Chapter 20
Organizational Identity in Nonprofit Communication about Disability

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the research process used to uncover and describe the organizational identities of ten nonprofit organizations that serve persons with disabilities. Identities were measured by examining the values used in a variety of marketing and public relations materials. This chapter 1) describes how DICTION was selected as a viable option for data analysis, 2) reveals the process of augmenting and building upon a previously tested values instrument with custom dictionaries, and 3) explains how the results were interpreted and used to describe the organizational identities of ten nonprofit organizations. The challenges of data collection and analysis are discussed. Future directions for values-based research are proposed. Discussion relates the results to the challenges inherent in disability-related communication.

INTRODUCTION

According to Milton Rokeach (1968, 1973), values are a central concept for all individuals—the dominant beliefs that comprise one's overall belief system and allow him/her to assess a situation and take action or change behavior. Organizational communication scholar Phillip J. Aust (2000, 2004) took the values concept from the individual level of Rokeach's work to the organizational level with his research that examined an organization's identity through communicated values—or the values apparent in the texts used in organizational documents. He posited that an organization operates under the values central to its original founders as well as the members who dictate current decision-making and communication efforts. Stuart Albert and David A. Whetten's (1985) seminal work proposed that organizational identity is the foundation of what an organization is built upon. Values are at the core of organizational identity.

This chapter explores the process of creating and using custom dictionaries to analyze the organizational identity of a group of nonprofit organizations. This research was an expansion of Aust's (2000, 2004) work. It was designed to measure the values in marketing and public relations materials used by multiple nonprofit organizations. Using a sample of ten organizations that serve persons

with disabilities or advocate for disability-related causes, results indicated very few distinctions in their organizational identities. The concept of "cause identity" as an important consideration in public relations practice as well as research was introduced (Lellis, 2012). This research also has the potential to contribute to a larger discussion about the social construction of disability.

BACKGROUND

Erving Goffman's (1974) book, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, described how the identities for marginalized groups are often shaped by how these groups are framed in public communication efforts. When we communicate about persons who fall outside the realm of "normal," Goffman argued, we may be creating socially constructed identities based on selected information presented—or virtual identities. Goffman argued that a "virtual" identity "has the effect of cutting [a person] off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world" (p. 19). Goffman used several examples of persons with disabilities who agreed that disability is a social problem of public perception.

An example that supported this statement is Caroline C. Wang's (1998) research on public health communication campaigns. She reviewed a series of images used in popular injury prevention campaigns and concluded that the campaigns – originally designed to be helpful to the general public – may have negative, stigmatizing effects on persons with disabilities. Themes of pity, fear, and hopelessness were noted in her review; overall, disabilities were presented as undesirable injuries that could be avoided. Wang reported the comments of several persons with disabilities who viewed the images as damaging to the public conception of disability, and stated, "For people with disabilities, a culture's response to their dis-

ability…may ironically guarantee that people with disabilities are less well off" (p. 154).

In his book Disability & the Media: Prescriptions for Change, Charles A. Riley, II (2005) wrote that persons with disabilities:

…are shamefully misrepresented in the fun-house mirror of the mass media. Consigned by the arbiters of what is published or produced to a narrow spectrum of roles, from freaks to inspirational saints, lab rats or objects of pity, people with disabilities have not seen the evolution in their public image that their private circumstances have undergone in the aftermath of political and medical progress over the past four decades. Even the specialized publications, programs, and films dedicated to people with disabilities (and sometimes run by them) present such twisted images that one wonders what bizarre trick is being played on the "last minority" which lags decades behind other groups – gays, blacks, Jews, women, seniors…(p.1).

Riley described the desire activists have always had, which is to "abandon…the old view of people with disabilities as 'abnormal'" (p. 7).

Although disability media coverage – including print, advertising, television, and film– has arguably evolved (Haller, 2010), media often still rely on the more-sensationalized stories of persons with disabilities overcoming challenges or participating in life despite their disabilities. The producers of this content have no loyalty to represent persons of disabilities in ways that would emphasize progressive disability messages over traditional ones, as these are the types of stories that continue to reach audiences and generate revenue from advertisers.

Nonprofit Communication

Nonprofit organizations use rhetoric to communicate about the services they provide or the initiatives they support while also representing

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