make coffee in a tense moment, and did it in a respectful way. The new employee responded to her after the crowd had left, *"Thank you for saving me; now I know how to do it, and will start making coffee sooner next time."*

Another instance occurred when the assistant store manager was sitting at the tables chatting with a customer she seemed to know well, and doing some simple addition on a paper napkin. A well-dressed man, obviously in a hurry, had come inside to use the ATM machine. A female employee was standing in front of the machine performing a needed function so the ATM would operate properly. It was apparent that it was the first time she had performed this particular function. The man was standing in her space, perhaps thinking the closer he got, the faster she would finish her task. Of course, that did not work. The assistant manager immediately recognized the problem and said, *"Maria, that machine doesn't seem to be working properly. It can be temperamental. Let me see if I can help you."* The assistant manager quickly

walked over and solved the problem. The man got his cash and hurriedly headed out the door,

perhaps not completely happy, but nonetheless satisfied. He was in-and-out in less than 7

minutes. As soon as the glass door closed, the assistant manager said, *"OK, Maria, I know you*

had never done that before, let me show you how, and you can practice while I'm standing here

with you, so if that happens again you'll be comfortable."

The importance of a company sharing their narrative and values with their employees

and training their employees to in turn share that narrative and reflect those values cannot be

underestimated when engaging customers. Certainly it is not unusual for employees' actions to

reflect corporate values, but what is unusual in this case study is that the employees have been

trained so well, and execute the values so well, that customers actually know and articulate the

internal corporate narratives and share them with other new store customers, as evidenced by the

following conversations that took place during a store observation.

Stakeholders Know The Corporate Narrative

"Did you know," a Hispanic man who is a regular morning breakfast customer, queries a

new person whom he has just met and has just sat down at the table next to him to have his first

early-morning coffee and taco breakfast at this convenience store location, *"that they are*

supposed to greet and welcome every customer as they walk in the door?" The newcomer nods,

obviously a bit surprised as he sips his coffee and looks up at the stream of people, coming

through glass door, and hearing multiple voices welcoming customers into the store. *"That's*

what they do here," and he says with complete conviction, *"they do it in every one of their*

stores." Another regular morning customer, reading his paper, looks up, engages in the

conversation and shares, "*Did you all also know that this is a training store. The store manager*

here is the best, and they bring people here to train under him, and they often send him out for

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weeks to train people in other stores. And the company makes sure that their employees know

the customer is number one here, they come first."

Working Together to Support Local Causes

Not only is this particular convenience store company committed to placing their

customers first, they also place great value on the support of local causes, which often emanates

from store customers. In this particular case study, patrons regularly give to the company's

designated causes because of the relationships that have developed between the employees and

customers. The regional manager for this convenience store shared this story easily during our

first conversation:

"When we do a community project, or sponsor a charity," the regional manager explains,

"our customers donate at this location because they know Robert, our store manager. If he says,

it's a good cause, then they are going to give. They don't even ask what the cause is. They just

reach into their pocket and give whatever they have, because Robert asked them to give. They

have a personal relationship with him, and they trust him."

This trust and the relationship described, which cuts across socio-economic boundaries

could be seen easily when the store was in the midst of an in-store fundraising effort for a local

children's hospital. At the cash register, customers were regularly asked if they would like to

give $1 to support the local children's hospital and, one particular morning, Robert was doing the

asking. Robert would politely ask customers, as they made their purchase, if they would like to

donate and invariably people would reach into their pockets or wallets and pull out change or

several dollars. Not a single person said, "No." At one point, there was a construction worker,

an EMS provider, a doctor, a business professional and a woman with two small children in line

to pay for their morning breakfasts and beverages. They all gave easily. The line cleared out,

and a homeless man came up to the counter to pay for a beer he wanted to purchase. The beer

cost $1.83. Robert rang up the purchase, then asked the man politely if he would like to donate

to the children's hospital. The man placed his crumpled backpack on the ground, reached in his

pocket and pulled out a tattered purple pouch. He opened the pouch and pulled out a single

crumpled dollar bill. He opened it up slowly and placed the dollar on the counter. Robert

thanked him, wished him well, and then the man smiled, stood a little taller, picked up his

backpack and his beer, and headed out the door.

With this particular in-store fundraiser which benefitted the local children's hospital, and

took place over a four-week period, the company's convenience stores nationwide—through in-

store donations only—raised $1.8 million. Other in-store charity fundraising efforts the

company supports include March of Dimes, MD Anderson Cancer Research Hospital and Stars

Scholarships.

Community relations, within the public relations context, often includes planning and

execution of special events. For this particular company those events are often held at their

stores. One of those special, annual events is for MD Anderson Cancer Center, and is entitled

"Striking Out Cancer." The community is invited to visit store on a specific day and join with

employees as they donate, and pick up a brushes to paint in red across the "Strike Out Cancer"

logo printed on the side of their convenience store buildings. Employees and customers are doing

it together as part of their convenience store community. They are physically and collectively

creating community through the support—financially and physically—of a common health

enemy that strikes everyone regardless of age, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

In addition, they hold monthly barbecue days at their stores, which appears to be part of

their community relations strategy and serves as a beacon for building face-to-face relationships.

On those days an enormous, black barbecue pit is set up in the parking lot, and barbecue is cooked for customers beginning at 5 a.m. and lasting for the better part of the morning. During the event at this particular convenience store, there is never an empty seat. Conversations are always abundant on barbecue days among patrons, among employees and between employees and patrons, and on those days, no one is in a hurry. Community replaces convenience as the order of the day, as whenever someone takes their leave from the eating area, they do so quite reluctantly. This is a place where customers obviously feel comfortable as everyone either knows one another within the walls of this in-and-out convenience store, or they are more than willing to meet you and welcome you into the conversation and the community. If you express any interest at all to join the jovial barbecue community, people offer to "share a chair," a place to put down your drink, or to stand so that you could eat, if they had finished. Store employees call everyone by name, and stop to chat or laugh momentarily. On these occasions, there is no doubt community relations has successfully transformed into authentic community relationships.

Developing Relationships With Customers

Corporate narratives, training, corporate social responsibility and community relations are all working in concert in this convenience store setting to build and create relationships. The employees' actions and the stories shared every day which become long-lasting narratives are serving as the foundation of those relationships. The primary way they are building relationships in this convenience store is that they have made it a place where everyone is welcome. During this study, nine specific themes emerged through my in-store observations that illustrate the specific communication and public relations strategies being used by this company to develop relationships with their employees and customers.

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"We are like Cheers." The first emergent theme, We Are Like Cheers," was not only seen to be taking place within the store on each visit, it was also specifically expressed in conversation by an employee as she sat down to eat her lunch with several customers. This was an in vivo code that represents the feeling of family and being welcome that exists in the store.

"*We are just like 'Cheers,' the show,*" Anna, one of the assistant store managers announces, as she smiles and sits down with her freshly prepared food – fried chicken in a hot dog bun, her favorite - on her break and chats with the customers whom she calls by name. "*As the song says,*" she shares easily, *'Everyone here knows your name, and everyone is glad you came'…and you can come in and stay as long as they like.*" Rachel, a middle-aged black woman sitting at the next table sipping her large tea and eating her afternoon cookies smiles knowingly at the assistant manager's comparison of this convenience store community to the long running "Cheers*" TV* sitcom where people came and shared their lives and daily experiences with the community they had created in a local Boston Bar. "*Yes,*" she says thoughtfully to Anna. *"You're right, everyone does know your name here, and everyone sits with each other and talks about life, family and politics. And, sometimes people, like me*," she laughs, *"we stay here all day. We don't judge people here, we are a family,*" Anna explains, *"people come, eat, drink and socialize either sitting down, at the coffee bar or between the two. This is their community and our community as employees. People come here,*" she smiles sincerely, *"and it becomes part of their life. We are,*" she nods, *"just like 'Cheers.'"*

Employees learn early on - as reflected in the Playbook - that customers are number one and that, as an employee in one of their stores, part of their job, part of the story they are telling, and the narrative that they are passing on is to make sure that:

"Every customer is to be greeted at the door, every customer is to be thanked for their business when they exit and you are encouraged to get to know our customers, take a risk and be friendly."

During every observation at the store, that narrative permeated the customer experience, as in addition to every customer being welcomed into the store, the moment they crossed the threshold they were also treated as guests rather than merely as customers rushing in-and-out to make an immediate purchase. Each customer is actually referred to in conversation as a "guest" by clerks and food servers alike. Even when a customer is directed to get it in line to make their purchase, it is done in a polite manner. The clerks, managers and food servers all say, *"May I please help the next guest in line?"* Perhaps that seems like a small distinction or a small action, but the juxtaposition of it is so striking in such an unlikely place that people comment on it and respond in like measure by being extremely polite to the employees as well as to one another.

"When they say, 'Good morning, welcome to our store,' I always say good morning back," one man whom I had never seen before said to me as he entered the store, and walked toward the table where I was sitting, sipping coffee, *"it's just polite. Did they say, good morning to you?"* he queried. *"They do such a great job here, but if they didn't say good morning to you, tell me and I will give them a hard time, and I'll let them know that they are falling down on their job, as I am the 'politeness police,"* he laughed. Frank, an early morning regular, sitting at the table next to me, heard the conversation, and then in response to the next doorbell ding, he looked up and greeted the incoming guest before the clerks or store managers could do so. *"I am here so often,"* Frank smiled, *"at least three or four times a week, and I know so many people that I often like to greet people and say 'good morning, welcome to our store' before the staff can do it. Sometimes, I even greet the staff when they come in for their shifts; it's just part of*

being in this community, and" he said philosophically, *"you know, if people hear and see you doing that, being nice and polite, they will probably treat the staff and each other a little better also."*

In addition to being polite and treating customers as if they are guests, every customer who enters the store is treated with respect regardless of their ethnicity or socio-economic status. That fact was authentically apparent in a single store experience.

"We do our best to treat everyone with respect here," explains Laura, the assistant manager. *"We are here to help everyone. Whether you wear a suit or sleep on the street, or wherever you come from, it's not important. Every person deserves respect."* As, if on cue, the moment Laura finished her statement, a man who appeared to be homeless walked up to the counter and asks her for food. The store is relatively quiet at the moment, so Laura asks another clerk to take her spot at the cash register, and then takes the man over to the fresh food area and asks a server to fill the container with specific items. Laura then calculates the cost, reaches in her pocket and counts out the exact amount, including tax, hands it to the man and walks him back to the cash register. Then, she asks him to hand her the money. He hands it to her, rings up the purchase, and then, just as she would for any other guest in the store, she thanks him and wishes him well as he nods appreciatively, and he quietly exits the store.

At this convenience store, the clerks, food servers, and managers—much like their counterparts in *"Cheers—* never seem too busy to chat for a minute, joke, or laugh openly with their guests. Some days, even though the lines for fresh food, drinks and snacks stretched to the back of the store, employees would still ask people about their families, give them a hug or take the time to query them about themselves as they come to the counter or while they are waiting in line, *"Hi dear, how are you doing today? Oh, I see you dropped the kids off first this morning?*

Did your mother go home from the hospital yesterday?" Or to their Spanish speaking guests, *"¿Su hija, Elena, cuantos años tiene?" (Your daughter, Elena, how old is she?) Ten cuidado, es muy caliente hoy." (Be careful it's very hot today).* Those few, brief words or expressions of caring are all part of what these employees do to make their guests feel welcome, known and cared about on a daily basis – just like *"Cheers."*

"Every member sincerely cares about customer needs." In this convenience store company, their internal corporate narrative, as described in their Playbook, sets forth their cultural goal, establishing an authentic sense of caring for their customers in their stores. According to their Playbook: *"We are striving to create a culture where every member sincerely cares about meeting the needs of our customers.*

The convenience store management in this case study believes that sincere caring for their customers' needs begins with the greeting, and how the employees share that greeting with each customer, every day. It is in fact part of their signature, as there was not a single observation in which a welcoming greeting was not shared as I entered the store.

"Part of our culture is that we want everyone to feel welcome when they come into our stores. We teach in employee training that everyone should and needs to be welcomed into the store with a greeting, but how the customer is greeted, or what the employee says, is up to the employee. It's about what feels comfortable and sincere for them to say to anyone entering the store. We share with employees that we want them to sincerely greet our guests, and give them guidelines, but we do not necessarily tell them how to do it. That is their choice, and is actually part of our philosophy, our structure company wide," explains one of the company's vice presidents.

There is nothing like feeling welcomed into a new environment. It sets the tone for the entire experience. The first time I walked into this particular convenience store to begin observing and the bell dinged, I was greeted by three clerks in three different ways, and my immediate response when they said good morning, was to say good morning right back, even though to whom I was responding was unclear. But it gave me the sense that they were happy that I had simply walked through the door, regardless of the size of purchase I made, or if I purchased anything at all. It also made me feel at ease to sit down at one of the tables, get a cup of coffee and a paper, and stay a while. I was not taking up someone else's space. I could be there, and I could stay as long as I liked.

Other guests, like Frank, must have had that feeling for quite some time as well. When Frank walked in that same morning I did, employees not only greeted him verbally, they came from behind the counter to physically shake his hand and several employees gave him a huge *abrazo*—Spanish for hug—and he did the same as well with other guests whom he saw and knew throughout the store. On that first day, once Frank had ordered his breakfast, he headed to the eating area, noticed a new person (myself) was sitting there, and immediately introduced himself and we shook hands. We chatted easily, and as he sat at the next table to eat, he continued visiting with and greeting people who came in that he knew, which turned out to be a large percentage of the early morning crowd that day. He finished his meal, said his goodbyes, and when he got up and left the store, everyone who saw him thanked him for coming and said they would see him tomorrow. On the second visit, not only did the employees extend their usual greeting when I came in the store, they added, *"Welcome back dear, great to see you today. Having coffee? Oh, the newspapers are over there today.* Not surprisingly, Frank, walked in a bit later, and was once again given an extensive welcoming ritual by employees and

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customers; he then ordered his food and came to the tables. On this day, he greeted me by name, sat in the closest seat at the adjacent table, and began sharing work and family stories. Once he finished breakfast, he came over, hugged me, and said, *"Hope you have a great weekend, we'll talk again next week, see you then."* In two visits, I had already been welcomed into the culture by employees and a "recognized regular," was accepted and felt sincerely cared about and, remarkably it was in the most unlikely of places: a corner convenience store.

Anticipating customers' needs and going above and beyond their surface needs is an authentic way to create public relationships. For someone to know you well enough, or see you often enough to know, understand and anticipate your needs as a customer tells you that they know me here, and they care about me enough to remember what I like and what I will be looking for when I come into the store. That is part of feeling welcome and that you belong in this community. One employee shared how that works at this store.

"We know our regulars," smiles Anna, an assistant manager, *"we know what they are going to order, and we often are making it for them as we see them walk through the door. Some buy the same candy bars every time they come in or they get the same drinks, so we get them ready for them, so when they get to the register, we have it right there for them and can ring it up quickly and easily. And if they don't get the same thing, we stop and ask why. Sometimes,"* she explains, *"they have been sick, or they just want a little variety. Also, we often take people home, like Oscar, who comes in here every day and he lives across town. In the evenings, we usually ask him if he needs a ride, and he will say, 'only if you are going that way,' he doesn't want us to go out of our way for him. We worry about him because he is older. We often give our regulars, like Oscar, rides home when they need it and we are getting off work, it's part of being a community, being a family,"* she shrugs easily. *"It is just what we do here."*

The sincere caring that exists within this store was also observed in casual conversations among customers. *"You know the employees here, they do come looking for you, if they have not seen you for a while,"* expressed one middle-aged woman who was visiting with her friend while having lunch. *"I was gone for a couple of weeks, one time, and the day I came back, everyone came up to me, hugged me, asked me where I had been, told me they had missed me and they were glad I was back. Now, how many convenience stores do you know where that happens?"* Her friend, smiled and nodded, and at that moment, David, one of the younger clerks, who had come from the cash register to the eating area to make fresh coffee, stopped, smiled warmly and engaged the woman, saying, *"Oh, hi dear, so glad to see you today. How was your lunch? Everybody doing well in your family? Enjoy your afternoon, and hope we see you and your husband back tomorrow."*

Community through proximity. One of the "Code of Conduct" tenets in the company's corporate "Playbook" and part of their employee-shared narrative is that "*Customers come first, supported by a value proposition that every experience will be fast, fun, friendly and delicious."* In other words, *delight every customer* which also circles back to the second stated corporate goal. Once the customer – turned guest – is made to feel welcome as they enter the store, the design or layout of the store becomes a structural element that plays a significant role in friendliness, food and fast service, which all serve as the underpinnings for conversation, storytelling and the creation of relationships.

In this particular store, the eating and coffee area is designed to be an intimate setting. There are only three laminate-topped tables and 18 silver and red chairs nestled in an area to the right of the front doors which are strategically placed directly across from the coffee bar. Just enough space is available for coffee drinkers to serve themselves and then turn and face the

tables to easily greet and chat with their fellow coffee drinkers, the customers seated at the tables

or they can easily sit down themselves. The design is convenient, friendly and conversational.

The space, at first glance seemed small, with less than enough room for the large numbers of

people coming into the store daily. But, in observing and becoming part of the community, the

size, location and proximity of the area to the coffee bar was perfectly designed to cultivate

relationships.

On the first morning, as I was sitting in the food area reading the paper, a black woman

with a blue bandana and a black fedora atop her head came to the coffee area. She spent 10

minutes at the coffee bar, shifting from one end to the other, as she mixed and re-mixed her

brew, pouring it out, adding creamer and chatting with staff and customers at the coffee bar.

"Good morning, Rachel," Laura, an assistant manager says, touching Rachel on the arm, *"How's*

the coffee today? We made a pot, just for you. Do you have the mix right, yet?" They laugh and

then another customer comes up, who obviously knows Rachel and Laura and says, *"Oh I*

thought that you made that coffee for me." *"Well, this one is for Rachel,"* Laura quips,

"because I knew she would be in here first this morning, and the fresh one will be ready for you

in less than a minute. By the time you get your taco, your personal pot of coffee will be ready."

The three of them laugh, and then they sincerely inquire about how they each are doing, as two

more people walk up, and the three politely slide out of the way and move to the adjacent tables

to continue their conversation and greet the several people they know facing the coffee bar at the

other two tables.

This scenario and ones like it were repeated often, as people met at the coffee bar,

engaged with employees and then sat down together. At times, families would come in and get

coffee together. EMS workers and doctors, construction workers, police and fire fighters, city

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officials and homeless citizens would all rub shoulders and greet one another as they prepared their morning beverage and waited for their breakfast taco order. Employees would come over and greet people they knew, sit with them for a few minutes on their break or meet a new person and ask their name, and help them if they looked lost or were looking for guidance on which coffee to choose, or where to find the coffee lids or sleeves.

The actual order of customers that came into the store in the mornings in search of coffee and breakfast seemed to follow a particular pattern. First it was the EMS workers, police and fire fighters, then came the construction workers, the homeless group and then the mothers and fathers with children on their way to school, followed by the professionals: doctors, lawyers, judges and elected officials. When people came to the coffee area, everyone shook each other's hands and gave a morning greeting, big or small. Often people who did not know one another shared tables, or sat for a few minutes while they were waiting for their breakfast orders. Conversations took place alternately in English and Spanish. As an example of the personal, friendly nature of the store, there were no numbers for breakfast orders placed, instead when orders were ready, guests' names were called out by the clerks who had been passed a little white sack marked in black magic marker with each the person's first name printed on it. Certainly "old school," by any standard, but also indicative of the importance of friendliness and food that has created community in this harbinger of convenience.

Efficient service. An example of a specific internal strategy taught to assist employees to ensure efficient service takes place states that:

"There should never be more than three people in line, if there is more than one team member on duty. If a person working at the register needs help, then he or she needs to communicate with a colleague that their attention is required ASAP."

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This front-line customer imperative was witnessed multiple times during observations in the store. On one specific occasion the morning breakfast rush was in full swing, but there was a lull in the constant flow of guests. During that momentary lull, David, one of the clerks had come over to the coffee bar to check to see if there was plenty of coffee remaining, or if more was needed. As he was preparing the machines to brew more coffee, the door began to ding constantly, and the line which had been non-existent, suddenly grew, extending all the way back to the coffee bar and restaurant area. David noticed immediately. He stopped making the coffee, and began to shift to the counter, and an alert manager looked at David who motioned he needed to get to the cash register, and the manager immediately came to the coffee area to finish what Daniel had started.   The line of twenty or so guests, quickly diminished, and no one in line seemed disturbed or frustrated with the length of the line. In fact, they were casually chatting among themselves and one customer shared, *"You know they get us in and out of here so quickly, and even when the line gets long, they are paying attention. I'm sure why he line is so long is someone couldn't make it in to work today. They are really very efficient here and very friendly, and the food is good too."* In addition to the customer compliment, other customers in line actually began to assist each other and the clerks. One young man asked a woman, whom he obviously had never met, and who was standing on the side of the line, *"Did you order breakfast, and is your name Diane? "Yes,"* the older woman replied politely. *"I think they put your order back with mine. I'll get yours while I am getting mine."* He gave the clerk both names, the clerk quickly retrieved both sacks filled with breakfast tacos that had just been placed on a cart behind him. The man, who was the last one in the line that long line, which in five minutes or less had dropped to zero, handed the woman her sack, and told her to please go ahead of him. She thanked the young man for his thoughtfulness, made her purchase and they both

complimented the clerk on what a good job he had done in getting that line down so quickly, and the fact that he was friendly and considerate of every person in line.

My store, my ritual. During multiple observations at the convenience store, it was apparent that regular customers believed that this was "their store." What happened within in it, had become part of their lives, part of their lived experiences. Their daily rituals and shared stories had made them members of this community of convenience, and had transformed them into loyal customers, and in turn they had in fact become family. While having lunch one day at the store, it was immediately apparent that a loyal following and family exist within this corner convenience store.

Anna, an assistant manager, was sitting at one of the tables talking to, Rachel, a regular customer, and they started discussing their personal history. *"I used to work at one of our other stores on the other side of town,"* Anna shared. *"It was a great store. We had some wonderful customers. In fact, we had a group called 'The Pajama Club.' They would come in early every morning,"* she smiles, *"in their pajamas to get their coffee."* A woman sitting at the farthest table overheard Anna talking about the 'Pajama Club' and raised her hand and said, *"I was one of those people, I was a member of the Pajama Club. I came in every morning and got my coffee in my pajamas and then went back home to get dressed. Your coffee is much better than mine,"* she smiled sincerely, and added*, "and I don't have to make it. I went to that store every morning. But you moved over here, Anna. It took me a while to find where you went. But once I found out, I followed you. And now, even though this store is not close to my house, I come here, in my clothes,"* she laughs *"and get my morning coffee, because you are here."*

Another example of a following and loyalty that exists in this convenience store setting, is that customers turned guests consider it to be "their store." That notion is evident through

interactions between the employees and guests whom, through those interactions, often become like family to one another.

Oscar a seventy-five- year old Hispanic man comes to this particular store every day. Even though he lives five miles away, he takes the bus every morning to this store, brings his red bag filled with anything he might need and stays all day in the store. *"Oscar,"* Robert, the store manager explains nodding, *"he is part of our family."* As Robert begins sharing stories about Oscar, he says, "*There he is,"* pointing out a diminutive man clad in a grey T-shirt and a red baseball cap who is walking through the store, making sure everything is order. "*He watches out for things here,"* smiles Robert. *"He walks the aisles, and lets us know if we need to re-stock something, if the trash is too high outside, if the food bar is low on napkins or forks, if he thinks someone might be stealing something in the back aisle, or if the tables need to be cleaned and the trash needs to be emptied. He knows everybody, and everybody loves Oscar."* At that moment, Oscar walks up to Robert, tips his hat and says in Spanish that they need more ketchup on the food bar. Robert excuses himself politely and comes back shortly, with a ketchup bottle in hand, offers it to Oscar and who sets off to replace the almost empty container with a new one.

"Oscar will be seventy-six in September," explains Robert. *Oscar told me, 'God willing, I want to celebrate my birthday right here in the store.' He asked me if we could have a cake in the store on that day. I told him of course we could. And,"* Robert laughed*, "he said that he wanted a cake that would feed a hundred, with a hundred plates, but not a hundred candles. All the store employees are going to chip in and get a cake for Oscar. He has so many friends here. Everyone, including all the store employees, loves Oscar.* As Robert finished sharing his story, Oscar who had returned from his ketchup-refill run, was sitting down at "his table," among an

obviously caring group of at least 10 friends, including a couple of store employees, who were laughing, telling stories, and having their lunch together.

Another conversation punctuating the notion that customers feel a sense of ownership of the store that harbors their daily ritual occurred when a woman, who is a regular guest, came to eat lunch one day and she shared her story with a couple she knew who were already sitting at a table. *"I told my husband,"* she smiled, *"that I am going to 'My Store' to meet 'My Convenience Store Friends' and have lunch. I love this store. It's not really like a store at all, it is like a place where you meet new friends, old friends and family. I think the staff really makes you feel like you want to come back and that this is your place, because I think it's their place too,"* and the two friends with whom she was sharing her story, easily nodded in agreement.

Certainly creating a following or loyalty is one part of the story or narrative happening in this particular convenience store setting, but sustaining that loyalty is also significant part of what is taking place as well. One notable way employees are making that happen is through providing special items for regular guests with whom they have developed relationships and who have become family.

"If we have a regular customer," Anna explains, *"like Rachel, Oscar, Henry or a member of the Wednesday morning breakfast club, we will take special requests. Take Rachel,"* who at that moment is dipping her tea bag in her 24 oz. cup of hot water she has just gotten from the coffee bar, *"she likes a special tea. Rachel is here every day – two or three times a day – we order in special tea she likes, just for her. There are other customers who make requests, and we do our best to provide what they like. Rachel and Oscar often sit together,"* she adds, *"and Rachel knows Oscar likes a certain kind of cookies, and she makes sure that we have them for him. In fact, Rachel is such a part of our store family that often she will go and get several*

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packaged food items, bring them to the table share them with someone she is sitting with or one of us who is sitting and eating on our breaks, and when she is ready to leave she brings all of the empty food wrappers to the counter, and pays for everything that she has opened or eaten. She is part of our family and we know her," and she shrugs, *"she knows us, and so do many of our customers. Actually they are not just customers, they are our friends. We sit down and eat with them, talk, laugh and joke and share stories and talk about life as we go about our business, and when we are on our breaks."*

Since human beings are certainly creatures of habit, another way to create a following or loyalty in relationships is through a sense of ritual – a daily ritual of coming to a certain place, and a ritual of specific experiences that take place within that space or location. For this convenience store, a ritual does seem to exist not only in coming to the store on a daily basis, regardless of whether you are staying for a few moments, or for the entire day, but also for food orders placed, or coffee, drinks and snacks that are ritually purchased. One man who sat down across from me for 30 minutes one day began chatting, and shared in detail a story regarding his daily ritual within this particular convenience store.

"This is my ritual," the man explained who is a local professional. *"I come here every day and buy two papers, then I get a taco and coffee and go to my office. I spread the papers out, and then I take the jalapeños and tomatoes out of the tacos and eat them while I read the papers. Then he smiles and say, "They overfill the tacos – they are very generous – so I have to take some out. But this is what I do every day. I don't know what I would do if this store wasn't here. It's my ritual,"* he says shaking his head adding, *"if it was gone, that would definitely not be a good thing."*

Another man, whom I know personally, came in on a Saturday morning, as I was reading the paper and having a taco, and queried me on what I was doing there. I asked him the same question. *"Well,"* he said, *"I come here every Saturday morning at about 10 a.m. I get tacos and coffee and take them home to my wife, and we have our Saturday morning breakfast together,"* and he laughs, *"we don't have to cook and we don't even have to make the coffee."*

An additional ritual observed in this particular convenience store is that judges, city officials, legislators and high-ranking law enforcement officials come in daily – usually in the morning - and get the same breakfast, coffee or drink, greet everyone they know throughout the store as well as in the coffee area, including employees, either through a handshake or a hug. They rarely sit at the tables, but there is often effusive greeting going on if they are waiting for their food, and once they have their drink and small white bag filled with their breakfast order in hand, they take their leave, having completed their regular *"convenience store ritual."*

It also appears that rituals in this construct exist among customers who do not even know each other, but nonetheless they are there, and are happening on a daily basis. An example of that happened one morning just before 8 a.m.

"There she is," Frank said to no one in particular, as the door dinged, and everyone said their morning greeting to a woman holding up her 64-ounce striped cup. *"Good morning"* Frank announced, his voice carrying across the store as she passed in front of the counters and the cashiers on her way to the soda fountain area. She, looked back and responded, to Frank with a familiar, *"Good morning, how are you doing today?"* and then she told the clerks as she passed, *"I'm going to fill up my cup and be back to pay for the re-fill."* They all nodded, obviously aware this was a regular occurrence. *"She comes in every day,"* Frank shared quietly with a woman sitting at the next table. *"She gets her soft-drink re-fill every morning. I don't know her*

name, and I don't know if she knows mine, but I know she works at the courthouse. It's funny" he says thoughtfully, *"even though I don't really know her, I would miss her if I didn't see here every day here."* At that moment, the woman who had just paid for her re-fill made her exit and she and Frank waved, wished each other well, and said almost simultaneously, completing their ritual, *"See you tomorrow."*

Empathy with customers. Part of creating authentic relationships is empathy, and part and parcel of that in a public relations and an external stakeholder context is putting customers and their needs first. True empathy with customers in a convenience store setting was observed within a momentary exchange of similar experiences while making a purchase, or over time and be part of a deeper, long-lasting relationship. One of many observations of empathy seen in this store took place at the cash register in a conversation between an obviously anxious female customer making a purchase and the kind clerk at the register.

A somewhat disheveled woman who came into the store several times during the week, seemingly came for one purpose and one purpose only: to buy scratch offs and lottery tickets. One day when she stepped up to the counter, and purchased several tickets, I happened to be standing to the side chatting with another clerk, waiting for a food order. She handed Gabriella, the clerk, her money, and Gabriella smiled and said, *"Hi, how are you doing today? You come in and see us often and buy tickets, do you win much?* The woman responded somewhat disgustedly, *"I never win sh_t, but I am addicted. I spend $200 a week in here on scratch offs and lottery tickets."* Gabriella responded sincerely, *"I understand, that is very frustrating."* The woman then chose multiple tickets, made her purchase and was out the door immediately as Gabriella said, *"Goodbye, and good luck!"* Shortly thereafter, the woman returned with several tickets in hand. There was not a line at that moment, so she walked up to Gabriella and presented

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her tickets to redeem her winnings. *"Guess I did win a little cash this time,"* she said with a bit of a lilt in her voice. Gabriella smiled and took her tickets and exchanged them for cash. As she was handing the cash to the customer, Gabriella shared, *"You know I used to do what you are doing all the time. I would buy tickets, run out to the car, scratch them off and be so happy if I won. Most of the time, like you said, I didn't win, but I was addicted to* it. *Then one day, it hit me and I understood that I was addicted, and I was spending money that I could be using for my family and my kids.* *"So,"* she said, *"I stopped."* The woman nodded, not really listening, but said a perfunctory thank you, as Gabriella smiled reassuringly and said sincerely as the woman turned to leave, *"Take care of yourself, and I hope your day goes well."*

In almost every observation at the store, clerks, managers and food servers came to the coffee bar and food area multiple times, sometimes during breaks, sometimes to restock and sometimes to make more coffee. But, regardless of their purpose they always made time to engage with people, regardless of whether they knew them or not, and more often than not, there was an empathetic conversation or action that took place.

On one occasion, a food preparer clad in her yellow branded uniform and green apron, came to get coffee. There was an older, Hispanic woman there who had prepared her coffee to her liking and she was struggling to put the to-go lid on top. The food preparer noticed she was having a hard time, so she stopped, went over to her and asked in Spanish, *"¿Todo está bien, señora, necessita me ayuda?" (Are you alright, ma'am, do you need me to help you?)* The woman did not answer, she just kept trying to push the lid on the coffee cup which obviously had extremely hot coffee in it. The food server, politely came closer to the woman, smiled and said, *"Es muy dificil para* me *también, mira" (It is very difficult for me too, look).* Then she slid her hand around the woman's cup and secured the lid for the woman. *"Es muy caliente, ten cuidad"*

(It is very hot, be careful). The woman, who obviously did not speak English, or for that matter, speak much at all, slowly nodded and thanked the employee who had understood her dilemma and had taken the time to help her. *"Muchas gracias"* (Thank you very much). The elderly woman finally managed to say as she slowly headed to the front counter to pay for her coffee. *"Con mucho gusto. Hasta luego, señora" (With much pleasure, until later ma'am).*

Other observations that create relationships through empathy in this particular convenience store included employees' consideration and treatment of homeless people who come and go in the store, people who are in need of food, and those whom they know who are sick, or regular guests who have not come in for some time.

"We all understand," explains Laura, the assistant manager, *"that but by the grace of God go I. We could all be where any of our customers are one day, and since this is our family we need to care for them and be sympathetic to them and their situations. People don't expect that in a convenience store, and they are surprised. But, once they have that experience here, they begin to understand that we have a community, we have relationships that we have built with so many of our customers, we know their families, their children"* and she smiles, *"even their dogs and cats. They share with us and we share with them. This may be our job as employees, but we all have stories to tell and share and that's what we do, and it makes us who we are here"*

Fostering community among customers. An unexpected relationship that seems to have developed is one among customers in this convenience store setting. In this convenience store's momentary construct, the relationship development, as if responding to the immediacy within that particular context, seemed often to develop quickly with just a word, an action or a single conversation, and almost instantaneously create community among customers.

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Once you sit down in the coffee area, share your table with a stranger, greet or engage with a regular guest, even in a limited way, you are not only in the conversation, you have become part of the culture, and you want to know more about the people who come there every day and share their lives, who they are and from where they have come. In other words, you want to know their stories, their experiences. You want to know them and for them to know you. Perhaps it is the eating and coffee area, and their close proximity to one another that serve as beacons that draw you in and create the opportunity for community among customers in combination with the initial feeling when you walk in the door that you are welcome and that you belong.

On one particular occasion, while sitting at the tables observing and drinking afternoon coffee, Oscar walked in the front door carrying his large red duffle bag and sporting his usual red baseball cap. He saw me and waved, greeted Robert, the store manager, and assistant managers, Laura and Anna, and then put his bag down in the end chair, took off his cap and asked politely in Spanish if he could sit with me. He sat and visited with me for an hour-and-half, mostly in Spanish, and although we had greeted one another a couple of times, we had never really had a conversation. We talked about our families, where he lived, and the fact that he came to this store daily because he had many friends here. *"I have been coming here for a long time. I come here every day, eat most of my meals here, and often walk downtown and back and then, sometimes go see people who are sick in the hospital."* As he was sharing his stories, he was constantly greeted by other customers and store employees. At one point, a middle aged Hispanic man wearing a baseball cap entered the store, he saw Oscar and immediately came over, and greeted him in Spanish, *¿Cómo estás amigo? – How are you friend?* They shook hands and hugged. Then he introduced himself to me, and asked Oscar in Spanish if he had

change for a dollar; he needed four quarters. Oscar reached into his red duffle and meticulously pulled out a prescription medicine bottle filled with quarters. They made the exchange of cash for quarters, then the man quips, "*Oscar is my banker. I see him here every day. I live a block from here, and come here every day to get my taco. I have been coming here for three years,* and he smiles, "*the same people like Oscar and me come here every day. People who come here become friends. Not really sure how it happens, but it does.* Then Oscar, speaks up and says, "*Si, todos están aquí son amigos*" – *Yes, we are all friends here*. "*I usually sit at that table*," Oscar says pointing to the back table next to the wall of drink coolers, *"that is my table,"* and then he smiles and says easily, "*but I will sit anywhere."* The two men, then say their goodbyes, and Oscar pulls out his flip phone to check the time. *"I need to catch the bus at 5:00. It is 4:30 so I better get ready."* As he puts on his red baseball cap and packs up his bag, he looks up and asks, "*Will you be back tomorrow?" "Yes,"* I responded*, "and you?"* He smiles and says, "*I am planning on it, but if I am not here tomorrow, I died. Only God knows for sure if I will be here or not, but if I am I will see you then. Hasta mañana"* (Until tomorrow).

Additionally, a unique and surprising way in which community through conversation is fostered among customers occurred in this convenience store context multiple times. The employees placed daily newspapers available for purchase on a multi-level stand at the front of the store. In addition to the local paper, *The Wall Street Journal, U.S. Today* and the *San Antonio Express News* are all available and positioned prominently for store guests to easily view the day's headlines. While sitting at a table reading multiple newspapers and sipping coffee—something that as a participant-observer, had already become a personal morning ritual within this community of convenience—a man entered the store, stopped at the news stand that was located just across from the check-out counter and started reading the day's headlines aloud. He

keyed in on one headline in particular, and began to engage the whole store in conversation.

"Did you know that the President went to Cuba? He asked loudly to anyone and everyone in the store. *I didn't know that, who in here knew that? What do you all think about that?"* From between the aisles, people began commenting, *"I didn't know that either,"* one voice called out. *"Me neither. "When did he go, is he back?"* From there, a whole conversation ensued that carried throughout the store and in the food ordering and checkout lines. People came up to discuss it further with him, and then they came over to get coffee and several people started talking about it, and sharing their opinions. This happened on multiple occasions, not only with the same man, but with others who came in the store and read the latest news headlines for everyone to hear. People sitting at tables would begin discussing the topic, and often would comment and share their opinions easily from one table to another.

Employees love their jobs. *"It's so nice to work right here, where everyone here is so dear."* That is the song, David, one of the employees, was singing one morning as he was preparing coffee at 6:00 a.m. for the early morning breakfast rush. Several people were sitting at the tables in the restaurant area as he was singing, and greeting guests as they crossed the threshold that morning. *"David,"* one store guest queried, *"I come here almost every day and you are always happy, are you ever in a bad mood?"* David paused, thought about it for a minute, and then said, *"Not that I can remember. You know,"* he said, *"I love my job. This is a great place to work. How lucky is that?"*

In another observation, a new employee explains easily why she loves her job in this community of convenience:

"This is a special place," Mary shares as she sits down for afternoon break. *"I have only worked here for a month, but I already love it. We joke, have fun and everyone supports*

each other. I have two jobs, and I love the people I work with here, and the customers.

Everyone treats one another with respect, and if you need help, all you have to do is ask, and,"

she smiles, *"we laugh a lot."* At that moment as if to prove her last point, the food preparer who

made her lunch, came over to get a cup of afternoon coffee at the coffee bar. *"Isn't that right,*

Rick? Don't we *have fun and love each other here*?" Rick, looks up, smiles and nods, *"Yes we*

do." "And of course you are my favorite person here, right Rick? He laughs, and then Mary

says, *"You know Rick made this taco creation I am eating - a carne guisada taco with macaroni*

in a home-made tortilla. It's new," she smiles. *"Rick do you think we can get them to put it on*

the menu? Other customers, and employees join in the banter, *"Hey Mary and Rick, if I come for*

a breakfast taco in the morning, will that be on the menu board?" Another customer adds,

"*Rick, guess we'll be seeing you on 'Top Chef' soon*." "*I didn't make it up"* Rick says honestly,

"*a customer wanted it, so I made it.* Then Laura, the assistant manager, who overhears the

conversation on her way to the back adds jokingly with the group, *"Ok everyone, don't be giving*

Rick a big head here. He is going to have to get back to the kitchen soon. Friday is barbecue

day you know, and those carne guisada and macaroni tacos are not on the menu." Rick and

Mary laugh, and Mary high-fives him, and thanks him again for sharing his talents as he heads

back to the kitchen.

Part of employees loving their jobs and the people with whom they work, is receiving

support when and where it is needed. In this convenience store that support was visibly

authentic on a daily basis. On one particular day, a disturbed, belligerent man entered the store,

and went to the counter to fuss at Laura, the assistant manager, stating that he was sitting outside,

and they were making him move. He began beating on the counter, yelling and telling everyone

who would listen what a bad store this was, how unhelpful everyone was and how unfriendly and

unkind people were in this state, especially in this city. As he raised his voice and became more aggressive, Robert, the store manager, who had been taking and preparing breakfast orders in the food line, stopped what he was doing and came over to stand behind Laura. The man continued to yell, hoping to be allowed to stay in his spot outside where had taken up residence. Laura politely stood her ground, and Robert supporting her said, "*I'm sorry sir, I don't think that we can help you this morning*. He stood there for a moment, looked at them both standing there as a unified front, and then turned on his heel and walked out, saying, *"I'll never be back, and I'll tell everyone I know never to come back here."* In response, Robert said sincerely, "*I am sorry we could not help you, we hope you enjoy your day, sir."*

In this particular convenience store, when it is fully staffed on a shift there are four people working in the fresh food area, three behind the counter and one manager. "*We are all cross-trained,*" shares Laura the assistant store manager. "*That is so important because if one person is sick, someone else can fill in. We all have to know and be willing to do any job and support one another.*" In this company the clerks and store managers are dressed in the store's signature royal blue shirts emblazoned with the company logo, and the food preparers who every morning make fresh, home-made tortillas are clad in yellow with green aprons. The registers and food areas are side-by-side with food orders being able to be slipped across to registers with ease. There is constant communication among the food preparers and clerks, as well as within their own groups. They are continually watching and helping one another as needed. They are different in their dress and function, but they are not separate. They work together with ease, often joking and laughing, and always willing to assist one another.

"*We are like the Smurfs – you know the little animated blue guys and the Minions in yellow,"* smiles Laura. *"We may look different, wear different colors, but we are all in the same*

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family here, and we are here to help each other all of the time. You know we do have good days and bad days," she shares honestly. *"Like if the equipment goes down or we have an emergency, but when that happens, we all pitch in and help in any way we can. No one is left out there on a limb all alone. That is part of what makes the difference here. We support each other, care about each other and have a good time, most days. That's what makes a family, a community and,"* she adds sincerely, *"that's why we love our jobs. If every company worked this way, and one of their first goals was to 'make it a great place to work' then more people would love their jobs and you would have more companies like ours. It's not perfect, and never will be, but,"* she says, *"we understand that we are so lucky to have what we have here, if other companies knew that and could create what we have here, wouldn't life be better for everybody?"*

Transparency during challenges. During observations in this convenience store a crisis occurred that had a significant impact on food and beverage sales city-wide, including for this particular convenience store. Because of this crisis, no beverages—with the exception of those bottled in their coolers—could be sold. Signs posted throughout the store on coffee dispensers, tea and soda fountain drinks, slushy, ice cream and ice coffee machines read: *"Due to the notice provided by the city, we are unable to provide this product at this time."*

This crisis lasted for a considerable period and frustration among food and beverage service companies around the city concerning lost revenue, as well as customers who frequented those establishments who were unable to purchase the products such as coffee, tea and soft drinks due to what they perceived as incompetence within the city to permanently solve the problem in a timely manner, created tension throughout the city. That frustration was apparent within the convenience store in this case study.

"Our customers were cranky," Laura, an assistant manager, explained honestly. *"At first they were pretty tolerant, but after two weeks, they were frustrated. I think,"* she smiles, *"they really needed their coffee. They have been fussing at us like you would at your family. It has been kind of crazy. But our job, as we told all of our staff was to be pleasant, helpful and understanding of their frustration. There is no question, it was hard. Our customers couldn't understand why we could not get water somewhere else, or boil enough water to make coffee and tea. So, we had to explain to them, time and time again, patiently and honestly, why we couldn't provide their coffee, tea and soft drinks. Even, David, our calmest and most patient staff member, if you can imagine, was frustrated. They are still coming to eat and we are selling more sodas, but everyone wants to know when it will be over, and we don't have an answer. All we can do is be honest and say, we don't know, because we don't. Nobody does. It is very hard."*

In the midst of the crisis, during an observation in the store, it was apparent that transparency was instrumental in creating a strong following and community, kept the guests coming back and engendered empathy for the company and the specific store which many consider their "second home."

"How much longer do you think this will last?," a woman who came in sporting her own stainless steel coffee cup asked, as she sat down with Rachel, Oscar and Howard, another regular customer. "*Some people think it will be over tomorrow,*" Rachel said, "*but I have talked to people I know at the city, and that is just not happening. It is going to be in place for at least another week. "Seriously,"* Howard said. *"I don't think I can go without my coffee here for that long."*

At that moment, another man came in for his afternoon coffee and snack, waived at the clerks who greeted him, and joined the group. He sat for a moment, looked up and saw the signs

still covering the coffee and ice cream machines, and then made his way to the frozen freezer bin. He picked up a pint of chocolate cherry ice cream, and then headed to the fresh food bar, returning shortly with a spoon. *"Well you solved your problem,"* Rachel quipped. *"Yes,"* he said, *"can't have coffee, but here's a way I can have my ice cream. I'll go up and pay for it in a bit."*

"You know I feel sorry for all of these companies in town," the woman who brought her own cup in said compassionately. "*Some of them are just out of business right now. It has to be having a big effect on them. I am worried about 'our store' here too. It has to be hurting them, and I have seen people being very impatient with the staff. We need to support them, and keep coming, and encourage everyone else to keep coming too. We can't lose our store and our community*." As she picked up her coffee cup and took her leave, Rachel continued to discuss the situation, and several staff members dropped by the table to chat. Oscar, obviously thinking about the stories just shared, quietly got up from the table and began making his way to the fresh food service area. As he went, he engaged a staff member and patted him on the arm, and then proceeded to the counter to order an afternoon meal, obviously in support of his home, his family his friends and the company, for which they worked, in his community of convenience.

Summary

In this chapter, the internal brand narratives of the convenience store company in this case study were shared including their goals, through identified themes that emerged during my time as a participant-observer in this culture. Artifacts, such as the corporate "Playbook" that is given to new employees, were also examined to reveal the company's self-proclaimed narrative. Additionally, interviews with employees and stories shared by stakeholders were present as they pertain to emergent themes.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how authentic relationships have been built and sustained through corporate and stakeholder narratives. In addition, the three guiding questions, as they relate to relationship-building in public relations will be discussed and analyzed as they pertain to extant literature in the field of public relations.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this case study was to gain in-depth understanding of how the observed convenience store creates relationships with its mobile and ever-changing customers and employees. The study will also offer the opportunity and to gain insight, from an ethnographic perspective, on how those relationships are built and sustained through narratives and storytelling among internal and external stakeholders within a public relations construct. Using an ethnographic approach, narrative storytelling and public relations strategy are examined from the perspectives of management, employees and customers. Public relations researchers agree there is a significant need for ethnographic research within the discipline (Daymon & Hollaway, 2011; L'Etang, 2011), few ethnographic studies exist within academic literature. Public relations practitioners seek to communicate and create relationships with multiple stakeholders understanding of what messages are effective and why they are perceived positively is limited. This study contributes to the need for a fundamental understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of corporate storytelling beyond the often limited approach of textual analysis, surveys, and interviews. As such, the results of this study contributes to the limited list of ethnographic research studies available in public relations, and the opportunity to enhance knowledge that will benefit academics and public relations practitioners.

Results of this study reflect, through the application of grounded theory and emergent thematic analysis, how the organization utilizes narrative storytelling to build and sustain authentic relationships with their stakeholders. Through participant-observation and informal interviews over a three-month period within a single South Texas convenience store, nine themes emerged as the underpinnings for relationship creation and development. "We Are Like

'Cheers;' "Every Member Sincerely Cares About Customers' Needs;" Community Through Proximity; Efficient Service; My Store, My Ritual; Empathy with Customers; Fostering Community Among Customers; Employees Love Their Jobs, and Transparency During Challenges. The emergent themes served to support the internal corporate narratives within this study. Those narratives were initially expressed in the company's corporate "Playbook," and then authentically shared during conversations with company managers and employees. In addition, those Corporate Perspective Themes – "This is Who We Are Internally and Externally;" "It 'Starts with Service and Becomes Relationship';" and "Act 'With as Sense of Urgency'" were reflected in multiple participant-observation experiences in this particular convenience store between internal and external stakeholders, along with conversations and informal interviews with employees and customers.

Strategies For Developing Authentic Relationships

The popularity of corporate narrative in public relations has grown in significantly the past few years (Smudde, 2014). Public relations practitioners are using narrative as an integral part of their strategy to engage and build relationships with their stakeholders (Denning, 2006; Prindle, 2011). With the expansion and extensive use of the internet, much of that narrative presence and engagement is seen online, rather than face-to-face. Public relations scholars have been emphasizing the importance of and need for research that considers how relationships are created, developed and sustained in face-to-face settings. (Broom et al., 2000; Gill, 2011a; Gruning, 2000). Even so, a research-oriented understanding of how those stories are told and shared internally and externally, and documentation of their ultimate effectiveness with the consumer, remains in question. Despite a recognition of the importance of narrative as a public relations strategy, little research exists in which companies have tracked the effectiveness of their

internal narrative being adopted by employees and passed on to customers (Gill, 2011a). The results of the study enhance knowledge in public relations in the use of internal corporate narratives and specifically illustrates how those narratives were successfully passed on from employees to customers in a face-to-face context.

The importance of a company sharing their narrative and values with their employees and training them to share that narrative cannot be underestimated when engaging customers. Through the communication of these narratives, managers and employees can foster trust and support for the organization by creating a bond with stakeholders as they explain the organization and its mission (Dowling, 2006; Taliaferro & Ruggiano, 2010) and, as a result, they co-create a company's reputation (Gill, 2011b). Certainly it is not unusual for employees' actions to mirror corporate values. The significance of the results of this case study, however, is how customers came to know and articulate these corporate narratives. The employees that I observed had been trained so well in the corporate narrative via the company's "Playbook," and communicated the company's values seamlessly in their daily actions, that customers were articulating the internal corporate narratives and sharing the narrative with new store customers, during the first meeting. In one exemplar presented in Chapter 4, a customer shared the company tenet that employees, as part of their training and their job requirements, are taught to greet every customer who walks in the door. The importance of that greeting and was reflected in the first conversation with a company vice president who expressed that every employee is taught to greet and welcome each guest who enters the store, and to do so in a fashion that is comfortable and sincere. The greeting served as the first visible public relations strategy to create authentic relationships.

There is no doubt that, to be impactful, a corporate narrative must be communicated, beginning at the top of the organization, if in fact it is to resonate with the consumers and translate to brand loyalty and an increased bottom line (Gill, 2011b). This company's corporate narrative in their "Corporate Playbook," which is given to all of their employees, and serves to frame how the organization wished to be viewed is articulated internally and externally. Since the corporate narrative serves as a basis from which all else emanates, if the employees believe in and communicate narrative, they will serve as ambassadors of the brand (Gill, 2011a). The first tenet of this convenience store's corporate narrative, "Make It a Great Place to Work," was witnessed in lived experiences that occurred on a daily basis within this study.

Often employees take ownership of corporate stories or narratives, as they pass on stories among themselves to external stakeholders (Gill, 2011a). In this case, not only was the use of the narrative of making it a great place to work visible in the cooperative, positive attitude of every employee in each observation as they worked, helped one another and engaged with customers, the phrase, "Make It A Great Place to Work," was actually used by an assistant manager during a store observation, as what they aspire to do as narrative within their store.

An equally important tenet and part of their company's internal narrative that visibly extended to their customers is that every employee (team member) and every customer will be treated with respect. This narrative was reflected in the way the employees treated one another and their customers - in a polite, respectful and engaging manner - and was also reflected, without exception, throughout each observation, serving as part of the authentic relationship-building process. It was apparent that this company's corporate narrative which employees share with customers matches the internal corporate narrative set out in their "Playbook" and delivered through extensive employee training.

Public relations professionals know instinctively that the use of narrative and storytelling in face-to-face relationships works with consumers but, since there are no significant ethnographic studies in public relations from the customer perspective, they do not know how it works. Nevertheless, within a lived experience, Janinski (2001) and Sillers and Gronbeck (2001) considered the importance of narratives as they serve to shape individual identity as well as a community's identity and culture, and support and bind lived experiences, establishing relationships over time. The results of the present study support these authors claims as stakeholders build relationships and community over time with one another because of the performance of narrative expressed using in vivo code "We are like Cheers," which set tone for the store experience. From the moment you enter the store; you are more than a customer, you have the feeling that you are a guest. This narrative is punctuated by the fact that clerks and managers refer to each customer as a guest, politely saying, "*I am happy to help the next guest, or next guest in line please*" It is a small but important distinction to be a guest in someone's store, rather than simply a customer. This simple language frame sets the tone for more of a relational, rather than a transactional relationship. Creating relational rather than transactional relationships, even in a momentary construct, are significant as there are important economic, societal and political benefits for relational parties. (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Ledingham, 2006). In this case, from the first greeting, it was apparent, relationships were being developed. In other words, this convenience store company was "getting it right."

In this convenience store, customers quickly and easily became part of the fabric of this completely diverse community. Upon entering this case study experience as a participant-observer, I knew that this convenience store had a unique, positive relationship with their customers. What I did not understand was how this relationship was built, or how customers

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became part of this culture and developed community. The answers came almost immediately. During my second experience in the store, clerks, managers, and customers were calling me by name, beckoning me to come and sit with them to share a meal, asking if they might sit with me, and were querying me as to when I would return. Easily - almost overnight - I was welcomed into and became part of this community of convenience. That experience continued throughout the study, and as such, gave me the opportunity to be part of the lived experience of these customers and employees.

Although it is easier to develop relationships and community in completely homogeneous contexts, Miller (2015) argued that it is possible to create community in heterogeneous contexts where people, work, consume, or pass through communities. That is exactly what is happening in this convenience store, as one employee stated, *"We are like 'Cheers,' everyone here knows your name, and everyone is glad you came, and you can stay as long as you like. People come here and it becomes part of their life."*

Caring About Customers' Needs: A Strategy Surpassing Service

During my observations, a manager shared in conversation that "*It's not our product; you can buy what we sell anywhere. It's our people that make the difference. Our people employees know our customers personally.*" Certainly, it is possible to create within any company structure, but the value of the results of this study pertain to gaining an understanding of how to create this narrative authentically. This particular narrative was initially reflected in the company's "Playbook" as their second tenet which is to "Delight Every Customer." Further, a stated goal was "We are striving to create a culture where every member sincerely cares about meeting the needs of our customers."

As reflected in public relations literature, customer service is has surpassed simply meeting the needs of customers and is now focused on delighting customers to create a loyalty, (Center, Jackson, Smith, & Stansberry, 2008). Delighting customers was seen frequently in the authentic experiences observed and the exchanges that took place between customers and employees. It occurred during the simplest exchanges when employees would instantly, and with a sense of urgency, shift from the task at hand to having particular customers' regular items purchased ready when they stepped up to the counter and beginning to prepare a guest's "usual breakfast taco" the moment they enter the door. Because of the focus on communicating an authentic concern for a delighting every customer, guests not only returned daily and felt at home here, they voluntarily shared stories about the company.

Brand Narratives: Turning Customer Service, Empathy into Ritual and Community

In any business, friendly, fast and efficient customer service is considered important, but in a convenience store context, it is considered an imperative. However, creating an atmosphere where those elements transpire on a daily basis with customers requires a specific strategy. Within this particular convenience store's narrative, urgency serves as an integral element of their employee training. Specifically, their employee training offers explicit strategies to make sure fast, efficient service happens which is driven by a "Code of Conduct" narrative that states "customers come first, and every experience will be fast, fun, friendly and delicious." That narrative passed on through employee training, was shared by every manager in conversations during observations, and explicitly seen through lived words and actions between employees and customers.

Since convenience stores are based on an in-and-out model, where the average customer spends three-and-a-half minutes or less in the store (NACS, 2016), speed and efficiency are part

of customer service and serve as an opportunity to delight customers. Employees in this convenience store seemed to know this well; during rush times in the store, when lines to purchase items were 10 to 15 people long and often stretched deep into the store, employees suspended any task at hand to quickly return to the register, they while communicating with each customer in a pleasant, friendly manner. As a result, the lines were always down to zero customers in less than five minutes. In addition, customers were pleasant – often observed sharing with one another - even while waiting in a long line - how efficient and friendly employees were and what a good job they did within this store. This serves as another example of how this particular convenience store is authentically passing on their corporate narratives, through training, to employees who are sharing it face-to-face with customers to build relationships and create brand loyalty.

Additionally, the structural layout of the store also appeared to play a significant role in creating relationships and community. There is an intimate eating area that is strategically placed across from the coffee bar with just enough space for coffee drinkers to serve themselves and easily chat with other customers standing at the bar or sitting at the tables. The space is designed to be convenient, and "conversational." In every observation, customers and employees were seen engaged in conversation in this area as they prepared their coffee and waited for their fresh food order, or as they sat down and shared a meal and conversation with a known friend or a new acquaintance. Community was being created and sustained through these face-to-face interactions that took place on a daily basis, as food, drink and conversation became part of customers and employees' every day ritual.

This particular convenience store company must be doing something well with their focus on friendliness and food and their creation of community. According to a National

Association of Convenience Store (2015) survey that included seven major convenience store brands, this particular company rated above all of their competitors in the categories of friendliness and food service sales. Their 40 stores considered in the survey reflected an 85 percent friendliness rating and freshly prepared food sales in their stores stood at 36 percent, significantly higher than all of the other convenience store chains in both categories.

Ritual. One strategic consideration in public relations is how to create a following and brand loyalty with customers. Scholars agree that a strong sense of external brand loyalty is initiated from a healthy internal relationship and internal respect for the brand, which often translates to a healthy reputation with stakeholders (Gill, 2011a; Louisot, 2006; Madlock, 2008).

An emergent theme in this case study was customers' rituals of visiting to this particular store on a regular basis, regardless of the physical distance from which they came. Some took the bus to the store daily and stayed all day, engaging with employees and customers turned friends. Others came every day to get their breakfast taco and morning coffee as they passed through on their way to work or school. They would either sit and enjoy their breakfast and share a brief conversation, or take their freshly-prepared breakfast, lunch or dinner with them, as it was ready. Regardless of their specific ritual, they engaged with employees and one another in familiar greetings, comfortable conversations or humorous, familiar banter, as they told stories, shared narratives and enacted their established roles in this community. Their rituals, as observed and experienced, served to create a connection and a brand loyalty, something highly-sought after in the public relations context. Those rituals and ensuing interactions, created a shared experience, and an ensuing social relationship, which is part of what creates community in a defined space (Burgess, 1925/1967; Schmalenbach, 1961; Smith & LeFaivre, 1984).

In addition to creating brand loyalty, the outcomes of those ritualistic experiences also creates an ownership of the store by its employees and customers. Customers were often heard referring to this store as "My store" and were regularly seen performing duties that would typically be the responsibility of employees. For example, customers would often get up from their seats to clean counters or tables, as if the store was their own home. In addition, others shared in casual conversation how much they loved this store and did not know what they would do if it were gone. That loyalty seemed to be communicated both by employees and regular customers as employees shared if a regular customer did not come in, as was their ritual, they would start asking questions and often call to check on them. In this study, it is apparent how those rituals, along with these shared narratives create what it means to be a guest at this store. The resulting outcomes are brand loyalty and positive relationships.

Empathy. Empathy has become a recognized part of the public relations construct of relationship-building. Although much of the research regarding empathy stems from psychology (Yoemans, 2016), it is thought to be a key principle in engaging publics (Kent & Taylor, 2001). Even with empathy's elevated importance in relationship-building, there have been few attempts to explore empathy in public relations research (Yoemans, 2016). Empathy encompasses viewing the world from another's perspective, and, although it is rarely discussed, it could possibly be the most underrated weapon in a public relations practitioners' arsenal (Checkler, 2015).

To create empathy in this setting, employees enacted the strategy of putting customers' needs first. True empathy is shared through listening and understanding (Checkler, 2015). In such a momentary construct – like a convenience store setting - the results of this study illustrate it is possible to effectively communicate empathy during transactions. Empathy often seen in

day-to-day interactions as employees engaged with customers as they visited the store. Employees were seen and heard demonstrating genuine concern for customers' family, health, work situations or financial issues.

Community. This store hosts a monthly barbecue event that fosters community among customers, while serving as an important corporate community relations strategy within the public relations strategy. The store hosts a monthly barbecue event for its customers. In two observations, the community established among customers on those days was evident, as customers prior to the barbecue day queried one another as to whether they would be attending or not, and what time they would be there. On event days, tables were constantly full, with everyone visiting and lingering as long as possible. Chairs were in short supply, but people offered to share chairs or give their chair away, if they had completed their meal. Regulars as well as first-timers were welcomed by the established customer and employee community in equal measure. Not only was community fostered for established customers it was warmly initiated for new customers. From a public relations perspective, this strategy serves as a model for how community among customers served to support the store, the brand and ultimately the bottom line.

Two Brand Narrative Outcomes: Loving Your Job, Loyalty in Crisis

In multiple experiences, conversations, and observations, employees expressed how much they loved their jobs. Not only was it evident in the employees' over-arching positive attitudes, they expressed it verbally, and one employee even made up a rhyming song about how nice it is to work for the company, which he sang to himself as he worked; he was easily overheard by customers, as they smiled and engaged in conversation with the employee. It was also apparent through observation that employees were proud to be working in this store and, in

a larger context, for this particular convenience store company. Public relations scholars agree that the internal reputation for an organization is the esteem in which it is held by its employees and is significantly influenced by the culture within the organization (Hewitt, 2003; Hull & Read, 2003). In addition, the true wealth of a company is considered to be attributable to intangible assets including *reputation, trust, goodwill and relationship,* and they originate from with the company (Post, 2004).

One of the most difficult challenges for a company in public relations is maintaining a positive relationship with stakeholders during crisis using honesty and transparency in the midst of crisis situations, a time when the public is searching for honesty and answers (Coombs, 2000). Three of the most important public relations strategies are honesty, listening to the publics concerns and understanding your customer (Seeger, 2006) In addition research indicates   that a positive pre-crisis reputation with consumers (Fombrun, 2000), in this case shared through narratives, can ease negative public opinion of the company during crisis.

During a two-week period, as a result of crisis, no beverages—with the exception of bottled or canned in their store's coolers—could be sold.   Employees quickly alerted customers to the situation and placed signs throughout the store. Frustration within the convenience store was apparent. But, because of the authentic relationships that have been proactively built, over time, customers continued to visit the store and, were sympathetic toward employees, concerned about how the lack of sales may be impacting "their store." To engender such loyalty for the company, is a testament to the successful corporate relationships that have been created and sustained in this community of convenience.

Limitations and Future Research

Exploring a particular community through a case study, using an ethnographic qualitative method of research, is designed to reveal observed practices, beliefs and values within that culture (Fitch, 1994; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Within this case study – in a single store location - all of those elements were revealed, however; limitations do exist. The primary limitation of this ethnographic case study is that only a single convenience store, located in one South Texas city was considered. It is not known from this one study whether the company is creating community and brand loyalty through relationships in additional locations where either homogeneous or divergent populations frequent their stores. Since this particular company owns stores nationwide, additional research would need to be conducted in multiple locations, with varying demographics, to be able to generalize whether this store's success is experienced on company-wide basis. Furthermore, future research should be conducted using a quantitative approach to identify how the emergent themes may be statistically related to outcomes pertaining to a company's bottom line – such as brand loyalty, and customer or employee satisfaction.

Another limitation in this study is that it focuses on in-store communication between store employees and customers and did not consider social media, or any other storytelling media. Since companies and public relations practitioners are focusing on narratives, primarily shared through companies' online channels (Gill, 2015), it would be important to consider the success of relationships with their customers within that construct.

In addition, I entered the study with a guiding question pertaining to the community relations/corporate social responsibility efforts being communicated by this convenience store to the public. Although much public relations literature focuses on the importance and benefits of community relations and corporate responsibility efforts (Aguinis & Galvas, 2012; Black &

Hartel, 2004; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Rodriguez & LeMaster, 2007), this did not emerge during my observations. With the exception of observed donations and a monthly barbeque event, community relations was not discussed by customers or employees in terms of its role in building relationships or community within the store. Since this is a conflict with extant public relations research, which contends that this strategy is of great importance (Heath & Ni, 2000), future research should be conducted in this area.

Finally, an interesting phenomenon was noted during my observations in the store. This store has a unique community established between customers. Future research on the value of customer-to-customer relationships in corporate public relations should be considered.

Implications of the Study

The results of this case study will serve both public relations practitioners and academic scholars. Although public relations practitioners recognize the importance of the use of narrative as a public relations strategy, little research exists in which companies have tracked the effectiveness of their internal narrative being shared with external stakeholders. As such, this study contributes knowledge in the use of internal corporate narrative and, specifically, illustrates how those narratives are successfully passed on from employee to customers in a face-to-face context. This case study affirms what public relations practitioners intuitively know is effective in creating relationships with internal and external stakeholders, but typically do not understand why stakeholders perceive the strategy positively. This study offers specific strategies for creating authentic relationships between employees and customers through narrative. These strategies may be utilized within other retail organizations as a foundation for developing positive relationships with stakeholders. Further, as few studies exist in public relations from the outside-in, this study adds to the limited knowledge of narrative as relationship-building in

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public relations from external stakeholders' perceptions.

From an academic perspective, this study offers a unique view inside of an organization's public relations efforts through the observation of customer and employee communication. With few ethnographic case studies available in the field of public relations, this study adds to academic knowledge in public relations literature with its use and application of an ethnographic approach on how internal and external stakeholders live and experience the creation of relationships and community using narrative. While the process of conducting an ethnography is time-consuming, the value of researchers participating in the experiencing of stakeholders cannot be understated. As such, this ethnographic case study adds to public relations researchers' knowledge regarding stakeholder perceptions of organizational public relations strategies beyond what is known from existing quantitative and qualitative studies. Finally, there is little academic research in the public relations discipline that reflects how authentic relationships are created with internal and external stakeholders – employees and customers - and sustained using narrative and storytelling. This case study, through ethnographic research, provides knowledge in scholarship and practice to bridge this gap.

Conclusion

The results of this ethnographic case study reflect that this convenience store has, beginning with their internal corporate narrative shared with their employees and aided by the daily interactions, successfully built authentic relationships face-to-face with their external stakeholders. Those shared internal corporate narratives are, in turn, passed on by the company's employees – their frontline ambassadors – to customers on a daily basis. Additionally, the narratives have become so engrained in the customer, that they often communicate the narrative

to each other or to new customers, which has translated into the development of a following,

community, and brand loyalty within a convenience store model.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What is your job at this store?

2. How long have you worked here?

3. Will you tell me what you like best about working at this Stripes location?

5. What do you do/say to make customers feel welcome in this store?

6. Describe what you do/say to show customers that you care about them.

7. Describe how you were trained regarding the importance of treating customers well.