

Journalists, the Makers and Breakers of Relational Capital

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to call attention to why storytelling is a pivotal building block of Relational Capital and second, to provide an understanding of how stories receive media coverage, in essence explain how PR professionals seek to influence the business press into telling stories about their client companies and how journalists in turn react to the story material sent to them by PR departments. This paper approaches this issue through gatekeeping theory and presents an example of the various gatekeepers affecting the media coverage of corporate stories. Although the paper includes theoretical reflection, it chiefly attempts to bring new insights to the topic by providing empirical research results. The paper reports findings from a qualitative analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with six journalists from the Finnish business press and six Finnish PR Professionals. The article shows three types of stories that PR professionals use to lure the business press into writing news about their client companies. These are: 1) an idea of a story 2) a hidden story and 3) a ready-made story. The article concludes in showing that an idea of a story will be appealing to business journalists, especially if the story is not obviously helping a commercial enterprise improve their image. It shows that a hidden story, however, can be appealing to business journalists even if the story would clearly improve a commercial enterprise's image. The ready-made story, though, is found to be appealing to journalists chiefly as background information that might trigger a later story.

Keywords: storytelling, gatekeeper theory, media coverage, relational capital

1. Introduction

The perception that the public holds of a company has many names. Some scholars call it reputation or image (e.g. Preston 2004); marketing practitioners often call it a brand (Knudsen and Jones, 2000). New insightful literature calls it celebrity and speaks of celebrity firms (Rindova, Pollock and Hayward, 2006). Call it what you may, everyone is essentially speaking of the same thing: "What does the rest of the world think about us" as an intangible asset. During the past decade, the notion of utilizing storytelling as a method of communication has raised considerable interest in the KM field (e.g. Snowden 1999, Denning 2000). While KM literature recognizes the power that storytelling has as a method of knowledge sharing and internal organizational communication, little attention has been paid to how storytelling creates Relational Capital. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to call attention to why storytelling is a pivotal building block of Relational Capital and second, to provide an understanding of how stories receive media coverage, in essence explain how PR professionals seek to influence the business press into telling stories about their client companies and how journalists in turn react to the story material sent to them by PR departments.

This paper approaches this issue through gatekeeping theory and presents an example of the various gatekeepers affecting the media coverage of corporate stories. Although this paper includes theoretical reflection, it chiefly attempts to bring new insights to the topic by providing empirical research results. The paper reports

findings from a qualitative analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 6 journalists from the Finnish business press and 6 Finnish PR Professionals, and includes a number of quotes from the interviewees. The article concludes in suggestions on how companies could attain more control over the stories that journalists create for the larger public. Finally, before plunging into the thick of this research, it is necessary to provide readers with two key definitions: that of storytelling and Relational Capital. Stories and storytelling have numerous definitions. In this research, a story is understood broadly, as a verbal or written description of true or fictional events, structured by a plot. A plot is understood as defined in Aristotle's *Poetica*: the arrangement of incidents that (ideally) each follow plausibly from the other. Storytelling refers to the verbal or written communicating of these stories. Likewise, Relational Capital enjoys a multitude of differing and often contradictive definitions. In this research, Relational Capital refers to an organization's relationships with the outside world. It includes both reputation and image at a large and all individual stakeholder relationships.

2. How storytelling creates relational capital

This article argues that storytelling is a primary creator of Relational Capital, whether organizations utilize it knowingly or not. Many arguments can be made to support this view. Various examples from the dot.com years proved the power of storytelling and its links to Relational Capital. For instance Vendelø (1998) showed that companies could build and enhance their

reputation by producing and presenting stories of future performance, and that the production of such stories could happen quickly and be rather inexpensive. It is easy to see, why stories created such great excitement during the dot.com years. Stories have always appealed to the human mind. After all, storytelling has been a major form of human communication throughout history (e.g. Orr 1990, Swap et.al. 2001). Great tales of hunt and heroic ancestors, as well as simple campfire lore, have entertained, taught, and in the absence of writing, been our primary method of moving wisdom from one generation to the next (Simmons 2000). Many argue that we are, by our very nature, storytellers (e.g. Fisher 1984, Polkinghorn 1988).

Sveiby and Skuthorpe (2006) illustrate the power and longevity of storytelling as a chief knowledge-sharing device in their studies of the Australian Aboriginal Ngunnabarra, a non-literary society that built and retained knowledge through storytelling and created the longest continuous record of actual historic events and spirituality known to humankind. In this research, they show how lifelong learning through the deduction of multiple meanings from stories was central to the Ngunnabarra education system. The Ngunnabarra stories include vivid facts of events that archaeological evidence supports, dating back as far as 40-60,000 years ago. As Sveiby and Skuthorpe explain, no written record or database could plausibly survive the test of time that stories prevail. The understanding we have of story and storytelling today is based on a foundation of multidisciplinary research coming from fields such as cognitive science, organizational studies, sociology, anthropology and folklore. Most research looks upon storytelling as both a social and a cultural phenomenon, which people actively use to make sense of their life, the organization they work in and the world they live in (Boyce 1996). A central aspect to recognize whilst looking at storytelling, as a building block of Relational Capital is a point brought forward by Harris (1994). Quoting Kintsch (1977), he explains how a very general script or schema exists for stories in the media. Media viewers and readers learn this narrative script implicitly during their early years, by hearing stories from their parents and teachers. Harris explains that both television and print media draw on this narrative script to make their stories readily understandable. For instance children's cartoons follow the script very explicitly, as do most TV shows, and even advertisements. Finally, Harris quotes Meadowcroft and Reeves (1989) who found that children obtain well-developed story schema skills by the age of 7 and that these skills led to a better memory of central story content, a

reduction in processing effort and a greater flexibility of attention-allocation strategies.

It is evident that stories have an inherent appeal to human beings. The research quoted above describes a rich variety of usages for stories and storytelling that we find in our everyday lives. Schank and Abelson (1995) put forth an argument, which may well explain the universal appeal of storytelling. In their title *Knowledge and memory: the Real Story*, they maintain that 1) Virtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences; 2) New experiences are interpreted in terms of old stories and 3) The content of story memories depends on whether and how they are told to others, and these reconstituted memories form the basis of the individual's remembered "self". In summary, stories are capable of carrying multiple meanings and communicating in a comprehensible, memorable way. The strength of storytelling lies in its ability to give meaning to the individual through the story. From an organizations viewpoint, this suggests that storytelling allows organizations to express their values and image to the larger public in an accessible and vivid manner (Knudsen and Jones, 2000).

3. Journalists as gatekeepers

The impact of storytelling as a powerful, memorable form of communication is apparent. It seems that in order to gain Relational Capital through storytelling, organizations can rely on three major channels: marketing, word of mouth and public relations. The latter of these three is the focal point of this study. It is a longstanding claim that the public believes issues in the news far more than statements made by companies themselves in advertising or other forms of stakeholder communication. Thus it is arguable, that business journalists have a vital gatekeeper role in creating and upholding any given company's Relational Capital. The ideals in journalism are of considerably high standard. According to McQuail,

"The normal standard of impartiality calls for balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation of news – separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgments or emotive language or pictures" (McQuail 1994).

As McQuail himself clarifies, reality is often quite different. Journalists are rarely able to be unbiased, as whether realizing it or not, journalists select, reject, and interpret both material sent to them and their own accounts on events taking place, hence making the news in its final form highly subjective.

Attaining media coverage for stories lies heavily on the organizations ability to influence journalists and produce stories that are appealing to them. Hence, the theoretical background chosen for this research is gatekeeper theory. Although the theory does not by any means provide a complete overview of news selection process, it serves the purposes of this study by focusing on the position of individual journalists and how they choose amongst a multitude of messages sent to their disposal. Gatekeeper theory argues that information travels through channels, and information encounters forces that determine its flow, i.e. gatekeepers. Shoemaker (1991) defines gatekeeping as the process

“By which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day”
(Beard and Olsen, 1999).

White introduced Gatekeeping to the communications field in 1950. He studied the decision making of one wire editor, looking at why he chose to run certain stories while disregarding others. White had his chosen wire editor, “Mr. Gates”, keep a record of all the stories available to him from three wire services during one week. Mr. Gates recorded his reasons for not publishing the rejected stories. White concluded that in most cases Mr. Gates' decisions on which stories to run were “highly subjective” and based on his “own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations” of what is news. The study has been duplicated several times. Snider replicated the study 16 years later, in a study where he looked into both the reasoning for rejecting certain stories and why some news items were chosen for publication. He discovered that the chosen stories represented a better balance among story topics, but that the news judgments were based on personal values, just as the original study showed. Bleske replicated the study in 1992, and although the profile of the gatekeeper has changed somewhat and the latest study shows “Ms. Gates” using a computer to edit copy, the result and conclusion was basically the same as White's (Allen, 1994, Kratzer and Kratzer 2003).

The idea of gatekeepers in mass communication has naturally evolved throughout the years. Later studies have found certain patterns in the judging behaviour of media gatekeepers. For instance Buckalew conducted a gatekeeper study on news editors at television stations, and found that news editors' judging patterns are characterized by five news facets: normalcy; significance; proximity; timeliness and availability of visual elements (Allen 1994). In addition, several authorities have pointed out that there are multiple gatekeepers, the first one being the source from which the story

emanates. The last is the reader herself, who chooses which news items to follow. Gatekeepers in the media are not only selectors of news stories, but also cover a wide range of media occupational roles (Hirsch, 1977, Dailey, Demo and Spillman 2003). Hence, although business journalists can plausibly be considered pivotal gatekeepers in the creation of Relational Capital, it is important to note that they are simply one key link in a process. A single gatekeeper is rarely responsible for final decisions. A good example of this comes from Berkowitz who studied a network-affiliated television station and discovered that a group of people and not an individual producer decided which news stories should air (Kratzer and Kratzer 2003). Nevertheless, the gatekeepers in the media arguably have a central role and a significantly strong influence on other gatekeepers. This was found by for instance McCombs and Shaw (1976), who looked at the effects of gatekeepers' decisions. They found the audience learns how much importance to attach to a news item from the emphasis the media place on it (Allen 1994).

4. Research design

The paper reports findings from a qualitative analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with six journalists from the Finnish business press and six Finnish PR Professionals. The interviews were conducted during the latter half of 2005, with initial data analysis taking place alongside data collection to allow questions to be refined and new avenues of inquiry to develop simultaneously with the gathering of material. The interviewees were derived from two sources: key informants and snowball sampling, where key informants was asked to identify other knowledgeable individuals to interview. Snowball sampling was chosen as it is appropriate when a study is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). The respondents from the business press (two females, four males) represent three major Finnish Media: Kauppalehti, Taloussanommat and Yleisradio financial news. Kauppalehti is Finland's leading business magazine, with six weekly issues and a monthly supplement, Optio. Taloussanommat is Kauppalehti's main competitor, with a very similar publishing structure and readership demographics. Yleisradio is Finland's national broadcasting company and produces financial news used in a variety of media, including their Internet, television and radio news. In addition, one respondent had held several years of experience with *Ekonomi*, the trade magazine of Finnish economists, and had recently moved to work as a financial reporter for a large

regional newspaper, and spoke of experience from both of these media.

The PR professionals (one male, five females) represent two middle size Finnish PR firms, which are both specialized in business related Public Relations, and one PR Manager of a large adult training institute with substantial experience of dealing with the business press. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using Weft QDA, a freely available software tool designed for qualitative analysis. The data was first divided into larger categories, such as nature of work or attitude towards ready-made stories. Subsequently, they were grouped into sub categories such as creativity of journalism or time pressure at work. The aim was to identify and analyse different aspects, which affect how PR professionals choose to pitch stories and business journalists choose to either utilize them or disregard them. The categories and sub categories created based on this analyses were thereafter re-read and categorized into four main groups of findings: first, how PR professionals use, and business journalists react to: 1) ready made stories 2) ideas of stories and 3) hidden stories, and second, answers identifying and weighing the importance of the gatekeepers who are involved in the process of stories attaining media coverage. The findings of the analysis are presented below, with the discussion presented alongside relevant quotes from the interviewees. In the quotes, the respondents are identified by gender and years of experience, for instance: Female, 7 years in PR. Some of the respondents held work experience from both journalism and PR. In these cases they are identified by gender, followed by work experience from their current position as either journalist or in PR, followed by their years of experience in their former field, for example: Female, 10 years in PR, 2 years in journalism.

5. Creating stories for the business press

Today, storytelling is a rather common tool in public relations, providing a valuable method of communication that is recognized by journalists and PR professionals alike:

"It became wildly common during the IT boom that everyone had a story to tell, a well rehearsed story...they started to appear sometime in 98-99, everyone had something. Although they were young guys, boys, usually... who hadn't really done much anything in their lives, but they brought up such interesting stuff about their pasts in a great way... Stories were in the air already before this but this is when it

really started... A story is, after all our basic building block, that's what its all about, a good piece of news is a good story...I think business people have realized this too...you get your message through much easier if you can tell a story" (Male, 21 years in journalism)

Storytelling has in fact, become such a common phenomena, that journalists claim to easily distinguish when they are being approached with a story instead of staple PR material. They also could pick out trends in business storytelling:

"The heroic stories that everyone was pushing five years ago are not around anymore. It's not about great leaders anymore. Now everyone is pushing these stories on the collective firm and their phenomenal group work and spirit and whatnots...What PR firms have completely forgotten is the grass root people, I'd love to see more of them. The nerd with the bad skin working in his lonely cubicle... The normal people behind the business and the success... I strongly feel that the readers of the business press want to read about people they can relate to and understand." (Male, 14 years in journalism, 2 years in PR)

5.1 Ready-made stories

According to Gans (1979) journalists are in constant search for new ideas and often pressed for time. Pressures of time, immediacy, and deadlines require reporters to make direct and indirect use of prepared information. Hence it is reasonable to assume that PR professionals would at least at times attempt to pitch ready-made stories to the media. When asked about ready-made stories, many of the PR professionals and business journalists stated that although they are useful in some situations, they often decided against using them:

"You should never ever send material that is too ready made. You have to leave the journalists with room for ideas." (Female 9 years in PR)

Both PR professionals and journalists commonly stated, that ready-made stories often feel too overtly positive for them to be used directly. Finnish business journalists are notorious for their negative outlook on "advertising" any commercial organization. It is considered unethical. Thus journalists typically shun away from news that seems like it would be highly beneficial for a company to get media coverage on:

"The stories have to be written skilfully, so the journalist doesn't immediately think that ok, now they're just advertising themselves

again...it has to be written so that you feel that you could get the same kind of answers if you made an interview on the topic yourself.” (Female, 6 years in journalism)

One of the most prominent features that the interviewees in both PR and journalism spoke about could be called the NIH (Not Invented Here) syndrome. If journalists are approached with material that is considered too ready-made, they will often disregard it even if the issue is considered newsworthy:

“If something is written in a really fascinating manner... I notice that hey, this same stuff has been sent to everyone. I realize that I can’t use this, as it is it’s sort of stealing my job. I’m useless if all I do is copy paste.” (Male, 6 years in journalism, 1 year in PR)

The NIH syndrome is plausibly caused by how journalists view their occupation. They see journalism as being inherently a very creative job that they take pride in. Most of the interviewees stressed that they never merely reflect the outside world and tell things as they occur. Their work involves a great deal of interpretation and decision-making:

“It reminds me a lot of an artistic process, when we start thinking about what we will do and how will we introduce and develop the story...” (Male 24 years in journalism)

However, many respondents claimed that it is useful to send ready-made stories, for they are utilized often enough, especially as background information:

“I read them. If they are well written I’ll read them. I’ll certainly not use the material itself at all if I run a story, but it might lead to me getting a kind of a ‘ah, I get it’ reaction and then if I run something related in a few weeks I’ll contact the people that were mentioned in the ready text, because they already told one version and parody is always easy to make” (Male, 14 years in journalism, 2 years in PR)

Some of the PR professionals emphasized the importance of sending out ready made stories, due to the increasing pressure journalists face in meeting deadlines and producing news quickly. Lack of time (or using it as an excuse) makes ready stories appealing for some journalists:

“This quarterly capitalism has driven us into such a state that we are pushing out more and more pseudo news...”(Male, 14 years in journalism, 2 years in PR)

“It’s a bit overstated to say we have a lack of time... Many have all the time in the world and it’s just a sort of laziness because

we are forced to write something new every day and if your lazy it’s of course easier to do something with information that is ready made and filtered...easier for us journalists to make a living” (Male 21 years in journalism)

In addition, some of the journalists felt that negative aspects are often hidden in business jargon, whereas sending a clear story indicates openness and the will to communicate:

“Listed firms have all these legal obligations to communicate...Quite often they’ll just send out the plain facts if it’s bad news... they don’t want to sort of imply or hint that there’s a bigger picture here and so they don’t put it in any kind of frames.” (Male, 21 years in journalism.)

It seems that ready-made stories do not hold a great appeal to business journalists, but they may be used as background information or occasionally used fully. Many of the journalists noted that their reaction to ready made stories is due to their being in business news, and stated that other fields of media may well be more appreciative of ready material. This also was apparent from the interviews conducted with PR professionals, who noted that journalists working in areas such as entertainment (movie’s, record releases etc.) seems much more enthusiastic toward ready-made stories and quite often print them as such.

5.2 Ideas of stories

Many of the PR professionals saw ideas of stories, which they also referred to as hints or even bates, as their preferred method of attaining media coverage for their story. The ideas of stories were often fully thought out stories that the PR professionals deliberately left bits and pieces out of:

“I always approach journalists first with a story suggestion. It has a clear idea of a story in it but it has some loose ends so they can tie it up in a fashion they like... I have this gut feeling I should let the journalist have the joy of finding” (Female, 10 years in PR, 2 years in journalism)

Many of the journalists shared this view, stating that they appreciate material that is thought out to an extent, but leaves them room for creativity:

“Of course its easier for us if the stuff we are sent is slightly ready chewed ...”(Male, 21 years in journalism.)

Avoiding an excessively positive tone or “advertising” was a key issue that interviewees often referred to when discussing how they use ideas of stories. Many PR professionals stated

that they generally choose topics that can be linked to a current discussion in the media or spoke of trends in the industry:

"I'd say some of the best PR successes our firm has had have been when we take an issue that is not straightforwardly tooting our clients horn... I'd say it's best if you just hint to a journalists about a story like that." (Male 12 years in PR)

Often enough, when recognizing a phenomenon that they felt could make a story, PR professionals will simply pitch this to a picked journalist who they consider would be interested in the matter, without developing the full story. Hence the appeal of ideas of stories to PR professionals may also lie in the fact that they take less effort to create:

"It can be kind of an idea, like this company is unique because it offers such flexible working hours to its personnel. Stuff we could write up as a full story, but it's easier to for instance arrange for our client and some journalist to... just sort of... discuss this topic. They often like it better anyway when they (the journalists) can figure out for themselves how they want to write the story." (Female 9 years in PR)

5.3 Hidden stories

Many of the journalists spoke enthusiastically about stories that can best described as "hidden". By this they meant a story that is not brought up straightforwardly, but that they can themselves find for instance amongst "PR jargon":

"This PR firm send us a usual press release on this large private hospital chain...about how they had expanded... and then just casually mentioned that here in the private sector, anyone can rise to become a manager... it had a small example of this 33 year old occupational health nurse... how she was running four medical stations and was the boss of all these doctors... just a few short lines in the midst of the text... Not hard to guess that our management pages called them right away to run a feature on it." (Male, 14 years in journalism, 2 years in PR)

Likewise, stories that the journalists did not anticipate receiving during an interview can also be defined as "hidden". Although they can be clear, ready-made stories, the fact that the journalist did not anticipate hearing it seems to make them and the subject matter at hand appealing:

"I've had my share of jargon-puffing CEO's...Even if their topic would be newsworthy, there may be nothing to use

as meat on the bones... Sometimes they save the day with a story...when I hear the words: there's actually a funny story about how we started our company, or why we came up with this idea... I immediately perk up in my chair..."(Male 21 years in journalism)

One journalists speaking of these hidden stories explained that he assumed PR professionals were "slightly hiding the beef" on purpose, to get journalists excited about finding it, but that he still found the hidden stories appealing:

"Well, smart PR people understand this and know how to pitch stories for journalists in a sly manner...they don't pop upright away, so we get like, this is my story, I invented this! They get us believing that we found the story ourselves." (Male, 21 years in journalism)

Interestingly, it appears that journalists were more willing to cover stories that plausibly would be directly beneficial to a company's image if the story was hidden. It seems that when journalists find the story themselves, concerns of "advertising" disappear:

"If say, a company says that they have recruited this and this many people, then we take the bate when we see it and realize that hey, they must be doing very well... Then we make it into our own thing." (Male, 6 years in journalism, 1 year in PR)

5.4 Gatekeepers involved in attaining media coverage for stories

In accordance to suggestions of later gatekeeper theory, this analysis shows that that business journalists are only one significant gatekeeper in the process of attaining media coverage for stories. Numerous gatekeepers can exist, but not necessarily:

"It's quite... well surprisingly lonely, actually. I make my own decisions. I guess you just learn to rely on yourself so much... mostly the only communicating I do is with the editors in chief, if even them." (Male, 24 years in journalism)

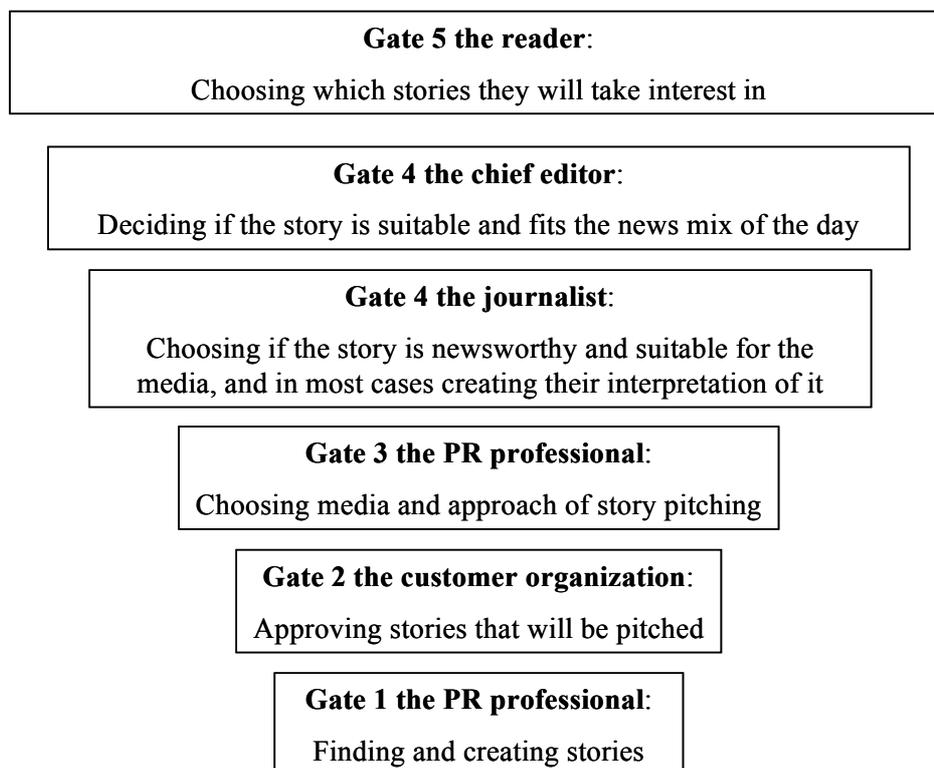
"We typically find the story... something we can tell about our clients that fits the bigger picture. Of course we get info straight from our clients as well, but in good partnerships, we do the actual choosing of what to pitch, our clients trust our expertise...Customers of course give the final ok, shall we advance on this idea" (Male 12 years in PR)

It seems that the gatekeepers can vary in different situations. At a minimum, the journalist finding a story and deciding to cover it will be the sole gatekeeper. This is the case in for instance many

online news desks. Providing that any readers come across this story in the press, they will naturally also act as a gatekeeper, choosing what they want to read. In addition, there typically is an editor in chief or other decision-making body within the media who chooses the final news mix for the day. When a story is offered to a journalist through a PR agency or department, a few more

gatekeepers can be added to the chain: the PR professional, who finds and creates stories and decides how and to which media they will pitch the stories to, and also the customer organization who approves of the stories or news that will be presented to the media. An illustration of typical gatekeepers involved in the process of a story receiving media coverage is illustrated in Figure 1

Figure 1: An Example of gatekeepers affecting the media coverage of corporate stories



Although the gatekeepers in the media can be considered pivotal, the gatekeeper role of the PR professionals is highly influential as well, as they commonly either contact a small number of media with a certain story or tailor make it in a manner that they feel will fit different media needs:

“The biggest challenge at the moment is that every media house has such diverse needs...packaging the same story in different forms for all these different receivers... that’s what makes the successful PR people. (Male 14 years in journalism, 2 years in PR)

6. Conclusions: Luring the business press into covering stories

Previous research has shown that journalists often base their decisions on which news to cover on instincts rather than textbook news values (Kratzer and Kratzer 2003). This research confirms this view to some extent. In the course of the interviews, both journalists and PR professionals gave some textbook examples on

what makes stories newsworthy, such as the size of a company or the monetary value of a deal. However, both groups of interviewees also affirmed that the manner in which a story is delivered has an impact on an issues appeal to journalists. Ideas of stories or hidden stories are much more appealing to business journalist than ready-made stories. When questioned about how journalists react to story material sent to them, their reasoning for finding material appealing and newsworthy typically centred around being able to discover news themselves and present the public their interpretation of it. Consequently, discovery and interpretation seem to be key issues that commercial organizations should take into account when attempting to lure the business press into covering their story. Finally, business journalists are seemingly more willing to tell positive stories of commercial organizations when finding the story themselves or when presented an idea of a story that gives them the chance to be creative and fit in the missing pieces. The argument is illustrated in table 1.

Story type	Appeal to journalists
Indication of a story	Appealing to business journalists, especially if not obviously helping a commercial enterprise improve its image
Hidden story	Appealing to business journalists even if the story would clearly improve a commercial enterprise's image
Ready-made story	Appealing to journalists as background information that might trigger a later story. Sometimes used as such for instance when pressed for time.

Table 1. Different story types' appeal to journalists

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