SeaWorld and the Blackfish: The Lack of Two-Way Symmetrical

Communication and Finding the Correct Message

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how two-way symmetrical communication could help SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment rebuild their reputation and take back their brand after attacks from animal rights groups following the release of the documentary *Blackfish.* The study analyzes SeaWorld's previous and current public relations campaigns, how effective they've been and if utilization of the two-way symmetrical communication model could benefit the company. In the past a documentary like *Blackfish* would have caused backlash towards SeaWorld only from the few who saw it in theatres, but today everything ends up on the internet and remains there, circulating outrage and criticism to new audiences. It's more important than ever for companies to have crisis communication tactics that can help them restore public opinion and support. This study analyzes crisis communication strategies, particularly utilizing two-way symmetrical communication.

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Statement of the Problem

Amidst crisis following a large movement of animal rights campaigns against SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, the theme park company has responded to its publics utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication. This communication model can be seen in their initial responses to opposing animal rights groups. First SeaWorld responded to a documentary called *Blackfish* (which accused SeaWorld of mistreating its orca whale population) through trying to discredit the movie before its release by sending their concerns to movie critics (Schwartz, 2013). After the film was released SeaWorld responded with an open-letter in newspapers to refute the documentary's claims (NPR 2015). SeaWorld's campaigns were met with criticism and negative press after deleting comments on SeaWorld's Facebook page which questioned the company's animal policies (Johnson, 2014).

These response strategies failed because SeaWorld ignored their publics' questions and concerns which could be better discovered and addressed through two-way symmetrical communication. Their opposition has been doing the same. SeaWorld's newest strategies have tried to utilize two-way symmetrical communication such as their Ask SeaWorld campaign on Twitter (Grisham, 2015). The campaign welcomes questions from SeaWorld's publics about their company and animal policies, but upon its launch the campaign was used by SeaWorld's opposition as a way to further attack the company (Grisham, 2015). SeaWorld must still find an efficient way to utilize two-way symmetrical communication.

Background of the Problem

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In 1991 SeaWorld trainer Keltie Byrne fell into a pool occupied by Tilikum and two other whales. The whales drowned her despite her attempts to get out of the pool (PBS). Nine years later a man who had hid in the park after hours was found dead, draped across Tilikum's back in a SeaWorld pool (New York Times, 1999). In 2010 trainer Dawn Brancheau was pulled into the water by her pony tail by Tilikum; she too drowned (Greene, 2010).

On January 19, 2013 the documentary *Blackfish* premiered in New York at the Sundance Film Festival. The film focuses on Tilikum and the deaths surrounding the whale, as well as accusations that SeaWorld mistreats its killer whale population. The documentary became widespread after airing on CNN. Public perception of SeaWorld changed practically overnight. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) jumped on the opportunity to make their own complaints about SeaWorld as well as other animal rights activists. In the aftermath since the airing of the documentary SeaWorld's stock has dropped and has had a reduction in park attendance (Pedicini, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

This study is being done in attempts to provide public relations practitioners the best practices for communicating with ones publics during a crisis, especially one that has resulted in the majority of the public viewing the organization or company negatively. By looking at the consequences of SeaWorld's current campaigns practitioners can learn what communication strategies do and do not work in this type of crisis. The study also will provide solutions for SeaWorld and any company in a similar situation with suggestions in how to develop two-way symmetrical communication channels and what the messages on those channels should be in order to win back good grace with the public.

Setting for the Study

This study will take place at California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, California as part of research for a journalism senior project. All interviews for the study will be done over the phone. Interviews will occur with a SeaWorld public relations employee, a marketing specialist in tourism and a public relations professional. The SeaWorld public relations professional will be able to speak about how SeaWorld is utilizing two-way symmetrical communication and if it has helped improve their image. The marketing specialist and public relations professional can give advice from their professional experiences as to how SeaWorld should best handle their public relations campaigns and specifically utilize two-way symmetrical communication to come back from this reputation blow.

Research Questions

This study is based upon the following research questions that are answered in the literature review chapter of this study and through interviews with public relations and marketing specialists. These questions were created through studying the background of SeaWorld's crisis and through the study of both *Blackfish's* campaign and SeaWorld's rebuttals.

1) What are two-way symmetric communication channels?
2) How can two-way symmetrical channels be developed?
3) What message needs to be outgoing across those channels?
4) How was SeaWorld utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication instead of two-way symmetrical?
5) How has SeaWorld been harmed by using the asymmetrical model?

6) How can SeaWorld and its opponents instead utilize two-way symmetrical communication?

7) Can SeaWorld implement two-way symmetrical communication using their current communication channels?

8) How would SeaWorld benefit from utilizing the two-way symmetrical communication model?

Definition of Terms

Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication: Public relations model allowing for communication not just from an organization to the public, but also for feedback from the public. Typically feedback is only used in this model as a way for the company to better understand their target audience (Hunt and Grunig, 1984).

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication: Public relations model allowing for feedback from the public, but the feedback is used as a way of understanding public concerns and making changes to accommodate them. Compromise is a key part of this communication model (Hunt and Grunig, 1984).

Communication Channels: A chosen medium to submit a message to an audience. Examples are newspapers or television (Business Dictionary).

SeaWorld: A theme park company known specifically for their wide array of marine animals including whales, dolphins, seals, polar bears, penguins, sharks and much more. They are most well known for their Orca shows with star mascot, Shamu (SeaWorld Entertainment).

Blackfish: A documentary following SeaWorld's treatment of killer whales and captivity of Orcas by the theme park company (Internet Movie Database).

PETA: Short for People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, one of the largest animal rights organizations in the world. The group focuses on animal abuse on "factory farms, in the clothing trade, in laboratories and in the entertainment industry" (PETA).

Animal Rights: Rights for animals to be treated humanely and protected from abuse from humans (Dictionary.com).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. This chapter, chapter one gives a brief introduction of what the study will cover and background information as well as necessary information needed to understand the rest of the study. Chapter two is a literature review of previous works that have already discussed two-way symmetrical communication and its benefits. The literature review will also answer the research questions listed in this chapter. Chapter three will give an overview of the methodology used in this study, such as how interviews will be conducted and limitations of the study. Chapter four houses all data analysis following the interviews including interview responses and background about each interview subject. The final chapter includes discussion and recommendations for SeaWorld and any other company undergoing a crisis involving a negative reputation amongst key publics.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

A review of existing literature on two-way symmetrical communications between organizations and their publics and how to develop two-way symmetrical communication channels.

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) created four models of public relation practices. Their models include: Press Agentry, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetric and Two-Way Symmetric. The four models all differ from one another and to fully understand their Two-Way Symmetrical model which is the focus of this study all four must be defined.

The Press Agentry model utilizes one way communication in order to help persuade or manipulate a public to see the organization positively. The Public Information model moves away from manipulative actions found in Press Agentry and instead delivers accurate messages and information to the public but lacks communication from a public back to an organization.

The Two-Way Asymmetric Model created by Grunig and Hunt allows for two-way communication between an organization and a public, but the organization uses the information to better tailor their message and target specific audiences most likely to affiliate with the organization.

Lane (2005) described two-way asymmetrical communication as "The role of the public relations practitioner in this asymmetric situation is to act as a facilitator or fulcrum in the interchange of information between organization and public. However, the aim is for power to

remain with the organization, and for the public to be encouraged to comply with organizational strategic objectives," (p. 6).

The Two-Way Symmetric Model allows the most communication between a public and an organization. Two-Way Symmetric allows for an open dialogue that then can help an organization change policies or actions that the public sees unfavorably.

Hagan (2003) described two-way symmetrical communication as a give and take between an organization and their key publics. The two must come to understand the other and compromise when needed (p. 151).

Developing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Rhee (2008) found in a study about Brookhaven National Laboratory that symmetrical communication was utilized through interpersonal channels (p.10). In interviews with community members living around the lab it was found that having personal conversations with the lab's employees humanized the situation and took some fear away, "People are more likely to believe when they have a one-on-one conversation with somebody and it may be semi-officially, or it might be an informal phone call, might not be a part of a meeting, but that person becomes a human being, less of a representative or a part of a large organization. When you see them as a human being and you hear what they are saying, you tend to believe them more" (p. 10).

Brookhaven National Laboratory began a program called envoy in order to change local public perceptions about their laboratory. The program has local envoys speak to the community about concerns. The program was successful as community members felt more at ease knowing and trusting the local envoys instead of someone higher up in the corporation. "A community member explained, 'Rather than bringing down someone with a high title from outside, the local

person [envoy] makes a different impact if they are addressing the [community]. I think they can relate on a local level and to local concerns.' She added that envoys put a 'personal face to the large organization'" (p. 11)

The study found eight important strategies that have been successful between an organization's two-way symmetrical communication with its publics and vice versa: openness, access, assurance, sharing of tasks, listening, responsiveness, continued dialogue, and educational communication (p. 11-13).

Sallot (2002) gave multiple examples for how two-way communication can be accomplished citing specific methods to retrieve data from the public. Communication audits, in-depth interviews and focus groups with members of the public, polling and keeping track of clients concerns are all methods to gain feedback from a public about their concerns or questions about an organization (p. 152).

The Message across those Channels

To truly benefit from using such channels it's also very important that the right message is told through communication channels between an organization and their publics. Currently SeaWorld and its opponents are using their communication channels not only for one-way messages but also using the wrong message.

Pedicini of Tribune Business News (2015) wrote about the grievances and attacks both sides have utilized against each other, making their messages hostile and aggressive. SeaWorld has used their channels to get out the message that PETA is enjoying the "attention by twisting statistics and falsely attacking us." Meanwhile PETA has used their channels to host demonstrations against SeaWorld by protesting naked in bathtubs outside a Macy's store.

Sallot (2002) studied how the public responded to different types of public relations campaigns and found that the public held more positive feelings toward an organization if they felt a campaign was being launched for purely altruistic reasons and not as a ploy (163).

Pedicini interviewed Glenn Omura, a marketing associate professor at Michigan State University, about the message SeaWorld specifically is using across its channels. She responded, "'fighting an emotional public opinion with facts' is 'okay to start, but it needs to launch a marketing campaign based on emotion and family-oriented values (fun and entertainment) if it's going to recover its place in the market.'"

SeaWorld and Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication

SeaWorld's response to their publics after the release of *Blackfish* has taken an asymmetrical communication approach. The theme park has responded by refuting claims and sending out its own message without really listening to what its public has to say. Before the film even aired in 2013 SeaWorld had already released statements calling the documentary "inaccurate and misleading" before addressing any of its claims. Schwartz for PR News (2013) predicted "by taking an aggressive stance against the documentary, SeaWorld may spark the interest of people who might not otherwise see the film. And people whose curiosity is piqued by the vehemence of the response."

NPR reported (Allen, 2015) that SeaWorld first responded after the airing of *Blackfish* by "running a full-page open letter in newspapers to tell what it said was the 'truth' about *Blackfish*." SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment YouTube channel also just recently launched a new ad campaign of commercial and web videos (2015) directly refuting *Blackfish* claims in which SeaWorld employees dismiss their opponents and asks for the public to do the same, "So

don't believe what PETA and *Blackfish* are saying. Our killer whales live lives just as long as killer whales in the wild."

SeaWorld also has a page on its website titled, *Blackfish: The Truth about the Movie.* Here the theme park explains in more details flaws with the documentary, "We object to *Blackfish* because its two central premises are wrong: (1) that life at SeaWorld is harmful for killer whales and for trainers working with these animals, and (2) that SeaWorld has attempted to cover up the facts surrounding the tragic death of trainer Dawn Brancheau in 2010, as well the history of Tilikum, the killer whale involved in that accident. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Johnson, CEO for PR agency *Strategic Vision, LLC*, (2014) describes the worst communication gaffe SeaWorld committed, "Posters on SeaWorld's Facebook page who expressed concern or disapproval of SeaWorld's policies saw their posts deleted. SeaWorld wouldn't even address their concerns."

Blackfish director Gabriela Cowperthwaite responded with her own letter to SeaWorld (2014). She too utilized asymmetrical communication, failing to address any of SeaWorld's concerns and instead used it as a chance to get her organization's message across *"It is ironic that SeaWorld launched its latest assault on Blackfish, a film that has brought the question of marine mammal welfare to the center of public debate, at a time when approximately 250 bottlenose dolphins were trapped, killed or sold to aquariums in Taiji, Japan, the town featured in the Oscar-winning documentary 'The Cove.' While the global community is outraged and condemns this horrific dolphin hunt, SeaWorld has watched from the sidelines. Had SeaWorld

added its powerful voice to the efforts to stop this drive hunt of dolphins for use by the captive industry—perhaps many dolphins would have been spared."

Consequences of SeaWorld's Use of Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication

The consequences of SeaWorld's use of two-way asymmetrical communication have been apparent as the company fails to bounce back from the controversy surrounding *Blackfish.* Greenfield (2014) listed out everything SeaWorld had lost due to the crisis but also their unsuccessful attempts at persuading the public that their message was correct and their opponents are wrong. The 2014 data showed that SeaWorld "reported a 28 percent drop in profit and a 5.2 percent drop in attendance, to 8.3 million, in the three months ended Sept. 30. It also announced a $50 million cost-cutting measure."

Pedicini of Tribune Business News (2015) reported that more recent consequences for SeaWorld have been drops in their stock, notably a 33 percent drop a day after the company admitted *Blackfish* had reduced park attendance, and their CEO stepped down in January.

Johnson, CEO for PR agency *Strategic Vision, LLC*, (2014) sites specific uses of SeaWorld's asymmetrical communication strategy as only helping their opponents cause, by failing to engage in a discussion. Johnson writes that social media is critical for audiences to interact with an organization during a crisis. SeaWorld, by not only ignoring their audience, but deleting their concerns on social media only caused more outrage (Johnson).

By the time SeaWorld attempted two-way symmetrical communication in 2015 through their "Ask SeaWorld" Twitter campaign some publics were already so turned off they used the Twitter hashtag "#askSeaWorld" to criticize the company rather than engage in meaningful discussion. Grisham of USA Today (2015) reported that animal rights activists went as far to

criticize SeaWorld's creation of the campaign, " 'Instead of spending millions of dollars in creating this website and trying to rehab its image, it should be spending the money on rehabbing the orcas confined there so they can live out their days in a sea pen in as natural an environment as possible,' Jared Goodman, director of animal law for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals foundation, told USA TODAY Network."

The site that was originally intended for two-way symmetrical communication failed to do so as successfully as possible as people like Goodman use it to only deliver their message and SeaWorld uses it only to deliver theirs. Both sides are still failing to listen to the other.

Utilizing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication for SeaWorld and its Publics

Lane (2005) writes that there are two ways to approach two-way symmetrical communication by public relation practitioners. They can either be the middle-man between management and an organization's audience (getting them in for a presentation of their viewpoint etc.) or speak on the public's behalf to management. No matter which route is taken, the publics must be given some amount of influence to management and management must be willing to listen and even prepared to take action after hearing the publics comments (p. 7-8). Lane goes on to list a step by step process called the Martson RACE model in order to create two-way communication channels between an organization and its publics: research, action, communication and evaluation. In the research step Lane writes, "As in two-way asymmetric public relations, practitioners may approach their management target public directly, and/or via an influencer," (p. 10) in regards to who and how to research. In the next step, action, Lane argues the public relations practitioner needs to reach across boundaries and communicate with the people who have the largest influence over an organization and relay information to them as

"persuasively as they would if they were trying to bring stakeholders into alignment with the organization," (p. 12).

In the communication step Lane suggests having the public present their case to management themselves, "Presentations made by publics themselves are not only more effective (arguably) because they are more genuine and therefore heartfelt, but also because they do not then compromise the position of the public relations person within the organization. However, where stakeholders are not in a position to state their own case, it may be necessary for the public relations professional to act as an advocate on their behalf," (p. 13).

Lindeborg (1994) found that public relations practitioners utilizing two-way symmetrical communication should, "retain their sense of being right, while at the same time respecting the opinions of others. They should be willing to debate and attempt to persuade others, while remaining open to being persuaded. Persuasion is accomplished through dialogue and agreement; it does not automatically follow the presentation of evidence," (p. 9).

The final step in the RACE model is to evaluate how the campaign did. It can be measured by how many messages from the public the organization listened to and if they responded positively to the suggestions and concerns (p. 13).

Barriers to SeaWorld Implementing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Lane (2005) found that problems with two-way symmetrical communications are if management of an organization will truly listen to their publics and make changes, "If one or more executives or management members come to better understand and appreciate the public's point of view, but the CEO does not and refuses to respond – is that a 'win' for two-way symmetric public relations?" (p. 13). Hagan (2003) addressed the same issue two years before

stating that public relations practitioners may relate concerns of a public back to managers who are unwilling to listen.

Lane also addresses that a public relations practitioner trying to accurately present information from both sides, the organization and the public, can be very difficult but has become an increasingly needed component of public relations in regards to consideration (p. 8).

Paine of PR News (2015) commended SeaWorld for their attempt at successful two-way symmetrical communication, "The SeaWorld campaign adopted what most PR people would applaud as an invitation to a two-way dialogue. The integrated marketing campaign includes published research studies, videos, articles and TV ads that welcome questions and highlight SeaWorld's scientific leadership on the subject of killer whales."

Paine went on though to address that SeaWorld was not prepared to handle the backlash that came with the campaign and that the company failed at the attempt at two-way dialogue, "The negative messages from PETA and Blackfish drowned out any positive messages that SeaWorld was trying to disseminate." Paine goes on to advise that SeaWorld has gone about delivering the message from the wrong people after SeaWorld's answers to tough questions weren't taken seriously, "If your strategy is to respond to criticism with facts, don't use the VP of Communications as your chief spokesperson, use a scientist. VPs of Communications are too well versed in corporate speak to sound authentic. Find someone who is a better, more credible spokesperson."

Benefits of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication for SeaWorld

A 2008 study by Rhee showed that successful use of two-way symmetrical communication along with strong leadership can help aid an organization's development of favorable relationships with its audiences. (p. 237).

Hirsh of the San Diego Business Journal (2014) spoke with a journalism professor at San Diego State, Bey-Ling Sha who suggested that SeaWorld listening to their publics' complaints and responding to them is a step in the right direction though it will be a while for SeaWorld to see the results, "…SeaWorld was wise to move beyond the war of words with critics and set forth concrete corrective measures, though it may not see immediate benefits from the strategy."

Sha also suggests that SeaWorld will face a steeper climb out of their crisis than companies like BP and General Motors because SeaWorld is an entertainment business; people do not have to go to SeaWorld like they need gas or to buy a car. However they have a chance if they stick with listening to their publics, "But SeaWorld is able to show it takes the public concerns seriously, and critics can claim at least partial success in altering the company's policies. 'Compromise is part of life; that is how you work out differences,' Sha said."

Oliver (2000) in a study on two-way communication internally with a company found that "lack of symmetrical communication leaves a credibility gap between policy and practice that creates a vacuum and makes the organization vulnerable, especially during crisis management." If SeaWorld employs open two-way symmetrical communication both internally and externally it helps a company run better during a crisis, which SeaWorld is most definitely in the midst of. Two-way symmetrical communication at all levels of the corporation may be able to help them ascend out of crisis.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology used to collect data for this study. Data comes in the form of interviews with public relations and marketing professionals.

Data Sources

The data for this study will be collected from three different professional interview subjects. The first source is a communications director for a theme park. The second is a public relations professional and professor on the subject. The third is a marketing professional working in tourism. Interview questions were all created from the beginning research questions used to collect information in the literature review in the previous chapter. All questions address how two-way symmetrical communication can be utilized successfully in a crisis and what public relations strategies are best to use to strengthen and rebuild a positive reputation with one's public.

Participants

Participants include David Koontz, Molly Kern, and Charlotte Alexander. David Koontz is the communications director at SeaWorld Park in San Diego. Molly Kern is the marketing coordinator for the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce. She specializes in tourism promotions for the city. Charlotte Alexander is a public relations professional who teaches on the subject at Cal Poly: San Luis Obispo.

Interview Design

The following questions will be given to each source with a few tweaks to each one depending on their area of expertise (for example Koontz's questions will be specifically address SeaWorld's crisis, where as Alexander's questions will be set up about crisis communications in general). The questions were developed from the study's research questions to find out if two-way symmetrical communication channels can be developed and if they're the best way to reach out to one's publics. The sources answers will add examples and be more relevant to this specific study than what has already been discussed on the issue in the literature review.

Questions

1) As a marketing/communications/public relations expert how would you define two-way symmetrical communication?

2) How can two-way symmetrical communication channels be developed by organizations? Do you have any examples?

3) What message should an organization communicate through those channels in times of negative press? What message have you used in times of crisis?

4) How can an organization utilize two-way symmetrical communication? Do you have any examples?

5) Have you found consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?

6) What are some barriers to utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels? Have you found any in your experience?

7) What benefits can come from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?

8) What other strategies can be used to help rebuild after negative press?

Data Collection

Data will be collected for this study through three phone interviews with each individual source. Over the phone the interviewer will ask the above questions in relation to the source's profession and get their advice and professional opinion about communication channels in time of crisis and the best way to reach out and communicate with an organization's publics.

Data Presentation

The interviews will all take place over the phone and be recorded through a recording system on a laptop and by putting the telephone conversations on speaker. The recordings will then be transcribed to be sure everything written down is accurately quoted. The transcriptions will be included with this study so that the readers can see the full context of all quotes and information used from those phone interviews. This methodology will be used to assure that nothing is misquoted, used inaccurately or taken out of context.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include time and commitment. Because this is a senior project it must be completed in 10 weeks, leaving little time to obtain more than three interviews or to wait too long for confirmations from interview subjects. As a result only three interviews will be conducted and some requested interview subjects were left behind after not hearing back quickly enough for them to be included in the study. As it is a senior project, it takes place during spring

quarter of school. As a result there are time constraints on when interviews can take place and the amount of time that can be invested into this project outside of classes and internship hours.

Delimitations

Delimitations on this study include choice of phone interviews, choice of a case study on SeaWorld and local interviews. Phone interviews were chosen due to travel costs. For example, going to SeaWorld to interview Koontz could cost hundreds of dollars and take out too much time from studies. A case study of SeaWorld was chosen due to SeaWorld's recent publicity and because being a California attraction (where the study takes place), there is ease in researching the theme park. Local interviews were chosen when possible for ease of access.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

Chapter four of this study will take a closer look at the responses of the three interview subjects as well as a short description of their credentials. Responses were recorded over the phone and transcribed. They'll be presented in the form of direct quotes and paraphrased answers. The subject's responses will be compared to the original research questions and the literature already existing on the subject (as seen in Chapter two).

Description of Interview Subjects in Related Fields

Public Relations

Charlotte Alexander was chosen as a public relations expert for the study. Alexander was the director of public affairs and community relations at Cuesta College for eight years before becoming a journalism and public relations professor at Cuesta and Cal Poly: San Luis Obispo for the next nine years. She then transitioned to non-profit work, primarily working in executive director positions for local San Luis Obispo non-profits. She is currently executive director of the Santa Maria Valley Humane Society.

Communications for SeaWorld

After reaching out to SeaWorld's public relations department, David Koontz responded to my e-mail inquiries. Koontz was thus chosen as a communications expert for the study, but also as insight into SeaWorld's communications specifically. Koontz is the communications director of SeaWorld San Diego and the park's spokesperson. He's the middleman between the media and the SeaWorld San Diego Park, responding to multiple crisis situations and being quoted in various news stories over the last few years about the park.

Marketing

Molly Kern was chosen as a marketing expert because she works in tourism, which is very similar to SeaWorld which though many things, is essentially a tourism sight. Kern is the marketing coordinator for the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce. In her work she researches target audiences who would enjoy visiting the city of San Luis Obispo and how to appeal best to that audience. As the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce says she leads, "tourism PR efforts for the City of San Luis Obispo."

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Questionnaire:

Each subject was asked to answer the following questions in regards to symmetrical communication and rebounding from negative press. David Koontz questions were of the same subject, but in regards specifically to SeaWorld itself (Appendix C).

1. As a marketing/communications/public relations expert how would you define two-way symmetrical communication?

   Question #1 was used in order to make sure that all subjects were on the same page as to what two-way symmetrical communication is and what it includes. It also gives better insight from experts as to how this model of communication should work.

   - Charlotte Alexander: "Two-way communication, the two-way symmetrical model basically means that you involve your publics in a two-way dialogue that not only promises to convey information and try to convey the other – your publics – that you also will absorb information and potential changes that they want in to your model" (Appendix A).

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- Molly Kern: "It's always really fact and research based. It's not media relations, it's not quite as much as spin but definitely a hea- kind of that you promised or a service out there, caring what people have to say and then tailoring it so that they understand what you're offering and then also you can make it better" (Appendix B).
- David Koontz: Unanswered (Appendix C).

2. How can two-way symmetrical communication channels be developed by organizations? Do you have any examples?

Question #2 was created to find out what specific channels can be used for two-way symmetrical communication to be effectively used. The question came from realizing that even if two-way symmetrical communication was being used by SeaWorld through social media, there must be other channels that could be used to more success.

- Charlotte Alexander: "Two-way symmetrical communication isn't going to work unless you have a channel where you can directly communicate and get information back and forth directly with the – obviously you can't talk to the whole organization. I'll use PETA as an example. You can't talk to the whole PETA organization but you can talk to the executive director, you can talk to their PR director back and forth one-on-one to convey that information" (Appendix A).
- Molly Kern: "If you really-you do believe in symmetrical communication an important thing to realize is that [your product] might not be perfect and your way of communicating about your product might not be perfect. It really comes down to listening what people are saying whether it's your

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customers, or people who are choosing not to be your customers, whether

it's because your competitors have a better product or service or because

they actually will choose anyone but you" (Appendix B).

"Every time we have a journalist or traveler here we figure out what did

they like the best? What did they wish was different? So we can speak

about San Luis Obispo in the most warm and accurate way possible"

(Appendix B).

- David Koontz: "I think the take-away is that [SeaWorld] look(s) at the

  environment that we know we are operating in and look to construct

  communication plans using multiple platforms and on multiple levels, and

  incorporate various communication models (and yes, in some cases,

  variations of communication models) the we feel are in the best interest of

  our company … I think it's also worth mentioning two-way symmetrical

  and asymmetrical models were designed long before the advent and

  seemingly exponential proliferation of social media. These platforms can

  be used to support both models in varying ways" (Appendix C).

3. What message should an organization communicate through those channels in times of

negative press? What message have you used in times of crisis?

Question #3 was created as one of the only questions to delve into what was the correct

type of information to send through two-way symmetrical communication channels,

specifically in time of crisis. In this way the study creates a sort of step-by-step process of

looking into how SeaWorld might be able to successfully respond to critics.

- Charlotte Alexander: "First and foremost because it's two-way communication you need to communicate that you are open to hearing what they have to say. And you have to not just use the words but actually if it's communicating with them and things we want to sit down and have a meeting with you and we want to actually listen … Okay so in terms of whenever a two-way symmetrical model has worked quite honestly, it's so rare I have never actually dealt with a client who actually wanted to engage in that. I don't have any success models for you, how's that?" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "The conversation really depends on the type of negative press but I'd say across the board definitely keeping in mind that your job is to communicate what's actually happening and to always be honest … So always really relying on the fact-based communication and then protecting your people. If you're a leader of an organization you always have to take ownership because just looking at how people see things now, they tend to trust and give more I guess benefit of the doubt to leaders who own their mistakes even if it wasn't their own personal mistake it was one of their people's, to try and present that honest, responsible and calm front in the face of pretty much any negative press" (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: "['Ask SeaWorld'] is an online platform, with social media components, where we invite the public to ask us questions about parks and animal programs. The goal is to candidly respond so that people have information that we hope gives them a better understanding of SeaWorld,

what we do and why, so they can use that information to make up their own mind on issues related to our company" (Appendix C).

4. How can an organization utilize two-way symmetrical communication? Do you have any examples?

Question #4 was asked to understand how an organization specifically can use this communication model. For some respondents, the question was repetitive as they'd already answered it in previous questions, but it was still asked to get more detail on how an organization could use the model and under what circumstances.

- Charlotte Alexander: "Essentially the only way you can do it, is what I'm going to call one-on-one, you have to identify those people who are opinion leaders, thought leaders, perhaps titular leaders like the CEO, using the PETA model, like whoever is the CEO of PETA is or whatever. You have to identify individuals. And you have to work out lines of communication with them" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "Yeah, I'd say it's definitely keeping in mind an organization isn't perfect, everything is evolving especially with the way that the world is right now, things are evolving very quickly and being open to kind of things like criticism or negative press as an opportunity for improvement I think is the big mental difference I guess between people who utilize two-way symmetrical communication as opposed to two-way asymmetrical or just full court press, all media all the time" (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: "[SeaWorld has] engaged in varying degrees of a two-way symmetrical approach with more specific audiences where this type of

approach was seen as not only being more appropriate, but could prove to

be more beneficial … An example of something that may be somewhere

in the middle of these two models is an element of our current campaign

we call "Ask SeaWorld." It is an online platform, with social media

components, where we invite the public to ask us questions about parks

and animal programs" (Appendix C).

5. Have you found consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?

Question #5 was created after the literature revealed that SeaWorld's use of asymmetrical

communication may be part of their problem reaching out to their audience and gaining

support back. It was asked to find out if such problems were seen by experts in the field

in general.

- Charlotte Alexander: "I would say that the main problem with two-way

  asymmetrical communication is again, there is kind of – the two-way

  implies that there is a feedback loop right? And when it's asymmetrical

  you're not honoring the feedback you're getting … You're not honoring

  the fact that it is a two-way communication and people can kind of get

  upset when you know they're supposed to be listening to you, but you

  don't get to listen to them or you pretend like you're listening to them and

  then don't really do that" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "I mean you see different companies or press strategies and

  you can definitely get a feeling for when someone is just saying something

  over and over again or taking a poll and listened but not done anything

  about it so I think that's definitely the biggest drawback" (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: Unanswered (Appendix C).

6. What are some barriers to utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels? Have you found any in your experience?

Question #6 was created to find out if there were any pitfalls to using two-way symmetrical communication and if its utilization could possibly make the problem worse. Examples were asked for to get a better idea of problems that might persist in attempts to use the two-way symmetrical model.

- Charlotte Alexander: "Cost, time. Another barrier you might say is sometimes you don't know all of the people that you should be communicating with. You don't know who should be on the other end of that channel. So sometimes you might have to do quite a bit of work to identify who those people should be. And again I'm just going back to the SeaWorld, PETA (laughs), PETA would be an obvious one, but there may be some others, organizations, some other people, other audiences, that you don't know are out there that are affecting the situation and identifying those people may be hard to determine" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "I definitely think it comes down to time. It takes more time to listen, to have those conversations. And then also if you have – because it is a reliance really on research and fact, sometimes that data collection takes a lot of money" (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: Unanswered (Appendix C).

7. What benefits can come from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?

Question #7 was designed to find out if benefits from utilization of this model would outweigh any possible barriers. It was also asked to find out what type of benefits SeaWorld or any organization might be able to gain from using this model of communication.

- Charlotte Alexander: "Oh, they can be enormous. Number one you're getting people – any time you can get anyone to think that a partnership with you is good and that you're actually listening to them they are much more likely to listen to you. They are much more likely to trust you, they are much more likely to think that you are not always working just for yourself but you are working for the greater good, you are working for them, or whatever. So trust is a huge benefit of that. Also a huge benefit is again getting to know your audience better" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "When you bring people into the conversation they become brand enthusiasts and they feel like you're listening and they feel like a brand understands them can become huge supporters and evangelists for your product or service. I think also the best part and from a company perspective the really selfish amazing thing is that you can improve your product and that's really what everyone's trying to do is improve the way they do things and improve what they offer (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: Unanswered (Appendix C).

8. What other strategies can be used to help rebuild after negative press?

Question #8 was asked to look at other strategies besides two-way symmetrical communication to see what other models could possibly help an organization out of a

negative situation. It was also asked to compare two-way symmetrical communication to other various methods and how two-way channels could be improved possibly utilizing multiple strategies.

- Charlotte Alexander: "Most of them involve, in my experience, it's segmenting, if there's a disastrous situation, you need to identify what the problems are and that again this may be, there may be more than one problem. It might not just be that what's been done – again I'm using SeaWorld because it's easier to take an example and parse it out. Let's say you think that the problem you've got to fix is that you are treating animals inhumanely, but there may be other parts of that problem that you're not considering" (Appendix A).

- Molly Kern: "I think just the principle of not lying, always being reassuring if it something that has adversely affected people, if it's a recall or something like that can be incredibly negative press for a company, but taking responsibility for whatever happened and then knowing that it's your organization's job to communicate the truth. If it was – if the negative press was out there but wasn't actually true, kind of taking that ownership of re-educating people and not putting the ownership on your customers to realize that you were right all along" (Appendix B).

- David Koontz: Unanswered (Appendix C).

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Research Questions

The following eight research questions were created at the initial start of the study. The questions were designed to answer how two-way symmetrical communication can help SeaWorld Entertainment Parks and other organizations rebuild positive relationships with their publics after negative press.

Research Question 1: What are two-way symmetric communication channels?

- Multiple studies form the literature review echoed Hagan's opinion that "The focus in the two-way symmetrical model then is balanced communication, a give-and-take relationship, between an organization and its publics" (Hagan, 2003).

Research Question 2: How can two-way symmetrical channels be developed?

- "A variety of methods is used in public relations to gather feedback information, including communication audits, involving interviews and content analyses of written and published communications; in-depth interviews and focus groups; issue tracking or environmental scanning for trends of concern to clients; and public opinion polling or surveying as perhaps the most persuasive, two-way research method" (Sallot, 2002, p. 152).
- "The following eight strategies were repeatedly described by top managers, CEGPA practitioners, employees, and community members as effective or important in dealing with the community: openness, access, assurance(respect), task sharing, listening, responsiveness, continued dialogue, and educational communication" (Rhee, 2008).

Research Question 3: What message needs to be outgoing across those channels?

- "Clearly, it is more effective, in the sense of enhancing credibility and trustworthiness among publics, to let purely altruistic motives be known, and to keep any other motives concealed." (Sallot, 2002, p.163).

Research Question 4: How was SeaWorld utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication instead of two-way symmetrical?

- "This isn't SeaWorld's first attempt to refute some of the claims of *Blackfish*. In late 2013, after CNN broadcast the film, SeaWorld launched a similar campaign, running a full-page open letter in newspapers to tell what it said was the "truth" about *Blackfish.* This new campaign goes a step further, directly naming and attacking SeaWorld's leading critics" (Allen, 2015).

Research Question 5: How has SeaWorld been harmed by using the asymmetrical model?

- "Social media allows corporations and brands to directly engage consumers during a crisis. Allowing consumers to voice their opinion as long as it is civil allows consumers to be engaged and often helps level off anger. Explaining a company's position on social media is critical. Ignoring the crisis and the consumer comments or in this case deleting them, keeps the flames going, as SeaWorld found out" (Johnson, 2014).

Research Question 6: How can SeaWorld and its opponents instead utilize two-way symmetrical communication?

- . "There are two basic approaches that can be taken by organizational public relations practitioners in the conduct of two-way symmetric public relations.

Firstly, they can facilitate the presentation of a case or information by stakeholders directly and/or secondly, they can act as advocates to management on behalf of others. In either case, the aim is to give stakeholders or publics influence in the decision-making process. The ability to make the final decision may still remain with the organization, but it is prepared to listen to, and act upon, the input of others," (Lane, 2005, p. 7-8).

Research Question 7: Can SeaWorld implement two-way symmetrical communication using their current communication channels?

- "The challenge with the symmetrical model in practice may be that public relations must present at times contrary views of external publics to a sometimes unwilling-to-hear-and-accept-them management" (Hagan, 2003, p. 66).
- "It is undoubtedly a difficult thing to do at all, let alone to do well, yet it seems an increasingly important area for consideration and reflection in public relations," (Lane 2005, pg. 8).

Research Question 8: How would SeaWorld benefit from utilizing the two-way symmetrical communication model?

- "More specifically, the analysis revealed symmetrical cultivation strategies can contribute to an organization's development of positive relationships with external publics" (Rhee, p. 237).
- "The lack of symmetrical communication leaves a credibility gap between policy and practice that creates a vacuum and makes the organization vulnerable, especially during crisis management," (Oliver, 2000).

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Data

For this study it was important to talk to experts who could give advice on the best way to utilize two-way symmetrical communication in regards to times of crisis. There was a lot of literature already established on two-way symmetrical communication and about crisis management separately, but not much about using the two-way model specifically as a part of a crisis communication strategy. To gain more information, data was collected through interviews with Charlotte Alexander, a public relations expert, Molly Kern, a marketing expert and David Koontz, a communications expert and member of SeaWorld's communication team. They were each asked questions on the same subjects, but slightly altered for their specialty, that were designed to answer the study's original research questions. The following tables represent their answers to those questions in regards to the original research questions.

Research Question 1: What are two-way symmetric communication channels?

This question was asked because it's the first basic term that must be defined before diving deeper into the subject. The literature seemingly agreed with the basic definition of two-way symmetrical communication, as a channel that is opened and allows for discussion between an organization and its publics; a natural give and take thus occurs (Hunt and Grunig, 1984 and Hagan, 2003).

This question was studied to be sure that a baseline understanding of two-way symmetrical communication was established not only with the literature, but with those currently in the public relation fields. From the literature it was rather clear that there was agreement on the definition, though it was not widely discussed in relation to the subject of this study.

Table 1 shows summarized responses from the three interview subjects. Though Koontz didn't respond to anything pertaining this in his e-mail, Alexander and Kern had the same overall definition of what two-way symmetrical channels consist of and the definition of what two-way symmetrical communication is. They both agreed that one-on-one conversations was a communication channel option, but Alexander more strongly felt that one-on-one conversations were the only way to really initiate and make change and compromise occur. Kern gave a variety of options of ways to at least collect data from an organization's publics.

Table 1

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Respondent	Definition of two-way symmetrical communication	Example of a Channel
Charlotte Alexander	Two-way dialogue that not only conveys information but promises to consider changes the public wants.	One-on-one conversations
Molly Kern	Fact based conversation with publics. Organization must really care and want to improve.	Quarterly feedback surveys, social media, one-on-one conversations
David Koontz	n/a	n/a

Research Question 2: How can two-way symmetrical channels be developed?

This question was developed in order to fully understand how two-way symmetrical communication can be created between two organizations. The literature found that one-on-one conversations were effective as a means for two-way symmetrical communication channels to be

formed (Rhee, 2008, p. 10 and Sallot, 2002, p. 152). Rhee's study in particular found that the public of a laboratory was more at ease with the lab's existence (that had caused some fear) after having conversations with lab employees.

This question was created to explore the different types of channels that two-way symmetrical communication can take form as. It also provided information about what channels were most effective when utilizing the two-way symmetric model.

Table 2

Developing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Respondent	What channels can be used?	Example
Charlotte Alexander	For any change to occur the dialogue must flow between those who can make change in an organization.	A meeting and discussion between SeaWorld's CEO and PETA's CEO.
Molly Kern	Multi-channel, surveys, social media, one-on-one.	Quarterly feedback surveys and "what can we do better?" questions after someone leaves an organization.
David Koontz	Multi-channel, social media	Ask SeaWorld Twitter campaign

In Table 2 Alexander and Kern agreed with the data from the literature review that one-on-one conversations were an effective channel to utilize when working from the two-way symmetrical model. Koontz, in regards to channels SeaWorld is currently utilizing, mentioned

multi-channels and social media as effective tactics to get their message out while also getting to hear from their publics.

Research Question 3: What message needs to be outgoing across those channels?

Research Question #3 was created after realizing that SeaWorld's message as well as their opponents had come across as attacking the other side multiple times. Pedicini summarized both side's behavior, "SeaWorld calls out People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the most vocal of its critics, saying the animal-rights group 'gets a lot of attention by twisting statistics and falsely attacking us.' PETA sent out 110 press releases about SeaWorld during the past two years and has organized publicity stunts such as sending naked protesters to sit in a bathtub outside a Macy's" (2014).

The question was asked to the interview subjects to get a better understanding of what should be done as most of the literature on SeaWorld specifically cited examples of what not to do. Subjects were asked generally about messages in times of crisis and not specifically about SeaWorld, except for Koontz.

Table 3 demonstrated varying, but somewhat similar answers. Kern and Alexander both emphasized the importance of figuring out what the true problem is the public is having with an organization and clearly identifying if the problem is false or true. These two identifications can change how the situation should best be handled. Koontz saw SeaWorld's message, specifically through the Ask SeaWorld campaign as a way to give the public a better understanding of the organization in hopes to change their minds and better educate them about the park.

Table 3

The Message across those Channels

Respondent	Message to utilize in times of crisis	Example
Charlotte Alexander	Identify the problem and communicate that you are willing to listen to the other side.	San Luis Obispo Symphony (for example of what not to do). Primary public wasn't given a chance to voice an opinion.
Molly Kern	Identify the type of negative press, in all forms be honest and take ownership whether you're in the right or wrong.	If an organization faces false negative press, CEO should take ownership of educating publics why it's false, not place blame on publics who believe it.
David Koontz	Give people a better understanding of the organization.	Ask SeaWorld Twitter Campaign, responding to public's questions.

Research Question 4: How was SeaWorld utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication instead of two-way symmetrical?

This question was formed to analyze how SeaWorld's public relations campaigns have been more asymmetrical than two-symmetrical. SeaWorld's initial reaction to the *Blackfish* documentary was to react by only sending messages out rather than taking any information back in (Allen, 2015 and Schwartz, 2013). SeaWorld's opponents have done the same; the documentary's director wrote SeaWorld a letter after their response that *Blackfish* was inaccurate. The letter consisted of her asking SeaWorld to answer to them, without her ever

responding to them (Cowperthwaite, 2014). Both sides essentially talk at each other at the moment without hearing one another.

Question #4 was studied to find out from experts if they thought SeaWorld's campaigns were two-way asymmetrical or symmetrical. The question was asked as a way of recognizing two-way symmetrical communication channels, to see if SeaWorld's campaigns were using the same traits or were working along another communication model.

Table 4

SeaWorld and Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication

Respondent	What does two-way symmetrical communication look like?	Example
Charlotte Alexander	Identifying opposing opinion leaders and having one-on-one conversations with them. Direct channel that is open at all times.	PETA CEO and SeaWorld CEO discussing other sides concerns and coming to a compromise.
Molly Kern	View negative criticism as a way to improve a company and staying open-minded.	n/a
David Koontz	Responding to public's questions.	Ask SeaWorld campaign

Table 4 summarizes what the three public relations experts characterized as two-way symmetrical communication. Koontz's response was closest to what SeaWorld is doing currently as far as two-way symmetrical communication. Alexander however suggests two-way

symmetrical communication would include opening one-on-one communication channels with opposition leaders and SeaWorld's leaders. Kern found two-way symmetrical characteristics to include simply having an open mind to criticism and being willing to find compromise and change.

Research Question 5: How has SeaWorld been harmed by using the asymmetrical model?

This question was created to study how use of two-way asymmetrical communication had affected SeaWorld and essentially why they shouldn't have utilized it and instead opted for a different communication model. The literature revealed that SeaWorld's choice of not interacting or allowing feedback from their publics caused more unrest towards the company, "Allowing consumers to voice their opinion as long as it is civil allows consumers to be engaged and often helps level off anger. Explaining a company's position on social media is critical. Ignoring the crisis and the consumer comments or in this case deleting them, keeps the flames going, as SeaWorld found out," (Johnson, 2014).

The question was asked to the study's experts in order to get further information on how asymmetrical communication can harm other organizations and if there was a connection between SeaWorld's struggles and their use of the communication model.

Table 5 collected the data of our expert's opinions on the consequences of two-way asymmetrical communication. Though Koontz didn't answer this particular question, Alexander and Kern unanimously agreed that utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication can cause a public to feel that though they are being asked for feedback, they are being ignored if nothing then changes. Kern made it clear multiple communication models should be used, but that the asymmetrical model did have a risk.

Table 5

Consequences of SeaWorld's Use of Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication

Respondent	Possible consequences of the two-way asymmetrical model	Example
Charlotte Alexander	The feedback loop isn't complete. Publics can be upset they're not being listened to.	n/a
Molly Kern	Risk of an organization becoming known for pretending to listen, but nothing ever changes.	Taking a poll, but the feedback of that poll is never used to make changes suggested.
David Koontz	n/a	n/a

Research Question 6: How can SeaWorld and its opponents instead utilize two-way symmetrical communication?

This question was created to discover how both SeaWorld and its opponents could utilize the communication model. The literature discussed public relations practitioners in middle-men type roles when utilizing two-way symmetrical communication, "Firstly, [public relations practitioners] can facilitate the presentation of a case or information by stakeholder/s directly; and/or secondly, they can act as advocates to management on behalf of others. In either case, the aim is to give stakeholders or publics influence in the decision-making process. The ability to make the final decision may still remain with the organisation, but it is prepared to listen to, and act upon, the input of others" (Lane, 2005).

The question was then studied because more information was needed beyond just the public relations practitioner's job, but how the company as a whole could use the communication model to save a waning brand and company. The literature was detailed on how a public relations practitioner needed to partake in the model, but didn't specify what the message should be or when the proper times were to employ the model.

Table 6

Utilizing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication for SeaWorld and its Publics

Respondent	Utilizing two-way symmetrical communication during crisis	SeaWorld specific
Charlotte Alexander	Identify the problems. Don't make promises that can't be kept.	Two-way symmetrical communication should only be used with organization's that SeaWorld is willing to compromise with.
Molly Kern	Be calm, responsible and fact-based. Stay away from personal attacks.	n/a
David Koontz	n/a	n/a

Table 6 houses the responses of the three interview subjects about utilizing two-way symmetrical communication, specifically during a crisis. Kern suggested the organization should still appear strong, coming off as responsible and never partaking in personal attacks against the opposition – even if they have defamed the company. Alexander meanwhile suggested specifically for SeaWorld to be weary of entering in to two-way symmetrical communication

channels with organizations they can never compromise with. She specifically mentioned PETA, as they want SeaWorld to end animal captivity, something she says SeaWorld will probably never do. Since no compromise can be reached, it would be dishonest to try. However, she said, compromise with other opposing groups might be reached (Appendix A).

Research Question 7: Can SeaWorld implement two-way symmetrical communication using their current communication channels?

Question #7 was created to take a look at if SeaWorld would actually be able to implement such channels. What were the barriers to utilizing this communication model? Lane and Hagan both addressed that in many cases organization may be unwilling to change and thus two-way symmetrical communication will never work as compromised can't be reached (2005 and 2003). It then just becomes two-way asymmetrical communication.

Question 7 was asked because it was important to find if there were more barriers to the model, as it is not used as much as other communication models. The experts had enough time in the field to explain why it wasn't used often and what the problems were with the model.

Table 7 summarizes the three interview subject's responses in regards to research question #7. Kern and Alexander both agreed that the greatest barrier to utilizing two-way symmetrical communication was the time and cost it took. It takes a great deal amount of time to have those one-on-one conversations and costs a lot to collect data of a public's opinion. Kern voiced the same concern as was found in the literature review, what if a company doesn't want to change? Alexander also noted that sometimes it was difficult to identify the groups to have one-on-one conversations with.

Table 7

Barriers to SeaWorld Implementing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

Respondent	Barriers to implementing two-way symmetrical communication	How to overcome it
Charlotte Alexander	Cost, time and knowing the opposition.	Utilizing opposition one had identified to help identify other opposing groups.
Molly Kern	Time and cost, organizations may not want to make changes.	n/a
David Koontz	n/a	n/a

Research Question 8: How would SeaWorld benefit from utilizing the two-way symmetrical communication model?

Question 8 was designed to find out if two-way symmetrical communication is worth it for SeaWorld to pursue. One study found that two-way symmetrical communication benefited how the public saw a company (Rhee, 2008) while another discovered that lack of symmetrical communication led to a credibility gap between a company's policies and actions. It was especially troubling for a company in times of crisis management to not be taking part in symmetrical communication (Oliver, 2000).

Question 8 was explored because if there were no benefits for SeaWorld, two-way symmetrical communication should not be pursued, but if there were the cost may be worth it for SeaWorld to being utilizing this communication model.

Table 8 summarizes the three expert's responses with regards to the benefits of two-way symmetrical communication. Alexander found that it built trust and produced a positive partnership, while Kern found that it could help spread the word about your brand if people felt they were part of the brand's decision processes. Both agreed the way to reap these benefits was through conversations with ones publics.

Table 8

Benefits of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication for SeaWorld

Respondent	Benefits of two-way symmetrical communication	How?
Charlotte Alexander	Building trust and a positive partnership.	One-on-one conversations, compromises.
Molly Kern	Larger support from publics, improving your product or service.	Including people in the conversation.
David Koontz	n/a	n/a

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was created to explore SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment Company's options to rebuild positive relationships with their publics. The study is in response to SeaWorld's sales and stocks dropping due to attacks from animal rights groups that claim SeaWorld is mistreating their animals and employees. After analyzing SeaWorld's campaigns it was found an essential problem was lack of two-way symmetrical communication. It was pertinent to talk with public relations and marketing experts as well as a SeaWorld employee about how two-way symmetrical communication could improve relations with a public during a time of crisis.

To collect data about two-way symmetrical communication, an expert in market, public relations and a communications employee for SeaWorld were interviewed from a questionnaire; the questions were created to answer the following research questions:

9) What are two-way symmetric communication channels?

10) How can two-way symmetrical channels be developed?

11) What message needs to be outgoing across those channels?

12) How was SeaWorld utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication instead of two-way symmetrical?

13) How has SeaWorld been harmed by using the asymmetrical model?

14) How can SeaWorld and its opponents instead utilize two-way symmetrical communication?

15) Can SeaWorld implement two-way symmetrical communication using their current communication channels?

16) How would SeaWorld benefit from utilizing the two-way symmetrical communication model?

The research questions and questionnaire differed slightly for each expert, in order to make sure the question was applicable to their field. Their responses were then compared to existing data from literature on two-way symmetrical communication and SeaWorld's crisis.

Discussion

After evaluating the data from Chapter 4, the responses from the three experts and the literature in Chapter 2 it is possible to draw conclusions to the research questions.

Research Question #1: What are two-way symmetric communication channels?

Of the two who answered this question, Alexander and Kern, they agreed that two-way symmetrical communication channels are those which foster conversation between an organization and its publics. The organization must be willing to consider the changes the public suggests through the channel in order for it to truly be two-way symmetrical.

The literature backs up Alexander and Kern's definitions, "As mentioned in my conceptualization chapter, the focus in the two-way symmetrical model then is balanced communication, a give-and-take relationship, between an organization and its publics," (Hagan, 2003, p. 151). Hagan's description of a give-and-take relationship matches up with Alexander and Kern's descriptions of a two-way dialogue and compromise.

It is reasonable to thus conclude that two-way symmetrical communication channels are those that exist to foster a two-way dialogue between an organization and its publics, where the organization is open to change and compromise with said public.

Research Question #2: How can two-way symmetrical channels be developed?

Kern and Koontz were more broad in their response to what channels could be used for two-way symmetrical communication. Both mentioned multi-channel and social media, but Kern went on to give examples of surveys and one-on-one conversations. Alexander had a more specific answer. She made it clear throughout all of her responses that the only way to truly see change in a company is if the CEO (or anyone with power to make change) is the one having one-on-one conversations with an opposing company or group.

The literature reflected both Alexander and Kern and Koontz comments. Rhee's (2008) study found that a public was more likely to have positive feelings towards a company after being able to speak with employees and having one-on-one conversations with them as Alexander suggested (p. 10). Sallot (2002) gave a list of channels and tactics that could be used to open up two-way symmetrical communication channels such as polling and in-depth interviews reflecting Kern and Koontz's suggestions of utilizing multiple channels and Alexander's one-on-one conversation method (p. 152). It should be noted that Koontz's suggestion of social media wasn't prominent during the time of both studies.

Given these responses two-way symmetrical communication channels can be developed in numerous ways when designed to gain feedback from the public, such as surveys or social media. However to truly initiate change a personal channel should be opened between two

higher-up executive employees at two opposing organizations so ideas can be shared and understandings can be reached.

Research Question #3: What message needs to be outgoing across those channels?

All three respondents gave different answers when asked what messages were best to communicate in times of negative press. Alexander and Kern both mentioned that it was important to truly understand the situation first. Alexander advised for companies to identify what the problems are that are causing the negative press and Kern said it was important to identify the type of negative press (is it false? True?). Alexander said it was best to communicate that your organization is willing to listen to the opposing group's view points and Kern said it was best for an organization to always be honest and take ownership of the problem whether the story is false or true. Koontz gave the example of SeaWorld's approach which has been to give the public a better understanding of the organization and what they do.

The literature was also mixed on the best messages to utilize. Pedicini (2015) described SeaWorld and their opponent's aggressive messages towards each other, revealing that SeaWorld is currently not following Alexander's advice to show opponents that you are willing to listen to one another's view. Pedicini interviewed a marketing associate professor, Glenn Omura at Michigan State, who believes SeaWorld needs to use facts as Kern said but also begin to utilize emotion and family values. Sallot (2002) found too that publics were more likely to be positive if they felt a campaign was purely for altruistic reasons and not as a stunt.

With so many mixed responses from both the experts and the literature more research needs to be done on the correct message SeaWorld should be using. What can be taken away from all of the data collected in this study is that a message in times of crisis differs according to

the situation. There is no correct message to be utilized by all groups in times of negative press. Companies must identify the type of negative press they are receiving, the exact problems they are being placed under fire for and then tailor a message for their unique situation.

Research Question #4: How was SeaWorld utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication instead of two-way symmetrical?

The three experts were asked how two-way symmetrical communication can be utilized, in order to see a distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical communication. All three had different responses to this question. Alexander suggested contacting the opinion leaders of opposing groups and having one-on-one conversations with them in hopes of reaching a compromise and setting up channels with them that are always open. She gave an example of SeaWorld's CEO and PETA's CEO setting up a meeting to discuss the problems between their groups. Kern said a distinction of a company using two-way symmetrical communication is that they try to stay open-minded and take criticism as a way to improve their company. Koontz gave the example of SeaWorld's Ask SeaWorld campaign as a way of responding to their public's questions.

The literature showed that SeaWorld's early responses to the documentary *Blackfish* did not utilize two-way symmetrical communication. Allen (2015) reported that SeaWorld responded to the film by running an open letter in newspapers refuting claims from the movie and Schwartz (2013) found that before the documentary aired SeaWorld had already begun labeling it misleading and inaccurate to movie critics. SeaWorld's opponents have used the same type of tactics, simply refuting SeaWorld's claims and not truly responding to the criticism from the other side (Cowperthwaite, 2014).

In comparison to the expert's examples of two-way symmetrical communication and the literature's facts on some of SeaWorld's actions following *Blackfish*'s release, SeaWorld was utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication before launching their new Ask SeaWorld campaign. This is seen in SeaWorld's newspaper ads and their letters to movie critics critiquing the film. The movie makers failed to use symmetrical communication as well, releasing their own letters demanding responses from SeaWorld without facilitating discussion from the park.

Research Question #5: How has SeaWorld been harmed by using the asymmetrical model?

Alexander and Kern both agreed that the risk of utilizing an asymmetrical model is that the public may grow tired of being asked their opinion, but never seeing any change in a company. Kern used the example of sending out surveys, but then the company never using the data collected to make improvements.

The literature included multiple reports of how SeaWorld's been harmed by *Blackfish* and how so far their public relations campaigns haven't been able to dig them out of this business nightmare (Greenfield, 2014 and Pedicini, 2015). Johnson (2014) critiqued SeaWorld's initial decision to not utilize social media for discussion and instead used it asymmetrically, only allowing their message out and messages they approved of from their publics. He cites this incident specifically as helping SeaWorld's opponents, rather than their own company.

SeaWorld has arguably been harmed by their utilization of the asymmetric model and their initial campaign against *Blackfish.* As Kern and Alexander pointed out there is a risk of audiences recognizing that they're not truly being listened to and that was evident in Johnson's discovery that SeaWorld was deleting fan's comments that were seen as negative rather than responding to their concerns. SeaWorld may have been able to recover their brand quicker if not

for these communication setbacks that only created the appearance that they had something to hide rather than help them keep the negativity toward SeaWorld isolated.

Research Question #6: How can SeaWorld and its opponents instead utilize two-way symmetrical communication?

Alexander and Kern had slightly different responses on this subject. Alexander advised not to make promises that one can't keep and emphasized that SeaWorld should only engage in two-way symmetrical communication with groups they are willing to compromise with. She specifically mentioned not to engage with PETA since they're against animals in captivity and since that is SeaWorld's entire business, no compromise could likely be reached. However, SeaWorld could perhaps meet with a group who is concerned about their employee's safety. That might be an area SeaWorld could more easily compromise. Kern advised that organizations should stay fact based, calm and responsible. She suggested staying away from personal attacks on opposing groups and taking the higher ground.

The literature gave specific ways to undergo two-way symmetrical communication. Lane (2005) discusses that if possible it would be best for a public to personally address and present their own ideas and concerns to a company's management just as Alexander suggested (p.13). Lindeborg (1994) echoed Kern and Alexander's advice for a public relations practitioner to be open minded to the public's ideas and opinions (p. 9).

Based on the data collected SeaWorld can utilize two-way symmetrical communication by opening up communication channels with opposing groups that they can compromise with. For example, they could reach out to groups who believe that orca whales need larger habitats and ask for their advice in building its Blue World Project which will create larger tank space for

their whales as well as create currents to help the whales get better exercise. Partnering with opposing groups and showing good will and compromise can help show audiences that they are making positive changes. SeaWorld should also keep away from personally attacking their opponents such as PETA, and instead focus on showing their publics fact based information proving that their animals and the animal trainers are safe and healthy. The same goes for SeaWorld's opponents.

Research Question #7: Can SeaWorld implement two-way symmetrical communication using their current communication channels?

Alexander and Kern agreed that barriers to setting up two-way symmetrical communication through any existing or future channels are the cost, time and if an organization is willing to compromise. There is a lot of time that must be put aside to have a one-on-one conversation, especially if it must occur between two CEOs. Costs can also be high depending on the channel, for example the cost of sending out surveys. All of this can be done in vain as well if the organization's CEO isn't willing to listen to what the publics are asking for. Kern also addressed that another possible problem is hearing only from those who hate a product, especially if those who like the product may not be as vocal about it in comparison. "You do run the risk of listening too much to someone who is just going to be unhappy all the time and alienating your base of who's really happy with how things are going," Kern said.

The literature reflected the expert's opinions with Lane (2005) and Hagan (2003) agreeing with Kern that a possible barrier is that company management will not always want to compromise or change an organization's policies. Paine (2015) gave an example of Kern's concern of negative customers being more vocal than those who are satisfied with a company

occurring, "The negative messages from PETA and Blackfish drowned out any positive messages that SeaWorld was trying to disseminate" in regards to SeaWorld's Ask SeaWorld campaign.

SeaWorld definitely can implement two-way symmetrical communication channels as was seen with their Ask SeaWorld campaign, but they must overcome the challenging task of getting their message past their critics. SeaWorld has the time and money to make these types of communications occur, they just have to identify the opinion leaders who it would be worth discussing and attempting to compromise with. SeaWorld has already improved greatly from once deleting negative opinions from fans on social media to now answering their questions, even if they're difficult on their public Twitter page and the Ask SeaWorld website.

Research Question #8: How would SeaWorld benefit from utilizing the two-way symmetrical communication model?

Both Alexander and Kern agreed that there could be enormous benefits from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication. The experts said that it can help foster support for an organization from their audience while building trust and a positive partnership. Kern specifically mentions that allowing a public into the conversation helps create brand enthusiasts.

The literature agreed that there were benefits of two-way symmetrical communication such as Rhee's (2008) study's findings that two-way symmetrical communication and strong leadership can help foster better relationships between an organization and its publics (p. 237). Hirsh (2014) interviewed a journalism professor at San Diego State, Bey-Ling Sha, who said SeaWorld will see better benefits from making corrective measure rather than arguing with opponents.

SeaWorld can definitely benefit from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication if it's used correctly. With so much negative press and negative views of SeaWorld, this is the park's chance to find out what specific issues are causing poor views of SeaWorld and then gives them a chance to factually correct people or compromise in areas where they are indeed doing poorly. Allowing their audience into the conversation gives them the change to rebuild trust and revitalize the parks brand.

Recommendations for Practice

Completion of the study has produced enough data to be analyzed on the subject of two-way symmetrical communication, in this case specifically in reference to SeaWorld's negative press. The study revealed a few stand out tactics for utilizing two-way symmetrical communication in a time of crisis which will be discussed below in more depth. Recommendations for practice utilizing two-way symmetrical communication are first identifying the problems, having an honest fact-based discussion and creating communication channels where one-on-one conversations can occur between two disagreeing parties.

Identify the problems and the groups in opposition.

As Kern and Alexander both pointed out the first thing to do during a crisis is to correctly identify what the problem is. If SeaWorld is being attacked with false claims that's a different situation then if what groups like PETA are saying is true. Company's must then identify what specifically publics are upset about. **"**Let's say you think that the problem you've got to fix is that you are treating animals inhumanely, but there may be other parts of that problem that you're not considering … there may be an offshoot of that

that you're not treating your employees correctly or that you're not abiding by the law of the land," Alexander said as an example.

After the problems are identified, the groups in opposition to an organization must then be found so that communication can occur between the groups in hopes of reaching compromise. Alexander pointed out that this can be difficult at times to find all of the opinion leaders against an organization, but once one group is at least identified they may be able to help an organization reach out to other unidentified leaders.

Honest fact-based discussion.

As Sallot (2002) found, publics are more likely to view a campaign positively if they feel it's done altruistically and with honest intentions (163). Kern also spoke highly of being honest in messaging, "Your job is to communicate what's actually happening and to always be honest…always really relying on the fact-based communication."

SeaWorld and any company amidst crisis should utilize the facts that support them and give them to their publics. If the honest facts do not support a company and if they are guilty of what they are being accused of, the company should be honest and apologize if there's any hope of moving on from the catastrophe, whatever it may be. SeaWorld has already begun doing this with their commercial spots featuring details about how they care for their animals and facts about killer whale life spans in captivity.

Initiating One-on-One conversations

Perhaps the most important take away from this study was the tactic of partaking in one-on-one conversations with a company or organization's publics. Lane (2005)

writes that arguably allowing a public to present their case to a company's management

directly is the most effective way to get their message across and to hopefully insight

management to compromise with their audience (p. 13). Alexander was a strong

supporter of one-on-one conversations in her interview going as far to say two-way

symmetrical communication wouldn't be effective without it, "Two-way symmetrical

communication isn't going to work unless you have a channel where you can directly

communicate and get information back and forth directly."

One-on-one conversations between two company employees capable of change

can be set up strategically by public relations practitioners with groups who they can

actually see a possibility of compromising. These direct channels will then be open even

after a crisis and allow for a trust to grow between the once opposing groups and allow

for the public to view both groups in a more positive light for being able to work together

and help one another. These conversations foster a mutually beneficial relationship, the

very definition of public relations itself according to the Public Relations Society of

America.

Study Conclusions

In conclusion, this study was able to successfully look at how SeaWorld would be able to

implement two-way symmetrical communication and how utilization of those communication

channels could help the company rebuild trust with its publics and secure the conservation and

family nature of its brand. There needs to be more research done on two-way symmetrical

communication actually being used in practice. Much of the data collected was hypothetical or

examples; there was little information on actual utilization of the communication model and the

outcomes that followed. This study was still able to give a collection of opinions and advice from three experts in the field and a review of the literature currently on the topic. Though the study was explored specifically about SeaWorld, the research can still be applied to any company in crisis, it just must be remembered that each case is individual and unique; therefore not all tactics may work in all situations. In general this study may now provide research for public relations, marketing and communications experts researching two-way symmetrical communication in the time of a company or organization crisis, particularly one involving negative press or negative public opinions.

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Appendix A

Interview Transcripts: Charlotte Alexander

The following interview was conducted to receive expert opinion from a public relations professional. The interview questions came from a questionnaire about two-way symmetrical communication in times of negative press.

Interviewer: Ashley Pierce

Respondent: Executive Director of Santa Marisa Humane Society (Charlotte Alexander)

Date of Interview: 5/22/2015

Interview Transcription:

Ashley Pierce: "My first question is as a communications/public relations expert how would you define two-way symmetrical communication?"
Charlotte Alexander: "Well okay here's the theory, which I assume you know you got all the background and all about you know the four … there being you know basically – I'm not going to go into the theory. Two-way communication, the two-way symmetrical model basically means that you involve your publics in a two-way dialogue that not only promises to convey information and try to convey the other – your publics – that you also will absorb information and potential changes that they want in to your model. So it's the kind of public relations that generally isn't practiced a lot because a lot of – particularly corporate PR don't want to have that dialogue affect both partners equally in some ways. Am I making any sense here? Given what you know about-"

AP: "Oh yeah that makes sense."

CA: "The idea is that both parties will benefit but sometimes particularly corporate – non-profit not so much, non-profit is kind of in a different world, but in the for-profit world sometimes a PR professional would really have to sell two-way symmetrical communication to the corporation, because they cannot see what benefit from absorbing the value or the activities of the people they're trying to influence would help them. Does that make sense?"

AP: "Yeah, absolutely."

CA: "So it's – let's just say I don't see that practiced very much even today in the corporate world. Now non-profits are a little different and I don't know exactly where SeaWorld falls and I'm assuming they're not a non-profit. In the non-profit world it's a little different because you're seeking to, you're seeking something if the bottom-line of making money, you're seeking to change something anyways so trying to get somebody to – so sharing and working on mutually beneficial projects of communications is of more benefit I think in the non-profit world. If that makes sense?"

AP: "Yeah, yeah it does. Okay so question number two, how can two-way symmetrical communication channels be developed by an organization?"

CA: "Well and I'm just speaking in a very practical sense, once you identify who it is you're trying to influence, in other words you're audiences, the only way that I see of building two-way symmetrical communication like that is one-on-one. That would be, and this is just my opinion, but you have to identify the people or the organization that you need to see as your audience and they could in this case be negative people. If it's SeaWorld I'm assuming they might be dealing with people like PETA and other animal organizations that think what they're doing is not good to the animals. So in order to even initiate two-way communication in this model you're going to have to do that one-on-one. Another reason a lot of time corporations don't particularly like this model is because it's very time consuming and it's very expensive because you're got to invest in some one-on-one building of bridges and communication channels that you can't just put out a press release – which that would be a whole other different model. You have to actually communicate back and forth and that means you have to have – you have to identify individuals that will carry your message that you also will listen to. So it's much more expensive and it's much more time consuming which means you have to pay PR a lot more, pay a lot more PR type people."

AP: "Yeah, do you have any specific examples of what those channels could possibly be?"

CA: "Well first and foremost would be one-on-one actually reaching out and talking directly to the opinion leaders in those audiences that you want to reach. So it would be one-on-one, however that's done. I mean initial contact could be through email or something like that but you have to be able to talk to them so I would say through phone, Skype, whatever. Two-way symmetrical communication isn't going to work unless you have a channel where you can directly communicate and get information back and forth directly with the – obviously you can't talk to the whole organization. I'll use PETA as an example. You can't talk to the whole PETA organization but you can talk to the executive director, you can talk to their PR director back and forth one-on-one to convey that information. The other thing about the symmetrical mode is you have to be willing to hear them, you have to be willing to absorb and understand where they're coming from. So it's not just putting information to them it's making sure once you get information back from them that there is a – what's the word I need – there is a method to understand what they're trying to tell you and how that can be absorbed into your own structure. And that – that kind of thing is very different then your traditional model of distributing press releases or email or something like that."

AP: "Okay, so number three, what message should an organization communicate through those channels in times of negative press?"

CA: "First and foremost because it's two-way communication you need to communicate that you are open to hearing what they have to say. And you have to not just use the words but actually if it's communicating with them and things we want to sit down and have a meeting with you and we want to actually listen. So in that kind of sense, you wouldn't say we want to set up a meeting and it's just our PR people and your PR people, it probably would need to be at the highest level, so CEO to CEO kind of thing. Because if the other side does not believe that you are truly willing to understand if not adopt their viewpoint, they're not going to talk to you. That communication isn't going to happen. If they're thinking you're just there to try to change their minds rather than actually listen to what they have to say there's no point in engaging in that exchange."

AP: "Okay, and then do you have any examples from your career of having like certain messages you've used in times of crisis?"

CA: "In terms of what? I'm sorry."

AP: "Oh, in ter- in times of just negative press or crisis, anything like that."

CA: "Well I have some really good examples of when things were handled wrong."

AP: "Yeah, that works too!"

CA: "Okay I'm going to use a very recent example where things have gone wrong and this truly shows an example of two-way symmetrical communication that didn't work. And I don't know if you're familiar with this – I don't know if you're up on the local, but recently the San Luis Obispo symphony fired their conductor and he's been there 31 years, are you familiar with that?"
AP: "No, uh uh."

CA: "Okay, they fired this conductor who'd been there for 31 years without cause and apparently for no reason okay. And the way they announced that was rather than identifying their main publics, their main audiences which would be symphony members and symphony donors, they put out a press release so that the world in general heard about that firing before the people who are most typically involved with the organization who are donors, volunteers and things like that. Had they been using the two-way model, which they should in this instance, they're a non-profit; they should have communicated that information in a way that allowed people to communicate back with them in a way that would indicate to the symphony what questions, problems there were from their audience. Why they might have a problem with that, what's going on, they didn't even consider that, even want to hear what the symphony members, what their public, what anybody, the board that made this decision and put out a press release did not consider that they needed to have immediate feedback from people who were going to be intimately, immediately affected by it. So in that way I think how they used the two-way model it would have worked much better for them, but they didn't, they just chose to write a press release and its backfiring all over the place. Okay so in terms of whenever a two-way symmetrical model has worked quite honestly, it's so rare I have never actually dealt with a client who actually wanted to engage in that. I don't have any success models for you, how's that? (laughs)."

AP: "That's totally fine! I think that's like a hard model to use, so that's understandable."
CA: "Oh it is and like I said I'm trying to think of past years how many times I've ever had anybody even consider using it or using it successfully and I just – like I said you would think non-profits would more engage in that but mostly the problem is because it's so time intensive and so costly, non-profits don't have the money to do it and the corporations who do have the money to do it, don't want to do it. So I'm sorry, I'm just telling you like I know it to be."

AP: "Yeah, no that's perfect. Okay number four, how can an organization utilize two-way symmetrical communication, or if you've already answered that like how can they do that successfully? I know you said it's kind of hard to do, but-"
CA: "Essentially the only way you can do it, is what I'm going to call one-on-one, you have to identify those people who are opinion leaders, thought leaders, perhaps titular leaders like the

CEO, using the PETA model, like whoever is the CEO of PETA is or whatever. You have to identify individuals. And you have to work out lines of communication with them."

AP: "Okay."

CA: "Mostly because when you think about it, like me standing up in front of a class talking, I'm pushing information to you. In general it's very hard – it's not unheard of, but it's very hard as students for you all as students to be giving me immediate feedback, I know we should change or I think we should change that, that isn't clear, whatever. One-on-one is the way you have to work (laughs), or one-on-two, do you know what I'm saying?"

AP: "Yeah-"

CA: "So very direct. You have to have a direct channel to the people and they have to feel that that channel is open at all time; that when they have a problem they can come to you as well. It just doesn't work like sending out a press release or me or someone standing up in front of a room and talking with no one-on-one feedback."

AP: "Okay and then number five have you found any consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?"

CA: "Consequences?"

AP: "Yeah like – (CA tries to speak) Oh, sorry just go ahead."

CA: "Let me think about this a minute. Read the question again."

AP: "Have you found any consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?"

CA: "Oh (laughs) well the consequences of asymmetrical …. No…. I'm just trying to think – I'm just thinking back through what would be an example of that. Let's come back to that because I need to kind of think about some …"

AP: "Okay"

CA: "… ideas of what …I'm just trying to identify things and I'm not coming up with something right now. So don't forget about it, let's come back to that okay?"

AP: "Okay that sounds great. Okay so number six, what are some barriers to utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?"

CA: "Cost, time. Another barrier you might say is sometimes you don't know all of the people that you should be communicating with. You don't know who should be on the other end of that channel. So sometimes you might have to do quite a bit of work to identify who those people should be. And again I'm just going back to the SeaWorld, PETA (laughs), PETA would be an obvious one, but there may be some others, organizations, some other people, other audiences, that you don't know are out there that are affecting the situation and identifying those people may be hard to determine. There are ways to help that you might use the people that you do establish communication with to help you identify those others. But there may be people out there – for lack of a better word – working against you that you don't know that they're there so

establishing two-way direct communication with them is difficult. So that would be a third barrier I think, not always knowing who the audience is that you should be talking to. When you're doing it in a one-way model you're scattering information out there so that might hit those people but you don't know if it does or not. In a two-way when you're trying to put that information out there, if they don't in turn turn around and make communication back with you you may never know about them and they may still be working against you if that makes sense."

AP: "Yeah, yeah it does."

CA: "Okay."

AP: "Number seven, what benefits can come from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?"

CA: "What benefits? Oh, they can be enormous. Number one you're getting people – any time you can get anyone to think that a partnership with you is good and that you're actually listening to them they are much more likely to listen to you. They are much more likely to trust you, they are much more likely to think that you are not always working just for yourself but you are working for the greater good, you are working for them, or whatever. So trust is a huge benefit of that. Also a huge benefit is again getting to know your audience better. The better you know what your audience wants, the more likely you are to be able to get that to them and therefore again they will think better of you and I mean talk about ideal research? That give and take is – I mean one of the problems that corporations have is oh we don't want to get – the two-way model requires the corporation to care about what information, what feedback you're getting from the other side. And if you don't care that can actually destroy the model, if that's the one you're working with if you don't care and you don't demonstrate that they can trust you and that you're hearing them and that you're whatever. So I mean the benefits can be huge, but and let me say another third benefit can be that the organization itself because they're being trusted by these other entities to look at the organization you're able to actually maybe make your own organization better. You know you may be contributing to the greater benefit better if you know what other people's objections are that you can fix inside of your own organization. So the benefits of two-way symmetrical communication working are huge. But the other side of it is, the corporation or the organization maybe very resistant to change and because of the cost involved and concerns that you can't do what other people want or something like that you, you may end up antagonizing people. I mean if you set up two-way and it turns out not to be two-way that can be disastrous too."

AP: "Mhm, definitely. Okay, number eight, what other strategies can be used to rebuild a brand after negative press?"

CA: "Oh, I mean there's all kinds of things you can do. Most of them involve, in my experience, it's segmenting, if there's a disastrous situation, you need to identify what the problems are and that again this may be, there may be more than one problem. It might not just be that what's been done – again I'm using SeaWorld because it's easier to take an example and parse it out. Let's say you think that the problem you've got to fix is that you are treating animals inhumanely, but there may be other parts of that problem that you're not considering. So you need to be sure you know what the problems are, you may at least be perceived to be treating animals inhumanely, but there may be an offshoot of that that you're not treating your employees correctly or that

you're not abiding by the law of the land. And I don't know, but you've got to clearly identify what the problems are before you can identify who is concerned about those problems. Again it's like if you're treating animals humanely you're talking to PETA people, but if you're talking as part of the problem their actually was involved some treatment of people, you know employees are not being treated, handled correctly or something, you need to decide what audiences would be reacting to that part of the situation. So you've got to identify the problem and you have to identify the people who are concerned about those problems and you have to devise different ways of reaching out to those different publics. Does that make sense?"

AP: "Yeah, absolutely. Are you ready to go back to the one question we skipped?"

CA: "Yeah and tell me that question again."

AP: "Okay, have you found any consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?"

CA: "Really, I can't think of a specific one, but I would say that the main problem with two-way asymmetrical communication is again, there is kind of – the two-way implies that there is a feedback loop right? And when it's asymmetrical you're not honoring the feedback you're getting. If you get what I'm saying? You're not honoring the fact that it is a two-way communication and people can kind of get upset when you know they're supposed to be listening to you, but you don't get to listen to them or you pretend like you're listening to them and then don't really do that. So I guess that's to me, what the consequences are. You're kind of promising something that you're not really going to honor and I think that in the end can come back and bite you. That's the simplest way I can put it."

AP: "Okay, that's perfect thank you! I'm pretty much done with my questions, but do you have any – I don't know if you know about the SeaWorld situation, but if you do, do you have any advice for their corporation and how they can bounce back from this or anything like that?"

CA: "And I really don't know about their situation. I do know just in general that they have come under fire for – well they've come under fire for a lot of things, including you know even keeping animals in a confined area. Is this the one about the orcas or something?"

AP: "Yeah, I'm specifically looking at the Blackfish movie that came out and it-"

CA: "Which I have actually seen, have you watched it?"

AP: "I haven't, I need to watch it, I haven't done it yet."

CA: "You should watch it, I've actually watched it, and I think that kind of what was in the back of my mind when I was talking about the treatment of humans as well as animals, because part of the documentary talks about how SeaWorld is putting its employees at risk. It's not just treating their animals badly, it's putting their employees at risk and they continue to send employees into a situation which is riskier than it should be that kind of thing. And there are people who think laws could be broken and stuff like that. Oh, do I have any advice for them? The biggest advice I could give them particularly if they're using two-way symmetrical communication is, you can not promise what you cannot deliver. So again identifying what the problems are, that's very important because if you identify that the issue is that you're keeping animals in captivity and we

don't like that to establish two-way communication with a group that there only purpose is to make sure animals are not kept in captivity, would be disingenuous because I cannot believe that SeaWorld would say, you know we've listened to you and we totally agree with you. We shouldn't be keeping animals in captivity so we're going to let them free. If you are not prepared to go there, there is no reason to start two-way communication with a group who has that as a central problem. Do you see what I'm saying?"
AP: "Mhm"

CA: "You really can only ethically enter into a two-way symmetrical model of communication if you are truly open to the idea of changing what you are doing. Now, that isn't to say you couldn't use the two-way symmetrical model on another problem. Putting our employees at risk, by exposing them to dangerous animals; if you honestly believe that the people who are concerned about that that you're communicating with have constructive ideas that they help you? Then sure, but be prepared to honestly you know consider those. It kind of goes back to public relations cannot simply be about talking. There has to be some understanding that there is action behind the talking. So if you're gonna go in to two-way symmetrical communication it cannot be PR person to PR person it has to involve people who can actually make change happen. And in some cases, and in some companies PR people can, but I'm just saying a public relations professional would not suggest to SeaWorld that you go into a two-way communication model without making damn sure that you have the people on your team or available to your team who actually can make change within the company. You see what I'm saying? So I think those would be my two pieces of advice."

AP: "Okay that's it for my questions, do you have anything you want to add?"

CA: "No, but I'd love, if you're going to write up something or whatever, I'd love to get a copy of it!"

Interview Transcripts: Molly Kern

The following interview was conducted to receive expert opinion from a marketing professional. The interview questions came from a questionnaire about two-way symmetrical communication in times of negative press.

Interviewer: Ashley Pierce

Respondent: Marketing Coordinator for the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce

(Molly Kern)

Date of Interview: 5/20/2015

Ashley Pierce: "Okay so my first question is as a marketing expert how would you define two-way symmetrical communication?"

Molly Kern: "I'm not sure if I have a definition for it exactly but it is a conversation you have with the public, with your customers. It's always really fact and research based. It's not media relations, it's not quite as much as spin but definitely a hea- kind of that you promised or a service out there, caring what people have to say and then tailoring it so that they understand what you're offering and then also you can make it better."

AP: "Okay and then my second question is how can two-way symmetrical communication channels be developed by organizations?"

MK: "I definitely think it relies on kind of your mindset as a marketing professional. There's some people who think that, the best way to market is being an ardent believer in your product or service by believing in it no matter what, it's always fabulous. I think for – if you really-you do believe in symmetrical communication an important thing to realize is that it might not be perfect and your way of communicating about your product might not be perfect. It really comes down to listening what people are saying whether it's your customers, or people who are choosing not to be your customers whether it's because your competitors have a better product or service or because they actually will choose anyone but you. Really listening to what your-what you hope your market will be and figuring out what they want, what they like, what they don't like and making changes either in your product or how you're communicating about that to make something that's the best for everyone."

AP: "Okay do you have any examples of how you've used it in your work?"

MK: "Yeah, so a major part of my position is in tourism public relations so we're always identifying target markets or people who would be a really great fit to travel to San Luis Obispo and love it. And so I would say right now a big trend is getting millennials into different markets because they haven't developed travel patterns or anything like that so a lot of my job is doing research on what millenials like. And it's a huge group of people so there's some that are interested mainly in tech and mainly in large cities, so we're not going to be looking have that group of people come to San Luis because they won't be happy with the experience once they're

here. We really focus in on millennial travelers who are interested in the outdoors. I have friends who are millenials who travel for the outdoors so kind of using them to see what people are looking for, how they can be best served. And then every time we have a journalist or traveler here we figure out what did they like the best? What did they wish was different? So we can speak about San Luis Obispo in the most warm and accurate way possible."

AP: "Okay, that's really cool. And then third question: what message should an organization communicate through those channels in times of negative press?"

MK: "It really depends on – I mean negative press can mean a lot of things. It can be, let's say you are a destination that prides itself on being outside of – you know more unique? And somebody says it's bland like Disneyland. So that's not like terrible press, but it's not good. You have to kind of figure out what kind of negative press it is first before you decide on your response. There's things that can be happening that are untrue that you have to combat there are things that can be really bad and totally true. And then so the conversation really depends on the type of negative press but I'd say across the board definitely keeping in mind that your job is to communicate what's actually happening and to always be honest. I think people who are in the scene, especially in the political arena, lying really doesn't get you very far in the end, it makes a bigger mess. So always really relying on the fact-based communication and then protecting your people. If you're a leader of an organization you always have to take ownership because just looking at how people see things now, they tend to trust and give more I guess benefit of the doubt to leaders who own their mistakes even if it wasn't their own personal mistake it was one of their people's, to try and present that honest, responsible and calm front in the face of pretty much any negative press."

AP: "Okay, and then have you used any sort of messages like that – I don't know if you've actually been – like actually had a crisis type situation, but if you've used any messages like that?"

MK: "I mean we've been pretty lucky, haven't had to have too much crisis communication. Something that is happening in California right now on the tourism front again is the drought, and it's not – people around come through – they've been hearing a lot of things and the governor declared a drought emergency, you know? People hear about it from all sorts of countries. Actually yesterday we just had a group of Brazilian journalists here and they were asking how it's affecting San Luis Obispo and things like that. And really what I always say is that it is an issue but we have a community of people here who are passionate about the place we live in and because of that we are passionate about conservation and using things wisely. And it's really kind of choosing the kind of conversation as opposed to saying there is or isn't a drought – because that's not – that's not true. We can't say there isn't a drought and it's not affecting us because it's a very real thing that we're all dealing with, but shaping the conversation and kind of giving more color to the conversation I'd say is something that we always do and then listening obviously to the kind of questions the people are asking, are they concerned about, well does that mean my hotel won't have a pool? Is a different question then how does this community approach environmental stewardship?"

AP: "Yeah, okay number four how can an organization utilize two-way symmetrical communication – and if you feel like you've already answered it you can you know not answer it again or-"

MK: "Yeah, I'd say it's definitely keeping in mind an organization isn't perfect, everything is evolving especially with the way that the world is right now, things are evolving very quickly and being open to kind of things like criticism or negative press as an opportunity for improvement I think is the big mental difference I guess between people who utilize two-way symmetrical communication as opposed to two-way asymmetrical or just full court press, all media all the time."

AP: "Okay and then number five have you found any consequences to utilizing two-way asymmetrical communication?"

MK: "I haven't personally had any consequences but I can definitely – I mean you see different companies or press strategies and you can definitely get a feeling for when someone is just saying something over and over again or taking a poll and listened but not done anything about it so I think that's definitely the biggest drawback. But I think for any communication strategy you do have to employ a variety of methods because everything is not going to be – you know. If you put too much credence in symmetrical communication you can always – you know squeaky wheel is always the loudest. So you do run the risk of listening too much to someone who is just going to be unhappy all the time and alienating your base of who's really happy with how things are going. So I think the balance between symmetrical and asymmetrical is definitely – it can sometimes be hard at times but it's important to have."

AP: "Okay and then six, what are some barriers to implementing two-way symmetrical communication channels?"

MK: "I definitely think it comes down to time. It takes more time to listen, to have those conversations. And then also if you have – because it is a reliance really on research and fact, sometimes that data collection takes a lot of money. And so I think that those are barriers as well as just kind of how flexible is the organization? Sometimes you'll find organizations that are very set in their ways and unwilling to change and that can definitely be a big barrier because you can't really have symmetrical communication if you're not willing to be flexible."

AP: "Okay and number seven, what benefits can come from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication?"

MK: "I definitely think that you can – when you bring people into the conversation they become brand enthusiasts and they feel like you're listening and they feel like a brand understands them can become huge supporters and evangelists for your product or service. I think also the best part and from a company perspective the really selfish amazing thing is that you can improve your product and that's really what everyone's trying to do is improve the way they do things and improve what they offer. And I think when you really are doing the listening part and taking that feedback and making changes it can be a huge not only communications win, but product win for your organization."

AP: "Okay and then what other strategies can be used to help rebuild a reputation after negative press?"

MK: "Yeah, again I think it really depends on the kind of negative press, but I think having an excellent media relations team in this day and age of every video going viral and everything lives forever on the internet, you have to make sure you have an incredibly well trained staff, because media relations is definitely an art and there's – even the most well-meaning people can make a mistake and it can live on forever and really haunt an organization, so definitely taking care of your team and making sure that they feel safe and comfortable in those situations. But I think just the principle of not lying, always being reassuring if it something that has adversely affected people, if it's a recall or something like that can be incredibly negative press for a company, but taking responsibility for whatever happened and then knowing that it's your organization's job to communicate the truth. If it was – if the negative press was out there but wasn't actually true, kind of taking that ownership of re-educating people and not putting the ownership on your customers to realize that you were right all along. To kind of have that – calm, responsible and definitely stay in the fact-based regardless if – there's sort of more heated personal attacks developing and things like that. It's always best – I'd say – the high road is sometimes the most expensive and time consuming, but in the long run definitely pays off."

AP: "Okay, I think that's it for my questions, do you have anything you want to add?"

MK: "Not really, I guess – I mean, I think from the classes I've taken and things I've read that symmetrical communication is definitely favored by more non-profits and things like that historically, but we can see especially now with social media, everyone having so much access, that organizations are realizing they don't really have a choice than to employ it. To really listen to their people- to their customers and make changes that are appropriate I think it's really becoming imperative for everyone to use it, not just advocacy, non-profit or charity based work."

AP: "Okay and sorry one more question I just thought of, do you have an – I guess – preference on how to collect that two-way symmetrical communication? Like do you use social media or some other form of data collection?"

MK: "Yeah, I mean there's some- social media is a wonderful way to kind of gage things, but I think it's important to also know that that's not the only way. The best sort of data collection is multi-channel, so it's everything from survey, in-person, using social media, really listening to reviews on Yelp and things like that, but knowing that – I feel like data can – you can make data say anything and really understanding the source and the method you're using to collect it affects the outcome. So if everyone on social media is complaining about something, it doesn't mean that everyone is complaining about it, it means that people who use social media to express themselves aren't happy with it, and that's not everyone. So really understanding kind of how you get your information and who you're hearing when you that data is important. At the chamber we do annual surveys that ask about kind of more in-depth questions about what products and services these people are appreciating and what they're not. We also use quarterly sort of feedback things where people can give us negative, positive any sort of feedback they want, personal outreach, it remains anonymous but again it's by email. We also have – because we're a membership organization we can see pretty clearly when someone decides to not renew their membership and we will ask them like what were you unhappy with? How can we do better? Because it really is something we care about, everyone having an exceptional experience and so there are many ways to kind of gage how people are perceiving you."

AP: "Okay, okay well thank you so much! That was just great, and thanks so much for just helping with this and everything."

Appendix C

Interview Transcripts: David Koontz

The following interview was conducted through email to receive expert opinion from a communications employee with SeaWorld. The interview questions came from a questionnaire about SeaWorld's messaging and use of two-way symmetrical communication following the release of the movie *Blackfish.*

Interviewer: Ashley Pierce

Respondent: Communications Director for SeaWorld San Diego (David Koontz)

Date of Interview: 5/11/2015 and 5/20/2015

Email to SeaWorld San Diego's public relations department:

"Thank you for such a quick response! Below are my questions, they are all in regards to Two-Way Symmetrical Communication (an organization and public communicating and listening to one another and compromising as fit) and Two-Way Asymmetrical Communication (an organization and public communicate messages to each other but don't actively listen to the messages or compromise with each other).

1) As a public relations specialist how would you define two-way symmetrical communication?
2) How can two-way symmetrical communication channels be developed by organizations?
3) What message is SeaWorld trying to get across to its publics through their communication channels?
4) How has SeaWorld utilized two-way asymmetrical communication? Has it been successful?
5) How has SeaWorld utilized two-way symmetrical communication?
6) How can SeaWorld utilize two-way symmetrical communication further to reach its publics?
7) What are some barriers to SeaWorld utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?
8) What benefits has SeaWorld had from utilizing two-way symmetrical communication channels?
9) What benefits does SeaWorld hope to gain from its current public relation campaigns? Is two-way symmetrical communication a part of that?

Let me know if you have any other questions and please let me know if an interview can be scheduled.

Have a wonderful day and look forward to hearing back,

Ashley Pierce

Email from David Koontz:

"Hi Ashlie, thanks for your patience. While much of the information and planning related to our communications and public relations efforts are proprietary to our company, I'll try to provide a little background information that I hope will be helpful to some degree. Instead of responding to each question, I thought I would give you some of my thoughts. Quite frankly, I believe there is probably a mixture of a number of communication models that we apply in our communication outreach. SeaWorld Entertainment Inc. is a large publicly traded company that is composed of 11 theme parks, including the three SeaWorld parks. As you can imagine, our communication outreach is fairly complex and takes place on multiple levels. We certainly engage in one-way communication dispensing information to various media (consumer, social, trade, etc.) in a more traditional fashion. A company of our caliber also employs two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical approaches, or at least hybrids of those models. While I'm unable to get into specific detail, I think it's reasonable to believe that we, and other companies of similar stature, engage in an asymmetrical approach by doing appropriate amounts of investigation to better understand messages that will resonate with our various publics. We have also engaged in varying degrees of a two-way symmetrical approach with more specific audiences where this type of approach was seen as not only being more appropriate, but could prove to be more beneficial. I think it's also worth mentioning two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models were designed long before the advent and seemingly exponential proliferation of social media. These platforms can be used to support both models in varying ways. An example of something that may be somewhere in the middle of these two models is an element of our current campaign we call "Ask SeaWorld." It is an online platform, with social media components, where we invite the public to ask us questions about parks and animal programs. The goal is to candidly respond so that people have information that we hope gives them a better understanding of SeaWorld, what we do and why, so they can use that information to make up their own mind on issues related to our company. While I think it could be debated whether this approach could be seen as negotiating with the public in the more traditional definition of symmetrical communications, we hope that by providing the public with a better understanding of us, it will resolve conflict that an individual or group may have. Again, I think the take-away is that we look at the environment that we know we are operating in and look to construct communication plans using multiple platforms and on multiple levels, and incorporate various communication models (and yes, in some cases, variations of communication models) the we feel are in the best interest of our company.

I know that I've approached this on a 30,000-foot vantage point, but I hope there is some information in my response that is helpful."