CHAPTER 1

# Understanding Research

## *An Introduction with Public Relations Implications*



One of the more pragmatic or practical areas of public relations concerns something that most public relations professionals seem to fear most: research. Why? The reason offered by many academic writers is that the field's history—arising from journalism and being applied in a written, creative format—produced an "informal" approach to research. This may be true to a certain degree. Public relations professionals have always relied on research in one form or another to demonstrate to clients that what they have produced has impacted on some public or audience. The simple counting of press releases for the client is a rudimentary form of research. Examining media outlets to see which has carried those releases is another form of research. Both, however, are informal research methods; they fail to provide much information beyond potential reach and effort. One can view research as formal or informal. *Formal* research is the systematic gathering, analyzing, and evaluating of data via some methodology, be it quantitative or qualitative. *Informal* research is the observing of people, events, or objects of interest as they occur, typically through qualitative methods.

Today's professional is in a business that demands more. Modern public relations research strives to deliver evidence that the bottom line has been enhanced by the practitioner's activities. In so doing, the way we approach research has moved from a primarily informal to a formal, social scientific approach to understanding the impact of public relations across the many public relations specializations. Furthermore, the profession has moved from looking at large groups of people, publics, to more targeted groups with

specialized human characteristics, such as specified demographics, psychographics, lifestyles, and even "netgraphics" (as analyzed through the Internet social networks people live in today).

## WHY CONDUCT PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH?

Research is essential to any public relations activity or campaign. *Research,* as noted earlier, is the systematic gathering, analyzing, and evaluating of data. Data are observations of some sort—they may be as simple as the number of people attending an event or as complex as the perception of an organization's reputation or credibility based on a measurement scheme. As evidenced in many public relations models, research is the beginning of a process that seeks to bring about a specific objective. Hendrix's (2000) ROPE (Research, Objectives, Program, Evaluation), Marston's (1979) RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation), and Cutlip, Center, and Broom's (1984) four-step process (Defining PR Problems, Planning and Programming, Taking Action and Communicating, Evaluating the Program) models posit that any serious public relations activity must begin with the research step.

Why are research (and definition) so important to public relations? As Donald K. Wright (1998) has pointed out, research is important because public relations people are finding that research is part and parcel of their jobs when they offer communication strategies, counsel on communication problems, and educate clients as to the best public relations strategies or actions. Without research, professionals are left to "fly by the seats of their pants"; that is, they are reduced to taking, at best, educated guesses regarding the problem and potential intervention programs, and thus they run a greater risk of being unable to predict outcomes accurately. Without research the professional cannot assess where a public relations program begins, how it evolves, or what the end product will be. Quite simply, without research you cannot demonstrate the efficacy of your program.

As public relations has transitioned from a technical (practitioner) to a management function (professional), the role of research has become increasingly important. Management decisions cannot be made in a vacuum; decisions are influenced by a myriad of factors, of which both the acquisition and analysis of data have become basic to good public relations practice. Think of research (and data) as part of a continuous feedback/feedforward function: Research planning and accurate data lead to valid assessments and analyses of public opinion and program effectiveness, and in the end may help to predict behavioral outcomes.

Public relations professionals use research in many ways. In general, public relations research is used to monitor and track, measure and assess, and finally evaluate public relations actions. It is used to monitor and track trends and developments as they occur to help understand and examine

current and future public relations positions. It is essential to the assessment and measurement of public relations messages and campaigns to ensure that planned actions are occurring as expected and to determine when to implement correction strategies. Evaluation is conducted during all segments of a public relations campaign: at the precampaign research phase (i.e., how well was previous research conducted?; which strategies have produced the best results given the current or projected conditions?), during the actual campaign (i.e., how effective has the campaign been at meeting its objectives at phase one, phase two, phase three, and so forth?), and at the end (i.e., how well did the campaign do what it was supposed to do?; how did it affect the "bottom line")? Figure 1.1 demonstrates this process over the life of a campaign and includes three types of research that are found in campaigns—evaluations of the effectiveness of the transmittal and reception of messages (*informative*); the influence of those messages (*affective*); and the intended action on those messages on the target audience (*behavioral*). Note that several evaluations in this model allow for strategic changes in the campaign to be made depending on the results of the evaluations (more on this in Chapter 2).



## WHAT IS RESEARCH?

What then is research? Research encompasses two methodological approaches to *data*. Data are the observations we make of the world around us via some methodology. As noted earlier, data may be gathered formally or informally.

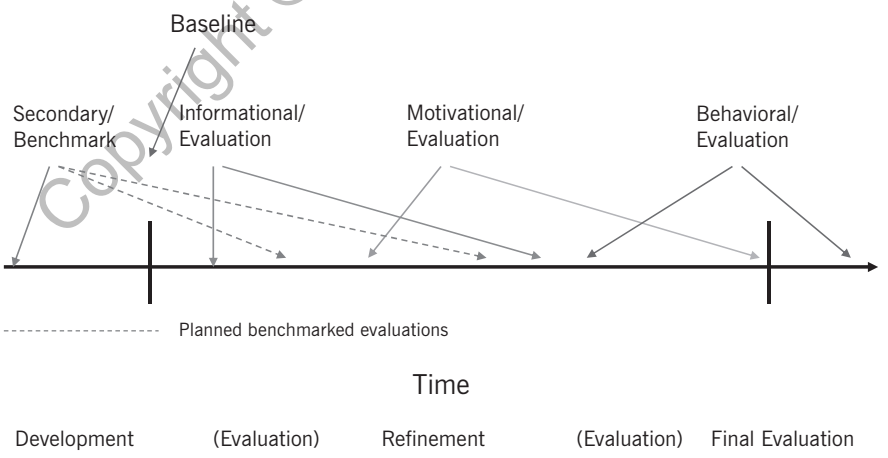


**FIGURE 1.1** A programmatic approach to measurement and evaluation.

Data are gathered informally when they are taken from the researcher's experiences. They are largely *intuitive,* the evaluation largely consisting in the researcher's "gut feelings." As such, data constitute informal observations made even daily. Such data are observed, noted, and judged as being appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad, fitting or not fitting expectations, and found in case study, interview, focus group, and participant-observation methodology.

When thinking of formal methodology, we take a more *objective* approach to the data—the data points when examined systematically lead us to some conclusion. This is the method of the social scientist, and our focus throughout this volume will be mainly on this method of inquiry—surveys and polls and to a lesser degree experiments. Although most social science methods are *quantitative* (objective, with a reliance on numbers and an understanding of large numbers of people), there is a *qualitative* (subjective, with a desire to better understand how a few perceive an object of interest) need that still can be systematically analyzed and evaluated.

It is wrong to believe, however, that one methodology is better than the other. Each methodology has advantages and disadvantages. As you may have already guessed, qualitative methodology is better for some types of research and quantitative methodology than for others. We explore this distinction shortly, but first we need to look at what differentiates formal from informal methods.



### *The Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods*

The major differences in method are found in Table 1.1. Note that major differences are found in all three categories of methods: data collection, data assessment, and outcome.

*Quantitative research* is the objective, systematic, and controlled gathering of data. It is objective in that the researcher carefully defines the "things" under study, precisely defining what it is that will be studied. It is systematic in that we carefully follow prescribed rules in gathering and assessing the data. It is controlled in that we carefully define, gather, and evaluate the data according to prescribed rules that can be reviewed for error. *Qualitative research* is less controlled and subjective; it is not systematic in either gathering or interpreting the data. Qualitative research relies more on the subjective evaluations of the researcher.

While qualitative research provides us with an in-depth description and understanding of a particular subject or event, its lack of control and its lack of objectivity do not allow us to predict and generalize outcomes beyond what was observed. Both methods have descriptive functions, but the quantitative method provides a description based on agreed-upon or carefully defined units that can be measured and assessed for reliability (consistency)

**TABLE 1.1. Major Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods**

| Quantitative research methods | Qualitative research methods |
|---|---|
| *Data collection* | |
| Controlled | Uncontrolled |
| Objective | Subjective |
| Systematic observation | Random observation |
| *Data assessment* | |
| Can be measured reliably | Cannot be measured reliably |
| Validity can be measured | Validity is assumed |
| Is deductively interpreted | Is inductively interpreted |
| *Outcomes* | |
| Description | Description |
| Understanding | Understanding |
| Prediction | |
| Control | |



and validity (do all see and act toward the activity or concept of interest similarly?), whereas the informal method describes the data based on the intuition of the researcher.

Finally, the quantitative method provides a way of predicting and generalizing outcomes to groups or individuals that were not necessarily part of the research. The qualitative method enables us to look at the outcome only as it occurred with the particular group or event, whereas quantitative research allows us to extend our findings to similar groups ("populations") who, if researched in the same way, would within certain degrees of confidence respond or react similarly to those researched (i.e., we are *X*% certain of the responses). With the quantitative method we can depend on accurate data (within certain degrees of confidence) to drive management decisions (whether these decisions are good or bad also can be addressed by research, but only if the basic, underlying questions have been addressed first). Furthermore, the quantitative method provides us a way to generalize from a smaller (and thus less costly) sampling of people to the larger population.

This is not to say that qualitative research is bad or that quantitative research is good. In most instances they are simply different ways of looking at the same problem. Each has advantages and each has disadvantages. With quantitative research, we are not interested in one person or event or object; rather, we are interested in *groups* of people. Thus, we lose an ability to understand in great detail how something occurred. In a nutshell, formal research creates population *norms*. Qualitative research gives us the opportunity to look in great detail at how an individual, a group, or a company acted or reacted to some public relations problem. In short, qualitative

research provides a depth of understanding that is not found in the norms associated with populations. It does not, however, allow us to predict or generalize—with any confidence, at least—about how similar individuals, groups, or companies would react. Obviously, each method complements the other and when used together allows us both to predict *how* groups acted or reacted as they did and to provide richer detail and understanding as to *why* they did. This process is called *triangulation,* whereby both methods provide data that lead to a better understanding of the problems under study.

### *Research Questions*

Now that we have distinguished between the two main types of research, we turn to how research is actually conducted. In so doing, we must differentiate between two basic types of research: *theoretical*, which seeks to provide the underlying framework for the study of public relations, and *applied,* which seeks to use theory-driven research in business world situations.

The best way to examine the two research approaches is via an analogy. The theory-driven researcher can be described as an architect. Just as the architect creates abstract plans composed initially of related concepts or ideas about what a structure should look like, the theoretical researcher creates a conceptual framework for how different communication concepts and ideas work together toward some end. The architect specifies how different materials are to be used, in what number and commodity, and under what conditions. Similarly, the theoretical researcher specifies which concepts or ideas can be used, how they relate to each other, and under what conditions we can expect results. The builder takes the architect's plans and uses them to construct an end product (e.g., a home or office). Similarly, the applied researcher uses theory to solve "real-world" (i.e., applied) problems.

The theoretical research's abstractions are first put to the test in laboratory settings. *Laboratory research* is research that has been carefully controlled to exclude anything that might influence the relationships under study other than the specific concepts under study. In other words, the theoretical researcher tries to test predicted relationships in as "pure" a condition as possible. This provides important evidence that one concept actually does influence another in a predictable way. The researcher's theory establishes which "variables" (concepts that have been carefully defined for measurement) cause changes in other variables and in which direction. Unfortunately, as John Pavlik noted in 1987, there is very little laboratory research conducted in public relations; this is slowly changing as the emphasis on research has increased in an attempt to demonstrate the impact of public relations on return on investment (ROI) (see Li & Stacks, 2015; Michaelson & Stacks, 2014; Stacks & Michaelson, 2010). Public relations researchers, however, still tend to rely on research conducted mainly by researchers from the

disciplines of communication studies (speech and mass communication), psychology, sociology, management, and marketing.

These findings are then used by the applied researcher. While public relations theory seeks to add to what we know about public relations (it creates a "body of knowledge" about public relations—the concepts of interest and importance, the relationships between those concepts, the outcomes as they *might* be applied in actual practice, as found in the body of research produced by the three major commissions and several task forces created by the Institute for Public Relations), the applied researcher practices that theory as strategic (or formal) research. *Strategic research* then is the development of a public relations campaign or program that uses particular theoretical elements (e.g., messages, sources, communication channels) in a practical way. *Evaluation research* is used to provide assessments of how well the program or campaign is working. It provides a *baseline* at a campaign's start and can set *benchmarks* against which other research can determine whether the campaign or program has worked and how well individual components of that campaign are working during that campaign.

The theoretical relationship between applied and theoretical and quantitative and qualitative research is driven by the kind of research questions being asked. A research question is actually a statement made into a question. There are four research questions found in most research: questions of definition, fact, value, and policy (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003, pp. 7–17). As we will see, the importance of research questions is that they in turn determine which research methodologies and assessment techniques are most appropriate to evaluate the question.



## Questions of Definition

The most basic question asked by public relations researchers is the *question of definition*. This question defines what it is that we are attempting to observe. Theoretical researchers ask whether a particular concept or idea actually exists and how it can be potentially measured. For example, we might be interested in determining how people react to certain political parties; the question of definition would specify exactly what we mean by "political" and by "party." We have two recourses: (1) we could go to the dictionary and look up the definitions of each word (or the paired phrase, if it is included) or (2) we could create our own definition, but the resulting definition would not only have to define a "political party" but do so in such a way as to be potentially measurable.

Definitional questions are judgmental in that they seek to define what we should be observing. Attitudes toward a particular product or person, for example, are concepts that often interest public relations professionals. The problem is that attitudes cannot be seen. However, they can be measured. Before you can assess them, the existence of the "attitude" must be

determined. This is the job of the theoretical researcher, who not only defines what is meant by "attitude" but also provides an understanding of how different message strategies (which also must be carefully defined) influence attitudes toward that product or person.

The applied researcher takes those conceptual definitions and develops a communication program around them. To create this program, the researcher must carefully craft a practical, concrete definition (in other words, one that the population under study can use and understand) upon which to build the program. Knowing, for instance, that certain messages have been found to change attitudes in an experimental setting, the practitioner will establish a message strategy that hopefully will maximize communication outcomes in a predictable way.

Questions of definition may be answered by either quantitative or qualitative methodology. Formal methodology requires that the concept be defined in an objective manner, one that can be used over and over again with similar results. The formal answer to a question of definition is much like a dictionary definition, providing a way to define the concept on which all can agree. For this to occur a clear vocabulary must be created. The third edition of the Institute for Public Relations' *Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research* (Stacks & Bowen, 2013) was created precisely for this purpose. It is available free of charge (*www.instituteforpr.org/ipr_info/dictionary_public_relations*) and is found in the Appendix of this book. Informal methodology defines the concept as a point in time; that is, the definition is encased by the events or time in which it was defined. As such, the informal answer is extremely subjective and not amenable to reuse.



## Questions of Fact

*Questions of fact* seek to compare across or between groups. They arise out of questions of definition and are tested quantitatively or "empirically." Questions of fact answer questions dealing with quantity—how much, how many—and are often referred to as *empirical questions*. As such, questions of fact are not amenable to qualitative methodology, which seeks to establish its perspective within the framework of a single event or individual or group. Furthermore, questions of fact can be verified or refuted by observation. Public relations often uses questions of fact when they ask whether a particular communication strategy has produced a change in how a particular public views a product or whether a particular communication vehicle has made a difference in the perceptions of an organization's communicated message. In each case, based on some measurement, we know whether the communication strategy in question has worked.

The theoretical researcher, guided by theory, predicts that the results of manipulating a variable will yield different outcomes for a particular public. In the laboratory, the researcher artificially splits the variables of interest and

sees if the theory has predicted the outcome on some measured variable. For instance, the researcher might argue that highly involved and personalized messages are received better by active than passive audiences, who, in turn, respond better to noninvolved and depersonalized messages. This argument can be tested in the laboratory, often using students who have been carefully screened and placed in "active" and "passive" conditions based on their knowledge of and expressed position on the object of the message—say, giving blood—and then randomly exposed to one message or the other. In this way, the theoretical researcher can verify if the highly involved message actually did produce more change toward blood-giving intentions among the active public and the noninvolved message/passive audience by giving message respondents a chance to sign up for a blood drive. The behavioral outcome is thus changed by the condition, whereby participants responded to messages in the *predicted* way.

Applied researchers use such findings to establish message strategies. If it is assumed that the actual campaign was to increase blood donations, messages advocating high personal involvement (which are expected to work on those already giving blood) and messages advocating low personal involvement (which work best on nongiving publics) would be created and transmitted to the targeted audiences. Instead of looking for differences between the two groups (one is already giving), the applied researcher would look at baseline or benchmarked data to determine success. During the actual campaign, surveys might be conducted to see if the messages were changing attitudes toward blood donation and the messages would likely be altered if they were found not to work (see Figure 1.1). Actual outcome assessment would compare actual blood donation against baseline data from both groups. If the campaign was successful, proportionately more blood would be donated.



## Questions of Value

Whereas questions of fact can only be answered empirically, *questions of value* can be answered quantitatively *or* qualitatively. Questions of value ask "how well" or "how good" something is. Answering such questions quantitatively requires the researcher to rely only on attitude measures and thus tends to reduce understanding to an empirical benchmark. Questions of value are best answered qualitatively by directly asking individuals what they think of the research object and why they think so. Empirically, we can ask whether you thought something was done well—a particular type of advertisement, for example. We can then test across groups—say, by sex—and determine whether one group or another feels it was better done through the creation of such empirical indicators as "How well do you think this advertisement depicted Generation X? Did it do it Very Well (5), Well (4), Neither Well nor Poorly (3), Poorly (2), or Very Poorly (1)?" Such statements can then be treated

as questions of value, but they do not really tell us *why* the respondents felt as they did. For this determination, qualitative methodologies are superior. They provide the "richness" needed to truly understand what was meant by "well" or "poorly." Such questions require in-depth understanding, something that is not amenable to quantitative methodology.

Theoretical researchers treat questions of value the same as they would questions of fact. They create a measurement system, and then in the confines of the laboratory they seek to determine how various groups of people differ on their perceptions or attitudes. The qualitative researcher will often use a quasi-laboratory approach—bringing respondents into a specially prepared room to ask questions either individually or in small groups about the research object while in a still fairly controlled environment (see Chapter 11). Respondents' answers to carefully prepared questions are then recorded for later analysis.

Applied researchers would basically conduct the same study. Instead of a quasi-laboratory, however, applied researchers may use meeting rooms to conduct the research or actually do the research *on-site*. Thus, if we were interested in understanding how employees felt about the quality of a company's communications, we could conduct a survey to establish baseline data and then conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups on-site to seek better understanding of why they felt as they did. This obviously is a *triangulated* approach.

Note that both theoretical and applied researchers address the same problem with slightly different approaches. Both provide important information for the public relations professional—one sets the underlying rationale and the other sees if it can be applied to what is often labeled the "real world." A second difference might be defined in relation to what each purports to research, the theoretical researcher most often dealing with opinions and attitudes, while the applied researcher tries to take that research approach one step further by directly observing behavior.



## Questions of Policy

*Questions of policy* are almost always strategic and often ask what *should be done*. Questions of policy lie outside of theoretical research and are almost always categorized as applied research. A question of policy is answered by carefully looking at the findings of questions of definition, fact, and value. For example, a question of policy might be: Should we target *X* because of *Y*? Because they are strategic, questions of policy require agreement not only on the definition of the problem (i.e., what the central themes or ideas are) but also on findings of fact (are there differences and if so how large?) and value (how good or bad are the differences?). Such questions are very complicated and often carry legal overtones.

Researchers do not usually answer questions of policy. Instead, these questions are best answered by theorists in the academic world and by executives in the business world. As noted, when answering questions of policy, agreement must be found not only on definitions but also on what constitutes differences and value. In its application to research, the question of policy addressed most often is that regarding the actual development and execution of the communication campaign or program. In the often artificial world of academics, computer and group simulations can be run under controlled conditions to see how well the variables under study work. If something has changed or the variables do not operate as expected, the theory can be reexamined and the situation resimulated. In the real world of public relations practice, however, such options are rarely available owing to cost and time constraints (e.g., Li & Stacks, 2015).

## USE OF RESEARCH IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

As the practice of public relations has grown over the years, so too has the use of research. As we see in Chapter 2, as public relations has moved from the technical to the managerial realms, it has had to develop ways of measuring successes and failures. As such, not only is research use on the rise, but also it is getting increasingly sophisticated. For instance, from 1980 to 1989, the percentage of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) "Silver Anvil" award winners using formal research in their campaigns rose from 25% in 1980 to 40% in 1989 to over 75% in 1998 (Wright, 1998). Not only are public relations firms and departments conducting more research, but also research is getting increasingly more complex, often employing both formal and informal methods and increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses of the formal data generated. In addition, the industry is conducting more public relations theoretical research, as evidenced in the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) and the Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF) forming a joint venture inquiring into the impact of public relations (Lilienthal, 2000) and the IPR's continuing Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation, Organizational Communication, and Social Media Task Force.

Finally, as public relations becomes increasingly global in theory and practice, there is a need for better understanding of complex social and economic issues. Public relations practices should be proactive; that is, they should be brought in before problems arise rather than only afterward. A larger and more comprehensive body of knowledge is needed to address questions dealing with change in social and economic environments, change and change management, crisis communication, and so on. Only short- and long-term research aimed specifically at the public relations function will be capable of addressing such questions

## BEST PRACTICES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

An essential relationship exists between public relations research and practice. In particular, there is the relationship between evaluation and measurement and successful public relations practices. The focus of this book's second edition was on what David Michaelson and Sandra MacLeod (2007) have labeled "best practices in public relations measurement and evaluation systems." Their article lays out what a public relations best practice should entail as found in two areas. First, best-practice *research methods and procedures* should (1) be clear and have well-defined research objectives, (2) have a rigorous research design, and (3) provide detailed supporting documentation. Second, best practice should stress the *quality and substance of the research findings* that (1) demonstrate effectiveness, (2) link outputs (tactics) to outcomes, (3) develop better communications programs, (4) demonstrate an impact on business outcomes, (5) demonstrate cost effectiveness, and (6) are applicable to a broad range of activities. Figure 1.2 shows how best practices public relations research and evaluation operates systematically.

This edition moves beyond best practices and focuses on setting standards for conducting, assessing, and evaluating research. That is, while best practices tells us how to answer problems, standards tell us what to answer and how much we believe that answer is true (Stacks & Bowen, 2013, p. 11). Standards provide the researcher with definitions, methodological considerations, measurement options, confidence in outcomes and assessment procedures, and an actual way to evaluate against the larger picture.



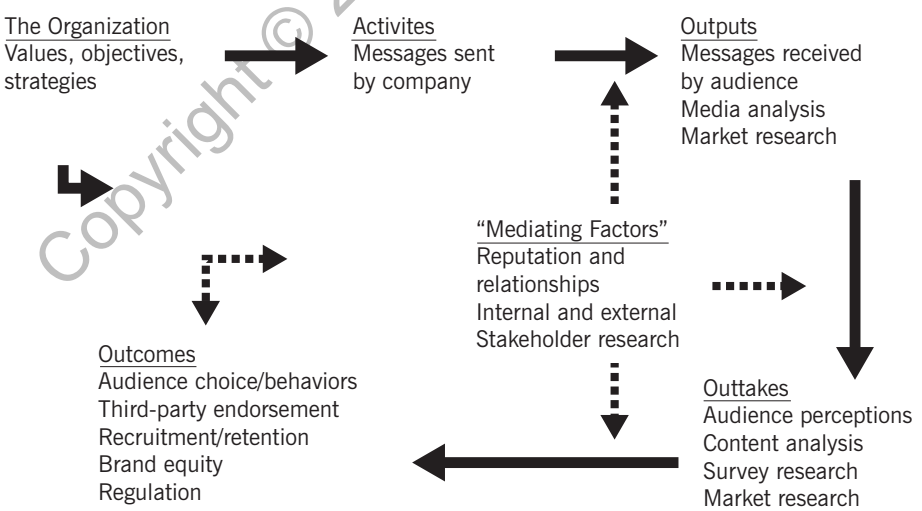


**FIGURE 1.2** A best-practices system approach to public relations.

As is discussed in more detail in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, *outputs* are tactical, and they might include press releases, a video news release (VNR), a press conference, or other messages, while *outtakes* are perceptions of influencers or target audiences that the outputs have been created to change or maintain and *outcomes* are the behaviors that the campaign is trying to obtain. The mediating factors are what the public relations campaign seeks to work with—identifying and employing variables such as confidence, credibility, relationship, reputation, and trust as required to obtain expected outcomes. Chapter 2 introduces a model of how this operates, and Chapters 7–13 focus on how data on these and other variables are obtained and evaluated for reliability, validity, and effectiveness.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has answered the question "What is research?" Chapter 1 builds on the insights of this introduction, moving the focus from a general review of research with attention to public relations to *the practice of public relations research*. While in this introduction we have been necessarily vague on public relations applications, the next chapter prepares us for such applications. Furthermore, Chapter 2 examines the assumptions we make regarding public relations and public relations research in particular. Chapter 3 will discuss how standards are created and met, how they should be applied to public relations research, and how they impact on evaluation.

To review, this introduction has differentiated between two classes of research, formal and informal—in which formal research constitutes either a quantitative or qualitative approach to understanding—and two applications, theoretical and applied. It should be noted (and will be reinforced later) that quantitative research takes a distinctively social scientific orientation, one that typically involves large numbers of observations to reliably and validly describe and predict communication outcomes. Qualitative research involves intense, rather massive observation and focuses on a relatively small number of observations to better understand particular events or individuals. Throughout this volume we continually refer to the type of question asked, noting again and again that the type of question often determines the *best* research method (quantitative or qualitative) and the *appropriate* evaluation or assessment techniques. Finally, the concept of best practices has been introduced.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do public relations professionals require more knowledge about and skill in conducting research?
2. How does research strengthen the position of public relations within a company or with a client?
3. How does formal research differ from informal research? Based on your understanding of public relations *practice,* which do you think is practiced most?
4. What kinds of quantitative and qualitative methods are applied in today's public relations? Why?
5. Differentiate between the kinds of research that theoretical and applied researchers might do. Can you think of instances where one approach might provide insight for the other, and vice versa?
6. Think of five definition, fact, value, and policy questions that might be used in a public relations campaign. Can you begin with a policy question first? Why or why not?
7. From your reading of public relations campaigns in previous classes, which campaigns demonstrate a best-practices approach? Why? Which do not? Why?

### PRACTICE PROBLEM

You have been hired by a public relations firm and assigned to your first account. In briefing you about the client and its needs, you find that not much initial research has been conducted and that, furthermore, many of the client's concepts and ideas are murky and not well defined. You will meet with a team from the client in two weeks. How would you establish the need for a research program? What would you tell the client about the relationship between public relations and the need for research? What specific kinds of questions would you seek to answer? Which methods (quantitative, qualitative, or both) would you suggest that the client consider? Why? How would you introduce the concept of best practices in your "pitch"?





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