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# Exploring the Value of Organization-public Relationships in Strategic Management: From a Resource-based View

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In Strategic Management:  
From a Resource-based View**

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**Abstract**

With a combination of the relational approach in public relations and the resource-based approach in strategic management, this study builds the links between relationships, organizational resources and strategic management. Interview data showed that relationships were organizational resources because relationship cultivation was an organizational capability that could generate quality relationship outcomes as intangible assets. Relationships as organizational resources could contribute to strategic management and organizational effectiveness through being the foundation for strategic analysis and strategy formulation and the participation in each strategic management stage. The findings showed implications for both public relations theory and public relations practice.

**INTRODUCTION**

Demonstrating the value of public relations has been of great concern to public relations scholars and practitioners ever since it was recognized as an important function for organizations and as an independent academic discipline (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). Studies have shown that public relations has value for an organization when it participates in strategic management and helps to achieve the organizational effectiveness. Incorporating public relations considerations into strategic management has been shown to be a critical characteristic of excellent public relations (J. E. Grunig, 2006; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2000; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002).

This study was designed to explore the value of public relations in the strategic management process by considering relationships with the public as organizational resources. It adopted the relational approach, which holds that public relations is “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 2) and also the resource-based view which argues that strategic organizational resources can become sustainable competitive advantages and contribute to achieving organizational goals (Barney, 1991). Following from Ni’s study which explored the value of relationships in an organization’s strategy implementation (Ni, 2006), this study explored the links between relationships with the public, organizational resources and strategic management in an attempt to show how relationships contribute to the overall strategic management process and organizational effectiveness.

Qualitative research methods were applied to investigate the value of organization-public relationships in strategic management. 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with strategic managers (including CEOs, vice presidents, general managers, public relations managers and other communication managers). The participant organizations and interviewees were selected from the *Fortune* 500 list and *Forbes’* China 100 top companies list 2007 through a combination of theoretical and purposive sampling.

The results of this study can benefit both public relations practitioners and strategic managers. On the one hand, they show the strategic role of public relations in an organization from a strategic management perspective, which may help public relations practitioners gain a seat at the decision making table. More importantly, it can guide the public relations effort in making use of the strategic resources, organization-public relationships to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and the organization’s goals. At the same time, the results of this study should help link public relationships with the strategic management process: strategy analysis, formulation, implementation and control. They are intended to provide the strategic managers with an important theoretical basis on how to involve public relations in the strategic management process.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

The purpose of this study was to elucidate how relationships are perceived as organizational resources and how relationships contribute to the strategic management process. This part will first review the organization-public relationship theory, including definitions of relationships, relationship cultivation strategies and relationship outcomes. The discussion will then bring in the resource-based

view of an organization from the strategic management literature and build a link between relationships and organizational resources. The value of relationships in the strategic management process will then be discussed from a resource-based point of view.

#### Organization-public Relationships

According to Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), relationships begin when there are consequences created by organizations which affect its publics, or when the behaviors of its publics have consequences for an organization. Following this line of thinking, Hung (2005a) defined relationships based on system theory: “Organization-public relationships arise when organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly” (p. 396). This definition indicates how organization-public relationships begin, the mutual impacts and the dynamic nature of relationships.

#### *Relationship Cultivation*

According to Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) and Hung (2005b, 2006), relationship cultivation strategies can include 1) access: opening and providing access to the organization’s decision making process; 2) positivity: giving relationships more content and making them more enjoyable; 3) openness or disclosure: the willingness to engage in direct communication and conversation about thoughts and feelings; 4) assurances of legitimacy: legitimizing each other, a reflection of both parties’ efforts to express commitment in maintaining the relationship; 5) networking: building a coalition with groups the public is affiliated with; 6) sharing tasks: organization and public performing their own responsibilities and sharing to solve problems; 7) being unconditionally supportive: the organization doing whatever it thinks is best for the relationships, even if it means giving up some positions and even if the public does not reciprocate; 8) cooperating: organization and publics bringing together their interests and to reach mutually beneficial relationships; and 9) saying win-win or no deal: if failing to find a solution that benefits both, they agreeing not to deal than to make a decision which is not beneficial for both parties. Rhee (2004) added more items to the list: visible leadership, listening, face to face communication, responsiveness, continued patient dialogue, educational communication and respect. When studying the multinational company-government relations in China, Chen (2005) found that personal relationship and political and social accommodation were effective in cultivating long-term and credible relationships with the Chinese government.

All of this prior work has shown that relationship development is a process which employs an organization’s competencies such as openness, access, networking, etc. to develop quality outcomes.

According to Hung (2002, 2006), the organization's motives and goals should help determine its choice of relationship cultivation strategies. Ki (2006) has clearly demonstrated that the strategies chosen and their implementation will affect the outcome. Relationship cultivation is a dynamic and continuous process that needs constant management. Following this line of thinking, it is reasonable to assume that relationship cultivation will be most effective if it is competence based.

### *Relationship Quality / Outcomes*

Much study has been devoted to developing criteria for evaluating the quality relationships. L. A. Grunig suggested reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding as the key elements of good relations with the public (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). Huang (1997) suggested trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality that have been adopted extensively in different contexts (e.g., Brunner, 2000; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Brunner, 2002; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Jo, 2006; Ki & Shin, 2005; Kim, 2001; Ledingham & Brunig, 2000; Yang & J. E. Grunig, 2005 ). These four outcomes represent the essence of quality in an organization's relationships with the public (Huang, 2001).

### *Relationships and Organizational Resources*

The resource-based view is one of the most widely accepted theoretical perspectives in strategic management (Newbert, 2007). Its central focus is the exploitation of an organization's resources to gain a sustainable competitive advantage that affords superior performance over the medium to long term (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). Ni (2006) has study discussed relationships as organizational resources with the VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) characteristics emphasized by Barney (1991). This study further explored the relationship between an organization's public relationships and its resources, reconsidering the basic definition of organizational resources and the nature of relationships.

### *Organizational Resources*

An organization's resources include not only all its physical assets, but also its capabilities, organizational process experience, information, knowledge, etc. (Dess, Lumpkin & Eisner, 2007). Most researchers group them into three categories: tangible assets, intangible assets and organizational capabilities (Dess, Lumpkin & Eisner, 2007; Pearce & Robinson, 2000).

Tangible assets are the easiest to identify. They include an organization's production facilities, raw materials, financial resources and real estate. They are the physical and financial means that a

company uses to provide values to its customers (Dess, Lumpkin & Eisner, 2007; Grant, 1991a; Pearce & Robinson, 2000).

Intangible assets are not physical in nature and are rarely included in a company's balance sheet such as information and knowledge (Galbreath, 2005). Fernandez, Montes and Vazquez (2000) further categorized intangible assets as either people dependent or people independent. People dependent assets, such as human capital, refer to personal knowledge, personal contacts and relationships, as well as individual qualities. Organizational capital, technological capital and relational capital are examples of people independent intangible assets. Organizational capital includes norms and guidelines, databases, corporate culture, strategic alliances, etc. Technological capital refers to access to, use of and innovations of production techniques and technology. Relational capital incorporates reputation, brand loyalty, long-term customer relationships, commercial names and so forth. Compared with tangible assets, intangible assets are more likely to be inimitable as they are invisible, and therefore more likely to be linked to performance differences (Ainuddin, Beamish, Hulland & Rouse, 2007). Fernandez, et al. (2000) have also pointed out that, unlike material resources, the value of intangible assets can increase with use, through repetition.

Organizational capabilities are intangible bundles of skills and accumulated knowledge exercised through organizational routines (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Teece et al., 1997). Reviewing the literature on organizational capabilities, Collis (1994) categorized capabilities into three categories. The first category includes capabilities reflecting the organization's ability to perform its basic functions. Grant observes, "Organizations can be identified and appraised using a standard functional classification of the firm's activities" (Grant, 1991b, p.120). The second category of capabilities share the common theme of dynamic improvement in the activities of the firm. Teece described them as "...the dynamic routines that govern the ability of an organization to learn, adapt, change and renew over time" (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516). The third category refers to capabilities that "enable an organization to conceive, choose and implement strategies" (Barney, 1992, p. 44), and "the organizational abilities to deploy the firm's resources and to develop new ones" (Henderson & Cockburn, 1994, p. 3).

Capabilities are said to be the preeminent sources of organizational success (Day, 1994; Michalisin et al., 1997; Teece et al., 1997). McEvily and Chakravarthy (2002) have suggested that different kinds of know-how generate more durable advantages than any other resources because know-how is usually complex, specialized and tacit. Such tacit capabilities are often inextricably embedded in an organization's experiences, learning and practices. Therefore, organizational



capabilities are considered to be the most difficult resources to duplicate and to contribute the most to organizational success (Michalisin et al., 1997; Galbreath, 2005).

### *Relationships as Organizational Resources*

Relationships are among an organization's most important intangible assets, as they can help both save money and make money (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002). Relationships are not static; they are dynamic processes that need to be constantly managed with skill and knowledge. Slater (1997) and Dyer and Singh (1998) pointed out that relationships established and maintained reflect an organization's knowledge sharing and learning ability. Their quality depends heavily on the relationship cultivation strategies an organization chooses to employ. But skillful relationship cultivation helps an organization change and adapt with its environment, and meanwhile develop new relationships as new resources (Teece et al., 1997). So the relationship cultivation fits into the second and third of Collis' (1994)'s three categories of organizational capability.

Proposition 1: Relationships are organizational resources because relationship cultivation is an organizational capability and it can produce quality relationships, which are intangible assets.

RQ 1: How, if at all, do organizations perceive and use relationships as organizational resources?

### *A Resource-based View of Relationships and Strategic Management*

The relationships developed through an organization's public relations activities have been considered as the mediating factor through which public relations work contributes to strategic management (J. E. Grunig, 2006; L.A. Grunig et al., 2002; Ni, 2006). However, few studies have evaluated the contribution of relationships to the strategic management process. Taking a resource-based view, Ni (2006) discussed relationships as organizational resources and their contribution to strategy implementation, but how relationships contribute to the strategic management process has not yet been fully explored.

According to Steiner, Miner and Gray (1982), "strategic management" can be distinguished from "operational management" by its recognition of environmental impacts and of the need for top managers to react appropriately to them. Managers who manage strategically do so by balancing the mission of the organization—what it is what it wants to be and what it needs to do— with what the environment allows or encourages it to do. Dess and Miller (1993) pointed out that, "Strategic management is a process that combines three major interrelated activities: strategic analysis, strategy formulation, and strategy implementation" (p.9). Strategic analysis involves analyzing the internal and external environment in light of an organization's goals. It is the "advance work" that must be done in order to effectively formulate and implement strategies. Strategy formulation develops

strategies based on the analysis and the organization's goals. This step can include decision making and strategic planning to ensure the organization is doing the right thing. Strategy implementation is, "the process by which strategies and policies are put into action through the development of programs, budgets, and procedures" (Wheelen & Hunger, 2002, p. 192). Control must then be exerted over the strategy's implementation (Dess, Lumpkin & Eisner, 2007; Dess & Miller, 1993). Organizations need to scan the internal and external environment continuously to anticipate and adapt to the environmental changes and maintain up-to-date strategies. At the same time they need to ensure effective strategy implementation.

Dess, Lumpkin and Eisner (2007) argue that strategic management is a both a process and a way of thinking throughout organizations. Managers must be proactive, anticipate change, continually refine their strategies, and when necessary make dramatic changes to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the organization's competitive advantage. Other strategic management scholars (Dess & Miller, 1993; Pearce & Robinson, 2000; Wheelen & Hunger, 2002) also pointed out that the core purpose of strategic management is to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and attain the organization's goals.

Resources serve as the foundation of the strategic management process. They constrain the basic direction of an organization's strategy, but then serve as the basis of its profitability (Grant, 1991b). According to Grant (1991b), internal analysis of resources concludes which are the most important from a strategic point of view. The essence of strategy formulation is then to design the strategies that can make the most effective use of the core resources to build competitive advantage and develop new resources. Strategy implementation then involves deploying resources, so resources are embedded in the whole strategic management process.

As one category of organizational resources, relationships can thus be a focus of strategic management, and they can contribute to building sustainable competitive advantage. Hereby, proposition two and three can be proposed as follows:

Proposition 2: Relationships are organizational resources which can help an organization create sustainable competitive advantage through the participation in strategic management.

Proposition 3: Relationships as organizational resources can contribute to an organization's effectiveness through the participation in strategic management.

RQ 2: How do organizational-public relationships as the organizational resources affect and contribute to organizational strategic management?

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviews were used to explore these issues. According to Kvale (1996), interviewing is an interpersonal interaction during which the interviewees' live meanings can be communicated not only by words, but by tone of voices, expressions, and gestures in a natural setting. Through qualitative interviews, researchers can obtain descriptions of the world as interviewees perceive it and reconstruct events without participating in them (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to L. A. Grunig (2008), interviews are perhaps the most commonly-applied qualitative research technique in the public relations field. Researchers can analyze interview data to "...explain what critical stakeholders think and do on their own terms" (L. A. Grunig, 2008, p.130). As in studies by Hung (2002), Chen (2006) and Ni (2006), this study exploited long interviews, elite interviews, in-depth interviews and active interviews<sup>1</sup> in the data collection process. Long face to face interactions and dialogues were conducted with strategic managers, including public relations directors from different industries. In order to have in-depth understanding of the context, we also did some field observation in connection with conducting the interviews in the interviewee's offices. Active dialogues were attempted with some interviewees, in which joint efforts were made to construct meaning and search for answers.

### Sampling

Theoretical sampling and snowball sampling were the main tactics for recruiting organizations and interviewees to participate. According to the theme of the study and the nature of the research questions, companies for interview were initially selected from the Fortune 500 list (available at <http://www.fortune500s.net/fortune500-list.php>) and Forbes' China 100 top companies list for 2007 (available at <http://www.forbeschina.com/inc1/200708.htm>) with branch offices in cities of Shanghai, Hangzhou and Hong Kong. After initial contacts with the 37 selected multinational companies and domestic companies via e-mail and telephone, 16 companies agreed to participate in the study. Interviewees include vice presidents, general managers, and public relations directors. These interviewees were then asked for further referrals.

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<sup>1</sup> Long interviews can expose the contexts of people's behavior, providing researchers a fuller understanding of meaning (Seidman, 1991). In-depth interviews intend to combine structure with flexibility. A range of probes and techniques can be used to elicit answers deep in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Active interview situations rely on interactions and dialogues between the interviewer and the interviewee to create meaning. They allow the subjects' interpretive capabilities to be activated, stimulated and cultivated (Holstein & Gubrum, 1995). Elite interviews refer to interviews with those who are influential, prominent and well-informed in their field and will not subject themselves to standardized questioning (Dexter, 1970; Marshall & Rossman, 1999)

Every Effort was made to avoid convenience sampling in recruiting as we agree with Patton (1990) that convenience sampling is neither purposeful nor strategic and therefore should be the last consideration. Finally, 17 interviews were held with strategic managers from 16 participating companies in the Chinese cities of Shanghai, Hangzhou and Hong Kong in August and November in 2008, during the summer and winter breaks of school. Most of the participating organizations requested that their identities to be kept confidential.

### Data Analysis

Three stages of data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusions and verification (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Berg, 2007) were followed in this study. To get a whole picture, the interview data was reserved with the original language in transcription as much as possible. Then as the project continues, the raw data was simplified and transformed into a more manageable form through written summaries, coding, and identification of analytic themes. To display the data, we first divided the responses of each question into different categories. Then conceptual mapping (Grich, 2007) was used to display the relationships between themes. Finally, after the data had been collected, reduced and displayed, analytical conclusions defined themselves more clearly and definitively (Berg, 2007). Then we verified the findings by reading the transcripts and field notes again to make sure the conclusions were real and not just the wishful thinking. During the data analysis process, to ensure the objectivity some interviewees were contacted for clarification and confirmation of our interpretations through e-mail. Triangulation was also used to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, translations and interpretation of the interview data.

### Ethical Concerns

During the initial contacts with the interviewees, the purposes of studies, how the data would be used, and the time required for interviews were clearly explained. If a potential interviewee was reluctant to participate, he was never persuaded. At the beginning of each interview, the aim was restated and permission for tape recording was obtained. Interviewees were assured that no information about their identities or those of their organizations would be disclosed in any form without their permission. A small souvenir was given to each interviewee to show our appreciation, and an executive summary of the report was promised to be given to them upon completion of the study.

## FINDINGS

### Research Question 1: Relationships as Organizational Resources

The research was designed to investigate to what extent and in what way managers, including public relations managers, perceive relationships as organizational resources.

#### **RQ1: How, if at all, do organizations perceive and use relationships as organizational resources?**

##### *Relationships with the Public*

The interviewees were asked about the organization's publics and their understanding about organization-public relationships. Most of the participants professed to realized the importance of the publics, and therefore the significance of relationships with them. One participant from a world famous business software company, remarked that

Every public is important. No matter which party is hostile to you, it will affect your long-term development. There is a famous saying in ancient China, 'the water can take the boat as well as overthrow the boat'. (水能载舟, 也能覆舟) If we say our company is a boat, then the relationships with all the publics are the water. If the water dries up, there is no resource. We can only gradually become a lonely and sunken wood.

According to the interviews, the multiple publics that companies in China face generally include the government, customers, the media, the community, investors, employees (including prospective employees), competitors, business partners(including suppliers, distributors, etc.), and "authorities" (scholars). Depending on the industry's situation and the company's stage of development, the respondents attributed different strategic importance to these segments of the publics. For example, the FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) companies and those who face end consumers directly care most about consumers; energy companies which may cause pollution give the community top status; respondents from multinational auto companies considered business partners and the government as important, presumably because they are usually joint ventures and "the government has much control in this industry." In the auto and energy industries, according to the interviewees, companies tried to build good relationships with the government so they could "lobby the government, take advantage and make the government's industry policies most beneficial [to their firms].".

A company's stage of development also seemed to affect its recognition of the publics. As firms grow and mature, they gradually pay more attention to the media, the government, investors and the community. But in China, regardless of industry or country of origin, nearly all the participant

companies emphasized government relations. To facilitate government relations, some multinationals located their government relations department in Beijing, separated from their headquarters in another Chinese city. Local companies also had special public relations functions for government relations. In China governments not only set policy, they are at the top of the social hierarchy and the center of power.

Nowadays companies face not independent publics, but public networks. Publics may influence each other, and relationships with one group may affect relations with others. Public communication is changing from point communication to network communication. This was mentioned by one respondent from a multinational business software company who said that in her opinion, the media were connected with the government, and the government was connected with her competitors and business partners. Sometimes it only “‘takes one hair to affect the whole body’ (牵一发而动全身), you must take all these relationships into consideration when you make decisions. You need to balance the interests.”

When publics are connected, they become more empowered. The rapid development of the internet in China provides more opportunities for publics to connect. As one participant from a Chinese internet company stated, “From website, BBS, to blog, instant messenger, more and more convenient channels are provided to different publics. Publics can access the media very easily.” During 2008, China had the world’s second largest base of internet users according to the recent report of CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center). 90% of the interviewed companies realized this new rising force, “the net public.”

Apart from technology, other social forces also tend to empower the publics. Since 1978, China has greatly changed its economic system, social culture and every dimension of social life. With the growth of the market economy and social change, Chinese consumers are gradually becoming enlightened and empowered. Consumerism is developing in the Chinese market. One participant from a multinational chemical company who has more than ten years experience in marketing and public relations remarked that:

If we say it was companies dominant and publics (consumers) passive in the past, then I think...the situation is different in recent years. Consumers are having an increasingly strong sense of individualization. Government policies have begun to care about those “minority” (弱势群体). Besides, with the participation of the third parties, such as NGOs and the media, I feel it’s hard to see one side dominating and the other side passively receiving.

Publics are becoming more complicated as they connect and become empowered. This makes the interdependence between organizations and the publics more salient. According to most interviewees, their companies realized the strategic importance of relationships with different publics. The vice president of a Chinese internet company explained as follows:

Every company lives in a business ecosystem. We need to achieve a balance in every loop of the ecological chain, upriver, mid-river and lower reaches. When every loop is healthy, we develop healthily and strongly. Good relationships are important in balancing this ecosystem. We need to be open, to cooperate along the ecological chain, so that we can achieve prosperity along with the publics.

### *Relationship Cultivation as an Organizational Capability*

Relationships with strategically important publics are cultivated over time. According to the interviews, the participants regarded relationships as organizational resources first because relationship cultivation was an organizational capability. Several themes appeared from the interviews explaining why relationship cultivation was perceived as an organizational capability. First, the top management's mindset affected how relationships were cultivated. Secondly, relationship cultivation relied on capable leadership and the expertise and knowledge of the executive team. Thirdly, relationship cultivation needed to be guided by effective strategies. Fourthly, the respondents felt that relationship cultivation needed to be a systemized and integrated capability. Finally, they felt that relationship cultivation should adapt to local circumstances.

### *Top Management's Mindset*

Half of the interviewees mentioned that relationship cultivation was an organizational capability because it was the "organization's" decision, which depended on the top management. Therefore, they believed that top management's realizing the importance of relationships and providing support was a basic condition for good relationships to be cultivated.

### *People, Expertise and Knowledge*

When the top management realizes the importance to relationship cultivation and invests in it, some respondents agreed that they needed to find the right PR people with good leadership skills and with expertise in communication and relationship cultivation. Others felt professional assistance was superfluous, like this respondent from a multinational energy company who stated, "When the boss asks you to build a good relationship with a certain public, the managers and the team should

understand what is a ‘good’ relationship, how to maintain it and how to solve problems.” Similarly, “You should be able to convince the top management the importance of relationships to the development of companies, and then, the right people would be located, and a capable process would be built,” a participant from a multinational chemical company remarked. So the need for public relations professionals was not universally acknowledged.

### *Relationship Cultivation Strategies*

Almost all of the interviewees agreed that relationship cultivation was an organizational capability because it relied on relationship building and maintenance strategies and skills embedded in an organization’s routines and experiences. Many of these symmetrical strategies have been covered and discussed by the participants in this study. Besides the strategies existing in the current literature, the participants also came up with several new strategies of relationship cultivation.

*Being ethical.* According to some of the interviewees, being ethical is a basic condition for developing good relationships with various publics. As a participant from a multinational chemical company put it, “If your company has unethical behaviors, or does some filthy things stealthily, even if you have the best communication skills, it still won’t work.” Being ethical is important. He further stated, “You must first ‘refine yourself and then benefit the world’ (独善其身, 兼济天下).” When talking about being ethical, many of participants, especially participants from Chinese local companies, related it with integrity.

*Thinking from the publics’ perspectives.* 80% interviewees mentioned that thinking from the perspectives of the publics was important in cultivating a quality relationship. “You should first know them, know what they need, and then to see whether you can help them to solve problems or satisfy their needs with your resources,” the participant from a multinational energy company remarked.

*Engagement and involvement.* Another strategy used effectively in relationship cultivation by interviewees was engagement and involvement. According to a participant from a multinational auto company, his firm held seminars to involve suppliers, government officials and others in discussion, and invited its dealers to participate in corporate activities annually. As he put it, “All the activities



are to engage them, involve them, let them get the first-hand information and let them understand. Only when they understand can they accept.”

*Personal relationships.* Public relations is a people business. One participant from a Chinese internet company stated:

No matter whether it is with the government, the media or investors, in the end, it is still about communicating with people. To a large extent, personal relationships between [public relations people] and the target audiences have effects on the communication.

A participant from another Chinese internet company also remarked, “We try to make every media representative our friend. When we have troubles, they will help us; when they need us, we will be there and help them.” A respondent from a Chinese real estate company remarked that, “Relationships are not only based on benefits. They are based on recognition and emotions”. Relating these remarks with Chinese culture, they can be easily understood. One important characteristic of Chinese culture is its relational orientation (Yang, 1992). For Chinese companies, according to the interviews, developing personal relationships with individual members of the publics is an effective relationship cultivation tactic for organizations. This is consistent with Chen’s discussion about personal relationships as a multinational-government relationship cultivation strategy (Chen, 2005), but it expands the strategy’s application to the corporate business world and to multiple publics.

#### *Integrated/Systematic Capability*

When talking about relationship cultivation as an organizational capability, most interviewees described it as an integrated and systematic capability, a capability showing a company’s different dimensions. It shows “the mindset of the top management, the allocation of resources, the knowledge and expertise of PR people, and the strategy implementation capability,” according to a participant from a Chinese internet company. “It is an integrated strength,” one participant from a multinational auto company explained. Perhaps the capability cannot be seen, but it needs to be a system. This participant further explained that, “the system, or the process, is the most important. A multinational company like [his own] has established a mature system...The core competency of relationship building lies in the process.”

### *Adaptation to local circumstances*

Around one third of the interviewees also mentioned their opinion that tactics, skills and expertise can be learnt, but they should be well adapted to the local environment, forming “localized expertise.” As one participant from a multinational chemical company put it, “[Relationship cultivation] should be based on the situations and realities of local areas. Strategic analysis and decision making is an important part...based on the needs of the particular publics.” Local culture, the political and economic systems, and situational conditions should all be taken into consideration. As a participant from another multinational chemical company remarked, “Some companies did well in PR or relationship building just because they did well in adapting to the local circumstances” (因地制宜).

### *Relationship Outcomes as Intangible Assets*

Another reason why participants perceived relationships as organizational resources was because they believed that relationship outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction were intangible assets and could generate tangible and intangible benefits.

#### *Trust*

Addressing this question, a participant from a multinational chemical company remarked that

A relationship is a kind of mutual attraction built through long term effort. It’s a kind of trust and credibility. It’s a positive interactivity among companies and stakeholders; it’s an outcome. This trust, credibility, and mutual support of course are organizational resources. They are important intangible assets. ...Sometimes, this asset can not only make money or save money, but save the life of our company.

Similarly, one participant from a multinational auto company thought if they build trust with the government it would lead to many opportunities. He reported that sometimes the government even involved companies in making industry policies and in setting development criteria if the companies were trusted and credible.

#### *Control Mutuality*

Some respondents agreed that one major aspect of a good relationship is to agree on the mutual influence and power balancing which is about control mutuality. As one participant from a Chinese internet company noted,

In China, the government is of course the most powerful. In media relations, the media are relatively more powerful, because they actually are our customers. We provide information to them, and they decide which to publish.

But when there are good relationships between different parties, even if there are power asymmetries, the more powerful party will try to empower the less powerful ones. For example, some participants mentioned that when they had good relationships with the government, the government would involve them in policy making and listen to their concerns. When companies had good relationships with their employees, employees could voice their opinions, and the company would truly take their feelings or ideas into consideration.

#### *Commitment*

According to Huang (1997) and Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), commitment means the degree to which the parties believe the relationship is worth maintaining. “Only when they feel committed will they take efforts and be responsible,” as one respondent explained. Commitment helps assure a long-term relationship, especially in unstable times. “When [the publics] are committed, they will not easily give up on us when there are problems. This is crucial for a multinational company which strives for long-term development,” one participant from a multinational cosmetics company concluded.

#### *Satisfaction*

Most of the managers said their companies evaluated customer satisfaction with their products or brands, because they believed customer feedback could affect sales and revenue directly. Just as one participant from a multinational cosmetics company said, “We would conduct formative research to evaluate our customers’ satisfaction so that we know what to do to keep them satisfied. When they are satisfied, they would keep using our products.” But keeping other publics satisfied should also not be neglected. “Satisfied relationships create harmony,” commented one participant. Another from a multinational chemical company agreed. He believed that when employees are satisfied they will not easily leave the company, and this retained the company’s human capital. When partners were satisfied, they would have long-term, stable, cooperating relationships with the company.

Additional outcomes identified during the interviews are provided in the follows:

### *Support*

Support from the government, the media, customers and others are all important elements of most companies' business operations. One participant from a multinational telecommunications company in Hangzhou explained, "Good relationships with the government yield returns. The local government gave us a lot of support, on policy as well as on funding...We really benefited." One third of the participants mentioned that support from good relationships was more salient during issue or crises.

### *Word of Mouth*

Most of the interviewees recognized that good relationships with publics can affect word of mouth marketing and add value to a company's products and brands. One participant from a multinational energy and petrochemical company said,

What is a brand? A brand is many mouths saying something good about it. If we can have good relationships with different stakeholders, we can win good word-of-mouth. From another perspective, our brands and products are getting added value.

Such attitudes are consistent with the paradigm asserting that quality relationships have positive effects on an organization's reputation (J. E. Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang & J. E. Grunig, 2005) and attitudes toward its brands (Kim & Chan-Olmsted, 2005).

Research Question 2: A Resourced-based View of Relationships and Strategic Management

### *Strategic Management*

#### *Strategic Management Process*

According to the interviewees, when managers decide on strategies, corporate or departmental, the strategic management process resembles that outlined by Dess, Lumpkin and Eisner (2007). Goal setting leads to strategic analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation and strategic control. One participant or another provided a detailed explanation of each stage. In terms of goal setting, one participant from a Japanese consumer electronics company said,

We have long-term, mid-term, and short term goals. For example, our long term goal is to become a great company; our mid-term goal is to achieve certain market share and revenue for certain products; our short-term goal is to complete certain projects before deadlines.

Goals at the corporate level are normally long-term, while at the business or departmental level they may be mid-term or short-term. “We need to start from the company’s goals to make our departmental goals,” remarked a participant from a multinational conglomerate.

*Strategic analysis.* The second step is to collect information, analyze the environment and situation before making strategies and decisions. According to the interviewees, there are external and internal environment analyses their companies rely on. “We need to know the macro trend, not only in Hong Kong, but the global trend to decide what we are going to do,” one participant from a Hong Kong limited company remarked. A general manager from a multinational telecommunications company also emphasized the importance of external environment analysis. At a micro level, some participants mentioned that the analysis of external information should include government policies, industry trends, market information, competitor information, and any hot issues.

Participants also acknowledged the importance of internal environment analysis. Production capabilities, human resources, the financial situation, and expertise were the factors mentioned. Some participants specifically asserted that resources are the foundation for internal analysis.

*Strategy formulation and implementation.* A general manager from a Japanese consumer electronics company explained the process as follows,

After we get the internal and external information, we will combine it with our goals, our positioning, etc. to make strategies. After the strategies are made, we will have a discussion process to go through the strategies to achieve communal agreement. Finally, the strategies will be implemented.

Almost all the participants agreed on the importance of strategy formulation and strategy implementation.

*Strategic control.* Nearly 70% respondents specifically pointed out that environments are changing, and strategies need to be reviewed and revised from time to time. The vice president of a Chinese internet company said,

The strategies don’t stay unchanged. Every season we will have a seasonal review. We will revise the details of strategies according to environmental changes. We will continuously evaluate whether the strategies are being implemented and on the right track. During the strategy formulation and implementation process, we are always keeping an open mind.

Another participant from a multinational chemical company concluded that strategic control involved making adjustments to current strategies, reviewing their implementation, and suggesting future variants.

#### *Functions/goals of Strategic Management*

Several functions or goals of strategic management emerged from the interviews. Six participants mentioned that one important function of strategic management was to ensure a direction for the whole company. “[A clear strategy] can help set a right direction that every employee understands and follows,” the general manager of a Japanese electronics company stated.

*Sustainable competitive advantage.* Most of the participants believed that strategic management can help companies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. A manager from a multinational energy and petrochemical company thought that because his company’s planners considered their firm’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges during the environmental analysis stage, employees understand which can help them in competition.

*Efficiency and effectiveness.* According to the interviews, another important function of strategic management is to improve efficiency and effectiveness. This also echoed what Dess, et al. (2007) mentioned as “do the right things” and “do the things right.” Half of the participants said they believed that strategic management can help companies better realize organizational goals. “It can make our work faster and better. ‘Faster’ means going in the right way and making fewer mistakes; ‘better’ means we can improve our effectiveness,” remarked one participant from a multinational energy and petrochemicals company.

#### *Public Relations Roles in Strategic Management*

During the interviews, the strategic managers, and especially the public relations directors, were asked whether and how they participate in the corporate strategic management process, particularly in goal setting and strategy formulation. Most of them asserted that they could influence the decision making of top management either by being part of the dominant coalition, or having their voices heard by the decision makers.

According to the interviews, whether public relations managers can participate in corporate decision making depends on top management’s mindset, the company’s culture, as well as the capability of the public relations manager concerned. “In the environment in China, not all the

companies have an open culture. Some Chinese companies just don't trust public relations," one participant who had been a public relations consultant for local companies for five years remarked. But when some of the public relations managers could not directly participate in the corporate decision making, they said they could find other chances to voice their opinions.

### *Relationships as Organizational Resources in Strategic Management*

Most of the participants professed to recognize the importance of relationships in the strategic management of an organization's resources. First, relationships are regarded as the basis for environment analysis and strategy formulation. One participant from a multinational energy and petrochemicals company stated:

One important part of strategic management is to analyze what kind of resources we have, including internal and external resources. Relationships can be regarded as internal resources.

They are the channels for us to know of external resources, to find which are beneficial for us.

Another participant, a general manager from a multinational auto company thought that relationships are the basis for strategy formulation. He said:

We develop strategies based on relationships with our key stakeholders. We will first consider whether our relationships with the local government, the community and other stakeholders can help in implementation. We will also consider whether the strategies would hurt certain relationships or our image, and whether new relationships should be developed.

Second, relationships can help at each stage of the strategic management process. As one participant from a multinational chemical company explained:

Overall, good relationships with different stakeholders can help us to get the information needed for strategy making. They can assist in strategy formulation. Besides, good relationships can facilitate the strategy implementation process. If we have good relationships with our employees, and if they are [in agreement] with our corporate goals, they will support the plans and put them into action better.

One participant from a multinational energy company also asserted that, "Relationships can contribute to each step of strategic management, especially strategy implementation."

In conclusion, relationships as organizational resources are the basis for strategic analysis and strategy formulation. Relationships can help in each stage of the strategic management process: strategic analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation and strategic control. The functions of strategic management can generate sustainable competitive advantage for companies as well as

improve their effectiveness and efficiency. So the findings that relationships as organizational resources that can contribute to sustainable competitive advantage and organizational effectiveness and efficiency supported propositions two and three.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to elucidate how public relations managers and other managers perceive and use organization-public relationships as organizational resources, and to explore the contribution of relationships to the management process. In this section, we will further discuss our major findings and their indications for both public relations theory and practice.

Results suggested that both public relations professionals and other Chinese strategic managers perceived relationships as organizational resources.

Companies in China today face multiple publics that are getting connected. With the development of the internet, social media and with consumerism taking hold in the market economy in China, the general publics such as customers and communities were gradually empowered. Most participants realized the influence of the increasingly complicated publics and the importance of maintaining good relationships with them.

Relationships were perceived as organizational resources. Relationship cultivation was recognized to be an organizational capability that could generate relational outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction, which constitute intangible assets. This is consistent with the definition of organizational resources as either assets or capabilities (Collis, 1994; Dess et al., 2007). According to the participants, relationship cultivation is not only a complicated process, but an integrated organizational capability dependent on corporate know-how. Top management's mindset, capable leadership from a knowledgeable executive team, effective relationship cultivation strategies, building a mature system and adapting to local circumstances were all highlighted as important to building good relationships with the public. This integrated capability fit into the three categories of organizational capabilities in literature (Teece et al., 1997; Barney, 1992). Besides, relationship outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, support, information sharing and word-of-mouth support were recognized as intangible relational assets. They can be accumulated over time and then applied in many ways to generate benefits for the company.

Relationships as organizational resources were agreed to contribute to strategic management in two ways: 1) as the basis of strategic analysis and strategy formulation; 2) providing help in each strategic management stage, strategic analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation and



strategic control. The responses reflected the findings of previous studies of the relationship between resources and strategic management that resources are the foundation for strategic management (Barney, 1986; Grant, 1991a; Mandal, 2007). According to Barney (1986), the search for competitive advantage and superior corporate performance must begin with an analysis of the resources and capabilities a company currently controls. Strategies should be designed around the most critically important resources so that companies can limit their strategic scope to activities where they possess clear competitive advantages.

According to the interviews, most respondents considered relationships to be the basis for strategic analysis and strategy formulation in strategic management. They claimed that when doing environmental analysis, their companies analyze the relational situation because relationships are regarded as the co-created environment in which they deal with different stakeholders. When making decisions, strategic managers consider which relationships can help with strategy implementation and the achievement of goals. Also, they consider what effects strategies would have on the company's existing relationships and what new relationships could be developed from the strategies.

Moreover, the study suggested that relationships as organizational resources can help in each strategic management stage. In strategic analysis, relationships serve as information sources and channels. In strategy formulation they help the organization incorporate different perspectives, insights and intelligence into their decision making. Relationships as the organizational resources could generate support in strategy implementation and facilitate the strategic control process.

Strategic management was felt to provide a direction for an organization's development, to help make the best use of strategic resources in the pursuit of sustainable competitive advantages, to promote effectiveness and efficiency, and to promote an organization's long-term development. The findings were consistent with the four attributes of strategic management suggested by Dess and Miller (1993), organizational goals, multiple stakeholders in decision making (strategy formulation), short-term and long-term perspectives and effectiveness and efficiency. They are also consistent with the scholarship of Pearce and Robinson (2000) and of Wheelen and Hunger (2002). So as the basis of strategic management and through supporting each strategic management stage, relationships contribute as organizational resources to building sustainable competitive advantage, to achieving organizational goals and to organizational effectiveness.

#### Implications for Public Relations Theory and Practice

The findings of this study have implications for both public relations theory and public relations practice. Like Ni's earlier empirical study (Ni, 2006), this study clarified the link between relationships and organizational resources in the minds of practicing managers. In addition, it

provided an overall picture of how managers feel that relationships as the organizational resources contribute to the strategic management process. Combining the relational approach of public relations with the resource-based perspective of strategic management has enabled this study to further elucidate the Excellence study on contribution of public relations to strategic management. The focus on relationships has suggested a new way to demonstrate the value of public relations in organizations.

The findings on relationships and relationship cultivation in China have implications for relationship management theory. The increasingly connected and empowered publics that the participants spoke of indicate the dynamic nature of relationships and the publics' changing perspectives. Relationship cultivation, which was found to be an integrated organizational capability, indicated a new integrated perspective for relationship study. It shed lights on the importance of exploring new ways to develop and integrate different know-how to achieve the most effective relationship cultivation through public relations. The linkage built between relationships, organizational resources and strategic management indicates the value of relationships in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, organizational goals and organizational effectiveness.

By showing the perceived value of public relations in strategic management, this study can help public relations professionals gain a seat at the decision making table and participate in strategic management. The findings also suggested how any strategic manager should try to utilize relationships and public relations in the strategic management process. Public relations practitioners should take the initiative to influence top management and get themselves empowered. They need to continuously practice what van Ruler and Verčič term "reflective management"<sup>2</sup> (Personal communication, Heath, 2009) to understand and define their role through interactions with outside parties and with top management. They should influence top management with their expertise and knowledge and ask for the resources and support they need. Other strategic managers (i.e. VPs, general managers) need to be able to rely on the expertise and knowledge of public relations people, so public relations managers need to understand management, finances and the industry so they can speak the same language at the decision making table. Excellent leadership of public relations managers is essential to exert the value of public relations and prove to top management. Third, this study explored relationship cultivation as an organizational capability which incorporated different

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<sup>2</sup> According to Van Ruler and Verčič (2003), human beings reflect themselves in relation to others and the social group as a whole. Their knowing is reflective knowing. The concept of reflectivity gives mankind the possibility of developing roles.

know-how. These findings help to provide public relations practitioners and top management as well with an integrated perspective on how to build quality relationships.

As the study was conducted in China and the interviewees were all Chinese, the findings are a particularly important reference for both multinational companies and domestic companies on how to build quality relationships and conduct effective public relations in China. For example, some participants from multinational companies heavily emphasized government relations because in China governments are at the top of the social hierarchy. Building personal relationships was highlighted as an important strategy for organization-public relationship cultivation in China's cultural setting.

#### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations were encountered during the research process which may have influenced the results of this study. First, because of the time and budget constraints, a single method (in-depth interviewing) was used in data collection. Although the interviewers tried to make observations during the interviews, this may not have been enough to fully probe the strategic management and relationship cultivation contexts described by the interviewees. Second, the participants were mostly selected from Fortune 500 multinationals operating in China and well-known Chinese companies. These firms were, by definition, top 100 local companies, which are internationally or domestically successful, so they may not have represented most companies in China very well. In addition, the interviewees were all industry elites including vice presidents, general managers and public relations directors etc. They regarded themselves as representatives of their companies and presumably were reluctant to talk about the negative aspects of their firms' relationships with publics. And of course this study has provided only an overall picture of how relationships function as organizational resources to contribute to strategic management.

In the future, case studies involving interviews, surveys, observations, document analyses, etc. may be useful. The scope of future research should also be extended to other countries to test the generality of the observations. Moreover, this study didn't touch on the specific roles of relationships in each strategic management stage. Future studies might explore these in greater depth. Another direction would be to explore how companies can best develop their organizational capability of relationship cultivation, since these were found to constitute an integrated and systematic capability involving various corporate know-how.

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## APPENDIX A

## PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NO.	COMPANY	POSITION	NATIONALITY	COMPANY RANKING	GENDER
1	U.S. chemicals company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
2	U. S. automobile company	Strategic Planning Manager	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
3	U. S. technology and services conglomerate	District General Manager	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
4	U. K. energy company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Fortune 500	F
5	French cosmetics company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
6	Japanese consumer electronics and entertainment company	General Manager	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
7	U. S. telecommunications	General	Chinese	Fortune 500	M

	company	Manager			
8	U. S. chemicals company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
9	U. S. pharmaceutical and health care company	General Manager	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
10	Holland/U.K. energy and petrochemicals company	District General Manager	Chinese	Fortune 500	M
11	German business software company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	World's 2 <sup>nd</sup> largest business software company	F
12	Chinese real estate company	Public Relations Manager	Chinese	China's top 100	F
13	Chinese internet company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Top listed company in internet industry in China	M
14	Chinese internet company	Vice President	Chinese	Top listed company in internet industry in China	M

15	Chinese internet company	Public Relations Director	Chinese	Top listed company in internet industry in China	M
16	Chinese telecommunications company	Public Relations Director	Chinese (Hong Kong)	China's top 100	F
17	Hong Kong conglomerate	General manager	Chinese (Hong Kong)	Well-known listed company in Hong Kong	F

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