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Non-profit organisations and stakeholder relationships: Assessing digital communication through public relations theory

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ABSTRACT

This research examines New Zealand non-profit organisations' (NPOs) use of digital communication channels to assess if digital channels are being used effectively for stakeholder engagement.

Qualitative interviews with 20 communication practitioners examined whether/how the NPOs are using multiple digital channels and identified the five most popular digital channels. The interview data was analysed using *HyperRESEARCH* and the five most popular channels identified overall were websites, e-newsletters, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Although the participating NPOs are all using multiple digital channels, the communication practitioners could not confidently say the channels achieve the organisation's goals, or assist with stakeholder engagement and participation. To help assess if the channels are being used strategically and are achieving the organisations' purposes, a quantitative content analysis of the most popular digital channels of five NPOs was undertaken. The channels' content was also assessed to identify if the communication practitioners are using public relations theories for dialogic communication, relationship management and stakeholder engagement.

Results of the interviews and the content analysis reveal that NPOs are not using their channels strategically, and are not always achieving their desired purpose. The communication approach by the NPOs is scattershot and ad hoc, and evaluation of the communication is limited. To assist NPOs to improve their use of digital channels to build effective stakeholder relationships, recommendations include using public relations theories, building a digital communication strategy, making differentiated use of individual channels – rather than using a one-size-fits all approach – and ensuring evaluation of the digital communication to maintain best practice. This should provide NPOs with evidence of improved stakeholder engagement and relationships.

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