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THREE ROLES OF THE TRADE PRESS

Abstract: The trade press are often overlooked in marketing channels research as important, third party institutions that can influence relationships in a marketing system. Three specific roles for trade media are suggested: as an external source of information, as a contributor to channel climate and as a conduit of influence. Tentative propositions about factors influencing the impact of the trade press are outlined within a framework of directions for future research.

Marketing channels researchers have devoted little theoretical or empirical attention to how external institutions and processes influence dyadic relationships between channel members. One institution meriting special examination is the trade press.

In most industries and professions, the trade press is an integral part of the marketing system, serving as an important third-party communications source. The purpose of this article is to examine three distinct, albeit inter-related, roles played by the trade press in a marketing channel: as a facilitator of information exchange, as a contributor to channel climate, and as a conduit of influence.

Overview of Trade Press

The trade press are defined as specialized organizations that provide relevant, industry-related news and information to channel members. For the most part, the work of the trade press is manifested in trade publications--newspapers and magazines devoted to particular industries or occupational specialties.¹

The origins of the trade press can be traced to the House of Fugger, the 16th-century German mercantile cartel that pioneered the collection and dissemination of price and related trade information in newsletters (Matthews, 1959). Recognizing the market interest in such intelligence, other publishers soon launched economic news services in Holland, England and Germany (Kirsch, 1978)

Price and shipping publications in the New World began in Nova Scotia in 1752 (Grunwald, 1986). The Price Current represented the first true business publication format in colonial America, adapted from earlier European versions. The earliest was the Carolina Price Current, which was founded in 1774 as a two-column single-sheet listing of commodities prices (Gussow, 1984).

Historically, the appearance of trade papers accompanied the emergence of new industries in America. Grunwald (1986) notes that most early trade papers were directed to retailers because merchants dominated the business scene. However, as American industry began to grow, publications began that directed their content to producer markets. By 1900, some 800 specialized business publications were operation in the U.S. That figure would double in the next 25 years (Forsyth, 1964).

Today, approximately 4,200 business publications are produced in the United States, serving 179 industry classifications (Standard Rate and Data Service statistics cited in Emery, 1992). Morris (1988) distinguishes between vertical publications (which serve a single industry, such as automotive) and horizontal publications (which serve a particular function across industry classifications, e.g. purchasing). The circulation of trade publications range from 1,000 to 200,000 copies per issue, with a combined U.S. circulation of 122.5 million copies. The New England Journal of Medicine is the oldest continuously published trade publication in the country, founded in 1812. More than 90 of the trade publications operating today are more than 100 years old (Grunwald, 1986), suggesting that these publications have become fixtures in the industries they serve.

Although many publications are house organs of trade associations, the majority of trade publications are produced by independent publishers, which generate revenues from the sale of advertising, subscriptions, or both. Annual revenues now approach \$3 billion annually in a publishing industry that employs more than 100,000 persons (McAllister, 1990; Veronis, Suhler & Associates, 1991). While many single-publication publishers remain, a clear trend is toward diversified publishing firms, which produce several publications serving different industry niches. Many of these publishers are operated by media conglomerates that own other media properties (Grunwald, 1986; Gussow, 1984).

Marketing Channels Communications: A Systems Perspective

When considered at all, the role of the trade press has been addressed by marketing scholars almost exclusively from a promotional viewpoint. However, this is an overly narrow perspective, particularly in light of the increased recognition of the importance of communications in channels.

Preston (1970) says that the principal activities of marketing are communication and exchange. Bucklin (1964) says that communication "consists of all activities that serve to transmit to prospective buyers or sellers information concerning offers to buy or to sell and the acceptance of those offers" and defines communication as one of five functional structures in a channel of distribution.

Compared to exchange as a concept, communication has received less attention. (For early discussions, see Gross, 1968; Grabner and Rosenberg, 1969; Levitt, 1967; Webster, 1968.) More recently, communication has been incorporated in several comprehensive models of marketing relationships (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Robicheaux and El-Ansary, 1975-76). Also, the recent work of Mohr and Nevin (1990; Mohr, Fisher and Nevin, in press) has begun to explicate the underlying dimensions of channel communication. Yet, Mohr and Nevin treat communication

solely from the perspective of interorganizational communication, drawing on the organizational communication literature (e.g. Euske and Roberts, 1987; Krone, Jablin and Putnam, 1987). They do not address mediated or "mass" communications.

The relevance of the trade press is further evident when marketing is considered from a systems perspective (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987; Levy and Zaltman, 1975; Stern and Brown, 1969; Stidsen and Schulte, 1972). The trade media can be seen as a important part of the larger channel environment, consistent with Bucklin's (1964) definition of a channel of distribution as the full "set of institutions which perform all of the activities (functions) utilized to move a product and its title from production to consumption." Systems theorists emphasize the importance of communications generally (Parsons, 1951), while Chaffee (1975:92) has observed that "all social systems employ some combination of interpersonal and mediated communications in varying proportions."²

Third-Party Communications Sources

The trade press play an important role in a marketing system by serving as third-party communication sources -- one of a number of similar independent entities found in marketing. Others include management consultants of all types,³ trade associations,⁴ educational program sponsors,⁵ and research/rating services.⁶

Overall, relatively little attention has been paid to third-parties in the channels literature; a notable exception is third-party intervention in negotiation and conflict resolution (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987; Stern, 1971).

Bagozzi (1979:779) explains that marketing exchanges are influenced by the constraints or opportunities afforded by various third parties, which he defines as "social actors outside an exchange but with the actual or potential interest in activities of the exchange." Achrol, Reve and Stern (1983:58) specify various third-parties in their expanded model of the dyad environments: customers, suppliers, competitors and regulatory agents (which they suggest operate within the "primary task environment") and end-users, potential competitors, sub-suppliers and special interest groups (which they place in the larger macroenvironment). Third-party communications sources are absent from

Achrol, Reve and Stern's model because they represent communications intermediaries between the dyad and the other external forces specified. Each can be viewed as specialized entities which meet specific communications needs.

Figure 1 categorizes various types of dyadic and extra-dyadic communications activities that can be found in a marketing system, drawing on the distinctions that have been suggested by various researchers (Moriarty and Spekman, 1984; Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Morris, 1988). The figure differentiates between dyadic/extra-dyadic communications and suggests three tiers based on the degree of personal/unmediated communication versus impersonal/mediated communications

involved. It suggests that trade press engages in a form of impersonal, extra-dyadic communication that is formal, directional, and mediated.

Although their involvement in communication differs, third-party communications sources, including the trade press, exhibit a number of distinguishing characteristics:

Market expertise. Industry knowledge is the stock in trade of all third-party communication sources. Each is compensated for its ability to facilitate decision-making, whether in the form of dues, consulting fees, advertising rates or subscription charges.

Figure 1
A COMPARISON OF DYADIC AND EXTRA-DYADIC CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS

	Dyadic		Extra-Dyadic	
	Vehicle	Vehicle	Third-Party Sources	Characteristics of Communications
Personal	One-On-One Negotiations	Advice, Rumors, Gossip	Management Consultants	. Bidirectional . Informal or formal . Unmediated
Quasi-Personal	Meetings, Presentations Letters	Conferences Trade Shows Seminars	Trade Associations Educational Programs Sponsors	. Bidirectional . Formal . Somewhat mediated
Impersonal	Brochures Collateral Newsletters Videos	Research Reports News Reports	Research/Rating Services Trade Press	. Directional . Formal . Mediated

Boundary spanning. Each third-party accumulates industry expertise and knowledge from across the market and outside of the system itself; their scope of experience thus extends far beyond that of the particular channel members. Boundary-spanning is their principal function (Gemmill and Willemon, 1972; Frazier and Summers, 1984; Wall and Adams, 1974).

Independence. Each third-party has limited allegiance to any single channel member, which allows for objectivity in compiling, interpreting and disseminating market knowledge. This differentiates them from mere agents employed by a channel member (e.g. an advertising or public relations agency).

Interdependence. While independent, these third-party entities have a vested interest in the

viability of the system and are critically interdependent upon the industries they serve. Their ability to operate requires close industry cooperation.

Publicness. Each third-party entity operates in full view of the market, to at least some degree. Public visibility is not only probable, but can be a central feature of the service they provide.

Judgment making. Each third-party entity, while independent, makes evaluations that impact channel members' behaviors. These might be in the form of association policies, consultant recommendations, performance ratings or editorial stances.

Endorsement. Each third-party entity carries a certain level of prestige, based on its expertise, independence and visibility. As a result, the positions, recommendations, ratings or editorial judgments they make -- whether positive or negative -- are viewed as credible and represent an important source of channel power.

Three Roles of Trade Press

The trade media perform a valuable function in a market system by matching sellers with potential purchasers through advertising. The trade press utilizes its editorial content to attract an audience and, in so doing, also provides an array of valuable industry information in the form of news and feature stories, signed articles (Williams, 1983), case studies or application stories, and departments related to new products, personnel, and promotional activities and materials. Coverage typically includes industry events and trends and external developments with implications for the system.

In his classic statement of the functions of mass media, Lasswell (1948) suggested that media perform three functions in society: surveillance of the environment; correlation of the parts of society in responding to its environment; and transmission of cultural heritage. McQuail (1987:32-33) also suggests three functions of media, which he terms the service, associational and command modes of media. Building upon these views of mass media generally, the trade press can be seen performing three specific functions in a marketing channel (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
FUNCTIONS OF THE TRADE PRESS IN A MARKETING CHANNEL

As an External
Source of Information

As a Contributor to
Channel Climate

As a Conduit of
Influence

The first role parallels the first functions suggested by Lasswell and McQuail, respectively: The trade press serve as an external source of intelligence, enabling channel members to access external, independent information for use in decision-making.

The second role, which roughly parallels Lasswell's second and third points, relates to shaping the climate in which channel members operate. Here the trade press have a potentially potent influence on how channel members view the channel, their role and their relationships with others. In fostering channel climate, the trade press both shapes and reflects channel conditions (indicated by the light upward bound arrows in the figure).

The third role, which extends beyond the Lasswell model, and most closely parallels McQuail concept of a command mode, suggests that the trade press serve as conduits of influence through which one channel member attempts to alter the behavior of others through advertising (the purchase of space to communicate a commercial message) or publicity (providing commercially significant news: AMA, 1960).

Trade Press as An External Source of Information

At the most basic level, the trade press is facilitator of information search leading to an exchange. The importance of this function is underscored by Alderson's (1954) observation that the two principal activities of marketing are sorting and searching.

Elfenbein (1945) observed that the business press is a working tool that is valued by businesses as a source of information. Unlike other forms of media, the trade press is generally not a source of entertainment (Wright, 1986). Grunwald (1986:6) has observed that the content of trade publications is generally so specialized that duplication with other media is minimal, and "the business press has established itself as a combined information and shopping mall indispensable to decision-makers."

The scant empirical research involving the trade press has concentrated almost exclusively on this function in the context of industrial buying. Cyert, Simon and Trow (1956), in their classic participant-observation study of a computer acquisition by purchasing agents, cited the role of the trade press as an additional source that supplemented letter writing, discussions with salespeople, and consultations with competitors. Aguilar (1967) later found that executives read three or four business publications and skim five or six more. Today, the trade press is routinely as sources that can be consulted in making industrial purchasing decisions (Baker and Phifer, 1966; Gross, 1971; Heinritz, Farrell and Smith, 1986; Matthews, Robeson and Banbic, 1977; Reeder, Brierty and Brierty, 1987; Rosenbloom, 1991; Webster and Wind, 1972).

Most researchers who have examined the role of trade publications have focused on the value of the trade advertising. Morrill (1970) analyzed some 1,100 studies and concluded that trade advertising is effective. Most recently, the American Business Press, a publishers' trade group, asked 13,000 business and professional buying influencers in 11 industries about sources they looked to for information. The trade press was cited most often--by 82% of all respondents, leading salespersons and trade shows as the most cited source in eight of eleven industry groups studied (ABP, 1992).

Less attention has been paid to the role of the trade press' news content. Robinson and Stidman (1964, cited in Kotler, 1984) suggest that the importance of product news is relatively small but consistent along a continuum from industrial to consumer goods. However, Moriarty and Spekman's (1984) analysis of 14 sources of information among industrial buyers found that news in trade publications was a significant source of information, outranking both trade shows and trade publication advertising.

Obtaining market information from trade publications can be seen providing at least three benefits:

Efficiency in Decision-Making. By compiling and disseminating information in a narrow range of business activity, the trade press improves the efficiency of the search process. Robbin (1947) suggested that trading originated as the cooperative organization of communication activities to achieve economic ends; trade press advertising and news can be viewed as a modern-day mechanisms that facilitates trading.

Among the unique features, trade publications circulate widely within an organization, thus expanding the points of access to information in an organization, often reaching the highest echelons of management. The importance of multiplicity of contacts has access has been recognized in the channels literature generally (Frazier, Spekman and O'Neal, 1988; Pfeffer and Salancik (1978). Unlike information that might be presented by a sales representative to only a few persons in an organization, messages in trade publications are readily accessible to a broad range of staff as a result of multiple subscriptions and high pass-along readership (Cady, 1945). This ubiquitous nature eliminates vagaries that can be created when only one gatekeeper manages the flow of information into the organization (Webster and Wind, 1972; Wall and Adams, 1974; Oliver, 1990).

Reduced Uncertainty. By providing important market information, the trade press information can improve decision-making, thus reducing uncertainty. Huber and Daft (1987) more precisely term uncertainty perceived environmental uncertainty (PEU), suggesting that it is a function of information load, complexity and turbulence. Significantly, these same concerns cogently summarize why news media were created. The trade press function to organize and reduce the information burden on individuals, crystalize issues, and help people make sense out of trends within the channel.

The root of "news" is "new," suggesting that one of the principal reasons that audiences seek out media is to help them deal with change. While improved information is valuable, limits exist in reliance upon information alone to reduce uncertainty, particularly in the ability of the trade press to provide tailored and timely information on any particular occasion. In some cases, altering the governance structures through the creation of hierarchies (Heide and John, 1987; Klein, Frazier and Ruth, 1990; Oliver, 1990, Williamson, 1985) or interorganizational relationships (Oliver, 1990; Achrol, 1991) might be more reliable.

Reduced Dependency. The existence of third-party communications sources, such as the

trade press, also reduces the dependence of channel members within a dyad for information. Resource dependency theory (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) suggests that to the degree that outside forces control resources that are important to the organization, the organization is dependent on them.

By making market information more accessible, third-party communications sources reduce the degree to which an organization is information-dependent on channel partners, making them less vulnerable to the limited scope of experience, biases, or opportunistic behavior of another channel member. Williamson (1985) has defined opportunism as "the incomplete or distorted disclosure of information, especially to calculated efforts to mislead, distort, disguise, obfuscate or otherwise confuse."

The use of such outside referents as a check reduces dependency by providing easily accessible validation and verification.

Trade Press as a Contributor to Channel Climate

Beyond serving as a source of information that can be accessed at the option of a channel member, the trade press perform a second function: helping to shape the environment that exists in the marketing channel.

If a market or industry is likened to society as a whole, the trade press represent the mass communication system for that system. In keeping with Ouchi's (1981) notion of clan, an industry can be viewed as bringing together various individuals and organizations who share a sense of identity and affinity. The trade press can be seen as one of a "variety of social mechanisms which reduce differences between individual and organizational goals and produces a sense of community" (Ouchi, 1981:136). Indeed, publisher David Brandt terms the trade press a form of "community journalism" (Michaels, 1978).

For many individuals, reading a trade publication represents a major cultural link to a often far-flung professional referent world. Trade publications are a particularly tangible form of "being a part of the system" and have the an advantage over other communications because of their pervasiveness, easy access, and low cost.

The concept of channel climate has received considerable attention (Falcione, Sussman and Herden, 1987; James and Jones, 1974; Schul, Little and Pride, 1985). Payne (1971:156) defines climate as "a molar concept reflecting the content and strength of the prevalent values, norms, attitudes, behaviors and feelings of members of a social system."

As a third-party communications source, the trade press can be viewed as one of a number of institutions in the marketing system that shape the environment in which channel members operate. Lippman (1922) was among the first to recognize the role of media in shaping an individual's world view. He distinguished between "the world outside and the picture inside our heads," explaining

"whatever we believe to a true picture we treat as if it were the environment itself." References to what Lippman termed the "pseudo-environment" can be found in the marketing literature as the "enacted environment" (Achrol, Reve and Stern, 1983; Cespedes, 1992; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Weick, 1979), while media scholars, in the tradition of sociologist Kurt Lewin, have examined the same phenomenon as the "construction of social reality" (McLeod and Chaffee, 1972; Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Wright, 1986).

Within a marketing channel, the trade press can be viewed as a creator of climate, or what might be termed competitive reality. Among the ways media can contribute to climate, the trade press 1) strives for market equilibrium, 2) promotes norms, 3) arbitrates conflicts, 4) fosters trust, and 5) provides benchmarks for satisfaction among channel members.

Maintaining System Equilibrium. Probably the most fundamental role of the trade press is to help preserve the system itself. The trade press has a vested interest in the orderly operation of the system and can be seen promoting equilibrium in several ways. Their content, for example, stresses issues such as productivity, stability, adaptability to outside forces. Similarly, the trade press can be seen fostering cooperation, horizontal integration, or systasy (Alderson, 1965; Pennings, 1981) by reinforcing the alternative roles of channel members and such values as solidarity, integrity and mutuality.

The trade press often attempts to create an identity for the industry and to draw the industry together in the absence of an authority figure that might be found in a bureaucratic structure (Ouchi, 1981). Serving as "voice of the industry" is a common role self-ascribed to the trade press, and trade editors and publishers are frequently sought out as experts on the industries they cover by the general press. Grunwald (1986) says that publications with strong editorial content can "build enviable images as leaders and arbiters." Gussow (1986) explains:

Though the basic purpose of specialized business periodicals is to provide its readers with news and information, there is another equally important role for some business periodical publishers and editors. This is leadership.

Specialized business periodicals are engaged in leadership activities have been able to shape the direction of the industries they serve; some have actually played a vital role in creating new industries and/or altering industries to the point where these become new fields of business. Business magazines have been involved, for example, in sponsoring and conducting seminars on industry problems, in developing and managing trade shows, in setting up award programs, and in helping to further (or in actually forming) technical and scientific societies or associations. The benefits to publications participating in such activities have been both improved financial status and heightened prestige.

Although the media are often portrayed as change agents, evidence suggests they often operate in an opposite manner. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) suggest that the media confirms or condones the present structure of society. Gramsci (1971) describes this as a process of hegemony,

while Noelle-Neumann (1973) theorizes that media often create a "spiral of silence" in which dominant views are accentuated and minority views are discouraged.⁷ Significantly, Wright (1986:20) notes that the propensity of media to maintain equilibrium is especially strong "when mass media heavily rely on government, business or other institutional sources for interpretation of events." Such is the case with trade media.

Establishment of Norms. One of the mechanisms used to maintain equilibrium is through the propagation and perpetuation of norms. Heide and John (1992) define norms in terms of expectations about behaviors that are at least partially shared by a group of decision-makers. In this sense, the trade press are overseers of the "rules of the game."

Norms have received extensive consideration in the marketing literature (Achrol, 1991; Arndt, 1979; Angelmar and Stern, 1978; John, 1985; Palamountain, 1969; Reve and Stern, 1979; Robicheaux and El-Ansary, 1975-76). Macneil's work on relational exchanges underscores the importance of norms when he suggests that formal rules of law have given way to more complex, often ambiguous standards that are taken to be typical, not merely ideal (Spriggs and Nevin, 1992).

Frazier and Rody (1991) suggest that the overall amount of information exchanged between channel members in an interorganization context has a homogenizing effect on the normative climate of a channel. It can be argued that the same principle applies at the level of mediated communications. The trade press, like other mass media, can be a shaper of norms in a system. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989:221) observe that

"...people in groups organize their exchanges with each other within mutually understood rules. ... The mass media are a major source of social expectations about the social organizations in society. That is, in their content, they describe or portray the norms, roles, rankings and actions of virtually every kind of group known in contemporary social life.

At least two explanations have been put forth as to the media's normative influence. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) stress the ethnicizing effect of media, i.e. the fact that media serve as an enforcement agent, which strengthens social control by exposing deviant behavior to public view and censure. Alternatively, the normative impact of mass media can be explained in terms of social learning theory in which media portrayals provide modeling for expected behavior (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

Conflict Arbitration. Another of the basic functions of news media is to report on disequilibrium in a system. This might involve external threats from outside the system (politics, economics, etc.), malfunctions of the market mechanisms (shortages, price vagaries), changes in market structure (mergers, acquisitions, failures), or conflicts between channel members (disputes, negotiations, litigation, legislative remedies.)

Channel conflict is defined as a situation in which one channel member perceives another

channel member(s) to be engaged in behavior that is preventing or impeding it from reaching its goals, usually due to goal incompatibility or domain dissensus. Conflict can vary in terms of its intensity, frequency and importance (Magrath and Hardy, 1988), and often can provide positive benefits (Pondy, 1967; Deutsch, 1969; Haberland and Nevin, 1992). However, conflict generally is considered dysfunctional in a channel (Dant and Schul, 1992; Magrath and Hardy, 1988; Stern and Gorman, 1969).

News coverage of a conflict can be viewed as representing one mechanism for conflict resolution. Stern (1971) cites publicity in trade publications among a variety of conflict management mechanisms (see also Brown, Lusch and Smith, 1991). By covering conflict in a channel, the trade press gives salience to an issue, provides a public airing of alternative positions and occasionally chooses to take sides (Grunwald, 1986). Coverage can prompt quick settlement (as to avoid undue publicity) or to protract the disagreement (when parties choose to battle the issue in the press). Through published editorials, trade press editors often comment on current conflicts in an industry, and thus serve as catalysts for channel opinion change. While such editorial judgments might not involve taking sides, or resolving the specific problem at hand, trade press editorials frequently attempt to define the terms upon which a particular dispute or problem should be resolved in the future--in the absence of a central authority.

Trust. Another important role of the trade press in creating a normative climate is to provide clues upon which a channel member can make evaluations of other channel members. One of these evaluations resolves around trust, or the belief that a party's word or promise is reliable and that the party will fulfill its obligations in an exchange (Blau, 1964; Frazier, Spekman and O'Neal, 1988; Rotter, 1967; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985; Swan, Trawick and Silva, 1985). Braddach and Eccles (1989) argue that trust (along with price and authority) represents a major control mechanism against opportunistic behavior.

The trade media can be seen fostering trust by reporting publicly on the activities of channel members. Implicit in the media's role as an independent third-party entity is the inference made by readers that the news carried by the trade press is objective and reliable. As such, reports about the behavior of channel members can be used as a third-party verification of observations or representations made, and thus serve as a proxy to predict future behaviors.

In effect, readers of trade media transfer the trust they hold in the media to the subjects they read about. Media theorists and practitioners describe the transference as an implied third-party endorsement (Detwiler, 1974, Hallahan, 1994; Rotman, 1973). Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) suggest that trust is especially important in the awareness and exploration phases of relationship development, when experience levels of the two channel members is limited. Coincidentally, this is the phase when third-party sources have been shown to be most significant in the mix of sources accessed in making purchasing decisions (Kotler, 1991).

Satisfaction. Finally, for both merging and developed market relationships, the trade press can be seen as providing an benchmark by which channel members evaluate satisfaction in a channel

relationship. Satisfaction is defined here as an affective response of channel members toward salient aspects of another channel organization (Schul, Little and Pride, 1985:13).

Satisfaction can be conceptualized as the reciprocal of conflict: when satisfaction is high, causes for conflict are low. The effect of higher satisfaction is presumed to be higher performance, which can be measured in terms of higher morale and cooperation (Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Brown, Lusch and Smith, 1991; Robicheaux and El-Ansary, 1975-76). However the obverse also has been posited: higher performance leads to greater satisfaction.

The role of the trade press relative to satisfaction is to help establish expectations of channel members about their relationships with others. By carrying news and feature stories about the successful (and unsuccessful) relationships that exist among other channel members, trade media provide an idealized picture of the type of relationship that other members might expect from the same channel partners. In Ouchi's (1980:137) framework, news covered in the trade press can be considered a type of performance evaluation "that takes the form of subtle reading of symbols that cannot be translated into explicit verifiable measures." In social exchange theory terms, media stories and advertisements provide an important comparison level against which relationships can be based (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959).⁸

Trade Press as Conduits of Influence

The third function of the trade press is as a conduit of influence between channel members. Influence can be examined in the broader context of channel power, or the ability of one channel member to exercise control over another.⁹ While power has received extensive discussion, influence -- the means of communications used in its application -- has received far less attention (Frazier and Summers, 1984).

Publicity and advertising are the two principal influence strategies used in mediated communications. While these two techniques have been recognized by marketers in a promotional context (Assael, 1985; Kotler, 1991; Morris, 1988; Powers, 1991; Sherlock, 1991; Wolfe and Twedt, 1970), these have been treated in only the most general and superficial way by channel researchers as tools to influence an organization's external relationships (Kotter, 1979; Pennings, 1981; Zeithaml and Zeithaml, 1984).

The ability of a channel member to utilize the trade press is based on the political economy of trade press operations. The trade press are supported financially by the organizations that these media cover. Support is direct through advertising and indirect through the provision of publicity.

Gandy (1982:61) has termed both publicity and advertising as forms of information subsidy, which he defines as "an attempt to produce influence over the actions of others by controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions. This information is characterized as a subsidy because the source of that information causes it to be made available at something less than the cost a user would face in the absence of the subsidy." The subsidization process can be seen

operating at two levels: influencers subsidize the cost to the trade publication of acquiring and disseminating timely and useful material, while influencers also reduce the cost to the ultimate audience of the information obtained.

To the degree an organization expends more effort than its competitors in reaching channel members through advertising and publicity, the ability of that channel member to exert greater influence is increased theoretically. However, the limited channel capacity and the need of the trade press to maintain editorial integrity as an independent, credible entity serves as a check on potential excesses.

Both advertising and publicity can be characterized as mediated, noncoercive influence strategies, consistent with influence strategy schemes that have been suggested at the interorganizational level. For example, Frazier and Sheth (1985) outline a model of five different influence strategies that might be applied in an attitudinal-behavioral influence framework. Their indirect influence strategies -- which incorporates information exchange, information control and modeling -- tracks the principal influences types that can be seen at work in mediated communications. In situations of interpersonal indirect influence, the authors explain that boundary personnel are left to themselves to process the information and to draw their own conclusions without any direct request for action (Frazier and Summers, 1985:34). Noncoercive publicity and advertising can be seen operating in a parallel vein. Although the content might propose a specific course of action, the audience is left to draw their own conclusion and decide whether any action is appropriate. Both are noncontingent forms of influence (Scheer and Stern, 1992) that preserve an influencee's sense of autonomy--an important factor in terms of satisfaction and trust (Schul, Little and Pride, 1985).

Frazier and Summer (1985) explain that noncoercive strategies are successful because they emphasize altering perceptions about the inherent desirability of particular behaviors -- contrasted to other strategies dependent on promises, threats, requests, or legislative pleas. John (1984) similarly suggests that the potency of noncoercive approaches relies upon the internal mental processes of the target. Consistent with these observations, publicity and advertising in the trade press can be seen as directed toward changing or maintaining perceptions about three key factors; 1) the market environment, 2) the influencer, 3) market relationships between channel members.

Perceptions About Environment If the trade press can help construct competitive reality, as suggested previously, building awareness and providing new information through publicity and advertising de facto are attempts to alter the enacted environment. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) cite public relations and advertising as forms of "information control," which they identify as a mechanism for the exercise and avoidance of influence. Cespedes (1992) more recently called for more examination of "ecological control," which he defines as a way to alter the terms of an exchange. Altering environmental perceptions is also consistent with Hardy's (1992) view of "unobtrusive power," which is based upon averting conflict.

By choosing to heavily publicize or advertise their presence in a market, a channel member

can influence what issues an influencee thinks about -- a process termed agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Shaw and McCombs, 1977). They also can shape the framing of news and information, i.e. defining the nature of the issue in a manner consistent with how the influencer would want the issue thought about (Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974).

Perceptions About Influencer A second major category of mediated indirect influence deals specifically with perceptions about the influencer itself. The importance of an influencer creating a favorable impression is acknowledged generally (Cheney and Vibbert, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Levitt, 1967; Spiro and Perreault, 1979).

Publicity and advertising employ various techniques to persuade, i.e. move other channel members toward a specific belief, attitude, or behavior. In a channel context, the persuasive efforts most frequently revolves around overcoming hesitancy about entering into a relationship, or in specifying which relationship to enter. Significantly, the persuasive influence strategies most commonly found revolve around the three bases of noncoercive power suggested by French and Raven (1959): expert, referent and legitimate power.

By showcasing propriety products, special knowledge. or problem-solving capabilities in advertising or publicity, influencers focus on their expertness. Publicity is a particularly potent form of influence because the news content of trade publications is thought to carry the publication's implied third-party endorsement (Hallahan, 1994), while most readers understand that any channel member can purchase advertising.¹⁰

The second approach commonly found capitalizes on referent power, or what French and Raven (1959) call a feeling of "oneness" or a desire for such an identity. Organizations and individuals want to be identified with well-known, prestigious organizations. Repeated visibility of one channel member in media can be seen as one way to maintain that identity, or "mindshare" (Stern and El-Ansary, 1992). Much of publicity and advertising that can be found in the trade press emphasizes the congruence between the influencer's goals and those of other channel members. Thus, influencers portray themselves as friendly, accommodative and culturally similar.

Finally, exposure in the trade press can be viewed as a way to attain legitimacy. Legitimate power is based on the values that are internalized by channel members and suggest that certain channel members ought to, or have a "right" to, exert influence and that others have an obligation to accept it.

Exposure in trade publications, like media generally, confers status on the organization (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948). Wright (1986:18) explains, because of the power of the media to legitimize the subjects they cover, "... persons, organizations and issues that get reported by the mass media are seen as important by the public, at least for the moment. Frequent attention by the mass media, presumably further verifies one's importance."

The status conferral function of the trade press benefits channel members by focusing attention on issues, people and organizations to which they should pay attention. Coverage thus can

accord prominence to newcomers on a prospective basis or perpetuate the importance of market leaders whose influence might be waning.

Perceptions About Relationships. Although exposure through publicity or advertising itself might be used as a reward or punishment, publicity and advertising in the trade press can be used to reinforce existing relationships, a process that combines elements of both environmental and influencer "image" control.

The willingness and ability of certain channel members to gain visibility in the trade press represents an important technique for preserving power in the channel. Whereas the upstart firm in an industry will seek out exposure -- and can often obtain awareness at a level that exceeds their position -- channel leaders and other established players often enjoy an advantage of resources that allows them to reinforce their position. Examples of reinforcement at work can be found in the high readership of trade articles and ads (Morrill, 1970) pertaining to firms with which channel members already have relationships. While they could obtain information or judge the source through direct means, the trade press provides an outside source of validation.

Reinforcement can take another form. While researchers have found that coercive power has a dysfunctional impact on collaborative relationships, sometimes the use of coercive power is necessary (Scheer and Stern, 1992). The trade press provides a an independent forum through which channel members can explain or justify such coercive actions, and thus allay concerns that might arise as a result of rumors or negative media reports, i.e. "damage control." Here the message to others in the channel is that the their relationship with the influencer is not jeopardized, despite problems that might have occurred with others.

Future Directions for Trade Press Research

A quarter-century ago, Webster (1967) lamented that little was known about the use of "noncommercial" information. While industrial purchasing behavior provided the context for his remark then, his concern could have been applied to channels generally. The dearth of knowledge remains today.

This review has suggested that the trade press represents a specific type of third-party communications source that can be utilized by channel members to either obtain or to communicate knowledge. At the same time, the trade press can be seen as making an independent contribution to the climate within a channel. And, in doing so, the trade press are not passive communication utilities, but are active participants in the communications within the channel.

Figure 3 outlines four types of communications common in channels, illustrating the dominant benefits found in each. Cell 1 represents personal, dyadic communications, the context that has dominated channels communications research to date. The three primary communications approaches

and benefits here include: *explanation* (description and objections handling), *demonstration* (e.g.

Figure 3
Distinguishing Communications Characteristics/Benefits

	Mode of Communication	
	Personal	Mediated
Within Dyad	1. PRESENTATION EXPLANATION DEMONSTRATION NEGOTIATION	3. SUPPLEMENTATION DOCUMENTATION ILLUSTRATION DRAMATIZATION
Involving Third-Party Source	2. CONSULTATION VERIFICATION VALIDATION	4. PUBLICATION LEGITIMATION ENDORSEMENT

showing how a product works) and *negotiation* (establishing the terms of a relationship). Cell 2 suggests that when a third-party is introduced to the interpersonal communication mix, the primary emphasis or benefits shift to recommendation, *verification* (confirmation of facts) or *validation* (support for a choice made).

With the introduction of mediated communications, represented in the right column, an important additional dimension is added. Cell 3 represents the various mediated communications tools used within a channel relationship, such letters, brochures, catalogs, videobrochures, contracts, etc. These offer *documentation* (additional details not practical to explain in person or permanent records or explanations or negotiations), *illustration* (verbal or graphic depictions of points difficult to communicate verbally or requiring continued study not possible with a demonstration), and *dramatization* (presentation of information in a compelling way that taps both cognition and affect).

Trade publications, as represented in Cell 4, combine the verification and validation benefits common to other third-party communications with the dramatization, documentation and illustration available in dyadic, mediated communications. In addition, the trade press add *legitimation* (both functions of the *status conferral* of the media) and *endorsement* (a special type of third-party verification and validation).

The Future of the Trade Press

As organizations become more complex, less rigidly hierarchial, and more laden with information, individuals at all levels within organizations will become less reliant on internal sources for information. Instead, organizational staff members will become dependent on external sources of information, and more individuals within organizations will take on roles as boundary spanners. One explanation for the recent proliferation of trade publications (many of which are extremely narrow in their focus) is the need for decentralized decision-makers to access specialized information, coupled with the desire of advertisers to reach these highly autonomous decision makers.

Significantly, the influence of the trade press transcends the various types of governance structures now found in marketing channels. While created initially to facilitate discrete market exchanges, the trade press has a role to play in domesticated markets (Arndt, 1979), marketing exchange and marketing coalition organizations (Achrol, 1991), and even in vertically integrated structures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many workers within franchise systems and multi-level corporations obtain significant information about their own organizations through trade media, as if they operated in a more transactional versus relational environment.

Technological innovations in communications would suggest that trade publications, as we presently know them, will be altered dramatically in coming years. Large-scale computerized data bases, for example, provide channel members with vast amounts of data. However, the sheer information load confronting channel members suggests that one of the most useful functions of all third-party communications sources is to provides cues as to which information to attend to and how to interpret it (see Malhotra, 1984).

Although the form of delivery might change with the advent of new technologies such as the World Wide Web, electronic mail, facsimile, and narrowcasting, the need for the trade press as a synthesizer and interpreter of trends will remain. The trade press will not only provide ready access to information, but in so doing will signal channel members about what's important and the values and norms of behavior within the system.

Figure 4
A SUMMARY OF TRADE PRESS FUNCTIONS AND ISSUES

Function	Suggested Effects	Research Priorities
External Source of Information	Improves Efficiency Reduces Uncertainty Reduces Dependence	Better understand extent and contexts of use of trade media as a source and underlying reasons.
Contributor to Channel Climate	Maintains System Equilibrium Establishes, Enforces Norms Arbitrates Conflict Fosters Trust	Examine relationship of trade press organizations and personnel to the industries they serve and how trade press content reflects prevalent beliefs, norms

Provides Benchmark for Satisfaction and values in industry.

Conduit of Influence	Shapes Perceptions of Environment Enhances Perceptions About Influencer Defines Perceptions About Power	Research views of influencers and of influencees relative to preferences and effectiveness of mediated versus interpersonal influence attempts.
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Clearly, the trade press are not all-powerful and will supplant organizational dyads as the prime focus of study in channels. Kotler (1984:486) sums up the problem well by observing, "Mass communications channels tend to have less insistent presence than personal channels, which means that audience members can more easily avoid them or tune them out." However, mediated communications, as represented in the trade press, can be conceptualized as a viable, albeit supplementary, communication source whose role is worthy of attention by marketing researchers.

Tentative Propositions

The trade press represent an untapped opportunity to examine channel communications in a fuller and richer context, to better understand the role of extra-dyadic third parties in marketing systems, and to integrate the hitherto unbridged research being conducted in channels and promotions, especially in the area of business-to-business promotion.

More descriptive knowledge needs to be compiled about trade press operations and use, and how these factors vary by industry, before channels researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the trade press. However, as a summary and as foundation for future research, this paper concludes by suggesting three broad sets of propositions:

P1: Channel members will rely heavily on the trade press as sources of information in channel situations where:

- a) Efficiency of searching information is critical (e.g. time or money is limited)
- b) High uncertainty exists (e.g. a new problem to be solved, a new vendor to be evaluated, a high-risk decision to be made, heavy competition)
- c) High dependency exists (i.e. a need to verify claims or a desire to validate a decision)
- d) Interpersonal sources of information are absent or undependable (e.g. personal experience or access to sales representatives is limited)

P2: Trade publications have the most influence over the climate of a channel where:

- a) Environmental uncertainty is high, requiring ready access to specialized knowledge and/or unity in the channel (e.g. highly regulated or politically sensitive industries or industries undergoing difficult times)

- b) Market concentration is low (i.e. there are many players involved in market-type transactions, and comparatively few vertically or horizontally integrated governance structures)
- c) Within channels dominated by vertically or horizontally integrated organizations, low levels of trust or satisfaction are present or internal interpersonal or mediated communications are poor.
- d) Other third-party communications sources are absent or weak (e.g. a new industry without a viable trade association, or few management consultants, educational program sponsors or research firms)

P3: Channel members utilize trade publications as mediated conduits of influence in channel conditions where:

- a) Information load is high, resulting from complexity or heavy competition, thus making interpersonal Communications impractical, and influencers can appreciably alter the information environment.
- b) Influencers require a competitive advantage through dramatization, legitimation or endorsement, as supplements to interpersonal influence strategies.
- c) Interpersonal communications are deemed insufficient by the influencer to maintain a channel relationship.

The first propositions focus on the channel audience, recognizing the trade press among many information sources that might be accessed in decision-making. The primary research approach is psychological, drawing heavily from the search literature as well as channel research pertaining to uncertainty, dependency. The second set of research questions address the trade press as institutions, focusing on interaction with other organizations within the system, largely from a sociological perspective. The third group addresses the question in terms of the sources, combining managerial, promotional and psychological perspectives.

From this discussion, it is clear the trade press can be examined within the context of many of the central concepts found in the channels literature. The three roles specified outlined in paper provide the foundation for a program of research that examines mediated, third-party communications from three distinct perspectives and levels and units of analysis. Develop a better understanding the role of trade press is an another step in developing a more comprehensive knowledge of how marketing channels operate.

Notes

1. Trade publishers can be involved in a wide range of industry information programs, including directory and book publishing, conventions, exhibits and conferences, data base marketing and the like. This discussion is limited to the role of regularly produced media of mass communication.
2. Political economy approaches also suggest that external and internal political and economic forces shape decision-making and channel relationships (Arndt, 1981, 1983; Achrol, Reve and Stern, 1983; Stern and Reve, 1980; Zald, 1970). The trade press alternatively can be viewed as a part of the political economy as or as a conduit through which its influences are transmitted.
3. Experts outside of the exchange relationships are frequently called upon to advise channel members and in so doing facilitate communication within the system. In the broadest sense, a management consultant includes any expert, including specialists such as arbitrators, attorneys and appraisers, to name a few.
4. While many industry groups are formed to cope with specific problems (government regulations, standards, training, etc.), one of the most important functions of trade groups is communication. Associations serve as a foci of information exchange, take positions and give advice that can influence market behavior (Assael, 1969; Oliver, 1990; Stabler and Aldrich, 1983).
5. Various industries have special educational programs operated by trade associations, professional societies and independent for-profit entities that aim to improve industry personnel performance. These organizations also provide a forum for members to communicate.
6. These independent firms compiled channel information that would be difficult or costly for individual channel members to develop, then disseminate it for a fee. These include market research firms, many of which make market information available publicly in addition to the proprietary research they conduct for clients, e.g. A.C. Nielsen's summary broadcast ratings. Other examples include rating services serving specific industries, such as securities (Standards and Poor's), insurance (A.M. Best) and automotive and computers (J.D. Powers and Associates).
7. Perceptual measures of climate and satisfaction often are not consistent with objective reality (see Churchill, Ford and Walker, 1976; Progressive Grocer, 1991).
8. Media representatives, including those from the Frankfurt and Marxist schools, stress that this is principally a function of the political economy of the media ownership (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Gitlin, 1988). Others stress that it reflects subtle influences created in the workplace and felt by media employees (Breed, 1955).
9. Examinations of power in channels draws heavily on Emerson's (1962) resource-dependency approach and French and Raven's (1959) explication of five bases or sources of power (see also Raven and Kruglanski, 1970). Coercive power is generally considered dysfunctional (Dwyer,

Schurr and Oh, 1987; Frazier and Summers, 1984; Frazier and Rody, 1991; Frazier, Spekman and O'Neal, 1988; Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Kasulius, Spekman and Bagozzi, 1978; Lusch, 1976; Wilkinson, 1979). Effects of power has been found to be mediated by whether it is exercised or unexercised (Gaski and Nevin, 1985) and whether rewards and punishments are used on a contingent or noncontingent basis (Scheer and Stern, 1992). This approach differs from others conceptualizations (Parsons, 1963; see also Tedeschi and Bonoma, 1972).

10. Stern and El-Ansary (1992) suggest that critical to the use of expert power are the power sources positioning themselves within the flow of communication and absorbing uncertainty by providing useful information. By generating an on-going flow of information that is carried in the trade press as either news or advertising, channel members meet those two important criteria. The authors also note that continued reliance on expert power requires doling out information in small portions and continually investing in the development of new information, two approaches commonly found in trade press influence strategies.

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