# Pathways of Entrepreneurial Women in Public Relations: Analyzing Ethical Decision-Making Practices

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**Abstract**

*In the past two decades, women have dominated the public relations practice, leading to a feminization of the field. Women's enrollment in public relations courses has skyrocketed and now exceeds 80 percent in undergraduate programs. Studies on women in public relations have focused on the field's loss of status, salary disparity, discrimination, stereotyping, and practitioner roles. Few studies, however, have investigated women who broke through the glass ceiling and forged their own pathway in the practice. Furthermore, in the past four decades, the public relations practice has shifted from the press agentry/publicity model to a two-way symmetrical model of public relations, one considered most ethical. Several studies have revealed that women are much more inclined to consensus build and focus on the interests of others, which are important characteristics in the two-way symmetrical model of the practice. This study used a phenomenological approach to investigate the pathways of women entrepreneurs in public relations, those women who founded their own public relations firms and bypassed the glass ceiling by constructing their own reality. Thirty women – ten from Los Angeles and Orange Counties, ten from New York City, and ten from London – who head top public relations firms, which they founded, were interviewed in depth about the ethical challenges they face and how they deal with them. Participants also completed a questionnaire about their modes of practice. The career pathways of the participants were forged by formal education and on-the-job learning experiences. Ethical dilemmas involved client credibility, billing, and various employee issues. Although the participants practiced a coalescence of the four models of the practice, the women leaned more heavily toward the two-way symmetrical model. Requiring courses on ethics and gender issues in public relations was recommended for undergraduate and graduate programs, along with ethical training for professionals.*

## Overview and Purpose of Study

In the past two decades, women have dominated the public relations practice, leading to a feminization of the field. Women's enrollment in public relations courses has skyrocketed and now exceeds 80 percent in many undergraduate programs. Studies on women in public relations have focused on the field's loss of status, salary disparity, discrimination, stereotyping, and practitioner roles. Few studies, however, have investigated women who founded thriving public relations practices and examined their approach to ethical challenges. Furthermore, in the past four decades, the public relations practice has shifted from the press agentry/publicity model to a two-way symmetrical model of public relations, one considered most ethical. Several studies have revealed that women are much more inclined to consensus build and focus on the interests of others, which are important characteristics in the two-way symmetrical model of the practice. Thus, this study examined the ethical challenges of successful female practitioners, women who bypassed the glass ceiling by becoming their own boss, and the model of the public relations practice they employ.

This study used a phenomenological approach to investigate the pathways of successful women entrepreneurs in public relations. Thirty women – ten from Los Angeles, ten from New York City, and ten from London – who head top public relations firms, which they founded, were interviewed in depth about the ethical challenges they face and how they deal with them. Participants also completed a questionnaire about their modes of practice.

## Literature Review

### *Women and Career Paths*

In 2010, women comprised about 47 percent of the workforce in the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to the U.S. Department of Labor in 2008, women constitute less than 10 percent of senior executives despite the surge of women entering management in the last 45 years. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination based on race and sex. In the early 1970s, feminist pressure for its enforcement assisted women in their pursuit of management positions. In 1972, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment and Title IX of the Higher Education Act, which prohibited sexual discrimination in school admissions. Hence, female enrollment in business schools surged, which paved the way for women's subsequent movement into high-paying, male-dominated professional occupations.

According to Choi and Hon (2002), Hymowitz & Schelhardt were the first to report on a glass ceiling, the invisible barrier faced by middle-management women who want to attain top-level positions, in an article of the Wall Street Journal on March 24, 1986. Glass ceiling is a metaphor for a barrier preventing women from advancing to the executive suite. The Department of Labor (1991) defined glass ceiling as "artificial barriers based on attitudinal bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions" (Wrigley, 2002, p. 1).

In a 1993 study of over 4,000 women by Korn/Ferry International, an executive search firm, and the UCLA Anderson Graduate School of Management, five traits were most frequently cited as being of greatest importance in becoming successful in the workplace: ability to make decisions, concern for financial results, capacity for hard work, desire for responsibility, and integrity. More than 90 percent believed in the glass ceiling, and almost 80 percent said they had been sexually harassed. O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria (2008) examined research on women's careers appearing in academic journals from 1990 to 2008 in three areas – careers, management, and applied psychology. The researchers found that the bulk of empirical studies continued to rely predominantly on traditional male-oriented career outcomes, such as position in the corporate hierarchy, income, and wealth accumulation. Admirable management practices, such as sharing responsibility and contributing to the development of others, reflect stereotypically feminine behaviors, but these best practices are not publicly acknowledged as feminine. Schein (2007) found that males still perceive men are more suitable for management positions than women. O'Neil et al. (2008) also noted that women face a "paradoxical reality" in the workplace (p. 734). Their management skills included collaboration, teamwork, and conflict resolution, but these attributes did not result in reward or recognition.

Mainero (1994) interviewed 55 high-profile executive women, who broke through the glass ceiling, about key events in the early stages of their careers that allowed them to become fast tracked. She found that the women were team players and alliance-builders with fellow employees and their own subordinates. Blair-Loy (1999) found many of the female entrepreneurs starting firms 15 years ago said they were trying to bypass the glass ceiling in large companies and to accommodate their families' needs. In contrast, those launching businesses more recently report they were motivated by the desire to escape bureaucracies and to create new business opportunities.

In the 1990s, studies addressing gender and career paths surfaced, suggesting that women are disadvantaged by social constraints and discrimination. Historically, men and women have assumed different societal roles. Some jobs are considered more appropriate to men while others are more suitable for women. The growth in entrepreneurship by women increased despite – or because of – discrimination and stereotyping in the workplace (Mueller, 2004). Furthermore, starting one's own business is a way to bypass the glass ceiling (Wrigley, 2002).

Moreover, women's definition of success may not align with the traditionally male, corporate criteria but instead may embrace a sense of personal fulfillment, integrity, and lifestyle balance. Women entrepreneurs are creating their own businesses instead of continuing in careers constricted by organizational structures and policies (O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008).

Empirical research on socialization and gender roles generally supports the proposition that women are more cooperative and empathetic, and are more interested in the welfare of others and achieving harmony in the group. They tend to place more value on interpersonal relationships (Mueller & Dato-On, 2008).

### Women in Public Relations

In 1960, women comprised a quarter of the public relations practitioners.  In 1968, student societies in public relations formed, and women accounted for 34 percent of the membership (Gower, 2001).  In the 21st century, however, women comprise about 70 percent of the practitioners in the public relations field (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Sha & Toth, 2005).  In 2008, more than 80 percent of the undergraduates enrolled in public relations programs in the United States were women.  According to Grunig (2006), "the study of women in public relations provides a superb model of women in the workplace as a whole" (p. 135).

Some scholars claim that public relations is a feminized field where women are ghettoized in technical positions, which garner lower pay and prestige (Aldoory & Toth, 2002).  Other scholars warn that women relegated to the technician role are kept out of the boardroom, thus creating a "velvet ghetto" (Gower, 2001, p. 14). Encroachment, the assignment of nonpublic relations professionals to manage the public relations department or function in an organization, such as marketing, may be tied to the loss of status as a result of the feminization of the public relations field (Farmer & Waugh, 1999).  Two influential research reports – The Velvet Ghetto (Cline et al., 1986) and Beyond the Velvet Ghetto (Toth & Cline, 1989) – were commissioned by the IABC Research Foundation to explore the effects of feminization, including salary disparity, gender bias, and gender roles.  Toth and Grunig (1993) sampled 1,012 respondents on a list of 17 role activities "to challenge the interpretation of roles research…as means of providing the missing story of women in public relations so that we also may empower women and begin to change the social structures that have devalued them" (p. 159).  They found that women who devoted more time to managerial activities still performed technical tasks while the managerial men performed more traditionally managerial tasks, such as counseling, policy making, and supervising the work of others.

Patterns of gender role segregation and salary discrimination exist in public relations (Tam et al., 1995).  Women practitioners appear to be clustered in technician roles unlike men who appear to dominate managerial roles.  In turn, role and gender appear to affect advancement in the field.  Hon (1995) explored the factors explaining discrimination against women in public relations and the liberal/radical feminist strategies that affect equity for women in public relations and found that women faced major obstacles in the practice, including gender stereotyping, marginalization of women, and the balancing of work and home responsibilities.  One of the coping strategies recommended by Hon (1995) was becoming the boss.  For some women in her study, becoming the boss was "the ultimate form of empowerment" (p. 79).

Krider and Ross (1997) used a phenomenological approach to examine the roles and experiences of seven women in public relations who were employed at a large public relations firm in the Midwest.  Participants used terms such as "white male ego at the top of practically every organization…very male dominated world…very heavily male dominated" (p. 444). The terms that surfaced most were white male ego, superwoman, sexism, and glass ceiling.

Toth et al. (1998) looked at data on the roles of PRSA members and the kinds of experiences they received on the job, using data from more than 1,000 respondents.  The researchers noted that women will be unable to advance in salary and role if they are not given the opportunity to handle research, counsel management, or engage in policy-making.  Serini et al. (1998) took data from a national survey completed by 678 PRSA members and six focus groups to explore the effects of sexual harassment in public relations.  Focus group findings revealed that some women in agencies found relationships with their male clients a particular concern, especially social obligations after work involving alcohol.  Based on the results of focus groups and depth interviews with women as potential managers, Cline and Toth (1993) found that women were seen as caring, understanding, and capable of working well with clients, especially in small agencies.  Grunig et al. (2000) discussed how feminist values, such as cooperation, justice, equality, equity, honesty, perceptiveness, intuition, fairness, loyalty, commitment, and altruism, enhance the ethical practice of public relations.  With the onslaught of women in the field, such values "help establish the field as a vital and ethical organizational function" (p. 49).

Wrigley (2002) conducted a qualitative study, using in-depth interviews and focus groups, to identify the factors supporting and perpetuating the glass ceiling for 27 female managers in public relations and corporate communications. Examining her findings from a feminist perspective, she suggested a new theoretical concept titled "negotiated resignation" (p.37) for explaining the psychological process of denial that women use to come to terms with the glass ceiling. O'Neil (2003) conducted a study of 309 senior-level corporate practitioners and looked at perceived organizational influence of men and women in corporate public relations. No differences in gender were found in relationship power or influence. Women had less formal structural power than men.

Aldoory and Toth (2004) used a quantitative survey and focus groups to examine perceptions of leadership styles and opinions about gender and leadership – particularly styles considered most effective in public relations. Focus group participants perceived women as making better leaders in public relations due to acquired socialized traits of having empathy and being collaborative nature in nature, which are traits of transformational leadership style. Pompper (2004) conducted four focus groups of 28 African American women and discovered that women in her study practiced a special brand of two-way symmetry by fulfilling the role of pioneer, educator, mentor, and agenda-builder.

Grunig (2006) conducted a content analysis of 500 articles over a 20-year period on women in *Public Relations Review* and the *Public Relations Research Annual/Journal of Public Relations Research*. Grunig claimed that most hypothesized studies which make distinctions between males and females are either unsupported or weakly supported. She noted that some scholars believe "the work of women – clustered disproportionately in the technician's role – is trivialized and devalued. Instead, they would argue (and I would agree) that we need to respect the preferences that become reflected in the career choices of individual women in this postmodern era" (p. 120).

### *Ethical Approaches in the Practice*

Public relations remains a relatively new professional occupation. Uncertainty exists among its practitioners about what it is, what its ethics and its values are (Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003). Its professional ideology remains amorphous and is yet to mature, especially with professional value systems that differ greatly throughout the world. If the goal of public relations is harmony and the development and maintenance of community, then the practice of public relations should be, in large part, an ideal paradigm for all other practices. In the business world, such an approach furthers the concept of public relations as the conscience of an organization, according to Leeper and Leeper (2001). Public relations practitioners are perhaps best qualified intellectually and professionally to address questions related to corporations' relationships with their stakeholders (Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003). As reputation managers, "ethics and reputation concerns go hand-in-hand, making ethical counsel a natural activity in public relations" (Bowen, 2008, p. 285). On the other hand, Bowen noted that managers have little training in ethical decision making (2002) and recommended a practical and rational model of ethical decision making (2005).

In the two-way symmetrical model of the public relations practice, public relations professionals act as the social conscience of their organization (Gower, 2003). Practitioners employing this model serve as mediators between the organization and its various publics, achieving mutual understanding through consensus building (Bivins, 1989). The two-way symmetrical model is the best model of practice to achieve organizational excellence (Pompper, 2004) and one considered to be most ethical (Grunig et al., 2002). Some researchers argue that women are more ideally suited for practicing two-way symmetrical public relations because of feminist values, such as caring, sensitivity, and diversity (Hon, 1995; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Andsanger & Hust, 2005).

Female leadership has been found to be expressive, by focusing on relationships, cooperation, and consideration (Aldoory, 1998). Grunig's 1992 excellence study suggested that "the most effective public relations grows out of an entire world view that is feminine" (Grunig et al., 2000, p. 59). Most participants in Choi and Hon's (2002) study "believed that more women in top management positions would make a qualitative difference in how organizations and society overall would function. They also felt that both women and men, as well as the public relations function, would benefit from this change" (p. 239).

Women's perceived feminine traits, such as cooperation, consensus building, and conflict resolution, are actually well suited to the practice of excellent public relations and communications management (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Wrigley, 2002). Public relations is an industry founded on feminist values, such as honesty, justice, and sensitivity, and such values are replete in the two-way symmetrical model of the practice considered most ethical.

These feminist values have a positive effect on the practice (Frohlich & Peters, 2007). "In summary, it is argued that men lack crucial sensitivity and empathy toward maintaining relationships with clients, journalists, and target groups; women, in contrast, are 'naturally suited,' as one participant puts it, for service-oriented professions like public relations" (Frohlich & Peters, 2007, p. 240).

Gilligan (1982) conducted a well-recognized qualitative that illuminated how women and girls resolve the serious moral dilemmas in their lives. She found that the development of morality for women centers around responsibility and care. To be impartial and fair, men are more inclined to adhere to abstract laws and universal principles to handle ethical dilemmas. Women, on the other hand, tend to use dialogue to allow each individual to be understood on his or her own terms. "They believe that mutual understanding is most likely to lead to a creative consensus about how everyone's needs may be met in resolving deputes (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 8). Hence, these studies further the notion that women possess natural abilities in consensus and relationship building, which are skills needed in the public relations profession.

This study's theoretical framework draws on feminist perspectives and on the theoretical models of the public relations practice, particularly Grunig's excellence theory. The feminist perspective uncovers women's experiences through their own cultural lenses rather than from a traditionally patriarchal viewpoint. Grunig's framework of the public relations practice identifies the two-way symmetrical model as the most ethical and most successfully implemented by women.

## Research Questions

To discover the ethical pathways of women who head their own public relations firms regarding their ethical challenges and modes of practice, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the ethical challenges these successful women entrepreneurs face and how do they deal with them?
- What theoretical model of public relations practice do they employ?

## Methodology

This study used a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of women entrepreneurs in public relations. Qualitative study lends itself well to feminist research (Grunig, 2006) and is typically associated with the feminist paradigm (O'Neal, 2003). In-depth interviews are ideal for small, purposive samples in public relations (Broom & Dozier, 1990). Thus, data were collected using in-depth interviews with 30 women at their place of business. Women from three major media markets – Los Angeles/Orange Counties in California, New York City, and London – were selected, identified through agency rankings in the area business journals and *O'Dwyers Directory of Public Relations Firms*. A set of open-ended questions were asked of each participant, using a standardized interview guide approach. At the end of the interview, a brief questionnaire was administered to each participant, which included four demographic questions and attitudinal questions about the nature of their practice. Interviews lasted from one hour to two and a half hours with the average interview being 97 minutes in length. Responses were transcribed in verbatim and analyzed for common themes and unique comments that emerged from the interviews.

## Results and Discussion

Four major themes emerged concerning the ethical challenges faced by these women: client credibility, billing issues, intolerance of bad client behavior, and employee issues.

### Client Credibility

All 30 of the women mentioned that the credibility of the client affected their own reputation, and their agency's reputation meant a great deal to them. They affirmed that they tried to accept only ethical clients and avoid ones who cannot deliver what they say.

- "We really do as much research as we can because I don't want to be affiliated with unethical companies, frauds, gimmicks. There's always a grey area with some of that stuff. To me our people here have to be proud of what they are doing, so that's the ultimate test here. It's not just their reputations. They affect our relationships and our credibility with the media."

- "I'm careful about the clients that I choose to work with. For instance, I've had a couple of clients in the past who I didn't feel that they were good people or ethically wise people. Nothing good is going to come of it, so I don't want anything to do with it."

- "I don't take on shady clients. Someone very wise in public relations once told me, 'You make your money walking away from a deal or from clients.' You know that if someone is dishonest, they're not going to be fun to work with."

To avoid working with a dishonest client, one participant explained that she uses her intuition:

- "I get a sense. I do a little research, but it's just a gut instinct. Like, I have someone right now begging me to take their account. And I don't feel that I can distinguish them. I don't want to take their money and not be able to deliver the results."

Others also say they get a sense, a gut feeling that something is not right about a potential client or an existing client. One gave an example of her reasons for resigning an account:

- "I don't have any outside proof it (the product) works, and we've been working (on it) for some time now. I've had the growing realization that I don't have a lot of confidence in this product….I don't want to be responsible for recommending the product or the company."

Others use methods of investigation before taking a new client, including social media and the Internet to investigate the legitimacy of claims:

- "If a client can't deliver, I won't take them on. You need to be honest. I counsel on the content and credibility of the message so I have to look at scientific research, third-party endorsements, and the long-term implications of the product. I have turned down business without it."

- "You can find a great deal about potential clients on the Internet and through social media about all kinds of things."

- "Not only do clients interview us, we interview clients. I have to believe in what I promote. If it was unethical and it was a lot of money, it would end up screwing you anyway. If they're going to be unethical, they'll be unethical with me too."

On the other hand, a few of the women owners felt it was unreasonable to thoroughly investigate the claims of the client:

- "I can't tell you that I've researched every _____ company in the country before we accepted the _____ company we work with as a client, but they seem really good and really smart. I think I probably want to, but I don't know if you could find someone that knew enough about their clients and their competitors on the inside. That would require some kind of crazy amount of research that I'm not sure that we would have any access to. We'd have to buy it. How would you go and find out which _____ companies are the best."

- "We had clients come to us and tell us this is the fact, and we don't know their company better than they do. You promote it the way they tell you to. You can't (check out all the facts). We're not engineers. There's no way.…there's not an ethical review in the new business process. I wouldn't even know how."

One woman discussed the ethical dilemma of angel investing – that is, obtaining investors for a new product venture that may or may not work.

- "So we're always striking a balance between helping our clients communicate what is possible and what is real without preventing them from communicating incorrect information to employees, to investors, to media. That's one of the biggest ethical dilemmas because you know very much the nature of an entrepreneur is some guy creates a product. They believe in it, but they also very often believe in their own hype, so we have to help dissect that hype into very real and tangible elements."

*Billing Issues*

Another major theme was billing issues:  charging for time and projects, employee mistakes, clients not paying, and reducing fees for clients.  Overwhelmingly, the agency owners talked about full disclosure with the client, the importance of detailing agency charges and ensuring clients get their money's worth.  Some struggle with over serving their clients:

- "I think our biggest challenge in agency is not to over service our clients.  We get so excited we just go running and sometimes we forget to get the budget signed.…we also have an agreement with our clients that there are no surprises.…part of customer service is sending invoices that people expect.  And not sending surprises over or being vague about what it's going to cost."

- "We are the shepherds of our clients' money, so we will have fiduciary responsibility for that.  We don't take that role lightly…We run our shop as if it is totally transparent and we will always error – if there's a billing issue or whatever – to the benefit of the client.  So that if and when we get audited – and we have been audited before – we can open up the books and you can see what it is.  Not to say that we're always perfect.  We might make a math error or whatever.  But, by the end of the day, the client is going to find out they got a really good deal because there were a lot of things that we didn't bill them for."

Some of the agencies work for other agencies.  Some of the participants' firms pick up the slack or use their particular specialized expertise for another agency.  Sometimes this causes ethical dilemmas in billing:

- "We're always spending above and over the time that we've allotted for.  But we don't bill that back to the client.  The ethical issue with billing was when a client, a third party, thinks that they're paying X for a retainer, but then they have this major mark-up that increases their retainer to Y, and we're being asked to perform to the client's expectations.  But the reality is that we're only getting paid X. That was the dilemma that I had to resolve directly with the other agencies we were working under. It put us in an ethical dilemma that we've really had a hard time with."

Probably all agencies have experienced a non-paying client.  These women have as well, but one faced a rather unusual ethical dilemma:

- "A client refused to pay us.  I was really angry because we worked so hard.  We bill our time and we always bill under, and I just eat it.  We're always giving so much value for the dollar.  We had a client that wouldn't pay their bill and then they accidentally double-paid a different bill and mailed me a check for almost the whole amount that I felt they owed me….I took my scissors out and chopped up the check and threw it in the trash because I didn't trust myself.  You kind of have to make your decision whether or not you're a thief pretty early on."

One owner fired an employee who overcharged:

- "I had one employee that overcharged a client. I have a policy that no invoice goes out without my final approval.  She sent it out without my approval.  She charged them, and she charged them to estimate, and we came in under estimate…I think she thought she was doing me a favor, pay me more money.  But you don't make money like that."

Another agency owner faced an ethical dilemma when a client asked her to reduce her fees in exchange for continuous business:

- "When it goes on for years and years and years, it came to the point where I feel that that was a very ethical issue…that to me was an ethical issue because I knew I was being taken advantage of."

Non-payment or reduced payment by clients extends to agency vendors, and for some women, these relationships are important.  In one case, a client authorized payment for a rush job.  The agency owner said the vendor worked extremely hard, putting in far more hours than he billed.  The client, however, refused to pay the vendor for the full amount.  This agency owner stepped in and paid the vendor, after several attempts with the client failed:

- "Sometimes it's the little guy that always seems to get the short end of the stick.  That doesn't seem fair.  I'm the little man myself, but I'm always going to make sure that vendors get a fair shake."

*Miscellaneous Client Issues*

Other client issues surfaced, such as working with clients that may compete with one another, which can be a problem for agencies that specialize in certain industries, such as technology, health care, and land development. One woman described her biggest ethical issue being when to disclose to a client that the key account liaison has departed from the agency: "My biggest ethical dilemma pretty much comes when you lose a staff member. At what point do you go in and tell the client. And, how much do you reveal about it because clients tend to leave." She described the first ten years of her career before she was a business owner when "e-mails going back and forth from names that weren't there anymore…That to me is an ethical dilemma." She explained that "Not every client's happy all the time. Every single client is going to have an issue at least once or twice a year. Sometimes it's your fault. Most of the time, to be honest, it's not. But you're a scapegoat."

Many of the agency founders handled global clients, and for some, they explained what is unethical in the United States may be an ethical practice abroad. Gift giving in some cultures may be seen as a bribe. In other cultures, the absence of gift giving is seen as an insult. One owner gave another example: "You do things that North America would perceive as unethical. Like we'll pay a reporter for a piece of coverage."

*Intolerance of Bad Client Behavior*

The third major ethical theme to surface among the women was an intolerance of bad client behavior. Although many of the women have mentioned that they have counseled their female employees when they have encountered inappropriate advances from clients or journalists, they did not see this as an ethical dilemma. Rather, they seemed to view it as part and parcel of the business world. When probed about sexual advances in their agency role, all admitted being hit on by clients and some by clients, subordinates, and reporters. All seemed to feel that male advances were part of the reality of doing business:

- "You nip it in the bud."
- "It's all how you handle it."
- "You don't back down."
- "You just address it and move on."
- "I think if I'm going to be one of 200 women in a room of 15,000 people, and if you expect not to have, you know, verbal comments, what am I doing here?"
- "Never had problem. But you set boundaries though. I'm there as your friend. I'm there as your agency partner. I'm there because we're here networking. I'm not here because this means it's a date or anything else."
- I've been hit on. I've been put in very precarious situations. But I have thick skin so if I didn't have thick skin, then I don't think that I would have a lot of my clients. Unfortunately, that's really the way it is. The way I handle that and especially that kind of situation is I laugh it off. I make it funny and I say, 'Oh, well.' A couple of times I've had to say, 'I'm a happily married woman, but thank you. Ha-ha.' You just kind of have to stand your ground and remain true to yourself."
- "One of my clients was always saying, 'Oh, you should come over here and give me a back rub, and blah, blah, blah,' and this guy's married, of course, and older by 15 or 20 years. It bothered me, but I would go, 'Oh, ha-ha.' And he kept saying stuff, 'oh, we should get a drink.' So one day I said, 'You know what?' I had some releases for him to approve. I said, 'Why don't I come over around 5 o'clock and I'll bring something to drink and it'll just be you and I.' And he said, 'Okay.'"

Weary of his harassment, she brought California Coolers to the meeting and opened two of them after they concluded their business, daring him to approach her:

- "There's nobody else left in the office because everyone went home at five. We're sitting there, and we've having our mixed beverages. That's alcohol at that point in my life. We finish them and I said, 'Well, I guess I'll go.' He said, 'Okay, thanks for coming by.' And he never bugged me again. I sort of called him on it – like, 'What are you going to really do, buddy?' But I didn't say that. He was my client, and I didn't want to be rude. I was tired of him bugging me."

All of the women seemed adamant that sex and romance have no place in their relationships with clients, subordinates, vendors, or journalists.  The following statement in particular best represented their thoughts on this matter:

- "But the key to success when it comes to that kind of stuff – and this is where I think too many women do a disservice – don't sleep with people in your industry!  Stay the hell out of the bedroom!  I will never date anybody that I ever have to pitch or have to work with.  Period.   I think it's a good business model for women."

On the other hand, poor treatment of agency members by clients was intolerable to all:

- "I do not tolerate men ganging up on a woman."
- "I will fire a client for the way the team is treated.  I won't take abuse from a client.  It doesn't have a place here.  It affects morale."
- "I have resigned clients because they've been too abusive to me or my staff."
- "There was client who wanted to do a press tour and wouldn't let the associate eat – only like hot dogs off the street and stay in these seedy motels.  I said, 'Forget it,' and I resigned them.  Because safety becomes an issue.  Well-being is an issue.  I mean, that's just not acceptable."
- "I take very seriously the way the team is treated because they are a very professional, respectable group.  They work really hard.  When there's abuse going on from a client, which does not happen very often – maybe one percent – we don't have room for them at this agency because that leads to a lack of morale.  When they go home at the end of the day, they don't feel successful.  And it impacts their ability to service their other clients.  So when that happens, we'll let the client know that we just need to conclude their contact or we'll set up some new ground rules for how they communicate."
- "I just have some real issues with how they treat their people and how they treat our people.  I just don't feel comfortable working with them any longer."

*Employee Issues*

The last theme concerning ethical dilemmas dealt with employees, but the issues relating to employees were varied.  There were few similarities among the participants.
The issue mentioned most was layoffs and firings:

- Making payroll – "My biggest concern is making sure I make payroll.  I absolutely do not ever want to go through a layoff.  For me, that's just not acceptable.  You offer somebody a job; you got to pay them."
- Losing an account that will result in a loss of jobs – "You know there's a layoff at the end of the quarter because a contract is ending or a client is experiencing financial difficulties, but there's still a lot of work that needs to get done by then.  When do you give employees a heads-up?"
- Firing an employee –  "You're playing with someone's life.  You can't forget the impact that it has on the other side that this is their job that they're losing.  And like, especially in this economy, if you toss someone out, they probably can't find something else and you're really hurting them.  That feels like ethics to me."

One agency owner faced a difficult ethical situation that cost her a valued employee:

- "There was one instance where I had an employee who shared information with one of my client's competitors, and I immediately fired him.  That was an ethical dilemma.  And he was fired.  Period.  That day.  He was a pretty valuable employee to me, but that was just not acceptable."

Another agency owner felt that the method of payment – salaries for managers vs. hourly for technicians – was an ethical issue, surfacing from recent changes in the law.  Another felt it was only ethical to give her employees an opportunity to decline working on an account they could not support, such as controversial political issues.  Another said she encountered an ethical issue when an employee took databases and client contacts when the individual left her employment.  One owner questioned the use of social media as a tool used by employees to tell others about their lives, including their thoughts about an employer:

- "I'm still trying to figures out how do I respect that and not impede in their private area. At the same time, how do I communicate that we need to just be aware of how we're going to be presenting ourselves? We brought in a consultant to provide some guidelines. So while I would never want to impede in their own personal life, when you're reflecting back on (your place of employment), there just needs to be some thought about you're putting out there."

Although the results of the questionnaire cannot be extrapolated to the general population based on a sample size of 30, the results are nevertheless interesting. Almost half – fourteen of the women – reported that they practice the two-way symmetrical model of the practice, described on the questionnaire as "building relationships with your clients' publics through communication tools, consensus building, and socially responsible business practices." Eight reported that they practice the two-way asymmetrical model, described as "communicating with your clients' publics through various means and getting audience feedback." Two reported they practice the public information model, explained as "preparing news releases, brochures, and other forms of media to inform and educate audiences about your clients' products or services," and six reported they practice the press agentry/publicity model, detailed as "employing publicity techniques to obtain coverage in the media."

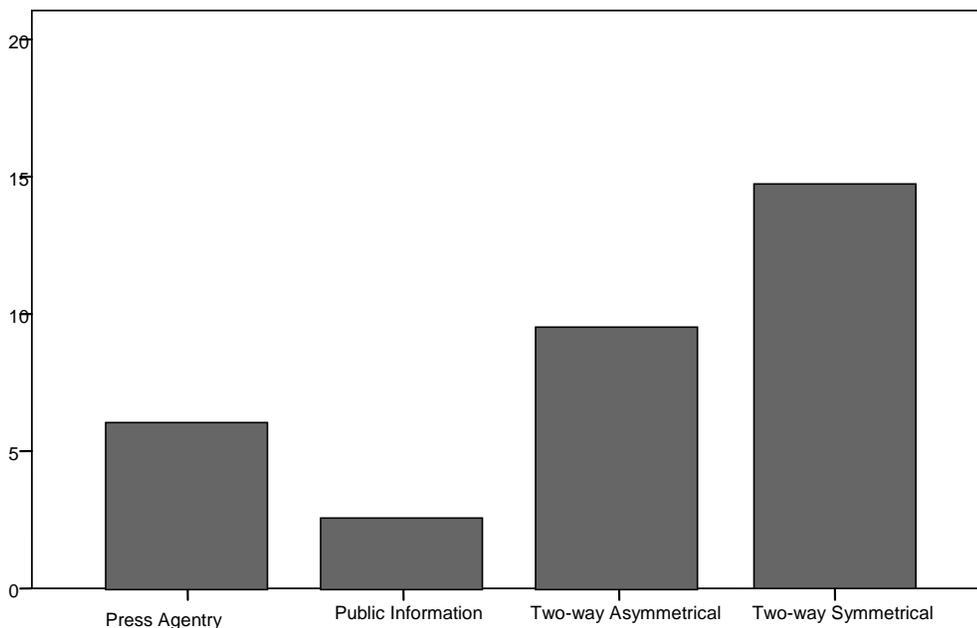## Models of the Public Relations Practice



**Figure 4. Models of public relations that participants selected as the best description of their own agency.**

Ethical issues and social responsibility were two concerns that surfaced from the participants' responses. Client credibility topped the ethical dilemma list. Ensuring that a client is credible and able to deliver what it promises is a concern and a challenge for most of the women. All said they have not accepted a client they suspect is unethical or unable to deliver. Some research clients and client claims thoroughly while others find it unrealistic to do so.

Billing issues were understandably a concern. Overcharging, undercharging, employee mistakes in billing, and clients refusing to pay are ethical issues that concerned these women. Miscellaneous client issues also surfaced, which included when to inform the client that the account person has left the agency and working with competing clients. Moreover, a few of the women mentioned facing varying ethical standards in different countries.

Another major theme that the women considered an ethical dilemma was bad client behavior.  The majority of women mentioned an assortment of client abuses they found intolerable, such as men ganging up on a woman, abusive behavior toward agency members or the client's own staff, and poor treatment when traveling with a client.  All were concerned about ethical issues involving employees – lawful payment arrangements, meeting payroll, losing an account that results in a layoff, and the firing of employees.

These women addressed these ethical issues by seeking special counsel, legal services, setting policies, consensus building, and confronting the issues directly through consultation.  Instead of practicing one particular model of the public relations practice as described in the literature, these women appear to practice a coalescence of the four models.  Still, in the participants' responses to ethical issues, they expressed a real concern about the importance of being social responsibility and ensuring that their agency dealings and recommendations are ethical.  To them, ethics is just good business.

### Recommendations for the Profession

Ethical issues surround the women in this study.  Few of the participants indicated that they have received much formal training in this area.  Most have learned by doing.  Some have consulted other agency owners, asked the advice of clients, and sought legal counsel.  Therefore, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) should offer seminars, workshops, white papers, and other resources on how to address a wide array of ethical issues.  Public relations professionals must challenge their organization's particular way of thinking, of solving problems, and of viewing the world.  An organization's ideology, values and worldview cannot remain static or unchallenged within the professional public relations community.  However, practitioners must first acknowledge their own professional ideology, values, and belief systems before they can address the same for their clients or the organizations which employ them.  Public relations professionals must work with management to establish ethical guidelines that focus on community building with all stakeholders, including multicultural and diverse societies worldwide. As professionals, public relations practitioners must not blindly take orders nor accept their client or organizational worldviews without question or challenge; rather, public relations practitioners must be able to apply professional problem-solving methodologies and their own professional body of knowledge to address client and corporate issues of relationship-building and community-building across cultures and nations.

### Limitations

The participants in this study were selected from the top firms in Southern California, New York City, and London, using agency rankings based on billings and the number of employees.  Therefore, the participants have achieved a certain level of success.  Their situation is unique.  Women who oversee the public relations function in companies and nonprofit organizations were not included in this study.  Women who head smaller agencies, firms that handle smaller accounts, and businesses that specialize in multicultural relations were not included in this study.  The sample size of 30 women is not large enough to extrapolate the findings to the broader population.  Since women are the only subjects in this study, no gender comparisons can be made between men and women.

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