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Analysis of the Current Public Relations Practices within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector and the importance of these practices to the industry.

Aoife Ducatta Lohse
Department of Media Communications, Cork Institute of Technology, Cork, Ireland

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AOIFE LOHSE

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Analysis of the Current Public Relations Practices within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector and the importance of these practices to the industry.

Name: Aoife Ducatta Lohse

Student Number: R00050384

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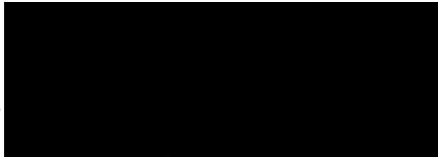
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Authors Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of

Master's Degree (MA) in Public Relations with New Media

Is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfilment for that stated above.

Signed...... ███████████████████ .... (Student)

Date............ 01 / 9 /14 ....

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current knowledge, importance and application of public relations within Irish Luxury Hotels. Another aim was to find out how the public relations theories of relationship management, strategic management and communications are used in the sector.

The research methodology in this study used a mixed method approach. Quantitative research was used in the form of an online questionnaire and qualitative research was used in the form of semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was distributed to all luxury four star and five star properties with an online presence in Ireland with an aim to develop a profile of the sector and to discover the current knowledge and application of public relations within the sector; 98 responses were received. To further this body of knowledge, qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews were used in order to gather an understanding of the sectors use and interpretation of public relations. Interviews were conducted with Karen Fleming- Marketing Manager, Hayfield Manor Cork, David Glynn- Marketing Director McWilliams Hotel Mayo and Alison O'Brien- Senior Account Manager, Fuzion Communications, Cork.

The mixed methods data highlighted the need for public relations to be handled as a standalone management function, integrated into daily business operations. Research also indicated that public relations is an important element to a business strategy which needs to be planned and implemented strategically integrated with other business functions.

In addition although results show that Irish luxury hotels have a high regard for relationship management, they have a varied knowledge of public relations and they generally fail to incorporate public relations as an internal communications strategy. Further although practitioners have embraced Web 2.0 and social media, they emphasised that these tools must be managed strategically.

The principle conclusion was that although the sector has a high regard for relationship management, the sector does not fully understand the extent of public relations or its potential to act as a standalone strategic business function that can manage both internal and external publics.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale

To be in the hospitality industry, whether running a bed and breakfast or to help manage a global hotel, resort and convention business; is to care deeply about your guests and your reputation (John Wallis, Hyatt Hotels & Resorts, 2012). 'The focus is still on creating and maintaining safe, clean and comfortable resting places for travellers of all types. However it is also about showing gratitude for everyone who chooses to spend time in our properties- and who take away enough positive memories from those experiences to return again, sometimes to the same properties, but also to those hotels that share the same brand' (John Wallis, Hyatt Hotels & Resorts, 2012).

"One of the primary challenges for the hospitality sector is to communicate with potential customers in a manner that is readily accessible and is an effective means of communicating messages" (Shannon College of Hotel Management, 2010).

In addition, the hospitality sector is a major industry in Ireland, employing over 180,000 people and contributing €5 billion into the Irish economy from domestic tourists with an additional €2.7 billion from foreign revenue earnings and this figure rises to €3.4 billion when cross-border visitor numbers are taken into account. Tourism also shapes Ireland's image and attractiveness as a place to live, work and invest, (Eurostat, 2010).

Given the importance of the hospitality sector in Ireland and its contribution to the economy as well as how important public relations are to the hotel sector; one might reasonably expect that prior scholarly work would have been broadly investigated in ways which the hotel sector by the use of public relations. However, in actual fact, the academic literature published on the use of public relations for the Hotel Sector in Ireland is scarce and merits further study.

Industry reports dictate that Five star properties experienced the highest occupancy numbers in 2012 with a 3 percent point increase, having the highest occupancy rates throughout 2012 (Failte Ireland). It is this author's opinion that this should be investigated in much further detail to see if the fact of paying a much closer attention to detail as well as the higher level of customer service has played a part in this. It is additionally this author's opinion that the close attention to reputation management in these luxury properties have had a result in

increasing occupancies. Thus as can be seen from above the underlying question arises, has the use and an increased knowledge of public relations had an effect on the rise in occupancy? For example in the 2011 public relations campaign conducted by Tourism Ireland, there were a series of public relations events set up throughout the year. With these events it helped promote Ireland on a global scale particularly with the stately visits from Queen Elizabeth and President Obama, promoting Ireland as a great place to live, work and stay, this resulted in increased tourism numbers, as well as increased bed nights across the nation for 2012 and 2013 (Failte Ireland Reports).

1.2 Focus of the Study

The general focus of the study is on the use of public relations in the Irish luxury hotel (ILH) sector. With a primary focus on the luxury hotel market, using both online as well as offline strategies, to ensure the success of the hotels public relations strategy/campaign. As well as a comprehension into the importance and understanding of public relations to the Irish luxury hotel sector. In addition to gather an evaluation, from an expert based perspective, of the potential of public relations practices for the industry.

Given the importance of the hospitality sector to the Irish economy and its people in terms of employment, a greater understanding of the characteristics of the hospitality sector and of the role of public relations within the industry is needed. Irelands main tourism bodies; Failte Ireland on a national scale and Discover Ireland on an international scale, as well as hotel industry agencies such as the Irish Hoteliers Federation are making significant public relations efforts for the benefit of the Irish hospitality sector, as demonstrated through numerous current PR campaigns. However the efforts made by these bodies and agencies alone are not enough for the Irish hotel sector to reach its potential contribution to the Irish economy. Individual hotels as well as global branded hotels must become more knowledgeable about public relations, the use of PR practices and relationship building as well as becoming more proactive in establishing a stronger position for a given hotel within the marketplace.

The efforts of individual properties/hotels when combined with the efforts of larger instituting bodies such as Failte Ireland and national sector agencies such as the IHF, they can create a synergy capable of establishing Ireland as a preferred domestic and foreign tourist destination as well as promoting the Island of Ireland as an attractive place to live, work and

invest. The Department of Arts, Tourism and Sport, 2008, state the importance of the synergies created by the institutions and agencies of Ireland as well as the importance of the tourism and hospitality industry in providing a stable, recession free future for Ireland.

In order to help reach the sector's full potential, the focus of the study is to address the use of public relations within luxury hotels, the level of its understanding and to form recommendations on the current trends within the sector.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives:

The following research question drives the study:

"How are Irish Luxury Hotels currently engaging in both online and offline PR techniques/ tactics to successfully communicate with their publics? ". And how important is public relations to the Luxury Hotel Sector in Ireland?"

The exploration of this primary question generates a series of sub-questions such as:
1. What constitutes a luxury hotel in Ireland?
2. What publics do luxury hotels have?
3. What channels do they use to reach their publics?
4. What is the level and understanding of PR tactics in luxury hotels?
5. How do luxury hotels in Ireland apply PR tactics and techniques, to conduct a successful PR campaign?
6. How do Luxury Hotels use PR as a social media as a PR function?
7. How do they use social media and strategies without bombardment of the same message, resulting in irritating people?

Research limitations and constraints may be encountered while conducting the research this thesis and may include:

1. A small questionnaire sample size due to time constraints.
2. Participation in questionnaire and interviews is on a voluntary basis on behalf of the interviewee. This could cause considerable difficulty in involvement and participation.
3. The research will be limited to luxury hotels within the Irish hospitality sector and within the region of the island of Ireland.

Research objectives have also been encountered as a result of conducting the study into the practice of PR in Irish Luxury Hotels (ILH). These research objectives have also been identified as capable of generating outcomes that are in themselves useful. This is not only useful in the collection of evidence in response to the research questions. But also establishes the study's findings within the literature as well as benefit those scholars and practitioners who may in essence draw on the study. The following objectives have been specified:

1. Develop a profile of the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector, resulting in a clear definition and capable of expanding current knowledge of the industry and help tailor further study recommendations overall for the sector.

2. Generate data of the current business practices of public relations within the Irish luxury Hotel Sector, not only in online but in offline strategies as well to become a successful campaign or strategy.

3. To investigate and highlight which public relations practices are best suited to the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector.

4. To generate an understanding and an expert knowledge of the best PR tactics, techniques, channels and strategies to complete a successful public relations campaign within the Irish luxury hotel sector.

5. To understand the level of use of public relations within the Irish luxury hotel sector as well of the use of social media as a public relations function.

6. To identify and recommend the most effective public relations practices from an expert perspective that are well suited to the Irish luxury hotel sector.

7. To identify research findings and recommendations which are likely to apply to a broader perspective of the Irish hotel sector and even expanded to the UK or Europe.

1.4 Structure of Thesis: Map of Research Journey

Having introduced the study and the research objectives as well as limitations in Chapter One, a brief map of the thesis follows to guide the reader through the project and the special contributions each chapter makes to the overall study.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature on the subject of public relations in Irish Luxury Hotels. The review will provide an explanation of public relations, the classification of Irish luxury hotels, public relations within the hospitality sector, the environment within the Irish hospitality sector, as well as the importance of the hospitality sector to the economy and

workforce in Ireland in its contributions and will present theories of relationship management, strategic management, communications and reputation management. The review of the research is followed by Chapter 3, which details the research methodology, including theoretical frameworks used, rationale for the use of multiple methods, as well as the methods employed to collect, analyse, interpret and report the data. Then Chapter Four delves into the findings of both the web-based questionnaire and the expert interviews. Then the final chapter summarises the main findings, and offers a conclusion for the research and suggests future research possibilities.

In conclusion, this study should be of use to a wide range of educators and professional including students, teachers, practitioners of ILH's and to a larger extent the entirety of the hotel sector in Ireland can draw from the findings of this research study. The information collected will help to provide educators and their students with a greater understanding of the successful public relations tactics, techniques and strategies in the hotel sector in Ireland. As well as giving industry professionals a guideline into which are the best techniques to employ within a luxury hotel to produce an effective public relations strategy. It will also provide the luxury hotel sector in Ireland with a reflection on how they can implement public relations within the business operations and how these practices can assist their business.

Chapter 2:
Literature Review

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Defining Public Relations

The practice of Public Relations is often misunderstood, and definitions vary; thus, it is necessary for the term to be explained further. Select definitions will be presented in an attempt to combine key attributes:

"Public Relations is a distinctive management function, which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools" (Harlow quoted in Wilcox et al., 2003).

This however is rather long-winded and describes what Public Relations does rather than what it is; in 2012, following a debate on the PR definition resulted in a new definition being published:

"Public relations is a strategic communications process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (CIPR, 2012).

Or

"Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (CPRS, 2008).

Although definitions differ, they all have an underlining commonality; that PR is the relationship-making communication between an organisation and it's publics that facilitates symmetrical communications. They also emphasise PR as a management function that reinforces a company's image. The theme of mutual and beneficial relationship as well as reputation or relationship management will be re-approached numerous times throughout this research, as it is a true endeavour of modern day public relations.

2.1.1 Defining Publics

One of the cornerstones of systems approached to PR is the understanding of publics that it incorporates. The basic segmentation proposed by Grunig and Repper (1992) is 'active' versus 'passive' publics. Active publics seek out information and respond to organisational initiatives. They are therefore more likely to affect the organisation. Then passive publics are those that do not proactively want to engage with the organisation. Then some publics may be 'latent' or publics in waiting, only becoming active when they are prompted by a particular stimulus (Tench and Yeoman's 2009).

2.1.2 Publics

A public is any group that has an actual or potential interest or impact on an organizations ability to achieve its objectives. Kotler, Bowen & Make, 2012; have identified seven types of publics in Hospitality:

1. Financial Publics: influence the company's ability to obtain funds: banks etc.
2. Media Publics: carry news, features and editorial opinions: news-papers etc.
3. Government Publics: management must take government developments into account on: service safety, truth in advertising etc.
4. Citizen-Action Publics: a company's decisions may be questioned by consumer organizations, environmental groups for example EPA.
5. Local Publics: include neighbourhood residents and community organizations.
6. General Public: in terms of reputation concern must be given to the general public's attitude towards operations, products, services and activities.
7. Internal Publics: include workers, managers, volunteers and the board of directors.

Kotler, Bowen & Make (2014), state that a company can prepare PR plans for these major publics as well as for its customer markets. For example, casino resorts in Las Vegas address how they are making efforts to conserve water when they announce plans for a new resort; they know that the local residents and government will be concerned about this so this in turn will create more favourable goodwill for the resort in the community.

2.2 Hospitality Management Definition:

When most people think of hospitality industry, they usually think of hotels and restaurants. However the true meaning of hospitality is much broader in scope. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, hospitality means "the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors or strangers with liberality and goodwill". Also the word hospitality is derived from hospice, the term for a medieval house of rest for travellers and pilgrims (Barrows et al 2012).

From this definition it can be expanded to those institutions that provide other types of services to people away from home such as private clubs, casinos, resorts, attractions and so on. These kinds of operations also have more than a common historical heritage. They share the management problems of providing food and shelter in a way that pleases guests.

This is expected to be done with 'liberty and goodwill' when dining in a restaurant or staying in a hotel, however the same can be said from the food service department in a health care facility or when enjoying an amusement park. (Barrows et al, 2014). When considering hospitality staff and the managers of the operation; the hospitality professions are among the oldest of the human professions, and they involve making the guest/client/member or resident feel comfortable and welcome.

2.3 Public Relations and Hospitality

The term public relations is widely misunderstood and is often misused within business, and the hospitality and tourism business is no exception. Every business interacts with a variety of publics: consumers, the general public, the media, suppliers, the financial community, the organizations employees, government and many others. Public-relations is the process by which the relationships with each of these publics is managed. All businesses must realize that the general public is affected by everything that companies say or do. Public relations are most obvious in the event of a disaster, such as a hotel fire, but public relations cover many other facets, which can and should take a positive tone.

Public relations should be an integrated part of the overall marketing plan in hospitality. Objectives, strategies, tactics, action plans, target audiences, implementation schedules and methods of evaluation as in marketing, the same approach should be applied to public relations. 'Positive and beneficial public relations do not happen by chance; they must be as a result of individuals making it happen according to plan. One of the basic needs of public relations is to provide accurate information': (Bojanic & Reid, 2010).

2.3.1 Definition of Public Relations in Hospitality

"Public relations is perhaps the most misunderstood part of marketing communications, but can be the most effective tool" (Miller, 1993). Definitions for public relations differ widely, as already examined, however according to Kotler the definition by Hilton best fit the hospitality industry: "The process which we create a positive image and customer preference through third party endorsement". Public relations is an important marketing tool in hospitality and until recently was treated as a stepchild of marketing. PR in hospitality is moving into an explosive growth stage. Companies are realizing that mass marketing is no longer the answer to some of their communication needs. Advertising costs continue to rise while audience reach continues to decline. In the current environment, PR holds the promise of a cost-effective promotional tool. The creative use of news events, publications, social events, community relations and other PR techniques offers companies a way to distinguish themselves and their products from their competitors (Kotler, 1989).

2.3.2 Public Relations Techniques in Hospitality (Bojanic & Reid)

- News Releases: routinely sent to media, providing information about people and events of interest.
- Photographs: particularly effective if featuring a famous personality or to create a human interest angle.
- Letters, Inserts and Enclosures: inserts can be used as envelope stuffers in employee pay checks or they can be sent as follow up correspondence to guests or clients.
- House Newsletters: these can be either internal or external but should be focused on a specific target audience. The purpose is to communicate positive images.
- Speeches and Public Appearances: members of management staff should speak before groups either professional or civic applications.
- Posters, Bulletin Boards and Exhibits: helps to draw attention to the organization.
- Audiovisual Materials: CD's, DVD's online sources such as YouTube can be distributed to the media and travel professionals.
- Open Houses and Tours: inviting the media and travel professional to the property to increase awareness and create interest.

2.3.3 Major Activities for Public Relations in Hospitality (Bojanic & Reid)

Publicity is a direct primary function of PR. Publicity is the task of securing editorial news space as opposed to paid space, in print and broadcast to promote a product or service. Publicity is a popular PR tool used in the five activities listed below:

- Press Relations- to place newsworthy information into the news media to attract attention to a person, product or service.
- Product Publicity- involves various efforts to publicise specific products: new/ re-designed products, special events etc.
- Corporate Communication- covers internal and external communications and promotes understanding of the organisation.
- Lobbying- dealing with legislators and government officials to promote or defeat legislation and regulation.
- Counselling- advising management about public issues as well as company positions and image.
- Crisis Management- not all publicity is good and hotels are open 24 hours a day, managers must realise that things do go wrong, however a CM program will reduce the negative effects of these events.

2.4 Public Relations versus Marketing

It is important to note that 'marketing' is the field most commonly confused with PR- not unreasonably as marketing refers to PR in its texts and practice as part of the marketing mix. To marketing practitioners and academics, public relations is one of the four P's- that make up a successful marketing campaign. This is not incorrect: as PR can play an essential role in creating successful products. The use of public relations to promote goods and services is sometimes called marketing public relations or MPR (Fawkes, 2012). However the fact remains that public relations although has to be integrated with marketing strategies, PR is an entirely spate entity to marketing.

The Institute of Marketing defines marketing as: 'the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying consumer requirements profitably, the two central words being 'consumer' and 'profit'. There is a clear exchange of money for services and goods and it is easily measured. However, public relations campaigns are often harder to quantify. Many organisations may not have goods or services to sell, but they do have

messages to communicate and importantly- to receive. They maintain relationships with all those who may work for them, give time or money, raise complaints or vote for or against them and these relationships are too complex to be covered by marketing.

Kitchen (1997), explains that 'Public relations and marketing are two major management functions within an organisation, but how they are organised depends upon managerial perceptions, organisational culture and historical precedent'.

2.5 Public Relations Theories:

2.5.1 Strategic Management

Irish tourism and hospitality SME's must implement public relations practice in a strategic conduct in order for them to be effective. To do so, public relations processes must be researched, planned, implemented and evaluated (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). This will ensure that the practice of public relations becomes and remains a strategic business function and id conducted in a manner that is congruent with other business operations (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). SME's must steer away from the common tendency to initiate public relations practices as a tactical response (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). Failure to recognise the power of public relations as a strategic business tool; results in a less likely ability for organisations to meet their challenges and will prohibit the maximisation of public relations benefits (Tench and Yeomans, 2009).

"Successful public relations programmes do not just happen; they are the result of sound research, meticulous planning and careful implementation" (Tench and Yeomans, 2009: 175). Planning is essential into formation and institution of strategic management, and is often overlooked. To oversights, SME's must organise their public relations practices within a frame work, ensuring that PR techniques are used in a strategic and effective manner (Tench and Yeomans, 2009).

Marston (1878) provides one of the most widely acknowledged frameworks for planning represented by the acronym RACE- Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation. Each step is carried out successively and ensures that the practitioner creates a strong, research built, through-out public relations campaign/ tactic (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). The framework is heavily adopted throughout public relations practices and places research at the

centre of all PR activity, allowing for any tactic or campaign to be built upon strong fundamentals (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). This model is particularly effective for SME's as the research phase ensures realism of objectives and goals; it also ensures that enterprises take an objective, research-led, approach to planning their business practices.

2.5.2 Reputation/ Relationship Management

An important emerging perspective in the systems family of approached puts the actual relationship of an organisation with its publics at the centre of PR activity (Ledingham and Bruning 2000). Maintaining and improving that relationship is the objective of PR. This means that strategies and tactics should always be assessed in terms of their effect on the relationship between an organisation and its publics, rather than for example, the benefits they provide for the organisation. The focus on relationships broadens the perspectives used to formulate PR strategies and tactics, but also by definition requires greater involvement by the organisation (Tench and Yeomans 2010).

This model is based on the relationship theory and centres on the role of public relations professionals in negotiating a complex set of relationships inside and outside client/ employer organisations (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). Positive relationships include trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship and communal relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Unlike some of the organisation centred perspectives of system theory approaches to public relations, it takes the stand point of the public's (Leitch and Neilson, 2001). The following theory was proposed by Ledingham, (2003): 'Effectively managing organisational- public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics'.

2.5.3 Communication Practices

2.5.3.1 Grunig's Excellence Theory

The excellence project (Grunig et al. 1992, 2007), seeks to measure dimensions of best practice , here the practitioner is mostly imagined as a boundary spanner, linking external publics tot organisational strategic communications. 'Their goal is mutual understanding between practitioners and their publics, 'in the two-way symmetric model, practitioners serve as mediators between organisations and their publics' (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). 'The highest ideal is symmetrical communication in which both parties are equal' (Fawkes 2012).

2.5.3.2 Internal Communication

Communications happen within an organisation whether it is managed or not. Daily interactions between people are a necessary part of getting the job done. As companies and organisations grow globally, however, such interactions are becoming more complex (Tench and Yeomans 2009). One definition of internal communication is 'the planned use if communication actions to systematically influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of current employees' (Stauss and Hoffman, 2000). Grunig asserts that if a system of two-way symmetrical communications is adopted then 'open, trusting and credible relationships with strategic employee's constituencies (groups) will follow (Grunig 1992). The strategic purpose of internal communication can perhaps best be summarised as one that is concerned with building two-way, trusting relationships with internal publics, with the goal of improving organisational effectiveness (Tench and Yeomans 2009).

2.5.3.3 Grunig's Models of Communication

James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) suggested four categories of communication relationship with publics. These have been the most influential models affecting the study of public relations and are worth looking at closely as many kinds of communication are undertaken in the same workplace (Grunig 2001).

- ### 2.5.3.3.1 Press Agentry Model

This is probably the kind of activity that most people associate with public relations. A press agent or publicist aims to secure overage for a client, and truth is not an absolute requirement. This is one-way communication, which emphasises the benefit to the sender rather than the receiver.

- ### 2.5.3.3.2 Public Information Model

This kind of communication provides information to people where accuracy is essential. This model does not seek to persuade the audience or change the attitudes. Its role is similar to that of in-house journalists (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), releasing relevant information to those that need it. The communication is still one-way, from sender to receiver, but is more relevant to the receiver than the first example.

- ### 2.5.3.3.3 Two-Way Asymmetrical Model

This model introduces the idea of feedback or two-way communication. However, it is asymmetric or imbalanced because the intended change is the audiences attitudes or

behaviours rather than in the organisations practices. It is also described as persuasive communication and can be demonstrated in health campaigns for example.

- **2.5.3.3.4 Two-Way Symmetrical Model**

This model is sometimes described as the 'ideal' of public relations. It describes a level of equality of communication not often found in real life. While other models are characterised by monologue-type communication, the symmetric model involves ideas of dialogue. Communication in this model is fully reciprocal and power relationships are balanced.

2.6 Recent Changes to Hospitality Public Relations Activities

According to Kotler, Bowen and Make, 2014; 'in the past it was common for the marketing function and the PR function to be handled by two separate departments, however today these functions are increasingly integrated. Kotler states that there are several reasons for this integration. First companies are calling for more market-orientated PR, as they want their PR activities that contribute towards marketing the company and improving the bottom line. Second, companies are establishing marketing PR groups to support corporate/ product promotion and image-making directly. Thus, marketing PR like financial PR and community PR serves a special constituency, the marketing department.'

2.6.1 Social Media and PR

"Social Media has proven to be a great way to reach thousands of customers and potential customers. Today most effective PR campaigns use the internet; websites, blogs and social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are providing interesting ways to reach more people. "The core strengths of public relations- the ability to tell a story and spark conversation- play well into the nature of such social media" (Jonathon Bellinger, 2009).

'Over 100million people visit a social network daily, the popularity of the Internet has resulted in a rash of online networks and web communities' (Web 2.0; Social Users Guide for Hotels, 2008). 'Social media has proven to be a great way to reach thousands of customers and potential customers. Today, most effective PR campaigns use Internet; websites, blogs, and social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are providing interesting new ways to reach more people' (Kotler, Bowen and Make, 2014). "The core strengths of public relations is the ability to tell a story and spark conversation- which plays well into the nature such of social media" (Kotler et al 2014).

'In the wake of democratized content and business satisfying the needs of the digitally connected consumer, PR has had to evolve with a new approach. This approach requires a shift in thinking, from strategy and planning all the way through to implementation and measurement' (Breakenridge, 2012). 'Professionals must discover new research methods, develop specific policies to guide employee and public participation, experiment with content through a variety of social media channels and learn to connect and build relationships with stakeholders through new technologies' (Breakenridge, 2012).

'Social media requires a shift in mind-set to unite communications and collaborative technology' (Breakenridge, 2012). 'Public relations will continue to transform, and the changes are monumental. For better or for worse a career in public relations means handling communications in the spotlight because of the increasing use of social media' (Breakenridge, 2012).

2.6.2 Changes to Media and PR -Edelman's Four Leafed Clover (Edelman, Caywood. 2012)

The media has undergone a profound metamorphosis. According to Pew Foundation report; the average informed person now has eight sources of information. Also now instead of going to media brands for news, search engines are the new door, with 90% of readers inquiring on subjects and clicking on the highest ranked articles. Then in addition increasingly peer recommendations on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are as relevant as media's concierge: one-third of Huffington Post readers come this way . This shows that the mechanics of PR has changed; 'today's media eco-system is akin to a cloverleaf' (Edelman).

The first leaf, **Mainstream** media's traditional delivery modes of newspaper, television, radio and magazine are still the largest drivers of established media business in terms of revenue. The second leaf is **Tra-digital**, the morphing of the new and traditional media on the web. The third leaf is **Social Media**- the communities that have been built by companies including; Facebook, Twitter etc. Then the fourth leaf of the eco-system is that of '**Owned** Media' which can be described as a company's own website.

It is clear that to incorporate all of these elements into a strategy that elevation is needed for Public Relations as a management discipline that sits as a full partner alongside finance, operations, legal, marketing and strategic leaders in the business strategy. PR is most effective when it uses when it engages audiences through each four parts of the media eco-system cloverleaf (Edelman, Caywood, 2012).

Chapter 3:

Research
Methodology

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodologies undertaken in this study, explaining the rationale behind their choice. It also provides a comprehensive overview of both the quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques used. This involved a mixed methods approach, using both interviews with experts to gain a qualitative perspective as well as an industry survey to discover industry trends into the current PR tactics and techniques in which Irish luxury hotels (ILH's) use.

A rationale will be provided for the choice of such methodologies. In addition the details of how data was recorded and analysed will be described, addressing issues of the validity and reliability of data. Then ethical issues when conducting the research are also carefully considered.

There are two core ways of doing research in public relations and marketing communications, namely qualitative and quantitative (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Both qualitative and quantitative thinking have value. Certain research questions lend themselves towards a more quantitative orientation, whereas other questions are more suitable for qualitative research. We need both forms of knowledge to create a more robust, ethical and sound research, academic disciplines and professional practices (Daymon and Holloway 2011).

3.2 Research Question

The Primary Research Question Is:

"How are Irish Luxury Hotels currently engaging in both online and offline PR techniques/ tactics to successfully communicate with their publics? ". And how important is public relations to the Luxury Hotel Sector in Ireland?"

This question stems from a desire to understand the best and most successful online and offline public relations tactics and techniques in which ILH's conduct to engage with their publics (particularly consumers). And how these online and offline strategies are created into a successfully integrated public relations strategy/ campaign. Although the research question addresses Irish Luxury Hotels specifically, the potential of this research is more widespread and could be carried to a wider audience of the hotel sector in Ireland. The researcher

examined the research question with a mixed methods approach in order to gather data representing the Irish Luxury Hotel sector in general and the in-depth knowledge of the industry from expert practitioners. The two types of inquiry when read separately and together offer a more comprehensive understanding of the current practice of public relations within ILH's and possible opportunities in the future.

3.3 Research Paradigms

Research is the art of scientific investigation for pertinent information on a specific topic (Kothari, 2004). According to Chisnall 1986, 'an effective research strategy is central to achieving the proposed objectives, as it forms the framework of the entire process. A paradigm is a basis for comprehension, where two paradigms prevail; positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative)'. Exploratory research was conducted to fill the gap that exists in literature regarding the successful use of public relations within the Irish Luxury Hotel sector. The research uses a mix of both the positivist and interpretivist paradigms by using both quantitative and qualitative research elements. 'The resultant statistical data from quantitative approaches are useful but of restricted value; such information is enriched by the qualitative research' (Chisnall 2005). The two types of inquiry when read separately and together offer a more comprehensive understanding of the current practice of public relations within Irish Luxury Hotels and possible opportunities in the future.

3.3.1 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research refers to studies that use mathematical analysis that can reveal statistical differences and are usually associated with a large sample size (McDaniel and Gates, 1998). Therefore 'quantitative data refers to all such primary research questions and can be a product of all research strategies' (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Quantitative research is generally associated with positivism, especially when used with predetermined and highly structured data collection techniques (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). By definition, quantitative research is the use of mathematically based methods, in particular statistic to analyse the data gathered by the researcher (Sage). Therefore quantitative research is essentially about collecting numerical data to explain a particular phenomenon (Sage Publications, 2010). For the purpose of the questionnaire used for the study quantitative research will be used; 'involving the use of structured questions in which the response options have been predetermined and a large number of respondents are involved' (Burns and

Bush, (2010). 'Strengths to quantitative research methods include the fact of having a large sample to result in statistical validity, which accurately reflects the population due to an in-depth exploration of questions. For the purpose of this study, quantitative research is used to facilitate the gathering of industry wide data trends that can be validated. However due to time constraints the quantitative aspects of this study are limited and more detailed research may be required.

3.3.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research refers to research findings that are not subject to quantification or quantitative analysis and the sample size tends to be small compared to quantitative research (McDaniel and Gates 1998). 'The essence of qualitative research is that it is diagnostic; it seeks to discover what may account for certain kinds of behaviour, for example brand loyalty' (Chisnall. 2001).Qualitative research is associated with interpretive philosophy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is interpretive because researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied.

Qualitative research methods are powerful means of gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of the relationship between international culture and communication from the perspective of those inside a society or ethnic group; it is non numerical data or data that cannot be quantified (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). The marketing scholar Gummerson refers to the 'excessive use of quantitative method's (2007:130), which he suggests precludes the openness tolerance and critique, which enable and motivate, creative thinking. Therefore the aim of qualitative research grounded in positivism is to explain phenomenon based on what is already known about public relations and marketing communications, (Scase, 2007). It is precisely the rigorous, reflective, reflexive, intuitive, contextualized, subjectivity, embodied in excellent qualitative research which is (qualitative research's) greatest strength (Keegan, 2006:607).

One of the main advantages with qualitative research is that it gives a rich, in-depth, narrative description of sample. This in-depth exploration of questions, results in a better understanding of underlying behaviours, (VanderStroep et al (2010). However due to time constraints the qualitative aspects of the study are limited; a more detailed qualitative research was not conducted as a result.

3.4   Data Collection

Data collection is very important because regardless of the data analysis methods used, data analysis cannot fix bad data (Burns and Bush, 2010). This stage of the project is vital as it is designed to request and record information gathered in the research project, which is critical to the success of the project (Burns and Bush, 2011). 'Asking the wrong questions or asking the right questions in the wrong order can destroy the usefulness of the research effort, therefore questions must be asked in such a way that they will elicit objective information from respondents' (Burns and Bush, 2010). The collection of data therefore must be precise, efficient and synchronised with the research methodologies.

3.4.1 Questionnaire

'A questionnaire is the vehicle used to present the questions that the researcher desire's the respondents to answer. It translates the research objectives into specific questions that are asked of the respondents, it standardises questions, fosters co-operations, can speed up the process of data analysis, and contain the information on which reliability assessment can be made' (Burns and Bush, 2010). "Then Chisnall, 2001 states that 'a questionnaire is a method of obtaining specific information about a defined problem so that the data, after analysis and interpretation, result in better appreciation of the problem. It is an important element of the total research design, and its preparation and administration demand considerable professional expertise". The questionnaires design was influenced by the research questions and objectives of this study (see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire).

Both open ended and closed questions were used in the questionnaire in order to obtain both qualitative participant driven data and quantitative, researcher driven data which would be analysed and compared. It was important that the questionnaire appear clear, precise, easily read, with a readable flow so as to increase engagement among participants. The questionnaire was designed to provide standardised results across the Irish Luxury Hotel sector that can be evaluated and analysed statistically. "The two most important and fundamental characteristics of any measurement procedure are reliability" (Miller). With this in mind the questionnaire gives an added benefit of providing comparison in the findings for the study, thus producing a just and fair study as well as ensuring validity and reliability.

A self administered questionnaire was piloted using a small sample of practitioners from Irish luxury hotels. The function of the pilot was to ensure that the respondents could understand

the intent of the questions and complete the questionnaire without issue, allowing for any necessary changes to be made before the questionnaire was distributed to a larger sample.

3.4.2 Questionnaire Sampling Method

"The primary role of any questionnaire is to provide the required information for management decision making, and any questionnaire that fails to provide important insights for management should be discarded or revised" (McDaniel and Gates, 1998). 'In summary a questionnaire must serve many masters, first it must accommodate the research objectives, but it must also "speak" to the respondents' (McDaniel and Gates, 1998). 'Sampling is an important component of any piece of research because of the significant impact that it can have on the quality of your results/findings' (Laerd Dissertation, 2014).

'Due to time, cost and accessibility it is not often possible to obtain the desired information from the entire population who are the subjects of the research. It is necessary, therefore to obtain data from a smaller group, who are members of the total population and which act as a representative of that population' (Cohen, 2007).

This research requires a sample of Irish Luxury Hotels- including hotel chains and international brands, from around the nation, in order to ensure that results represent national trends and are not region specific. As a result 'Purposive Sampling' was used so that a sample can be built that is satisfactory to the studies specific question and objectives. The questionnaire will be distributed via an online format for reasons of cost, ease of distribution, diversity of regions and response for survey completion. Ninety Eight questionnaires were completed representing the sample size, generating a response rate of approximately 28 per cent.

3.4.3 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

'An interview is defined as a conversation directed to a definite purpose other than satisfaction in the conversation itself'. 'It is concerned with a purposeful exchange of meaning, and it is this interaction between the interviewer and the respondent which contributes so much to the success of the interview' (Chisnall, 2005).

Semi-structured or focused interviews are often used in qualitative research. The questions are contained in an interview guide (not 'an interview schedule, as in quantitative research) with a focus on the issues or topic areas to be covered and the lines of enquiry to be followed.

The sequencing of questions is not the same in every participant as it depends on the process of each interview and the responses of each individual. The interview guide however ensures that similar types of data from all informants are being collected (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

A mix of semi-structured but in-depth interviews will be used, 'which are non-directive interviews in which the respondent is encouraged to talk about the subject rather than to answer yes or no to specific questions' (Chisnall 2005).

This method allows for a more detailed exploration of the current practices of public relations within ILH's into a more detailed investigation. Rather than relying on concepts and questions defined and prepared in advance of the interview by the researcher, the semi structured interview allows key research questions to be introduced but maintains the flexibility within the interview to probe for further details and explore avenues introduced by the participants that were not foreseen, maximising the contribution of the practitioners knowledge and insight. All interview subjects are given the same limited range of pre-defined question topics and then given the opportunity to voice their own opinions, thoughts, attitudes and experiences on the topic.

"Personal in-depth interviews offer many of the advantages of a focus group without the negative effect of someone dominating the discussion. This format allows the researcher to use a questioning technique called laddering, in which the researcher asks 'why?' several times to discover underlying feelings and motives" (Caywood, et al, 2012).

3.4.4 Semi- Structured Interview Sampling Method

For the purposes of the semi-structured, in-depth interview; purposive sampling was used. The method allowed for the purposeful selection of influential; marketing and public relations practitioners that operate within ILH's and industry experts, in order to gain relevant, reliable and valuable insight into the research question.`

'In many cases purposive sampling is used in order to access 'knowledgeable people', i.e. those that have an in-depth knowledge about a particular issue, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience (Ball, 1990).

"Purposive sampling was used to access participants who have an 'in-depth knowledge' about particular issues" (Cohen, 2007); that are in relation to the use of public relations

within Irish Luxury Hotels. Although purposive sampling methods were used, the time constraints of the research dictated that the sample size is relatively small.

The time limitations of the research dictated that the sample size was small. However there were time economies gained in this approach using investigated methods to generate relevant data, while data analysis was of reasonably low complexity using statistical analysis methods.

3.5   Research Participants

3.5.1 Questionnaire Participants

Approximately four hundred questionnaires were sent to public relations and marketing practitioners within luxury hotels in Ireland. They were distributed through the use of personal and business generic email addresses that were publicly available through the company websites or elsewhere online. Approximately half of respondents were contacted a second time with a request to participate, this resulted in a 28% response rate from participants during the busiest season for hotels. One condition of the questionnaire was that the business operates within the classification of a luxury hotel according to Failte Ireland.

3.5.2 Interview Participants

Practitioners were selected for the interview process on their experience working within the industry and with ILH's. It was vital to conduct interviews with practitioners that currently work within the industry, ensuring that the shared knowledge would be up-to-date and relevant to today's current environment within Irish luxury hotels.

The following experts contributed to the research:

- ❖ Karen Fleming- Director of Sales and Marketing, Hayfield Manor, Five Star Hotel, Cork

- ❖ David Glynn- Director of Marketing, Fitzwilliam Four Star Hotel, West Meath

- ❖ Alison O'Brien- Senior PR Account Manager, Fuzion PR Communications, Cork.

Karen Fleming has spent years working in reputable and award winning establishments both at home and abroad before joining the award winning Hayfield Manor Hotel team in 2010. Now as the sales and marketing manager she strategically plans, assists and oversees the

every-day processes of communications for the company (See Appendix B for a copy of the interview transcript).

David Glynn is the director of sales and marketing in one of Mayo's leading 4* Hotel, the McWilliam Park Hotel. David has worked in the industry for many years experiencing the full blow of the recession and finding unique ways in which to combat and come out with growth (see Appendix C for a copy of the interview transcript).

Alison O'Brien is the longest team member at Fuzion communications; she is the senior PR account manager and has long worked with public relations within many industries; however at Fuzion Alison is the go to for hospitality. Recent accounts that Alison has managed include Cork innovates, Kinsale Chamber of Tourism and The Malton Hotel, Killarney (see Appendix D for a copy of the interview transcript).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

"Reliability and validity are crucial aspects of research practice and the importance of these criteria should be fully recognised by all who are engaged in survey work of any kind" (Chisnall, 2001). 'Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of the results derived from research: to the probability that the same results could be obtained if the measures used in the research were replicated' (Chisnall, 2001). Reliability is defined as the extent to which a questionnaire, test, observation or any measurement procedure produces the same results on repeated trials (Miller, 2014). Then 'validity refers to how well the specific research method measures what it claims to measure' (Chisnall, 2001).

"Validity is an important key to effective research. If a piece of research in invalid it is worthless. Validity is thus a requirement for both quantitative and qualitative naturalistic research" (Cohen et al, 2011). 'Validity is defined as the extent to which the instrument measures what it purports to measure' (Miller, 2014). Validity and reliability therefore by definition; mean that the research methods are accurate and appropriate, and that the data was gathered without bias. Bias can be minimised by ensuring research procedures, sampling and data measurements have no errors in them.

The issues of reliability and validity are relevant to both research methods; however it is important to note that each method of research was approached from a different perspective.

3.6.1 Validity and Reliability in Questionnaire

"In much quantitative research, validity must be faithful to its premises of positivism and positivist principles, for example controllability, replicability and predictability" (Cohen et al, 2011). "It must also ensure that the types of validity to follow are carried out, including: being faithful to the assumptions and underpinning the statistics used, the construct and content validity of the measures used, the careful sampling, and the avoidance of a range of threats to internal and external validity" (Cohen et al, 2011). It was therefore of great importance to ensure a representative sample for the purpose of this research that was neither too small nor too large as to not distort the collected data. Please see sampling method used for this research in 'Questionnaire Sampling Method' section.

"Validity is important because it measures the accuracy of results within a study and therefore the degree to which you can make assumptions, correlations and relationships from data. Evidence cannot be reliable if it has poor validity, however if it has poor reliability it cannot be valid" (Cohen et al. 2011).

The questionnaire was guided by my Literature Review with the purpose of investigating the research question from the perspective of industry experts in ILH's. Further insight is hoped to be gained through the semi-structured interviews, which will be integrated into the final questionnaire, lending an expert perspective to the formulation of questions.

Reliability is garnered through various methods in the questionnaire process. The most predominant method is the Test-Retest approach; where questions seeking the same conclusion were rephrased to ensure that the responses were reliable.

3.6.2 Validity and Reliability in the Semi Structured Interview

"Much qualitative research abides by principles of validity that are very different from those of positivism and quantitative methods. Validity in qualitative research has several principles; the natural setting is the principal source of data, context-boundedness and 'thick description' and data are socially situated as well as socially and culturally saturated, and so on (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

Maxwell, (1992) argues that 'qualitative researchers need to be cautious not to be working within the agenda of the positivists in arguing for the need for research to demonstrate concurrent, predictive, convergent, criterion-related, internal and external validity'.

Data triangulation was used to enhance the validity of interviews in order to minimise misunderstanding in the interpretation of the findings (Stake, 1995). "Triangulation means using more than one method to collect data on the same topic. This is a way of assuring the validity of research through the use of a variety of methods to collect data on the same topic, which involves different types of samples as well as methods of data collection. However the purpose of triangulation is not necessarily to cross-validate data, but rather to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon" (Kulkanari, Dec, 2013).

Agar, 1993, claims that in qualitative data collection the intensive personal involvement and in-depth responses of individuals secure a sufficient level of validity and reliability.

Therefore as a part of this research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with multiple industry and practitioner experts. The experts were all asked to provide their insights and opinions to a set of pre-defined questions. These questions are not posed in a set manner, conversation is set to be allowed to flow freely and any unforeseen avenues can be explored further. However, all pre-defined questions will be presented to all experts, providing a greater reliability and validity. 'It is necessary to be mindful of the fact that interviews are not simply data collection situations but also a social and even a political situation' (Cohen et al, 2007).

The interviews are used as a means to supplement data, in gathering in-depth information about the use of public relations practices within Irish Luxury Hotels. The attempt was to generate an expert-led understanding of relevant public relations practices and techniques from the semi-structured interviews and to ensure that they complement and fit within the confines of the reality of PR operations within the Irish Luxury Hotel market.

In relation to generalizability, the research contends that the findings from the research will be typical and transferable to other hotels across the luxury market sector as well as being more widespread to the Great Britain and is not necessarily limited within the confines of the Irish context.

3.7 Ethical Research

'Ethics may be defined as a field of inquiry into determining what behaviours are deemed appropriate under certain circumstances as prescribed b codes of conduct that are set by society' (Bush and Burns, 2010). 'Ethical behaviour in business expands the responsibilities of management; decisions involving ethics permeate an organisation' (Chisnall, 2001). "Methodological and ethical issues are interwoven in research 'what makes research 'ethical' is not a characteristic of the design or procedures, but of our individual decisions, actions, relationships and commitments" (Havercamp, 2005). Consequently all research conducted for this project was in accordance to the Codes of Practice outlined by the PRII.

'Interviews have an ethical dimension; they concern interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human condition. Though three main areas of ethical issues can arise here such as; informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interviews' (Kvale, 1996). In terms of the quantitative methods of research, 'the questionnaire will always be an intrusion into the life of the respondent, be it in terms of time, level of threat or sensitivity to questions, or the possibility of invasion of privacy. Questionnaire respondents are not passive data providers for researchers; they are subjects not objects of research' (Cohen, 2011).

The key to ethical research lies in respect for the individual and the ensurance and promotion of their rights. To protect the rights of the research participants, the principal of voluntary participation is adhered to. This is again reiterated at the beginning of the questionnaire as well. In close relation to this is the issue and requirement of informed consent. Consent will be achieved through email correspondence and a full explanation of the questionnaire and interview details will be provided.

In addition it is important to note that both confidentiality and anonymity are also significant ethical considerations for the research. "Confidentiality is upheld both where information that is revealed by the participant and their identity, is kept private by the researcher and is not disclosed to any third party". Then the "essence of anonymity is that information that is revealed by the participants should in no way reveal their identity" (Cohen, 2007). To ensure both confidentiality and anonymity are upheld in this research, enterprise names will not be disclosed in this paper and all information related will be subsequently destroyed.

3.8 Limitations of Research Project

It is important to acknowledge a number of potential limitations that could be encountered through the research conducted for this project.

- ❖ Due to time constraints with the time limit of the project during the data collection phase as well as the lack of availability with key industry personnel during the summer months, the interview method sample size may be small.
- ❖ Those in hospitality often put marketing and public relations together; therefore the distinction between the two will be a challenge as to ensure they are on a public relations mind frame when answering questions both in the interview and the questionnaire methods of data collection.
- ❖ External validity problems may be encountered if the researcher attempts to generalise data attained from participants in both the questionnaire and the interview processes, therefore care must be ensured as to avoid this from happening.
- ❖ Although the research of the use of public relations in luxury hotels can be extended to a broader view of the hotel sectors in Ireland; exact tools that may suit every individual property as well as other classes of hotel is limited; as the research is taking a much more generalist view specific to the four and five star sectors of the hotel industry.
- ❖ Recommendations will be made in Chapter 5 that will include avenues in which future research can overcome the limits found within the current study of the project. Continuing investigations into this study with a larger tie frame will provide a more conclusive answer to the research question.
- ❖ It is important that further research is conducted due to the lack of literature in the area of public relations in the hotel sector and further research would provide a more valid and reliable answer to the research question.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has described and justified the methodology undertaken to develop an answer to the studies primary research question (Outlines in section 3.2). The data collection and analysis methods were explained and ethical issues as well as issue of validity and reliability of research were considered. Chapter 4 will present the research findings and offer analysis of the data, collected as a result of the outlined research methods.

Chapter 4:

Findings, Discussion & Analysis

Chapter 4: Findings, Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The results of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews is presented in this chapter and organised into themes relevant to the research question and objectives. There is a gap in the current literature regarding the understanding and use of public relations among Irish Luxury Hotels (ILH's). It is vital that this gap be addressed to build a better understanding on the use of PR in Ireland and to provide more tailored recommendations and critiques of public relations practices for the industry and subsequently for Luxury Hotels on a more macro scale.

4.2 Profiling the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

4.2.1 Introduction

A web-based questionnaire was sent to approximately 350 Luxury Hotels across the nation to all four and five star hotels in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (see Appendix E for sample of responses). The data generated by the questionnaires returned by participants from the luxury hotel sector was used to develop a general profile of the main public relations practices employed in Irish Luxury Hotels (ILH's). Profiling of the Irish Luxury Hotel sector allows for findings that are bound by real industry limitations and characteristics. This in turn facilitates a research-based discussion of public relations that reflects the nature of the businesses as formulated by the industry itself.

4.2.2 Findings

4.2.2.1 Industry Sector Breakdown

The literature review points out that the Irish Luxury hotel sector is comprised of both four star and five star hotels. The questionnaire incorporated both of these hotel classifications, enabling a more complex profile of the luxury hotel sector in Ireland to be developed.

Figure 4.2.2.1.1 Irish Luxury Hotel Industry Breakdown
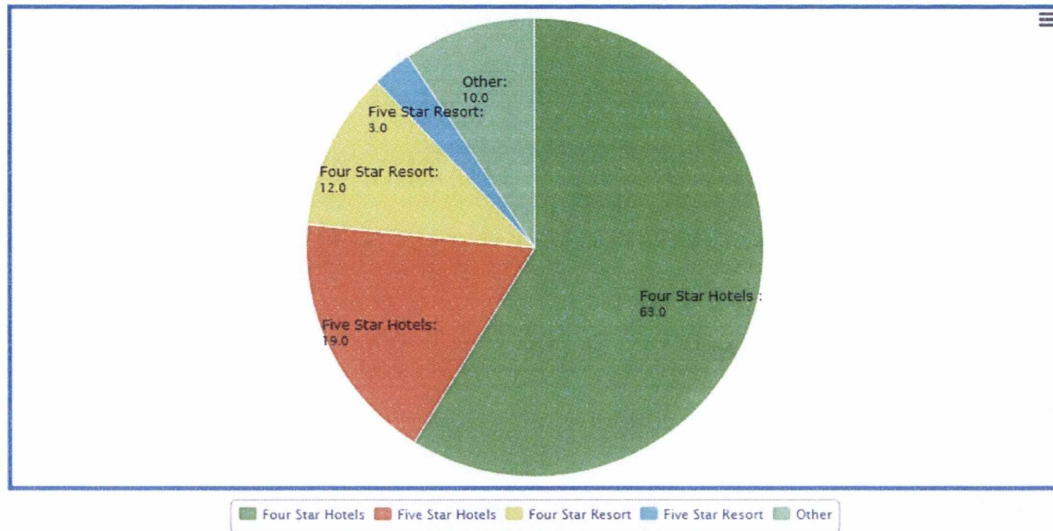
Figure 4.2.2.1.1 shows that industry participants state that they identify with more than the original sectors indentified previously in the literature. The other areas of the sector identified were Luxury Bed and Breakfasts, Three Star Luxury Hotel & Resorts, and Four Star Luxury Guesthouses. This finding generates a more comprehensive framework on which to evaluate the Irish luxury hotel sector, than what was previously considered. It should be noted that although some of the other areas of the sector answered the survey, they were not a directed participant of the study.

The four star hotel area of the sector is dominant within the industry, making up 63.3% of respondents. This was to be expected as per the literature review, in identifying a total of approximately 300 four star hotels and approximately 50 five star hotels in Ireland.

While five star hotels and resorts as well as four star hotels and resorts are usually grouped together as the classification of a luxury hotel, they were separated for the purpose of this thesis, because the operations within each classification have quite different characteristics. It is clear from the graph why the separation was necessary due to the significant difference in sector respondents, however if the sectors had been group it still would have shown the dominance of the four star luxury hotel sector in Ireland.

4.2.2.2 Location and Ages of Luxury Hotels in Ireland

Luxury hotels in Ireland are evenly spread across the country from Portrush in Northern Ireland to Bantry West Cork. However to note there were a majority of participants from Cork, Kerry, Dublin regions of Ireland.

The hotel sector has long been a vibrant industry in Ireland, especially in the years of the Celtic Tiger. For this reason the survey was given an age requirement to evaluate the age of luxury hotels in Ireland, in order to determine a context for the industry's maturity level and to identify any industry or sector trends.

Figure 4.2.2.2.1 Age Distribution of Irish Luxury Hotels

0-5 years: 4.08%

50 years+: 21.43%

46-50 years: 3.06%

31-35 years: 4.08%

26-30 years: 4.08%

21-25 years: 10.20%

16-20 years: 4.08%

6-10 years: 36.73%

11-15 years: 12.24%
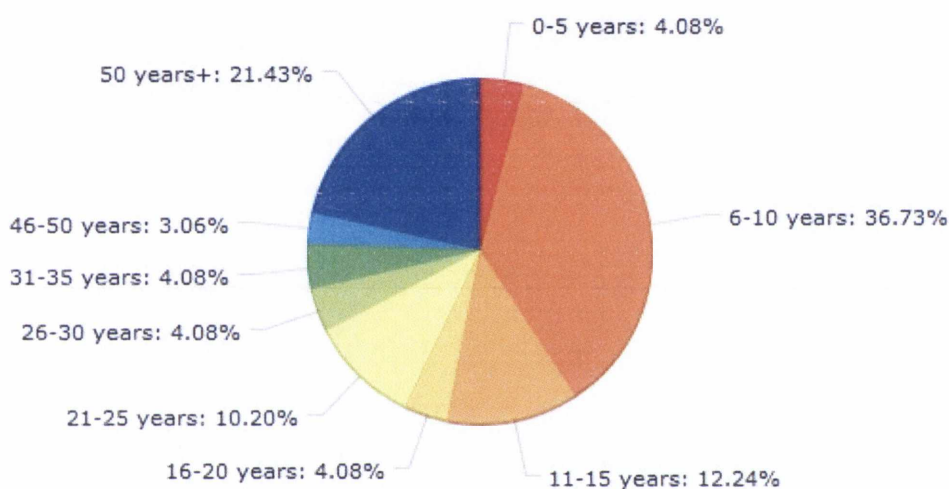
Results indicate that the industry is relatively young with nearly 37% of participant luxury hotels being 10 years of age or less (see figure 4.2.2.2.1). The youth of the ILH sector was market by a growth spurt of the industry during the Celtic Tiger period, which then helped fuel the economic recession in Ireland. National agency statistics however show now after a six year recession, prices are starting to increase and revenues are getting better with an increase in bed nights and profits across the country for 2013.

It was interesting to see that no luxury hotel respondent operated within the age of 36-45 years, but then 21.4% of hotels in Ireland were over 50 years old. This number was much larger than originally anticipated.

It can also be assumed that due to the scale of four stars compared to five star hotels in Ireland, that the majority of hotels built in the last 6-10years are four star hotels.

4.2.2.3 Full Time Employment Levels in Ireland

Respondents were asked to provide their full-time employment information. Respondent results demonstrated that employment levels in ILH's range from small independent companies with 2 full time employees to large chains with 365 full time employees. This gives a broad outlook for recommendations and critiques.

Figure 4.2.2.3.1 Full-Time Employee Distribution of Respondents

Full Time Employees

Legend: -10, 10 +, 20 +, 30 +, 40 +, 50 +, 80+, 100+, 300 +
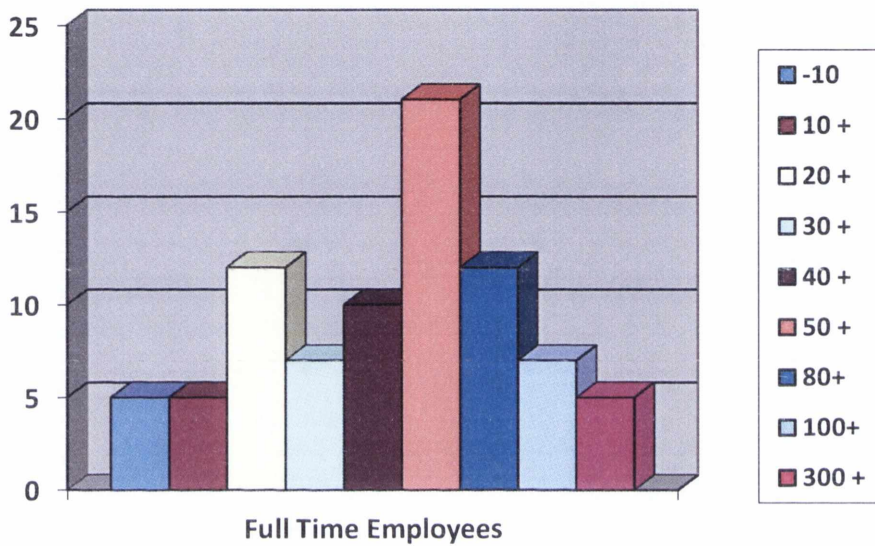
Figure 4.2.2.3.1 provides a visual reference for the distribution of employees within the questionnaire respondent's businesses. Results show that the majority of respondents have between 50-80 full time employees. Due to the variance in results, the data was investigated further to determine the industries statistical mean, median and mode. These calculations have assisted in developing an understanding of the industry norm

Figure 4.2.2.3.2 Statistical Analysis of Respondents Full-Time Employee

Mean (Average)	108
Median	60
Mode	80

4.2.2.4 Part-Time Employment Levels in Irish Luxury Hotels

The hotel sector along with the rest of the hospitality industry in Ireland is seasonal and therefore it is important to take into account seasonality. In order to do this, the survey inquired about the numbers of seasonal or part time workers that the questionnaire respondents employed. This is ever more apparent when, while conducting the survey, one respondent did reply to the query regarding the amount of part-time employees with; 'it depends on the time of year'. The range of results is smaller than that of full time employees being 0 to 750 (please see table *4.2.2.4.1*). Results were then run through further statistical analysis to provide more of an understanding of the sector and to discover any trends that may exist (please see table *4.2.2.4.2*).

Figure 4.2.2.4.1 Part-Time Employment Distribution of Respondents
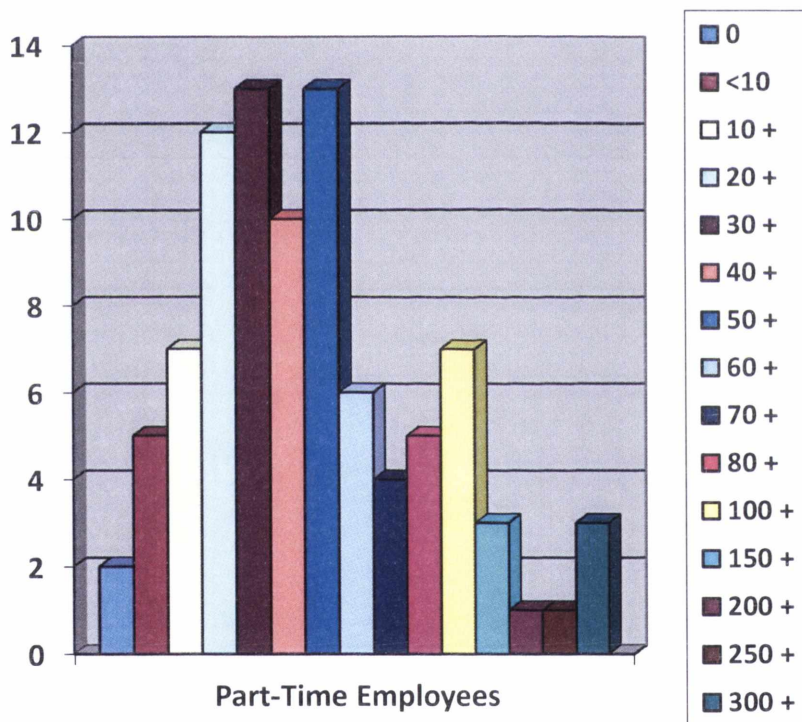
Figure 4.2.2.4.2 Statistical Analysis of Respondents Part-Time Employees

Mean (Average)	69
Median	40
Mode	30

This analysis concludes that on average hotels employ a greater number of full time workers (108) as opposed to part-time workers (69), which again might come as something of a surprise. In the advent of the recent economic recession, many hotels turned to part time contracts and workers for labour; as such, this data is a good sign for the industry, suggesting an increase of stability for hotels.

4.2.2.5 Conclusion

To conclude from above results, the industry appears to have maintained growth during the recent economic recession, with the above figures showing signs of stability throughout the sector. Profiling of the Irish Luxury Hotel sector allows for findings that are bound by real industry limitations and characteristics; this in turn can increase validity in recommendations.

4.3 Understanding of Public Relations in Irish Luxury Hotels

4.3.1 Introduction

One of the main research goals in this paper was to evaluate the level of understanding that Irish luxury hotels have on the practice of public relations. It is important to gather this understanding in order to evaluate the perceptions that Irish luxury hotels have of public relations, and to investigate whether or not the understandings that do exist accurately represent the practice of public relations that are relevant to Irish luxury hotels (ILH's).

4.3.2 Findings

4.3.2.1 Respondent Impression of Public Relations

In an attempt to gather further insight on the level of understanding of the role of public relations within the ILH sector, an open question asked respondents to 'give a brief description of their impression of public relations'. Three main themes emerged from the responses: (1) Profile and Public Awareness, (2) Relationship Building and Communication and (3) Expensive and for Large Companies. These themes reflect a consensus among the majority of respondents.

The open ended comments that illustrate each theme are as follows:

Company Profile and Public Awareness:
- ❖ "PR is about highlighting the positive aspects of your organization to other individuals and organizations through effective channels of communication"
- ❖ "PR is a valuable part of any business- it is how all publics see your business, so their perception is extremely important and it gives you an edge over your competitors".
- ❖ "Public relations is an essential part of every successful luxury hotel- without it, your efforts would be somewhat pointless as it helps to promote your brand and to build a credible reputation with the public."

It is apparent from the above that there is a clear association with public relations as a means of creating a company profile and raising company awareness. More importantly, according

to results, public relations efforts are seen to be more effective in reaching end goals as opposed to marketing. It is also clear that respondents acknowledge public relations as being of high importance to the organisation as it is 'how all publics see your businesses'.

Relationship Building and Communication

❖ "Public relations is communication to the public outside of advertising or news features. It is written to the public, however, keeping our guests in mind. It allows our potential clients to hear news, updates, features, interesting vignettes and other details about the hotel.

❖ "Public relations is any effort, campaign or deed that will garner goodwill for the business and solidify relationships with people who are critical to the well being of the organisation. It can be organic or organised in a systematic way, but it should always have integrity."

❖ "Public relations is a great way of getting a structured message or a broad message about your business to the public domain. PR can be key to the rise of a business and PR needs to be consistent with a property so that the momentum keeps going."

There is a clear association with public relations being the vehicle in which to forge relationships and enhance communication effectiveness. Respondents also acknowledge that public relations is about communicating the company's messages to target audiences, and then subsequently to build on the relationships with these audiences. It is also apparent that the respondent interpretation of this area requires strategy as well as consistent effort and should always have 'integrity'.

Expensive and for Large Companies

❖ "I believe PR is very important but not sustainable enough for a business full-time in terms of cost and time."

❖ "Public relations is suited best to organisations with larger budgets."

❖ "I believe a lot of hotels do not engage in a lot of PR as resources are so scarce."

Although few in numbers there were some respondents that felt that the practice of public relations is expensive and should be reserved for large companies; this could possibly be due to a lack of knowledge on the area of public relations with these particular respondents as there are many low cost and no cost ways in which businesses can now engage in PR effectively.

4.3.2.1 .2 Respondent Impression of Industry Strengths and Obstacles in PR

Strengths in Public Relations

To gather further insight on the level of understanding of the role of public relations within the Irish luxury hotel sector, a qualitative question asked of interview respondents 'What are the greatest strengths in public relations to industry?'

> ➢ "It really does give the brand an extra feel over the hotel competitors because PR - be it something basic or something completely different - really does position the individual hotel above its competitors." (Glynn interview)
>
> ➢ "It is very much a people driven industry and in hospitality it is about providing experiences that people enjoy so other people generally want to hear about it." (Fleming interview)
>
> ➢ "Luxury hotels are seen as a treat to customers so in that they don't have to go abroad, as well as the Irish heritage customer attraction throughout the globe." (O'Brien interview)

It is clear that there is a baseline within responses in that core strengths of public relations are that it is a people driven industry and therefore it is well suited to the luxury hotel sector. Effective public relations practices can place a business above its competitors and, in addition, the term 'luxury' has an appeal in and of itself which can be utilised effectively by savvy businesses. Once again, from this the importance of public relations within the Luxury hotel sector becomes evident.

Obstacles in Public Relations

In order to explore the understanding of public relations further, during the interview process interviewees were asked to 'illustrate the greatest obstacles facing the industry'.

> ➢ "It is a very time consuming business, to get your ideas; the creative thinking as well as pitching can be time consuming and difficult to get by in." (Glynn interview)
>
> ➢ "With public relations in hotels definitely the biggest obstacle for everybody is budgets." (Fleming interview)

From the above it can be surmised that there is an underlining base in the obstacles in which respondents associate with the practice of public relations. Budgets, time and resource

restrictions appear to be the common barrier in the practice of public relations; this re-confirms the negative associations with public relations being expensive and for larger companies.

4.3.3 Conclusion

The emergence of these themes shows both positive and negative associations with the practice of public relations; however, the negative associations only accounted for 5% of respondents. The emergence of relationship building and communication, which entailed 48% of the responses, shows that there is a pre-existing recognition of public relations as a strategy for relationship management and communications, two of the strategies and practices presented in the Literature Review.

While it seems that businesses are able to recognise the role of public relations in forming better relationships with their customers, their answers appear to disregard the potential that public relations has to offer to facilitate employee relationships and communications, focusing only on customer responses. It is necessary to address this sector oversight, as recognition of the level of unawareness of PR as an internal strategy allows for more thorough discussion on internal public relations.

4.4 Strategic Management

4.4.1 Introduction

Strategic management emphasises the need for public relations to be a researched, planned, implemented and evaluated business process. It is rooted in the concept of maintaining a level of formality in public relations as a business function, conducting it in a manner that supports all other business functions. Questionnaire responses indicate that many Irish Luxury Hotels (ILH's) view public relations as an important tool in creating awareness, communicating their messages as well as an efficient way to drive sales and revenue.

4.4.2 Findings

4.4.2.1 Main Target Publics in Irish Luxury Hotels

In the aim of gathering an understanding of the main publics which ILH's target, respondents were asked directly what their main target publics consisted of. It was surprising to see that many respondents mistook the query as asking after target markets - many respondents replied by detailing various customer segments of the market as opposed to actual publics such as stakeholders, customers, suppliers and so on. Therefore, for the purpose of examination, publics were divided into Customers, Agencies/Third Party Providers, and the Media. It is also important to note that so many did not understand the question, answering with such a response as to reflect their lack of knowledge on the subject. This may be due to respondents misinterpretation of PR or a general failing of public relations; not stressing the wide variety of avenues it has to bring to an organisation (please see figure 4.4.2.1.1).

Figure 4.4.2.1.1 Respondent Target Publics
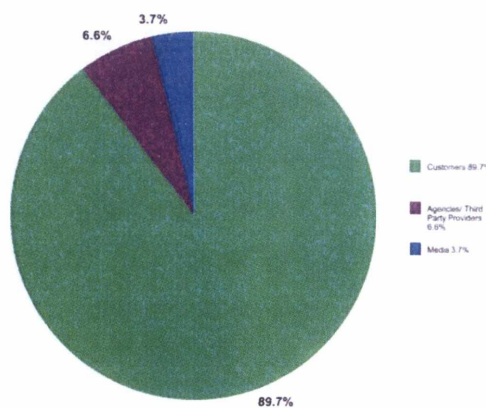
As mentioned before, many respondents mistook the question as asking after their target markets; listing the various customer segments within the market. This corresponds to the findings in the Literature Review in that 'marketing is the field most commonly confused with PR; however, the fact remains that although public relations has to be integrated with marketing strategies, PR is an entirely separate entity to marketing.' (Fawkes, 2012)

In the theme uncovered it is inherently clear that the majority of ILH's direct their PR efforts towards targeting customers, with 89.7% of respondents listing customers as their target publics. Only 6.6% of respondents stated that their PR efforts are directed toward agencies for tours/travel etc. to gain business and to better reputation, while as little as 3.7% of respondents stated that they directed PR efforts towards the media, including newspaper editorials and so on.

It was an interesting find in the research to see that there was such a small amount of PR effort directed toward the media at only 3.7%. It would seem this answer corresponds to the interview phase of the research; with experts in the industry stating numerous times that businesses do not have time or resources to engage in official public relations.

Karen Fleming in her interview said how 'many businesses do not have the time nor sometimes the expertise to 'say' to right a press release; sometimes people would not even know where to start' (please see Fleming interview Appendix B). Then Alison O'Brien from Fuzion Communications in Cork felt that 'hotels don't engage with the media enough to benefit from the PR opportunities that are there to support their advertising.' (please see O'Brien interview Appendix D).

It was common to all three interviews that traditional forms of media were being lost out on - mainly due to time, budget and expertise restrictions - and that 'there needs to be a consistent relationship with the media on a long-term basis and to be seen helpful to the media on industry topics' (see Glynn interview Appendix C). This agrees with Bojanic and Reid in that 'publicity is a direct primary function of PR' and Edelman supports this showing the importance of traditional media stating that 'mainstream media are still the largest drivers of established media business in terms of revenue'.

4.4.2.2 Main Public Relations Objectives for Respondents in Irish Luxury Hotels

The analysis in this section allows the researcher to seek the most common objectives which ILH's are trying to achieve through the use of public relations. Please see figure 4.4.3.1 for further analysis of the main PR objectives set by respondents.

Figure 4.4.2.2.1 Respondent Objectives for the Use of Public Relations

■ Create Brand Awareness   ■ Communicate and Interact   ■ Generate Corporate Responsibility   ☐ Brand Development
■ Drive Sales and Increase Revenue   ■ Asscoiation with Locality   ■ Generate Media Coverage
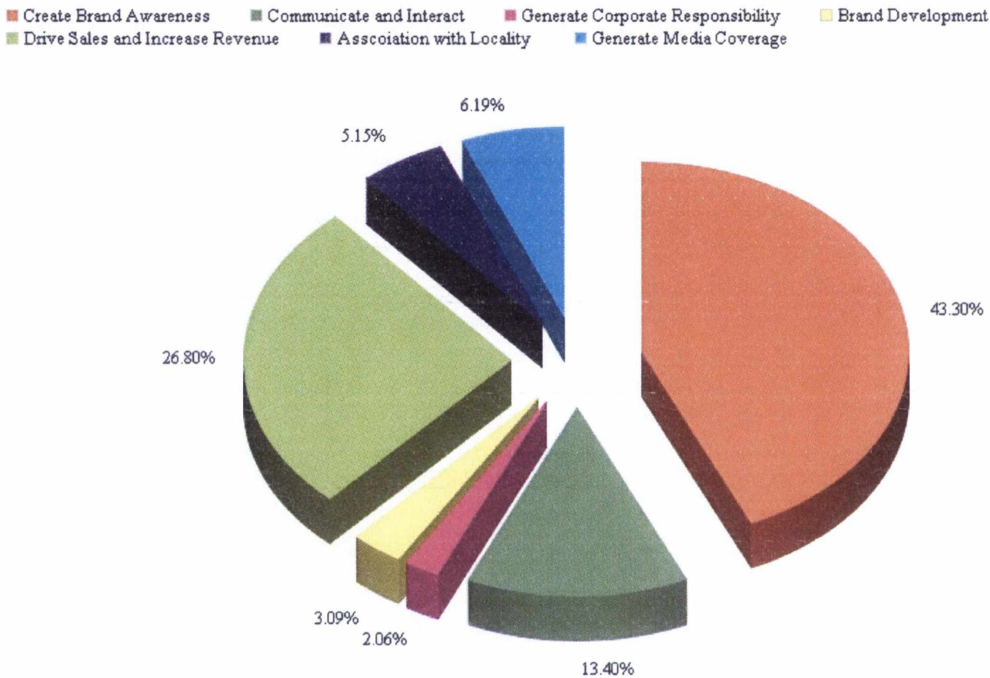
In order to gain further insight on the level of PR objectives set in ILH's, and to increase the validity of results, a qualitative question was built into the survey. The majority of respondents at 43.3% stated that generating brand awareness was the main objective of their PR efforts. Many respondents stated that their main objective was 'to further enhance their image, promote their messages and events and to portray themselves as the ultimate place of luxury' (see Appendix E for sample of responses). The second largest segment of objectives is that of driving sales; and although the literature states that no business can exist without making profit, that is not really what PR is about.

Additionally, in the process of the interview phase of the research, David Glynn stated very clearly that 'PR is not all about sales and if your communication is seen to have a sales message in it, the overall objective to create awareness and conversation will be ignored'. (please see Glynn interview Appendix C). This suggests once more that perhaps respondents are misinformed of what PR objectives should be trying to achieve. However, this does

correspond with Fawkes, 2012, in that 'to marketing practitioners and academics, public relations is one of the four P's that make up a successful marketing campaign.' Although this is true, public relations is about forging relationship.

The objective of communicating and interacting with publics was lower than originally anticipated at only 13.4%, with so many businesses interacting on the various social media channels in particular. Again, in accordance with the interview stage of the research where all three interviewees stated that communication and listening is one of the most important ideals of public relations, this research shows that perhaps respondents and practitioners in the ILH sector do not fully understand the concept of public relations nor acknowledge the full potential it has to offer.

The smallest segment is that of conducting corporate responsibility through the use of public relations at 2.06%. Again in accordance with the interview phase of the research, this low number could be due to the time and budget restrictions that are consistent with hotels. Also, the lack of respondents wanting to achieve media coverage showed that respondents do not recognise the full potential that public relations has to offer, or perhaps they do not have the expertise to operate to the optimal degree of potential (please see Fleming interview Appendix B). This shows the majority of respondents understanding of public relations within the Irish luxury hotel sector is misinformed; reflecting Miller, 1993, wherein it is stated that "public relations is perhaps the most misunderstood part of marketing communications, but can be the most effective tool."

4.4.2.2.2 Respondent Values in Public Relations

To gather further insight on the level of understanding of the planned practice of public relations within the Irish luxury hotel sector, a qualitative question asked of interview respondents: 'What are the most important values of public relations?'

> "Public relations really builds up the character of the business. Sometimes you have to be bold and not too safe and don't focus on sales messages, as it's very easily seen through." (Glynn interview)

> "If at all possible, engage with a PR company or hire a PR professional in-house and proactively work with professionals to lead you on it." (O'Brien interview)

"Know your own story that you are trying to convey and the messages inside it as well as the target the appropriate audience for each PR activity." (Fleming interview)

"Uniqueness of the story behind a hotel, what they can offer, be it the unique dishes or unique staff and how they go about their daily practices in a unique way." (Glynn interview)

From analysis a baseline for the main values in public relations can be seen which include; be bold to build up character in a business, proactively work with PR professionals to enhance and effectively build on a company's image, show the uniqueness of the business as well as all that it has to offer and, most importantly, know and tell the story behind the hotel.

4.4.2.3 Conclusion

The respondents of ILH's, to a large extent, identify public relations practices as a customer orientated enterprise, with the focus being centred on that relationship. There is a general understanding of public relations, however it is more reflective of marketing relationships, rather than for that of public relations. It would appear that many are uneducated on the subject of public relations, that their knowledge is mostly reflective of stereotypical notions of public relations, and that they disregard the full potential of PR for internal management, efficiency, long-term profitability, cost reduction/saving, and as a process for strategic management. This corresponds with Miller, 1993, in that 'public relations is perhaps the most misunderstood part of marketing communications'. However, the majority show a good level of understanding for the value of public relations in building relationships and communicating their own individual stories.

4.5 Communication Practices within Irish Luxury Hotels

4.5.1 Introduction

The theories and models presented in the Literature Review emphasised the importance of communication as it allows for a relationship to be built between two interdependent parties, with the goal of improving organisational effectiveness. The importance of communication is magnified when operating in the hotel sector due to its service nature - in being so open, people can visually ascertain if you actually are what you are trying to convey.

Two clear avenues of communication practice became apparent through the research conducted. The two emergent avenues were internal and external communication through various communication channels under organisational media, electronic media and social media.

The themes addressed in this section aim to evaluate the current communication practices of Irish luxury hotels and to evaluate communication methods and practices from a practitioner perspective. Survey and Interview research was conducted to evaluate communications practices for Irish luxury hotels (ILH's) in order to foster insight from experts regarding the potential for PR as a communications strategy.

4.5.2 Findings

4.5.2.1 Respondent Methods for Internal Communications

To further investigate the use of public relations in ILH's, respondents were asked to outline the communication methods undertaken to communicate with employees. This investigation was undertaken because whereas in any business your team is of utmost importance, however this is particularly true for hotels, as your operations staff are your PR ambassadors. Karen Fleming points out that 'we hope that employees would be PR advocates for us when they're out and about even when they're not in the hotel' (please see Appendix B interview script).

4.5.2.1.1 Respondent Methods for Internal Communications

71 (82.6%): Telephone
75 (87.2%): Emails
10 (11.6%): Newsletter
76 (88.4%): Face-to-face
43 (50.0%): Memo's
11 (12.8%): Intranet
13 (15.1%): Social Media
9 (10.5%): Other
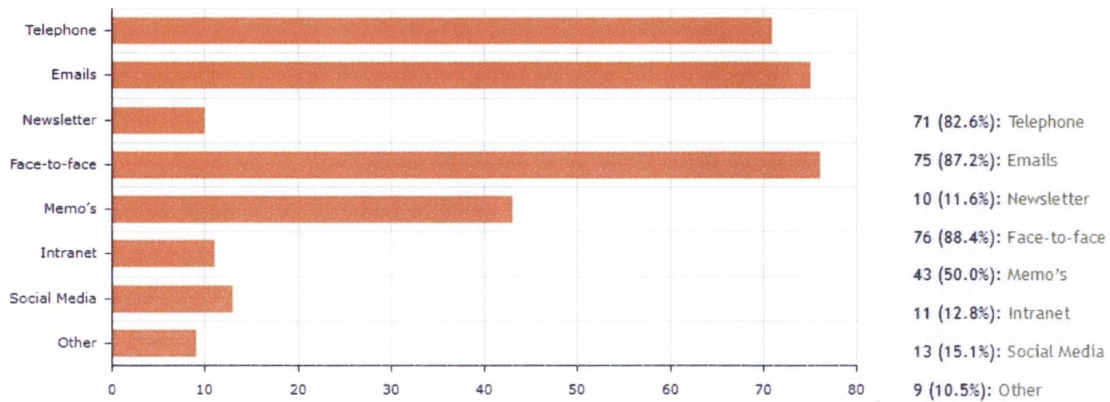
The majority of respondents consider the face-to-face method as well as email and telephone to be the most effective means of communicating with their employees. It is not surprising that nearly 90% of respondents selected face-to-face as the most effective means of communication given the personal nature of public relations.

Respondents were given the freedom to select more than one option for this as this takes into account real life situations, ensuring validity for the study. It is interesting to note that there were a number of people who entered a mobile Text as another means of communication. Other means of communication included notice boards, internal documents, messages above or on time clock for clock-in, letters and daily line up meetings.

4.5.2.1.2 Respondent Reasoning behind Selected Means of Internal Communication

The most popular method of internal communication was that of face-to-face communication, many replied that this is because due to an ever changing environment, dealing with new customers and varied demand on a constant basis; face time provides motivation. In addition the most re-occurring reason for this method was that it is personal and encourages relationship building. One respondent wrote that 'it is hospitality, after all'.

The other most common responses were that these means are the fastest and most direct route to obtain information or to pass information along. Additionally, using a variety of communication methods increases their likelihood of reaching all employees in a manner that is coherent to them. Overall, those means are an effective way to reach all ages and to ensure clarity of the hotels message, as well as what may be going on in the hotel on a daily basis and into the future. Respondents also stated multiple times that the use of email ensures all employees are informed whether or not they are working that day.

Contradictory to what one might expect, Social Media was mentioned numerous times as an effective means of communicating with employees, with some respondents saying that other methods work well but that social media in particular tends to stand out. Some respondents even go so far as to state that social media is better than email, because everyone is usually on Facebook and its quick and easy. This further emphasises the importance of social media for ILH's as internal communications method.

4.5.2.2 Respondent Methods for External Communications

The industry questionnaire evaluated the methods by which ILH's communicate with their consumer public. Through the process of the research, three classifications of communication emerged, including organisational media, electronic media and social media (please see figure 4.3.2.3).

Figure 4.5.2.2.1 Organisational Media Used to Communicate with Customers

48 (72.7%): Newsletter
44 (66.7%): Direct Mail
46 (69.7%): Brochure
38 (57.6%): Special Events
47 (71.2%): Face-to Face Discussions
13 (19.7%): Other
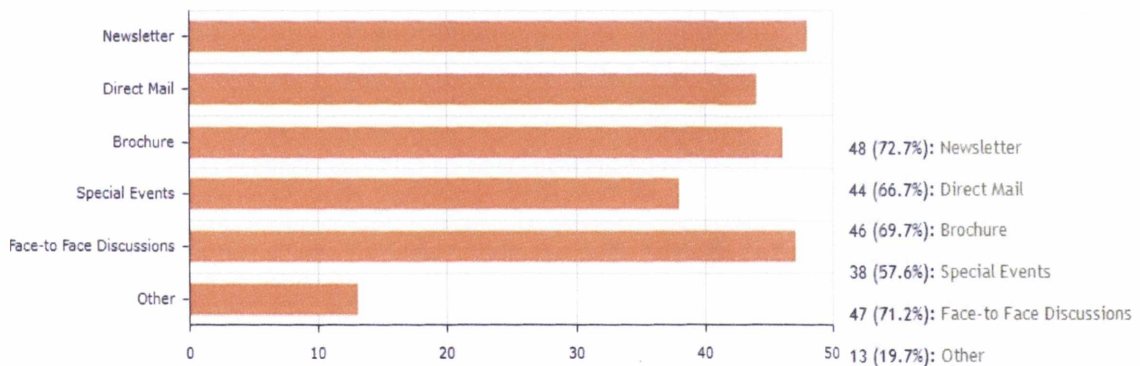
The survey discovered that Newsletters (72.7%) and face-to-face discussions (71.2%) were the most popular means of organisational media to communicate with customers. The question allowed for respondents to indicate any other means of organisational communication at 19.7%, these being telephone, newspaper editorial - both national and international, and E-zine. This shows that traditional methods of communication are still ever as popular as they had been in the past; however, in accordance with the interview phase of the research, perhaps newspapers are not a central focus due to time and budgetary restrictions.

Figure 4.5.2.2 Electronic Media Used to Communicate with Customers

66 (100.0%): Website

15 (22.7%): Audio Media

31 (47.0%): Video Media

34 (51.5%): Electronic Publishing

9 (13.6%): Other
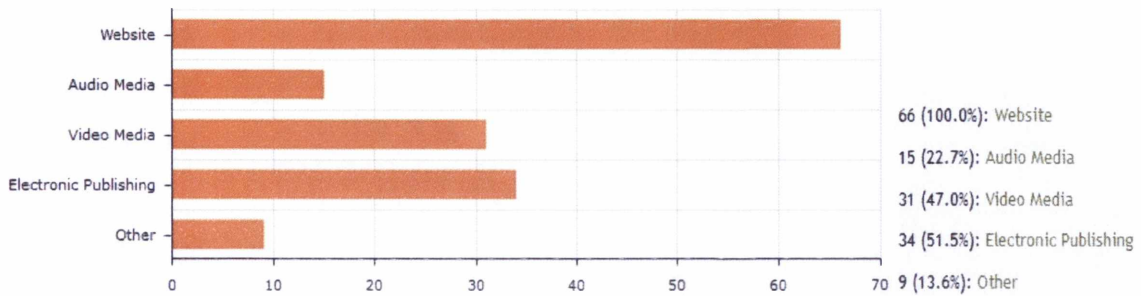
The survey discovered that a full 100% of respondents used a company website as a communication platform and 51.5% used electronic publishing. Video media was higher than anticipated at 47% and audio media including podcasts was again higher than anticipated at 22.7%. The question allowed for respondents to indicate any additional methods of electronic communication and E-zine were most popular, though radio ads and email were also mentioned. For the case of research and due to their popularity, further examination E-zine was embarked upon. It was subsequently discovered that hotels submit unique articles to E-zine in exchange for traffic and exposure back to the company website.

Figure 4.5.2.3 Social Media Used to Communicate with Customers

64 (97.0%): Facebook page/ group

57 (86.4%): Twitter account

31 (47.0%): YouTube account

26 (39.4%): Pinterest/ Flickr account

1 (1.5%): Wiki

18 (27.3%): Blog

13 (19.7%): Other
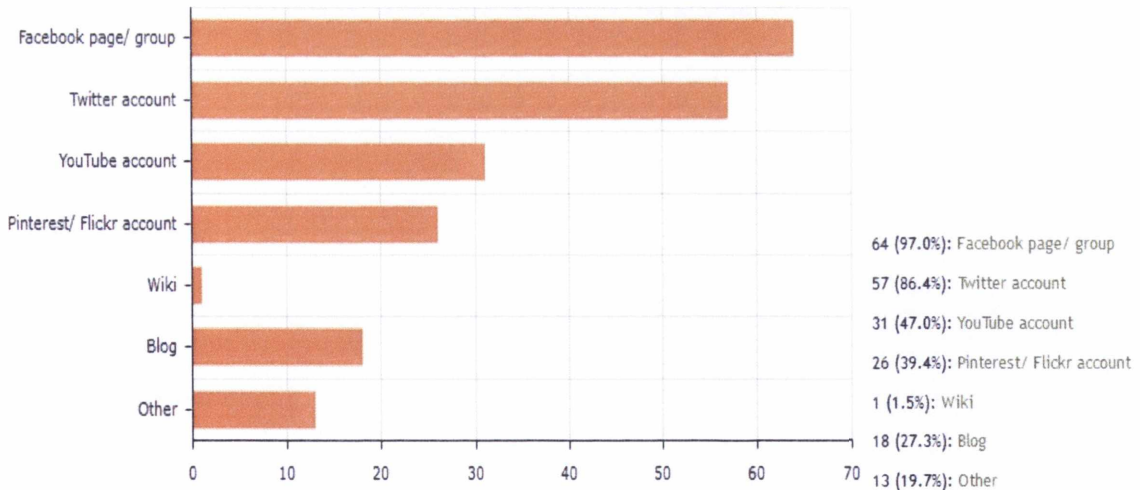
Figure 4.5.2.2.3 dictates that the importance of social media must not go unnoticed as the survey discovered that approximately 97% percent of ILH's have a Facebook presence, while approximately 87% have Twitter accounts; presenting the importance of social media as a customer communication platform. What's more, 47% of respondents stated that they had a YouTube presence, thereby increasing the validity of data on audio media having the exact

same result. Having a visual presence was larger than anticipated at nearly 40% as well as having a hotel blog at nearly 30%. The question also allowed respondents to indicate additional methods of communication via social media as nearly 20% of respondents indicated so including Linked In, Instagram, Google Plus and Trip Advisor.

4.5.2.3 Effectiveness of Social Media Channels

A qualitative question was asked of respondents in 'what are the most effective social media platforms and why?'

❖ Interestingly, 97% of respondents stated that Facebook is the most effective platform for communication for customers as it has a quick response, it builds brand awareness to large audiences and is the optimum platform for engagement with customers.

❖ An additional 88% of respondents also feel that Twitter is an effective means of communication to customers and businesses, as well as an effective means of networking with suppliers as it also has a large audience.

❖ 52% of respondents thought that YouTube was an effective means to communicate their message to customers as it is descriptive and important for visual impact and may even lead to sharing, driving awareness and maintaining/enhancing reputation.

❖ In a number higher than originally anticipated, 67% of respondents stated that they had a Linked In presence. However, this was more for the intention of gaining corporate customers, talking to business people (networking), recruitment and promoting brand awareness among the business community.

❖ 16% said they had a presence on Foursquare, but this was mainly for the purpose of the US market or for other businesses, thereby showing the decline in the popularity of this medium.

❖ Respondents were also asked if they used a blog and 30% of ILH respondents did affirm that they operate a hotel blog. The common reason given for this was that it helps generate traffic to a site and build search engine optimisation ranking, though some felt that blogs are slowly fading out.

The question allowed for the respondents to indicate other means and they stated that Trip Advisor is a major platform as it has a huge presence, followed by Google+, Pinterest, Flickr and Instagram as they are all important reference sites that are fast and effective. In addition to this, Alison O'Brien stated that more and more people are using Instagram rather than

Facebook or Twitter to make it really visual for people, they like to see where they're going and what it looks like, so hotels should be focusing more on visual sites such as Instagram.

4.5.2.4 Respondent Reasoning behind Communication Methods with Customers
An open ended question was asked of respondents in asking 'which communication efforts are most effective in communicating with customers overall and why?'

> ➤ Social media was the most effective with 49% of respondents stating that this was the best means for communicating with customers especially in the age category of 20-40 year olds. One respondent stated the effectiveness was apparent as 'the use of social media allows you to respond real time and for others to read your response and potentially benefit from it also. It also allows you to convey a hotels individual personality to a larger degree versus print media'.
> ➤ 18% of respondents indicated that traditional forms of media such as direct mail, newspaper editorial and radio ads are effective for the over 50's market.
> ➤ Finally, 7%of respondents stated that the company's website was the most effective way of communicating to customers while 9% thought face-to-face was the most effective means of communication.

However, consistent to many responses was the conclusion that 'each communication method is used to target a different audience; for example, young people prefer social media while older people prefer traditional forms of media. Therefore, it depends on who you are trying to reach'.

4.5.2.5 Respondent Traditional Media Communications
In order to get a deeper view of the communication practice of public relations within ILHs, interviewees were asked a qualitative question of whether 'Irish luxury hotels use the full potential of local and regional media?' Interview respondents detailed;

> ❖ "I don't think they engage with them enough to benefit from the PR opportunities out there, so unless they are engaged with a PR company it can be hard to avail of the opportunities out there." (O'Brien interview)
> ❖ "I don't think they do. I think they are seen as just being there and, when they do something, decide 'oh, let's get coverage on it', instead of working with the media as partners." (Glynn interview)

❖ "I wouldn't say that is the case and it really comes down to being time poor or cash poor. Another reason may be that there is no one in the business properly qualified to write a press release as it can be difficult to word and get the messaging right." (Fleming interview)

In the above question interviewees felt that:

❖ "Luxury hotels need to be working with journalists on their schedule, what works for them, work around it, work with complimentary partners in the region, partner with local journalists to avail of opportunities." (O'Brien interview)

❖ "What is important to the hotel may not be important to the journalist, there needs to be an ongoing consistent two way relationship with the hotel and the media as well as being seen as helpful to the journalist/media as a go to for industry information." (Glynn interview)

From an analysis an underlining baseline has emerged that respondents don't feel luxury hotels use the full potential of traditional forms of media due to time and budgetary restrictions. However, they also felt that businesses need to try to develop a more consistent relationship with traditional media and to be seen as a go-to for industry information.

4.5.2.6 Symmetrical Communication

Communication is an essential contributor to the success of a business; therefore it should also be planned and executed in a strategic manner in order to be most effective. Businesses must implement strategic communications and to do this they must communicate in a symmetrical manner. Again in accordance with the literature review, it is important for communication to be well thought out, researched and planned. Karen Fleming, Sales and Marketing Director, 5 Star Hayfield Manor Hotel, Cork explains that Irish luxury hotels must:

> "Know the story that you are telling or communicating, that's the important thing. So if we are communicating something; we need to be asking 'who is going to be reading this and what are we trying to say to them?' For example, when we are sending stuff to our US database, that's going to sound a little different than sending it to, say, the UK agents. You want to relate to the end reader, so say you're sending a press release out to spa users in Cork; it's going to be slightly different to sending it out to businesses. So just for positioning know your

own story and the message you're trying to covey, then as well who is going to be reading it, who is the target audience for each PR activity, and interact accordingly."

The process of symmetrical communications is located within the delivery of the message. Although it may be difficult to facilitate, it is becoming of increasing importance. The web revolution has empowered the individual; therefore there is much less tolerance for asymmetry in communications. Symmetry in communications has now become a way of operating for businesses, for if people have taken the time to write either good or bad they expect a response. And although this revolution has challenged public relations to become more symmetrical, it has also empowered businesses with the necessary tools to facilitate this symmetry in communications. This is supported by Bellinger, 2009, in the statement that "today's most effective PR campaigns use the internet, websites, blogs and social networks to provide interesting new ways to reach more people and that the core strengths in being able to tell a story or spark conversation work well with social media."

4.5.2.7 Overall Communications Conclusion

It is clear that traditional forms of communication are still vitally important, with respondents illustrating this as well as interviewees. Although respondents feel the Irish luxury hotel sector does not use the full potential of the media, they feel that having a consistent relationship with traditional media channels are still relevant to the practice of public relations.

Luxury hotels operating in Ireland have also moved to online means of communication with 100% of respondents using their website to communicate with their customers. Social media is showing ever growing importance with 97% of respondent using Facebook and 87% using Twitter to communicate with customers. This research demonstrates that Irish luxury hotels place greater emphasis on their relationships with customers and therefore place greater emphasis on external communications.

However, Irish luxury hotels do not place enough emphasis on the facilitation of conversations with internal publics, the use of public relations as an internal communications strategy has been overlooked by industry practitioners. The industry should further examine public relations as a strategy of internal communications with the goal of improving organisational effectiveness.

4.6 Relationship Management in the Luxury Hotel Sector

4.6.1 Introduction

The theories and models presented in the literature review emphasised the importance of the relationship, which exists between interdependent parties and is facilitated through communication, which is essential to the success of the business.

The importance of relationship management is magnified significantly when operating within the hospitality sector due to its service nature and being so open to all publics.

A two sided perspective to relationship management became apparent through research conducted. The two emergent prongs were: relationships with employees and relationships with customers. Then the importance and practice of relationship management was also examined.

4.6.2 Findings

4.6.2 .1 Importance of Public Relations within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

The survey aimed to understand the importance of public relations to practitioners working within the Irish Luxury hotel (ILH) sector as a method of gathering influence for recommendation. However, as seen in previous chapters, perhaps those in the industry do not have an exact knowledge of public relations and the art form it is today.

In addition, research shows that people in industry are not taking advantage of all the opportunities public relations have to offer. They do, however, realise that there is a significant need for public relations to accomplish success within the business.

The question was split into three areas which included; the importance of PR to business operations, the importance of PR in forming relationships with customers and the importance of PR in forming relationships with employees, (please see Figure 4.6.2.1.1-Figure 4.6.2.1.3).

Figure 4.6.2.1.1 Importance of Public Relations to Business Operations

Very Unimportant: 1.61%
Unimportant: 1.61%
Neutral: 4.84%
Important: 14.52%
Very Important: 77.42%
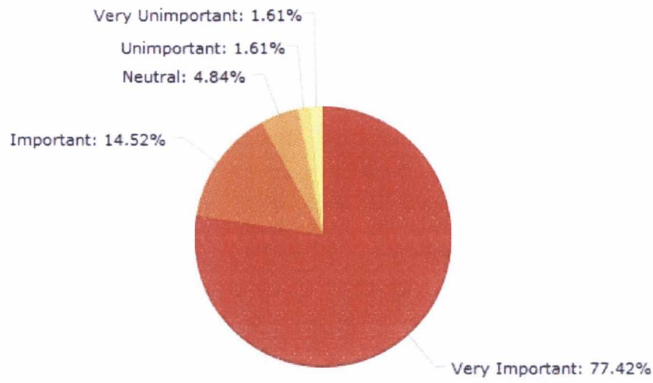
Figure 4.6.2.1.2 Importance of Public Relations in forming Relationships with Customers

Very Unimportant: 1.61%
Important: 6.45%
Very Important: 91.94%
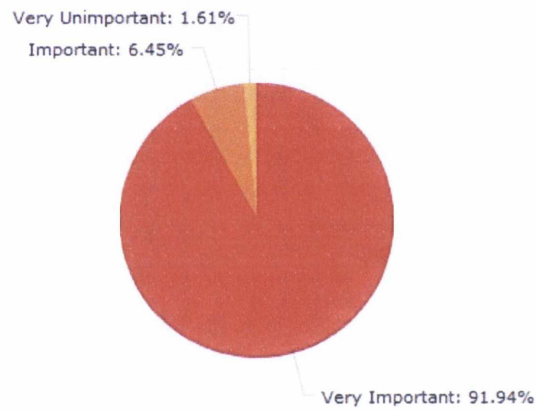
Figure 4.6.2.1.3 Importance of Public Relations in forming Relationships with Employees

Neutral: 1.61%
Important: 8.06%
Very Important: 90.32%
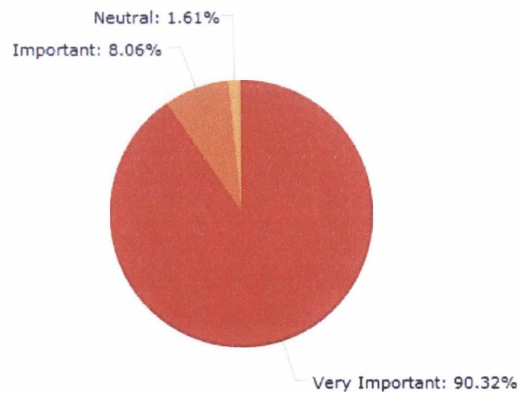
From analysis of the Figures above, it is interesting to note that the majority of respondents in all areas of importance thought that public relations was either very important or important, although the research gathered in various stages shows that those in industry are not utilising the opportunities that public relations has to offer or do not fully understand the concept of public relations. This supports Bojanic and Reid's theory that 'the term public relations is widely misunderstood and is often misused within business, and the hospitality and tourism business is no exception'. This discrepancy indicates that that the full extent to which industry responded regarding the employment of PR may not accurately reflect the reality. This could possibly be due to a lack of knowledge regarding the particulars of public relations, and how it is so often bundled with marketing, especially in hospitality. This was found in the Literature Review with Fawkes, 2012, stating that "marketing practitioners and academics sometimes regard public relations as one of the four 'P's that make up a successful marketing campaign". Fawkes states however that although public relations has to be integrated with marketing strategies, 'PR is an entirely separate entity to marketing'.

4.6.2.1.4 Important Values for Relationship Management Practice

To gather further insight on the level of understanding of the planned practice of public relations within the ILH sector, a qualitative question asked of interview respondents 'What are the most important values in the practice of public relations?'

- ❖ "To illustrate unique selling points in your business, in turn promoting your quality offering which creates a personality within the business, then providing excellent customer service at a reasonable price" (O'Brien interview).
- ❖ "Planning or reactive planning to stay alert to all the public relations opportunities around, to do this listening is an important factor, the whole industry is built on the listening tools that are there so they are really important" (Glynn interview).
- ❖ "Customers are King! They are so important, not only in reviews but how they talk about the hotel, so a hotel must make sure that there are very good service mechanisms in place" (Glynn interview).
- ❖ "Listening is so important; if you are truly listening to somebody you will really hear what it is they want or do not want, and that the customer is always right. As well as to always find a solution as well as efficiency in prompt responses then to treat every customer like a VIP" (Fleming interview).

It is clear from the above that interview respondents have a good understanding of the values within the practice of public relations with listening being a top priority. It is also important to have a planned approach to public relations. In order to communicate with your publics there is a need to know what it is they like or do not like in order to reach them efficiently, through actively listening to your publics this can be achieved. This illustrates that Irish luxury hotels demonstrate the 'ideal' of public relations in symmetrical communications and describes the equality in the level of communications to external publics, as supported by Grunig's model of symmetrical communications.

4.6.2 .2 Practice of Relationship Management within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

There is a gap in academic research relating to the current employment of public relations within Irelands Luxury Hotel sector. The survey concentrated on helping to fill this gap to the extent possible within the limitations of the study.

Figure 4.6.2.2.1 Practice of Public Relations in Irish Luxury Hotels- Time Dedicated
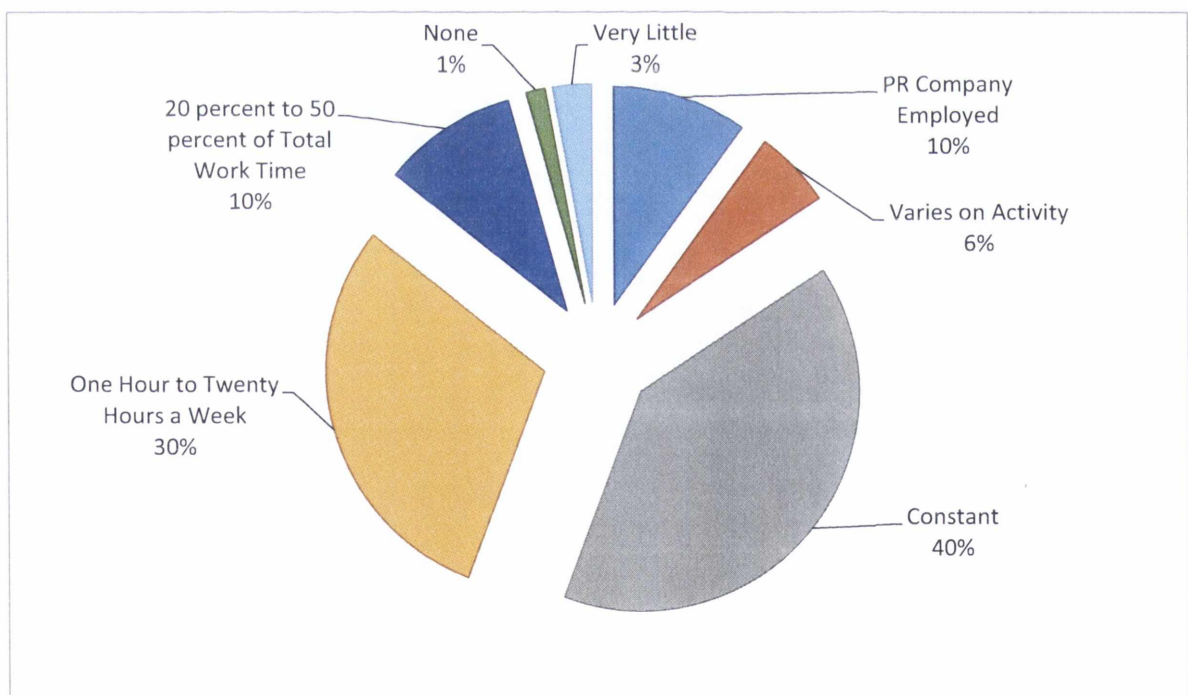
To investigate the use of informed, educated and experienced public relations practices further, the study inquired into exactly how much time practitioners dedicate towards public relations and reputation management within their business. Figure 4.4.3.1 dictates that 40%

of respondents feel that public relations and reputation management is a constant activity that cannot be ignored, while another 30% of respondents spend at least one to twenty hours a week of their working time dedicated to public relations efforts.

A public relations consultancy or professional is hired by 10% of respondents; therefore they left all PR related matter to them. This number was much higher than originally anticipated due to the recent economic recession and as already stated numerous times budgetary cuts. Then the remainder of the activity is split over ten per cent of respondents stating they spend 20-50% of their working time dedicated to public relations efforts. It was interesting to see such a varied amount of results when asking this question, however it is clearly apparent that public relations within ILH's needs to be an ongoing effort, with constant planning, maintenance, monitoring and control. This is supported by Bojanic and Reid 2010, who state 'positive and beneficial public relations do not happen by chance; they must be as a result of individuals making it happen according to plan. One of the basic needs of public relations is to provide accurate information'.

4.6.2 .3 Number of Respondents Hiring a PR Practitioner

To investigate the use of informed, educated and experienced public relations practices further, the study inquired as to whether organisations hired a PR Practitioner, either in house or a consultancy. A total of 61 per cent of respondents hire either in-house or consultancy public relations personnel, and 39% hire no sort of public relations personnel at all.

Figure 4.6.2.3.1 Number of Respondents hiring a PR Practitioner
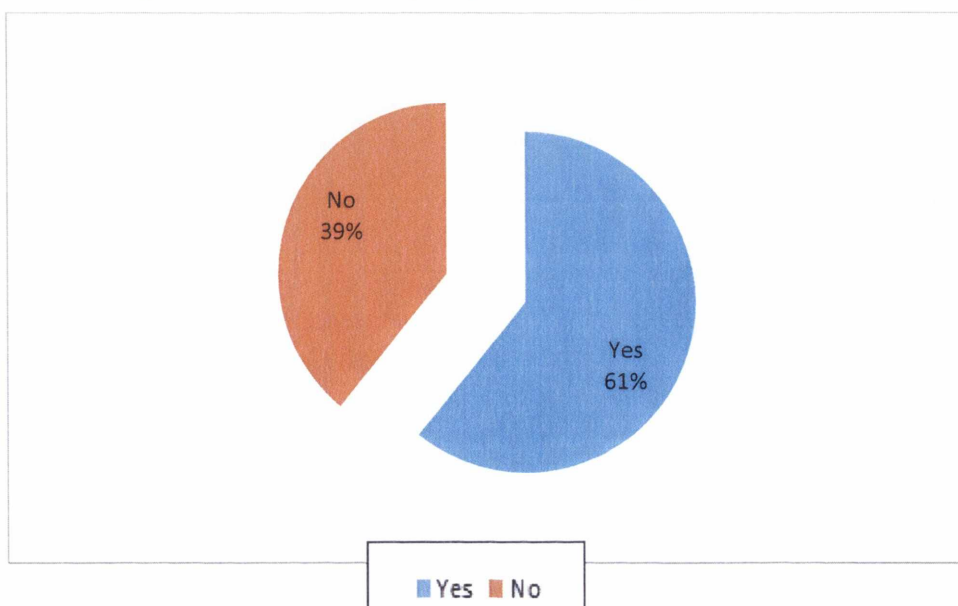
The majority of ILH respondents said that they either employed a public relations person in house or a consultancy outside the firm. The breakdown for in-house and consultancy was evenly split for each at in-house PR personnel at 52.8% and outside consultancy contracted at 47.2%. Then 39% did not employ any sort of public relations personnel. Responses overwhelmingly cited expense/ resource limitations as a reason. Other responses indicated that a multitude of organisations would be willing to hire a PR practitioner, but have yet to do so and some responses reject the investment of PR as a current or future business expense. Again this from the majority is felt as an unnecessary expense in times of hardship, and the money would be better spent elsewhere. Again in the interview phase of the research, all three interviewees agreed that the reason public relations efforts were not being employed in the hotel was due to time, budgetary and expertise restrictions. According to Alison O'Brien, Fuzion Communications Cork, 'it really depends on their budgets, we have definitely seen cutbacks in PR, as a few years ago we would have had a lot of hotels on our books here, and currently we have got two new ones back on board but for the last year we haven't been working with any hotels so, really PR is dependent on budgets'. In addition common to all interview responses that engagement with a PR company or professional is an important factor to business practices and operations in ILHs.

4.6.2.4 Planned Reputation Management Efforts

In order to gather an understanding into the planned communication efforts in Irish Luxury hotels (ILH's) respondents were also asked to detail their planned efforts accordingly.

Figure 4.6.4.1 Planned Reputation Management Efforts
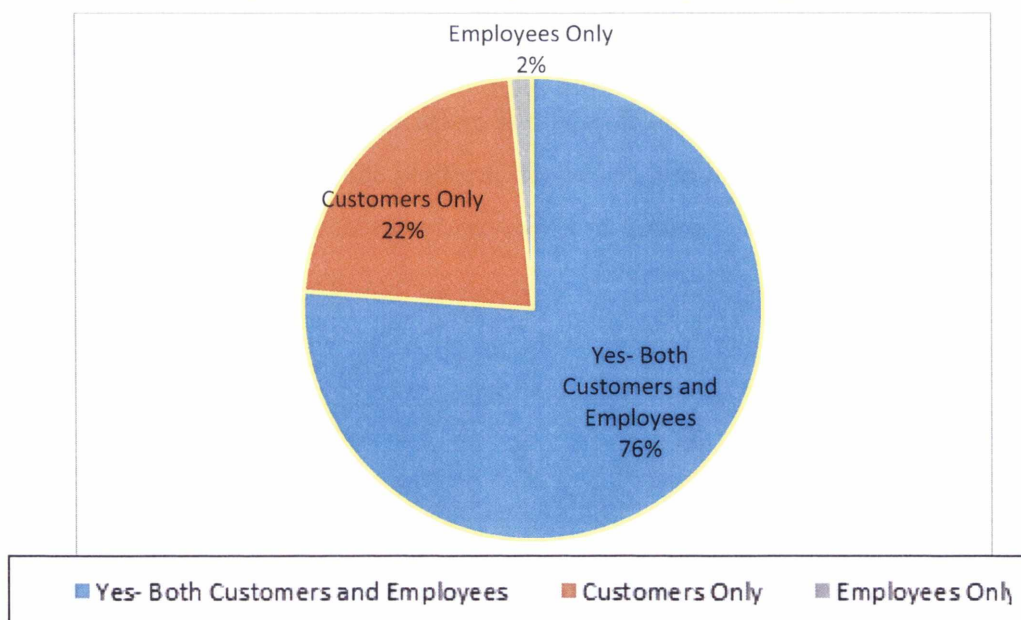
The majority of respondents at 77.4% detailed that they undertake some form of planned communication in an effort to build relationships with both customers and employees. While 22.6% detailed that they undertook efforts to build relationships only with customers and then 1.6% only undertook PR as a means to build relationships with employees. This again validates the importance of PR within the ILH sector as nearly 80% of respondents undertake a strategic approach to planned communications for both customers and employees which is that of the principles of PR. Also important to note; every respondent filled that they have some form of planned communications, none of the respondents answered no.

4.6.2.6 Conclusion

To conclude, respondent's results indicate an overall high regard placed on the importance of public relations to business operations as well as forming relationships with customers and employees. The values in which respondents have for public relations was that of strategic planning and to stay alert to opportunities, then to promote the businesses unique selling points, then emphasis was placed on publics perceptions and that they are critical as well as symmetrical communications being essential in business operations.

Then the majority of respondents felt that public relations is a constant activity needing consistent planning and monitoring. Nearly 40% of respondents had no sort of public relations personnel on their team, perhaps explaining the confusion and bundling of public relations with marketing. However the majority of respondents 76% stated that they conducted planned communication efforts with customers and employees to build relationships.

Finally the online trend of communications is predominant with nearly all of the respondent's preferred methods being an online platform. However, it is important to note that traditional avenues of communication could have been explored further.

4.7 Social Media within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

4.7.1 Introduction

"The broad and immediate reach of the Internet and social media have made the world a global village" (Caywood et al). Web 2.0 is characterised by the ability of information processors to become information distributers. It is no longer the select few distributing information to the masses, equality has been achieved and any individual that can distribute information, regardless of whether it is founded in truth. This revolution has eradicated economies of scale and information gatekeepers to a wide extent, within European and Western context.

Using the power of Web 20.0 social media brings a whole new era of dialogue to businesses, sharing personal or business information within select networks. The social consequences of both social media and revolutionised Web 2.0 are vast; as businesses are provided with a global platform that is low cost and can foster relationships worldwide with customers, distributors, manufacturers etc.

The changing external environment has also altered the way in which public relations is conducted. There is now great emphasis on the need for symmetrical communications and corporate honesty and transparency. Public relations has transformed from being an information distributor to being an information facilitator. 'The role of the practitioner and of business executing public relations practice is now to foster relationships and use their skills to create mutuality between the organisation and the public'(Breakenridge, 2012).

4.7.2 Findings

4.7.2 .1 Web 2.0 and Social Media within the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

The Web Revolution has empowered the internet to become a tool that fosters the distribution of information on a global scale; it also permits for the deconstruction of communication barriers. It virtually eliminates the barrier of economies of scale, one that has a strong influence on the operational capabilities of Irish luxury hotels (ILH's), and of information gatekeepers, enabling and empowering all individuals.

The has been a complete shift within the ILH sector away from using third party agents to secure travel plans and needs, to eliminating the middleman and booking online, this is particularly true for rural destinations. Therefore it is vital that Irish luxury hotels be active online. "Any communication, if anyone has taken the time to write to or about us, be it good or bad, I think that needs to be addressed straight away" (Fleming interview). Businesses must view Web as a communication tool that allows them to access a global market and fosters more symmetrical relationships; therefore it too must be catered to in a businesslike manner. Practitioners stress the importance of keeping information up-to-date and responding to any enquiries in a time efficient manner and the Internet provides a platform for symmetrical communications but is dangerous if not properly maintained.

Survey results reflect that the ILH sector has embraced the online trend. One hundred percent of respondents were contacted via email as all had a website presence online with at least general contact details. Upon further research although some basic, nearly all had an up-to-date webpage online, with all types of website design features- videos, background audio, moving visuals etc. This result may not be accurate to every individual property, because if there are any four or five star hotels without a website they would not have been researched and included in the survey. This is due to the online nature of the survey having a direct relationship with having an online presence. However the response rate of 28% indicates that many ILH management do respond to their mail inquiries and have an up-to-date and active online presence.

The Internet has become a necessary business tool and is especially important as it has become the most popular vehicle for businesses to transport their image and communicate their messages. "The whole industry is now built on the listening tools that are there online so it's really important. Such as Google Analytics or Google Alerts; which see your brand being mentioned, and sometimes it can be a shock to see these big conversations going on online about your brand that you don't know of, but obviously listening and replying, just interaction is so important" (Glynn interview). The Internet allows businesses to promote themselves on a global scale, but the need to monitor and engage with now a very opinionated and diverse public; showing the importance of public relations to the sector. The opportunities are endless, and if hotels differentiated themselves creating unique selling points and experiences, they are able to leverage these advantages to a global public and can afford themselves limitless potential.

4.7.2 .2 Social Media within Irish Luxury Hotels

Social media has become an everyday essential tool within business practices, due to the empowering nature of the internet and its ability to host global networking integrated platforms. Therefore it is clearly essential that this tool be used by Irish Luxury hotels (ILH's). It allows them to operate in a manner that is not limited by resource restrictions and provides a platform for the online facilitation of strategic management, relationship management and communications. "Social media is where everyone is at now, again it's the accessibility thing; you can see it easily online, so yeah it's very important" (O'Brien interview).

Survey results demonstrate that ILH's flourish in the social media hemisphere, building them into their daily business practices. However, this adoption is not complete. "It certainly provides a platform to communicate with people and to communicate your individual hotel personality". Results suggest that ILH's have a stronger presence on Facebook than Twitter. Results show 97% per cent of questionnaire respondents have a Facebook account while nearly 87% have a Twitter account.

Practitioners emphasised the benefits of both social media platforms. While Facebook may be effective at community and customer communications, Twitter must not be overlooked: "Twitter is where it is at now rather than Facebook" (O'Brien interview). Practitioners suggest Twitter as a platform to facilitate professional communications, foster relationships and to develop a presence within the context of ILHs in Ireland. "Twitter really builds up a better sense of community, as we involve the business community when we Tweet for example 'where is good to dine in Cork?' we encourage businesses to engage with us" (Fleming interview). The growing importance for ILH to have a presence on Twitter is evident; not only for reaching customer publics but also to engage with local businesses to create a community, networking and creating an image for themselves in their individual sectors.

In addition practitioners advise that creating a visual representation of a hotel online can be a good vehicle for spreading image and awareness. Respondents from both the interview and questionnaire emphasised the emergence of hotels having a presence on platforms such as Instagram. "Instagram; it creates something visual so hotels should be looking at, in the states people are using Instagram rather than Facebook or Twitter so make it really visual for people" (O'Brien interview). In the communications section- *4.5.2.2.3* -social media other

section, Instagram was also mentioned multiple times. This is a rising trend with 39% of industry respondents indicating they have either a Pinterest or Flickr account. Then 47% of respondents indicated that they has a YouTube account, then to further validate the findings 47% also stated they used video media to communicate.

Practitioners, however, further stated that these social media channels must to be handled with care, with timely and accurate communication. Additionally, businesses need to be aware of the audience they are targeting when operating within the social media environment. "Social media is great because you can really target it down to the specific area or audience" (see Glynn interview Appendix C). The days have also changed to where social media was limited to those of a younger demographic, now all sorts of demographics use all different types of social media channels and online mediums. Then the relationships in which businesses form on these social media channels are becoming ever more important to businesses, with businesses now building some sort of social media element into their daily practices.

4.7.2 .3 Web 2.0 and Social Media Conclusion

Social media and the revolution of Web 2.0 have transformed the way in which businesses communicate. There is a need for hotels to continuously monitor their environment and engage with their publics. Two-way symmetrical communication has now become the expected norm in business communications with their publics. This increases the importance to have planning and strategy in place to communicate and target message adverse publics. Social media channels are also forging relationships between businesses, forming communities in which various businesses encourage spreading the word about each other. Twitter is becoming the most popular means of creating a community within each individual hotel's business community. While Instagram is showing signs of an emerging trend within hotels as it creates something really visual for people. It is apparent that social media has become an integral part the daily business practices of Irish luxury hotels and opportunities for public relations though social media are endless. However it is important to note that respondents have not integrated social media into their internal communications; which could be explored further.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Recommendations & Implications

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Recommendations & Implications

5.1 Introduction

This paper addressed the context of public relations within Luxury Hotel sector in Ireland by asking the question: "How are Irish Luxury Hotels currently engaging in both online and offline PR techniques/ tactics to successfully communicate with their publics? ". And how important is public relations to the Luxury Hotel Sector in Ireland?" This chapter will present the main conclusions of the research, the recommendations that stem from the research findings and the implications of said findings.

5.2 Research Findings

Numerous findings were generated throughout the primary research, as presented in Chapter Four. The findings of the research can be summarised into five main conclusions in conjunction to the objectives outlined in Chapter One, section 1.3.

5.2.1 Conclusion One: Profile of Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

The Irish luxury hotel (ILH's) sector is mainly saturated by four star hotels, accounting for 63% of respondents. This corresponds directly with the literature where much the same is stated. Furthermore, the industry is dominated by enterprises under the age of ten, accounting for 37% of respondents; reflecting the growth of the sector during the Celtic Tiger. However, it was surprising to see that 21% of respondents had been operating for 50 years or more, emphasising the history of the industry in Ireland. In addition, on average 108 full time employees and 69 part times workers are employed in ILH's. The industry appears to have maintained growth during the recent economic recession, with the above figures showing signs of stability throughout the sector.

5.2.2 Conclusion Two: Sector Understanding of Public Relations

At 95%, the majority of industry respondents understood that public relations is a means of creating profile and public awareness for a business as well as a means of relationship building and communication. Negative associations only accounted for 5% of respondents, feeling that public relations is expensive and should be reserved for larger companies. However, additional research indicates that perhaps respondents are not as informed as

originally anticipated, as many respondents appear to disregard the potential of public relations as a tool for internal communications. Furthermore, many respondents associated public relations solely with driving sales, and although this is a bonus, public relations is about forging relationships and communicating messages. Again, this may indicate that the reality of PR application is less than results claim.

The respondents of ILHs, to a large extent, identify public relations practices as a customer orientated enterprise, with the focus being centred on that relationship. There is a general understanding of public relations; however, it is more reflective of marketing relationships, rather than for that of public relations. I feel some are uneducated to the full potential that public relations has to offer to stakeholders and publics other than customers.

Irish luxury hotels do not place enough emphasis on the facilitation of conversations with internal publics; the use of public relations as an internal communications strategy has been overlooked by industry practitioners. The importance of forming such relationships is outlined by Grunig, as 'if a system of two-way symmetrical communications is adopted then open, trusting and credible relationships with strategic employee's constituencies (groups) will follow'.

5.2.3 Conclusion Three: Communication Practices in Irish Luxury Hotels

Traditional forms of communication are still a vital component to Irish luxury hotels (ILH's). However, respondents did feel that ILHs do not use the full potential of national and regional medias due to three consistent themes; either they were time poor, cash poor or they were uneducated in the practices of public relations. The importance of having a consistent effort toward traditional media channels is supported by Edelman, who states 'mainstream traditional delivery methods are still the largest drivers of established media business in terms of revenue'.

Additionally, in regards to communication, ILH's have in their entirety embraced the Web 2.0 revolution, with 100% of respondents using their website and email to communicate with their publics. Social media also displayed results of vital importance in communication efforts, with 97% of all respondents communicating via Facebook and 87% via Twitter. This supports Kotler's statement that "the core strengths of public relations is the ability to tell a story and spark conversation- which plays well into the nature such of social media". Again the research indicated these efforts are directed towards customers, and therefore place greater emphasis on external communications.

76% of respondents said they engage in planned communication efforts directed at both the customer and employees. However, research indicates that Irish luxury hotels place greater emphases on communicating with external publics (customers) and do not place enough emphasis on the facilitation of conversations with internal publics; the use of public relations as an internal communications strategy has been overlooked by industry practitioners. The above findings support Breakenridge, 2012 who states 'professionals must discover new research methods, develop specific policies to guide employee and public participation, experiment with content through a variety of social media channels and learn to connect and build relationships with stakeholders through new technologies'.

5.2.4 Conclusion Four: Relationship Management in Irish Luxury Hotels

Relationship management by the majority of respondents within the industry is regarded as very important to business operations, as well as forging relationships with customers and additionally employees. This is indicative of the need and value of public relations to the Irish luxury hotel sector, as 'maintaining and improving relationships is the objective of PR' (Tench and Yeomans,2010) .

The growing importance of reputation management is clear, with 61% of respondents indicating that they employ a PR practitioner either in house or with a consultancy, while another 40% state the practice of public relations is a constant activity that cannot be ignored. The degree of importance laid upon relationships in PR is clear, as the CIPR states that the very definition of PR is 'the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics'. The results show that there is a real importance, relevance and necessity for the practice of public relations in ILHs which should be incorporated into daily business practices.

5.2.5 Conclusion Five: Web 2.0 and Social Media in Irish Luxury Hotels

It can be safely said that the industry has utilised and kept pace with the web revolution, with all of the respondents claiming to operate via online platforms, thereby highlighting the trend of online platforms being the most preferred methods of communication in ILHs. The web and social media have become essential tools with which ILH's must familiarise themselves. Social media emerges as the industry standard for facilitating a dialogue with both internal and external publics, with particular attention paid to Twitter, as the majority of respondents indicated that Twitter was becoming an important channel not only for networking to customers but for networking to other businesses within their respective industries.

5.3 Public Relations Recommendations for the Irish Luxury Hotel Sector

5.3.1 Introduction

The value of effective communication at all levels within an organisation cannot be overstated. There are multiple benefits to be gained in having the environment and tools in place that will allow effective communications to occur unhindered. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the correct conditions exist, so that an environment can flourish where communication is leveraged to the fullest degree, encouraging engagement and facilitating the forging of relationships at all levels. The findings and analysis of the research can be summarised into five main recommendations:

5.3.2 Recommendation One: PR as a Standalone Integrated Management Function

From the findings analysis section, it is apparent that some bundle marketing and public relations efforts into one. There needs to be a wider recognition in place towards the two being separate entities. In addition, there is a need for recognising public relations as a standalone management function and for it to be strategized in that way, integrated with other management functions.

5.3.3 Recommendation Two: Public relations as an Internal Communications Strategy.

Management in Irish luxury hotels needs to establish and invest in a strategic internal/ employee communications function as a process of public relations, and to implement a social media plan targeted at employees. The objective is to generate feedback on important issues that affect staff and on the strategic direction of the hotel.

5.3.4 Recommendation Three: Traditional Medias as Collaborative Partners.

Traditional media are still an ever important channel for communication in the industry, although due to time and resource restrictions, the full potential of these mediums are not being utilised. Management in Irish luxury hotels need to establish long-term relationship with media people of interest and endeavour to be seen as helpful to them or as a voice to go to on industry issues, so as to develop a consistent relationship with them and avail of as many opportunities as possible.

5.3.5 Recommendation Four: Emerging Trends in Social Media

The world is now a global village, with all respondents operating online, as well as their preferred communication methods being online vehicles. Apart from the hotels website and email, social media is taking precedent over other online methods of communication. Twitter

is becoming the prominent voice in hotels and in creating a sense of community; therefore, management of Irish luxury hotels need to establish and invest in a social media strategy for planned communication efforts allocated to employees, customers and other businesses, in order to forge relationships and communicate effectively.

Instagram and other photo sharing sites are another emerging trend which management should take into account, as it creates something very visual in which there are a lot of photo opportunities for hotels. YouTube or video sharing is another avenue for hotels containing an array of opportunities, with nearly half of respondents indicating this trend.

5.3.6 Recommendation Five: Engage with a Public Relations Practitioner

Management in Irish luxury hotels need to engage with or hire a PR practitioner, whether in-house or external, in order to avail of the wide array of opportunities public relations has to offer. In addition, this would assist the Irish luxury sector in better understanding public relations and its extended reach beyond customers.

5.4 Recommendations & Implications for Irish Luxury Hotels

Research findings offer Irish luxury hotels (ILH's) an opportunity on which to move ahead in their development. The study provides tailored recommendations on the public relations theories that ILHs should incorporate into their planned business strategy. While most information published on public relations in general comes from practitioners alone, this research reflects the reality of the industry as described by luxury hotels themselves. Therefore, it may be more understandable to ILHs and be more easily incorporated into their business strategies.

Expert practitioners also lend their experiential knowledge to outline examples of how ILHs can easily incorporate public relations into their daily business practices. Irish luxury hotels must turn their focus onto re-evaluating their practices and setting up a business plan that follows a strategic framework like those presented in the Literature Review. Marston's RACE framework is heavily adopted throughout all public relations practices and places research at the centre of all PR activity; this ensures realism of objectives and goals. It also ensures that enterprises take an objective, research-led approach to planning their business practices. Research suggests that ILH's also highlight what is unique about their business and establish relationships to add to their business value. However, many industry respondents associated public relations as more of a customer orientated enterprise as opposed to detailing the full potential it has to offer.

Most importantly, this study emphasises the change in public relations within ILHs, with traditional notions of public relations as press agentry towards a conversation facilitator and a forger of symmetrical relationships. This research shows that the industry has moved away from engaging in brochure public relations and toward creating strategic relationships with an array of publics, interacting with them and using these relationships as a strategy for business success. The industry does acknowledge public relations as an important component to daily business practices; however, the potential for public relations practices to be extended to internal business communications as well as other areas is yet to be established.

The industry has also embraced the Web 2.0 and Social Media, bringing it into their daily communications and using it for creating awareness and individual personalities for their business. Although traditional forms of communication are important, all of the businesses displayed favouritism toward online means of communication and relationship building. The relevance of these channels as a conversation facilitator is clear from the research. Also according to the research, Twitter is becoming the most important channel for creating a sense of community; however, the stronger presence was found on Facebook, with nearly all of respondents stating they made efforts toward a Facebook presence. The new emerging trend was that of Instagram, as it creates something visual for people, which hotels have a lot of opportunities to create. The above research all suggests that social media and the web have become necessary daily tools for practitioners which they need to monitor control and regulate accordingly.

This research provides a reference for ILHs on the practice of public relations that suits the industry. It offers a compilation of information to act as a source of understanding and public relations promotions.

5.5 Recommendations & Implications for Public Relations Practitioners

Practitioners who dedicate themselves to the industry can only add to the conclusions outlined in this research. However, from these findings it can be concluded that there are many practitioners who are relatively inexperienced in working with the Irish Luxury Hotel (ILH) sector, so it is possible they may be able to benefit from this body of knowledge.

The practice of public relations differs amongst each individual property in the ILH sector; however, many consistent trends emerged. Ireland's luxury hotel sector provides a unique challenge to public relations practitioners; although the traditional knowledge of public

relations is apparent, the wider range of public relations practice opportunities are being underutilised. This research provides a more narrowed-in set of information on the industry as well as explanations of the understanding of public relations within the ILH sector.

The need for ILH's to engage with a public relations practitioners either in-house or with a consultancy is clear, with many experts indicating that they miss out on many opportunities with both national and international medias due to being either time poor, cash poor or unable to write for public relations.

The make-up of the ILH sector is very unique and therefore practitioners can benefit from this research as a source of industry-specific understandings. This research may help practitioners who are not dedicated to working in the industry in making more informed and effective decisions.

5.6 Recommendations & Implications for other Industry Hotels

While this research focuses on the luxury hotel sector in Ireland, it is not necessarily limited in its relevance to other hotel sectors in Ireland. The findings may be relevant to many other hotels in Ireland as well as luxury hotels in the United Kingdom and across Europe.

Irish luxury hotels operate within a unique set of business operations and limitations. Many have to conduct public relations practices with limited resources. The research conducted and outlined in the study focuses on providing public relations practices that fit well within the limitations and allow for luxury hotels or accommodation providers to maximise the results of their efforts.

It is necessary for all luxury hotels to manage their businesses strategically. Public relations also needs to be planned strategically as a standalone business function. There is a need for further research on the practices of public relations within other broader sectors of the hotel industry; perhaps this body of research could act as stepping stone for such research.

5.7 Limitations of Research

A variety of limitations were encountered throughout the research process. The limitations stemmed from limited time resources and the limited time of respondents due to high season. It is important to present these limitations and recognise their impact on results.

- ❖ The five star area of respondents lacked in numbers. Although the ratio is reflective of that in industry, more five star respondents would have increased the validity of results.

- ❖ Although the response rate was 28%, this is not the sample size as originally anticipated and may not accurately reflect the sector population. Hence, this challenges the validity of results.

- ❖ Bias may have impacted questionnaire results. Some conflicting results emerged in the questionnaire and were discovered through Test Retest question formatting. Additionally, some respondents mistook some questions as asking after a marketing perspective.

- ❖ Although there was an attempt to cover the range of traditional media utilised in luxury hotels in the interview phase of the research, the questionnaire only briefly explored traditional means of communication. Therefore, results lack this area of research and more research is necessary to further explore this practice within the industry.

- ❖ The interview phase of the research allowed for the collection of practitioner knowledge. However, it did not cover all of the avenues that were originally intended. More interviews could assist in a more diverse practitioner opinion set and provide additional recommendations for Irish Luxury Hotels.

When recognised, the limitations act as a guide for how to interpret results. Research limitations, when acknowledged, provide basis for the need of future research.

5.8 Further Research

There is a need for further research in the area of traditional forms of public relations practices in Irish luxury hotels. While the research presented addresses the make-up of the luxury hotel industry in Ireland and online communication practices extensively, as well as the three theories of public relations as they are of use to the sector, there are other aspects that must be explored for further clarification.

Although it was briefly examined in the research, a more specific investigation into the traditional or offline practices of public relations would further this research. In addition, to engage in further investigation using a case study approach into what practices are best suited to individual properties, as well as an extended investigation into practices of the Irish hotel sector as a whole.

The business environment is constantly changing; in an ever competitive sector there is an ever predominant need for consistent monitoring of the external environment and its effects on public relations practices for the industry. Further research must be conducted to more accurately reflect the variety of Irish luxury hotels; this will also provide a greater validity in results.

Further research will allow for the provision of further understanding, recommendations and implications for Irish luxury hotels and practitioners alike. The research conducted acts as a starting point for further research and acts as a platform on which further knowledge can be built.

5.9 Conclusion

The research conducted aimed to provide a comprehension on the level of understanding and the application of public relations within Irish luxury hotels. The research also aimed to explore the public relations theories of relationship management, strategic management and communications for the sector. The primary research conducted provided the desired information and allows for a more detailed understanding of how public relations is practiced within the sector, as well as a basis for recommendation.

The Irish luxury hotel sector accounts for nearly half of the entire hotel industry in Ireland. It also accounts for the most bed-nights experiencing growth since the economic recession. The luxury hotel sector is an essential contributor to Ireland's economy and workforce in Ireland; therefore, the investment in public relations within the industry is necessary to ensure future economic success for Ireland as a nation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire Sample:

The questions asked in this questionnaire are for the purposes of creating a report on the current PR practices both online and offline within the Irish luxury hotel sector. All information disclosed in this survey will be kept confidential, financial information will be used to discover industry trends and provide recommendations only.

Company Name

Type of Business

- O   Four Star Hotel
- O   Five Star Hotel
- O   Four Star Resort
- O   Five Star Resort

Other Please Specify

Where is the Business Located (town and county)?

Age of Business
- O   0-5 years
- O   6-10 years
- O   11-15 years
- O   21-25 years
- O   26-30 years
- O   31-35 years
- O   36-40 years
- O   41-45 years
- O   46-50 years
- O   50 years+

Number of Full Time Employees

Number of Part Time Employees

What methods do you use to communicate with employees?
- O Telephone
- O Emails
- O Newsletter
- O Face-to-face
- O Memo's
- O Intranet

Other Please Specify

Why do you use the selected methods of communication?

Who are your main target publics?

What are the main objectives you are trying to achieve with the use of public relations?

Which of the following PR techniques do you engage in to communicate with customers?

Organisational Media
- O Newsletter
- O Direct Mail
- O Brochure
- O Special Events
- O Face-to Face Discussions

Electronic Media
- O Website
- O Audio Media
- O Video Media
- O Electronic Publishing

Social Media
- O Facebook page/ group
- O Twitter account
- O YouTube account
- O Pinterest/ Flickr account
- O Wiki
- O Blog

Others Please Specify

In your opinion, what efforts were most effective? Why?

How much time do you dedicate to public relations and reputation management within your business?

> (blank box)

In your opinion, what is the importance of public relations to your business operations?
O Very Important   O Important   O Neutral   O Unimportant   O Very Unimportant

In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with customers to the success of your business?
O Very Important   O Important   O Neutral   O Unimportant   O Very Unimportant

In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with employees to the success of your business?
O Very Important   O Important   O Neutral   O Unimportant   O Very Unimportant

Do you actively undertake planned communication efforts in order to build relationships with customers and employees?
- O   Yes, with both customers and employees
- O   With customers only
- O   With employees only
- O   No

Does your company have a dedicated staff member dedicated to the PR role or hire a consultancy within this area of expertise?
- O   Yes
- O   No
- O   Please Circle: In-house or Consultancy

If yes, How do you communicate? And how often?

> (blank box)

Please give a brief description of your impression of public relations?

> (blank box)

Appendix B- Interview Script Karen Fleming- Marketing Manager, Hayfield Manor, Five Star Hotel Cork

1. What do you feel is the role of PR within the Irish Luxury Hotel Industry?

Well I suppose the role of public relations is communicating your brand, image and your mission, but I feel that's the same regardless of what business you're in. But I suppose for hotels because they're so public and they're so open and accessible to people, so they have to be careful because they can portray one message or release one message and then come to the physical company and very easily see if that is the case. So if they have a press release for example that says they have the most amazing afternoon tea in the world and somebody comes and that's not the case, then it's found out very quickly so I suppose from a hospitality point of view that makes it a little different then say from a company that has a mission but the public are not in and out the door all the time.

2. How do you explain the practice of PR in Irish Luxury Hotels?

Again I think that depends on the individual hotel, because we for example are a small independently owned family hotel, and we would not have the budget as say the Shelbourne would have because they're a part of the Marriott management chain. So they would have a much different approach then say what we would have. Because on one level they would have the hotel marketing department but they would also have the group marketing department, they would have different resources then other hotel so that's very dependent on the individual property and the sizes of their team. Because a lot of hotels in Ireland especially smaller hotels would not have a marketing department, and I don't think a lot of hotels in Ireland engage in a lot PR I would have to say. They rely very heavily on word of mouth and don't engage in official PR, even everything we do is PR, like every interaction is PR but official paid for planned PR I wouldn't say is undertaken by even hotel in the country as they just wouldn't have the resources.

3. In your opinion, do you feel people are turning to public relations as a more efficient way of promoting their business?

I couldn't say that's my experience, no I don't think so, but that again I feel might be because for a smaller independent hotel resources are scarce.

4. Just in your own experience what are the main PR issues encountered on a daily basis? And then what would be the main PR tactics to combat these issues? So for example social media would you use that as a means of customer service?

We don't receive a great amount of feedback regarding the hotel on social media, no not so much. I think it depends on the channel so Facebook for example is only really about having the chat with people. And we do promote on it but I wouldn't say it's a huge driver of direct sales. So the revenue doesn't come back directly from Facebook, I'm not saying people that have seen us on Facebook look at that picture or look at that hotel it looks great. But I don't

think the everyday chat on Facebook is about building relationships, your informal relationship I suppose you know.

5. How can businesses effectively communicate with their publics? With consideration to employees?

The marketing department doesn't communicate on a huge level with the staff, which I feel could be improved upon, because I used to work in operations so it's good to know say what changes are happening to the website or whatever, sometimes when in operations you're not always really aware of what strategies are in place. But we do a HR induction where the mission and vision is communicated to all of the staff and the team would always get information on the hotel so we hope that they would be PR advocates for us when they're out and about even when they're not in the hotel.

6. How can businesses effectively communicate with their publics? With consideration to employees? With consideration to customers?

Well I think face to face communication is the best once the guest is here, that's the optimum but in order to get them here first we have to communicate with them. I suppose we are very lucky as we have built up a database so a lot of our information will be going back to our priority guest database as we call it. So we communicate with them after they leave there is a post stay email and before they stay there is a pre-stay email. We would regularly send them offers and new information about the hotel, but at the same time we don't want to annoy them so there's a fine line between inundating people with information and being useful in saying we have new information for you. We would also have a guest survey in the rooms, then they can either hand into reception or being left in the rooms, and then the go to our person who replies to them and then she adds their details to the database. Then we would also have a huge interaction on trip advisor, I think it's very important to be timely in your response on that, that's crucial. Any communication, if anyone has taken the time to write to or about us, be it good or bad, I think that needs to be addressed straight away, because I think that communication is about listening it's not always about us talking, to guests it's about us listening to them and what they want.

7. What should Irish Luxury Hotels be focusing on now to attract new customers, both domestic and abroad?

A lot of our activity would be to get new business as well but then I also think that it's down to the people in operations to as much as it is in marketing and sales, to encourage a repeat visit, but once the operations side is over a post stay email is sent out and the follow up with the guest- was everything to your satisfaction, and all of this is very important but you have to be getting new business as well. But we also have to be getting new business as well because even though we have a huge foreign leisure business and even though they may return once is hard to assume they may return on a hugely frequent basis. But our corporate's do return but again I think you need to establish a relationship with the agent that's booking for them if they're not booking themselves to encourage increased business and that's always ongoing with new companies opening up. We would be very lucky in having a large clientele

coming from overseas, I think that's because we have so many multinationals in Cork so Cork is a lucky destination there's a lot of multinationals here so were very lucky in cork, and it's a lucky destination. Some corporations as you know yourself from Fota are not allowed to use five star hotels, by in large we do quite well because if the has VIP's or they have Exec's they want to take care of them and they want to show Cork of in a favourable light so were lucky that they like to use five star hotels in that sense. We do have a lot of corporate customers coming direct to us but then we would also contact and visit them, like a lot of companies in Cork know we are here but still it the gentle reminder; have you thought about us for dining recently? It not just to think about us for bedrooms, it's just like how are you getting on and is everything ok. We would also have conference and meeting facilities again I don't think we are at the forefront of everybody's mind for meetings and events but, I think you have to recognise your strengths as well as we are recognised as a luxury leisure hotel as well. But any corporate do tend to come back but with corporate especially in the last few years budgets have become very restricted. And then sometimes corporate cannot be seen using a five star hotel, so it's not that they don't want to use us or that we are not competitively priced, but more that it's just they can't be seen to be in a five star hotel.

8. How can Luxury Hotels better position themselves in the market place?
I think particularly if you are an independent hotel like we are, you're marketing affiliations are very important because you don't have the support of a maybe say a chain behind you. So we are affiliated with for example SLH (Small Luxury Hotels) so that gives us an international brand to work with. And then on a national basis we are with Blue Book, and in Ireland that is recognised as a very good quality product and SLH is the same, so those affiliations gain us variable recognition both nationally and internationally. So I think that's important for a small independent hotel because it's very hard to shout loudly in the world and SLH and Blue Book can promote you they have a huge database and you're promoted to more eyes than maybe you would be if you were just trying to work on the database yourselves.

9. What are the 5 most important things you have learned while working in industry?
To Listen; although I think we should do more of that sometimes, I think you need to listen if you're really listening to somebody you will hear what it is they really want or what they don't want and what you can do better, regardless of your position in the hotel.
Then that the guest is always right, even though we might like to argue that statement, it's true. Then to always find a solution, sometimes we just, we might say no a little quickly, if the guest is looking for a certain thing, or is there's a booking requirement. I personally am a yes person, I think from working in the industry so I'm just programmed to say yes and to never say no. Now if somebody asks for a swimming pool in their room, obviously we can't do that, but I have to find something that will work. I think then efficiency like a prompt response, as people don't like to be left waiting for anything, even a table a breakfast or an email, just any response, just anything. Then the fifth thing is that everybody likes to be treated like a VIP on occasion so to treat all guests like that.

10. What do you think is the biggest obstacle facing the industry in terms of PR?

Definitely budgets, nobody really had an advertising or a marketing budget let alone for PR so it's very difficult to budget for everything, it's very difficult and it's not seen as a priority. I mean in hotels your caught between investing in the physical product and investing in your staff, who are there on the ground meeting the guests. Or investing in something that might bring you more business down the line, so definitely I think the biggest obstacle is the budgets for everybody.

Then in terms of CSR would you feel that this would be diminished in a lot of hotels?
We for example, because we are quite well known in the area and we are a five star hotel so people automatically think we have money, but they don't realize that a five star hotel has to invest in a lot more than the think, that you might have to get away with in a three star, so our money is spent in many ways but I think we get a lot of requests weekly even daily for sponsorship but we decided because a couple of years ago we were constantly saying yes to that one and no to another one, then feeling dreadful, so we decided that it was all just a bit hit and miss. So we decided to adopt an annual charity of choice so for this year we are with the Mercy Foundation and last year we were with Jack & Jill, the year before it was the Irish Guide dogs. So we direct our efforts towards them as much as we can, we also did Mary Mount as well one year. So for example we would do an afternoon tea for them or if they ever need conference or meeting facilities we would sponsor that and provide for them.

11. What do you think are the greatest strengths of the industry in terms of PR?
I think the greatest strength is that it very much is a very people driven industry, you know, and I suppose the hospitality industry is about providing experiences that people enjoy, so other people generally want to hear about it. It's not bad news that your, if your engaged in some PR generally in hotels it's not going to be bad news really, it's going to be positive, because PR in hotels its positive things usually for people to read. Nice stuff that everyone can relate to such as family birthdays, going away for an anniversary is promoted.

12. Does social media provide an opportune network to customers and the local community?
It certainly provides a platform to communicate with people and to communicate your individual hotel personality, as I feel people like to get a sense of personality from a hotel, via Facebook or via Twitter, definitely as well as Trip Advisor but I think they need to be well managed, you have to be very careful with them. In particular with Trip Advisor, it does build your personality and you then can also see if you're connected to those people via Twitter or via Facebook, so you know what they're about so you can know a little more about them or even companies. Or if you're talking to them in a networking environment, it gives a sense of community, because often for example we would give a Tweet about 'where is good to dine in Cork?', and a few people would mention us, but also people would mention other restaurant, then we would people Re-Tweet the feed so then you are also supporting all the other businesses and Cork as destination. So it really builds up a better sense of community then saying we want all the diners ourselves, and then sparking conversations saying come to cork and we will all take care of you, so a much better sense of community on some of the platforms which is nice.

13. Do you think that Irish Luxury Hotels use the full potential of the media, in particular, local and regional media?

I wouldn't say so and to be honest it's probably because they are time poor, you know from working in the industry, you're completely focused on specifics, for examples if you are in operations you are completely focused on the guest. And we don't all have huge sales and marketing department, we are very lucky with what we have, but and even we don't have the time and I do think that it really comes down to being time poor and cost. I mean we get loads of emails everyday from both the local and national newspapers, with opportunities to advertise but we just can't afford to do so and I imagine other hotels can't either so either you're time poor or you're cash poor. Also I think a lot of the times n hospitality unless you have q person qualified in the marketing department, the GM, the deputy GM or whatever they may not be qualified to write a press release, they may not even know where to start with one. It's just so difficult to word the information and give it the right message, a you can write anything but is it going to tell people what you want them to understand and it's not that easy, also they might not have the resources for it.

14. What advice would you give other Luxury Hotels in industry in regard to public relations?

I suppose you have to know the story that you are telling, or communicating that's the important thing, so if we are communicating something; we need to be asking, who going to be reading this and what are we trying to say to them? For example when we are sending stuff to our US database that's going to sound a little different than sending it to say the UK agents. You want to relate to the end reader so say you're sending a press release out to spa users in Cork; it's going to be slightly different to sending it out to business. So just for positioning know your own story and the message your trying to covey, then as well who is going to be reading it, who is the target audience for each PR activity.

Appendix C- Interview Script David Glynn - Marketing Manager, McWilliam Park, Four Star Hotel, Mayo

1. What do you feel is the role of PR within the Irish Luxury Hotel Industry?

   I think that PR is very important in that it gives you an edge over your competitors as it just shows you're doing something different from the other hotels.

2. How do you explain the practice of PR in Irish Luxury Hotels?

I suppose it really differs from hotel to hotel, you know in hotels sometimes it's not something specific, just if someone has an idea that they just role with it and that there would be no strategies in place. Now people are realising that there is a lot more thought put into it for different occasions, be it the world cup or the elections or Christmas, there's different photo and PR opportunities with a lot more thought being put into the campaigns now than say a few years ago.

3. In your opinion, do you feel people are turning to public relations as a more efficient way of promoting their business?

I suppose its seen as free publicity, but that's only if it's actually successful and gets the coverage, there's a lot done that doesn't unfortunately get coverage, so in one way if it works its great but it can be very time consuming as well, you know the planning of the idea, the operations side of it, so it can be efficient if it's done well.

4. What are the main PR issues encountered on a daily basis?

A lot of people would see, cheap publicity stunts and view PR in a bad light but for example ourselves anyway a few years back n 2009 in conjunction with all the budget cuts gave away one hundred free rooms to families on a certain day for a number of families that were badly affected by all the cuts. That in particular worked very well but it would never work again, you know because it was PR in sympathy with the hardship at the time. But definitely the main issue would be trying to come up with new ideas.

5. What are the main PR tactics to combat these issues?

Definitely new ideas and that PR isn't about sales so if the campaign has a sales message in it is seen as advertising and you know it won't be picked up on it has to be something that's strictly not sales related. However this is much easier said than done.

6. How can businesses effectively communicate with their publics?

Traditionally and it still is finding out they key people whether be it like in education, health lifestyle fashion and building relationships with them. Then phone or email obviously and Twitter is very important as well, a lot of people now would more believe a message on

Twitter as opposed to actually phoning them or a phone call. So Twitter would be the best one at the moment.

7. What should Irish Luxury Hotels be focusing on now to attract new customers, both domestic and abroad?

I suppose it is really the uniqueness of the story behind a hotel, what they can offer, be it the unique dishes or the unique staff, just the extra angle that they have, rather than saying the customer will have great food and our beds are the greatest because people will expect that. So really it's about the story behind it and the way they go about their daily business in a unique way.

8. How can Luxury Hotels better position themselves in the market place?

So for example with a hotel that overlooks the seas; when really they want to position themselves in a place that offers everything. They shouldn't just offer that unique factor of overlooking the seas, they should use every aspect; such as being a home from home, and that they really look after their guests. Whether it be giving them information on the local area or helping them print their boarding passes, airport transfers; all things that you wouldn't find in a travel lodge or a budget hotel.

9. What are the 5 most important things you have learned while working in industry?

I would have said planning, but now we tend to be reactive to look at the different opportunities that arise, for example with the world cup, there were a lot of brands focusing on Luis Suárez biting the other player. I personally didn't know who he was until the day before, but to stay alert a see the PR opportunities around that. If you hear things that are in the news, you know it has to be carefully thought out like with Gareth Brooks there was one you may be able to do something with those customers. But obviously you have to tread so carefully with those things, because sometimes you could open the flood gates, as if you do something for one; you could end up getting a hundred requests to do something similar. Do you do it privately or publicly?

Customers are King!! I know it's a cliché but you know they are so important not only in reviews but how they talk about the hotel, means so much so just having good service mechanisms in place. As even in the online world; they still talk/ word of mouth means so much even it is digital that simple word of mouth is so important so it is not to be neglected.

Listening; the whole industry is built on the listening tools that are there so it's really important. Such as Google Analytics or Google Alerts; which see your brand being mentioned, and sometimes it can be a shock to see these big conversations going on online about your brand that you don't know of, but obviously listening and replying, just interaction is so important. Because there can be mistakes made but the important thing is to react accordingly and conducting damage limitation in extreme cases, just to acknowledge the faults and deal with them.

10. What do you think is the biggest obstacle facing the industry in terms of PR?

Well as I said it is a very time consuming business, you know to get your ideas; the creative thinking of them and the pitching of ideas is difficult as well and a lot of people view some pitches as just looking for publicity and won't do them. You often here on radio stations; for example where restaurants ring in offering something, like last year a particular restaurant in Dublin wouldn't take families and all the restaurants in the area were ringing in saying that they would. Then the radio broadcaster actually said he wouldn't read out the names as they were all trying to get cheap publicity; the broadcaster actually said 'I'm not going to say the names of the restaurants but there are restaurants that will take families'. Which is a bit frustrating, and it is a bit like thanks; you've gone to the trouble of stopping the car or whatever and nothing. So a lot of the time people do think your just looking for cheap publicity so a lot of it is seen as that and it is not seen as quality PR. But it's also the same like trying to get into the mindset of the journalist or the editor such as what interest or impresses them.

11. What do you think are the greatest strengths of the industry in terms of PR?
So if something work and it works well and gets the significant coverage; then can seem really positive. It really does give the brand an extra feel over the hotel competitors and the other hotels that are doing these things, because be it something completely different, be it charity or giving to the less fortunate or whatever it may be. PR really does position the hotel or the individual place above its competitors.

12. Does social media provide an opportune network to customers and the local community?
Again it can be good, especially for local events; you could have an opportunity to sponsor an event in the local area. And then in turn you would get so many opportunities for photographs for the local papers and the editorial coverage very localised. And again the PR messages can be really targeted to just a specific area; for example for hotel launches and so on. So it's really not wasting a shot in the dark, you can really target it down to the specific area with a specific message.

13. What social media platforms would you recommend Luxury Hotels to be interacting on?
Twitter as I've already said is definitely the main thing at the moment.

14. Do you think that Irish Luxury Hotels use the full potential of the media, in particular, local and regional media?
I don't think they do; I think there just seen as being there, and then they think oh let's do this and get coverage on it. I don't think they realise they need to have a consistent relationship with the media all the time. At the end of the day, what's important to the hotel may not be important to the journalist. It can't be like once a year where hotels ring them up and basically demand coverage; I think you need to have more of an ongoing relationship and be seen to be helpful to them. For example if there is something going on in industry; that they

know that they can call you to be someone who can give a quote on it. Be it tourism figures or hotel prices just so that it can work both ways you know.

15. What advice would you give other Luxury Hotels in industry in regard to public relations?

Sometimes people see public relations as a waste of time, and won't bother with it but it is really up to the character in the business. Like even my own boss would sometimes say some of my ideas are a waste of time, but then they see the results and the opinions change to; That's Great! So you really sometimes have to be bold but obviously again this is much easier said than done and you know there are the times when things work and it's great. But then when you spend a lot of time doing something and you don't get any coverage or results it's easy for them to say well that was a waste so it's really difficult one to call sometimes. But one piece of advice is to always follow your own instincts and don't be too safe and focusing on sales messages as that's very easily seen through. I think I should really practice what I preach more often.

Appendix D- Interview Script Alison O'Brien- Senior Account Manager at Fuzion Communications, Cork.

1. What do you feel is the role of PR within the Irish Luxury Hotel Industry?

I think ultimately it's to help sell bed nights through the promotion of the hotel, through either special offers or activities happening in the resort and things like that for any hotel that's the main thing they have to do in the end.

2. How do you explain the practice of PR in Irish Luxury Hotels?

My experience of PR within the hotels that I've worked with, I'd say PR tends to be a bit ad hock, that the marketing team within the hotels are often too busy to concentrate on that, they just need to make sales, so unless there is a PR company engaged with the hotel, the practice of PR is only happening, when they feel it needs to happen, there generally is not any PR person in house I any of the hotels.

3. In your opinion, do you feel people are turning to public relations as a more efficient way of promoting their business?

I think it really depends on their budgets, we have definitely seen cutbacks in PR, as a few years ago we would have had a lot of hotels on our books here and currently we have got twp new ones back on board but for the last year we haven't been working with any hotels so, really PR is dependent on budgets.

4. What are the main PR issues encountered on a daily basis?

I think say like when you're asking a journalist down to a hotel and they have been offered a stays at hotels the whole time so the offering isn't unique enough so just trying to get a journalists interest and they just don't have enough time at the moment with the cutbacks in media they don't have the time to be going down, so it needs to be something really unique and sometimes hotels think their offering is unique, but it's pretty much the same as the next luxury hotel.

5. What are the main PR tactics to combat these issues?

I think looking at creating USP's (Unique Selling Points) with the hotel and its very much working with journalists on their schedule, what works for them, work around it, work with complimentary partners in the region, that if a journalist is coming down for an opening of something else that's when they should partner with them and work with them.

6. How can businesses effectively communicate with their publics?

I think it's through a range of PR activities whether its stories of new launches within the hotel, getting reviews from travel writers. Running competitions in the media and social media, or direct marketing- emails texts- mail outs to their existing clients- that works. Also profiling of hotel staff, at Fuzion here we would always say putting a face behind a company

is much more important; as people relate to people much more than things so I think that really works for hotels.

7. What should Irish Luxury Hotels be focusing on now to attract new customers, both domestic and abroad?

As I have said already their USP's, and obviously price, you can't go too low if it's going to be a luxury hotel, but it still is a consideration, and working on getting reviews particularly for those abroad, say that for American tourists, they know about this hotel- they want to come to it.

8. How can Luxury Hotels better position themselves in the market place?

Accessibility to airports, travel links, creating a personality and again as I said the price.

9. What are the 5 most important things you have learned while working in industry?

USP's, Quality Offering, Personality, Customer Service, Price.

10. What do you think is the biggest obstacle facing the industry in terms of PR?

I think competition from other luxury hotels as there is an awful lot of them out there at the moment, so the people competing against each other and keeping up with them.

11. What do you think are the greatest strengths of the industry in terms of PR?

I think that Ireland being a destination for Americans heritage side is something that we can play on that works well in particular. Then with the domestic market- accessibility, as it's easy to get to them, their seen as luxury, it's a treat, you don't have to go abroad so.

12. Does social media provide an opportune network to customers and the local community?

Definitely that's where everyone is at now, again it's the accessibility thing; you can see it easily online, so yeah it's very important.

13. What social media platforms would you recommend Luxury Hotels to be interacting on?

I think Twitter is where it is at now rather than Facebook, as well things like Instagram; it creates something visual so hotels should be looking at. I was in the states recently and more and more people are using Instagram rather than Facebook or Twitter so make it really visual for people, they like to see where they're going, what it looks like, if it's nice so I think things like that. .

14. Do you think that Irish Luxury Hotels use the full potential of the media, in particular, local and regional media?

I don't think so probably not, I think they don't engage with them enough to benefit from the PR opportunities that are there to support their advertising, as in a lot of hotels there would be advertising spend for local and regional media, but I feel that there are more opportunities

there for luxury hotels. As marketing teams in hotels become so focused on sales, that they don't have the time to write a press release, or they don't know how to so unless they are engaging with a PR company it can be hard to avail of the opportunities out there.

15. What advice would you give other Luxury Hotels in industry in regard to public relations?

If at all possible to engage in a PR company or hire a PR professional in house as we are the experts in it, so it's done for you and hotels should pro-actively work with them, let them lead you on it.

Appendix E- Sample Questionnaire

Sample One

Company Information

The questions asked in this questionnaire are for the purposes of creating a report on the current PR practices both online and offline within the Irish luxury hotel sector. All information disclosed in this survey will be kept confidential, all information will be used to discover industry trends and provide recommendations only. Thank you very much for your time and support.

1. Company Name-
   The Gleneagle Hotel Group

2. Type of Business-
   Four Star Hotel

3. Where is the Business Located (town and county)?
   Kerry

4. Age of Business
   6-10 years+

5. Number of Employees
   Full Time **60**
   Part Time **40**

6. What methods do you use to communicate with employees?
   Telephone, Emails, Face-to-face, Memo's, Intranet

7. Why do you use the selected methods of communication?
   To communicate rosters, guest requests, important events, weekly events, etc

8. What are the main objectives you are trying to achieve with the use of public relations
   Give a good impression of the hotel; promote new products/services/staff; free advertising

9. Who are your main target publics?
   Corporate, incentive, group tour and leisure customers; local community; national and local media and influencers

10. Which of the following PR techniques do you engage in to communicate with customers?
- Organisational Media- **Direct Mail, Brochure, Special Events, Brochure**
- Social Media-**Facebook page/ group, Twitter account, YouTube account, Blog**
- Electronic Media- **Website, Video Media**

11. In your opinion, what efforts were most effective? Why?
    Direct mail achieved a more targeted approach and was more effective

12. How much time do you dedicate to public relations and reputation management within your business?
It is constantly in our minds on a daily basis...even responding to Trip advisor reviews is a form of PR for us

13. In your opinion, what is the importance of public relations to your business operations?
Very Important

14. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with customers to the success of your business?
Very Important

15. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with employees to the success of your business?
Very Important

16. Do you actively undertake planned communication efforts in order to build relationships with customers and employees?

Yes, with both customers and employees

17. Does your company have a dedicated staff member dedicated to the PR role or hire a consultancy within this area of expertise?
Yes-In house

18. If yes, How do you communicate? And how often?
Constantly- dedicated media and PR coordinator for the group who targets media that are influencers in our key markets

19. Please give a brief description of your impression of public relations?
It is very important. Can be a free form of advertising but also used as an awareness tool and in reputational management and in the event of emergencies/issues/incidents

Sample Two

Company Information

The questions asked in this questionnaire are for the purposes of creating a report on the current PR practices both online and offline within the Irish luxury hotel sector. All information disclosed in this survey will be kept confidential, all information will be used to discover industry trends and provide recommendations only. Thank you very much for your time and support.

1. Company Name-
   Dromoland Castle

2. Type of Business-
   Five Star Hotel & Resort

3. Where is the Business Located (town and county)?
   Clare

4. Age of Business
   50 years+

5. Number of Employees
   Full Time **170**
   Part Time **50**

6. What methods do you use to communicate with employees?
   Telephone, Emails, Newsletter, Face-to-face, Social Media

7. Why do you use the selected methods of communication?
   It is effective at reaching all employees

8. What are the main objectives you are trying to achieve with the use of public relations?
   Educate potential and existing clients on all the positives of using/staying at our hotel

9. Who are your main target publics?
   Customers

10. Which of the following PR techniques do you engage in to communicate with customers?
   - Organisational Media- **Direct Mail, Brochure, Special Events, Face-to Face Discussions**
   - Social Media-**Facebook page/ group, Twitter account, YouTube account**
   - Electronic Media- **Website, Electronic Publishing**

11. In your opinion, what efforts were most effective? Why?
    Facebook is effective due to large following

12. How much time do you dedicate to public relations and reputation management within your business?

We outsource to PR specialists companies, it is a constant activity.

13. In your opinion, what is the importance of public relations to your business operations?
Important

14. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with customers to the success of your business?
Very Important

15. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with employees to the success of your business?
Very Important

16. Do you actively undertake planned communication efforts in order to build relationships with customers and employees?
Yes, with both customers and employees

17. Does your company have a dedicated staff member dedicated to the PR role or hire a consultancy within this area of expertise?
Yes-Consultancy

18. If yes, How do you communicate? And how often?
We have a sales department that communicates with: the travel industry worldwide on a daily basis, also with end- user clients both individual and corporate, a PR company that communicates with Travel writers on a daily basis, an internal marketing person who coordinates all PR, Sales and Advertising functions.

19. Please give a brief description of your impression of public relations?
Essential in keeping all market segmenta informed

Sample Three

Company Information

The questions asked in this questionnaire are for the purposes of creating a report on the current PR practices both online and offline within the Irish luxury hotel sector. All information disclosed in this survey will be kept confidential, all information will be used to discover industry trends and provide recommendations only. Thank you very much for your time and support.

1. Company Name-
   Sheen Falls Lodge

2. Type of Business-
   Four Star Hotel

3. Where is the Business Located (town and county)?
   Kenmare, Kerry

4. Age of Business
   21-25 years

5. Number of Employees
   Full Time **65**
   Part Time **21**

6. What methods do you use to communicate with employees?
   Telephone, Emails, Face-to-face,

7. Why do you use the selected methods of communication?
   They are the best and most effective options available

8. What are the main objectives you are trying to achieve with the use of public relations?
   Create exposure for the hotel to promote our facilities and packages/promotions.

9. Who are your main target publics?
   Customers

10. Which of the following PR techniques do you engage in to communicate with customers?
- Organisational Media- **Online Newsletter**
- Social Media-**Facebook group, Twitter account, Flickr/ Instagram, Linked In- (corporate)**
- Electronic Media- **Website, Electronic Publishing**

11. In your opinion, what efforts were most effective? Why?
    E-newsletter is targeted and its sent to people who are interested in the product. Facebook, reminds people of the hotel. More successful when photography is used.

12. How much time do you dedicate to public relations and reputation management within your business?

Social Media is updated every 2nd day- 10/12 hours over the course of a week.

13. In your opinion, what is the importance of public relations to your business operations?

Important

14. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with customers to the success of your business?

Very Important

15. In your opinion, how important is the formation of relationships with employees to the success of your business?

Very Important

16. Do you actively undertake planned communication efforts in order to build relationships with customers and employees?

Yes, with both customers only

17. Does your company have a dedicated staff member dedicated to the PR role or hire a consultancy within this area of expertise?

Yes-Consultancy

18. If yes, How do you communicate? And how often?

We have a company who look after our PR but they are assisted by the S&M Manager. Communication to all publics are on a daily basis.

19. Please give a brief description of your impression of public relations?

Managing the distribution about the business to our customers via various mediums, press visits, reviews, social media activities, competitions, etc