

**THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA:
A CASE STUDY ON THE ROLES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
PRACTITIONERS IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN PENANG**

by

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**AMALAN PERHUBUNGAN AWAM DI MALAYSIA: SATU KAJIAN KES
TERHADAP PERANAN PENGAMAL
PERHUBUNGAN AWAM DI INDUSTRI HOTEL
DI PULAU PINANG**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini merupakan satu kes terhadap peranan pengamal perhubungan awam di industri perhotelan di Pulau Pinang. Peranan 23 orang pengamal perhubungan awam dikaji dengan menggunakan kajian tipologi peranan Broom (1982). Faktor yang mempengaruhi peranan pengamal juga ditinjau. Kajian ini menggunakan metodologi soal selidik and temubual. Borang soal selidik dihantar pada bulan Januari 2009 kepada pengamal perhubungan awam di industri perhotelan di Pulau Pinang dengan menggunakan *purposive sampling*. Perangkaan deskriptif digunakan untuk menalisis data kajian. Temubual terperinci dengan 10 orang pengamal pula dijalankan pada Disember 2009. Kajian mendapati bahawa di samping keempat-empat peranan Broom iaitu juruteknik komunikasi (*communication technician*), penasihat (*expert prescriber*), pemudah cara komunikasi (*communication facilitator*) dan *problem-solving facilitator*, pengamal juga memainkan peranan sosial iaitu mengikut keadaan. Namun, kajian mendapati bahawa peranan *technician* merupakan peranan utama para pengamal. Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa unsur seperti pengalaman dalam bidang perhubungan awam dan saiz jabatan perhubungan awam adalah antara faktor yang mempengaruhi peranan pengamal.

THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY
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PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS
IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY IN PENANG

ABSTRACT

This is a case study on the roles public relations practitioners enact in the hotel industry. The roles of 23 practitioners were studied using Broom's (1982) 24-item role typology. The factors influencing practitioners' role enactment were also investigated. The study employs the survey method and in-depth interview. A survey was conducted to collect data using the purposive sampling method. In January 2009, survey questionnaires were distributed to practitioners in the hotel industry in Penang. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The in-depth interview with 10 practitioners was conducted in December 2009. The findings suggest that public relations practitioners in the hotel industry perform a combination of the technician, expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving facilitator and social roles depending on the occasion with the technician role as the dominant one. Factors such as public relations work experience and size of public relations department emerged as determinants of practitioner role enactment.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Public relations is a profession that is growing in importance worldwide. Today, public relations is perceived as a complex and dynamic process of negotiating and compromise with key stakeholders. According to Grunig, this new approach of “building good relationships with strategic publics” will require public relations practitioners to be strategic communication managers rather than communication technicians (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009, p. 98). In sharing this sentiment, Abbas (1989) said that public relations help build bridges of friendship and goodwill between an organisation and its publics.

Global Alliance (www.globalpr.com) estimates that there are some three million people practising public relations as their main profession worldwide (Wilcox et al., 2009). Malaysia has approximately 10,000 public relations practitioners (Hamdan, 2009). Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth and van Leuven (2004) opine that the growth of public relations globally is because of the value public relations brings to governments, commercial entities and nonprofit organisations.

There is a major growth of public relations practice in Asia such as China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam with the expansion of their free market economies that creates a fertile environment for increased public relations activities (Wilcox et al., 2009; Yan, 2009; Martin, 2009; Pang and Yeo, 2009; Chaidaroon, 2009; Mak, 2009). The public relations practice and industry in Malaysia are fast progressing and maturing (Idid, 2004). It is emerging as a recognised profession because organisations are beginning to realise the value of public relations. All types of organisations need public relations as public interest is for organisational interest (Umi, 2001).

Public relations helps private companies to promote their image and win over customers, thus increasing their bottom line (Idid, 2004). The practice of public relations has become more specialised and complex with globalisation, advanced information and communication technologies and the emergence of new media. According to Hamdan (2009), organisations that want to promote a positive image, reputation and high favourable visibility must employ public relations practitioners who are professionally trained, ethical and experienced in the field to create the desired impact.

Like many organisations in the hospitality industry, hotels operate in a highly competitive environment and are more sensitive than many others to world economy, policy issues and public attitude in establishing a solid corporate

identity. According to Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000), the hotel industry today is a global industry and the pace of competition and growing volume are among the challenges facing hotel organizations. In his review on global public relations, Wilcox et al., (2009) posits that public relations is growing rapidly in the hospitality and service industry in Serbia, Singapore and Thailand. This is because Serbia is actively promoting its tourism and travel industry while Singapore is adding new resorts and casino and Thailand is the primary hub in South East Asia for international tourism. Likewise, Penang, a well-known tourist destination in Malaysia is aggressively promoting tourism as one of the main engines of economic growth with the development of new hotels and convention centres.

The role of public relations practitioners in the hotel industry has evolved and is continuing to evolve. The key role of a public relations manager twenty five years ago was “to entertain important guests, handle customer complaints and go shopping with the wives of important customers” (Wallis, 1997, p. 382). According to Wee (1986), the scenario in Malaysia then was similar as hotel public relations took performed the technical functions of wining and dining. Back then, proper specialists were not hired. Instead, the hotel depended on secretaries in the sales department to send hotel collateral to key publics and the Director of Sales to handle the media (Wallis, 1997). Public relations in the hotel industry used to be a merchandising arm of sales providing marketing

support. As such, it used to be a common sight for public relations practitioners to report directly to the sales and marketing director.

The role of public relations practitioners today has taken on a new meaning. Today, as public relations is being valued by the industry, most public relations practitioners have direct access to hotel general managers, a move which bodes well for the industry. Most international hotel chains today have a public relations department. The purpose of the public relations department is to build a brand for the hotel by organising events that will increase the hotel's profile.

As the building of strong corporate image and long-term relationships with stakeholders becomes necessary for hotels to stay competitive, the need for effective public relations has also grown as public relations is crucial in the promotional activities and communication of hotel organisations (Huertas, 2008). Public relations plays an important role in constructing images of locations, activities and identities (L'Etang, Falkheimer and Lugo, 2006). Despite this, the hotel industry continues to be conceptually dominated by marketing as discovered by Huertas (2008) because experts in the field have yet to distinguish between the different areas of communicative disciplines.

This study seeks to explore how public relations is practised in the hotel industry in Penang. It analyses the roles hotel public relations practitioners enact, factors

that influence the role enactment, public relations models practised and the management's perception of the public relations practice and its relationship with the stature of public relations practitioners in the organisation.

1.2 The Hotel Industry in Penang

The hotel industry plays a significant role in the economy of Penang which has been established as a premier destination for local and international tourists (www.visitpenang.gov.my). In December 2008, the Travel and Leisure magazine in the United States of America listed Penang as one of the best islands in Asia to visit while in January 2009, readers of The New York Times chose Penang as the second best destination among “44 Places To Go in 2009” under the food category.

It was also in 2009 that George Town ranked 10th in the annual Location Ratings Survey by ECA International as one of the preferred Asian location for Europeans to work and live in because of its low cost of living and facilities that are comparable to that of developed countries (Law, 2010). With its old world charm and modern infrastructure such as a bustling port, heritage city and an industrial hub, it is little wonder that tourism plays a significant role in the economy of Penang through employment, foreign exchange earnings, investment and regional development activities.

The tourism industry is crucial to Penang as it is currently the second most important economic sector after manufacturing. In 2008, the services sector contributed to 56.0 percent of the state's gross domestic product (www.iproperty.com.my/news) suggesting that the industry offers much scope and good potential for further and future growth. Tourism receipts are of critical importance to Penang's balance of payments as well as to national economic welfare. Tourism resources alone are not enough for a successful tourism industry (Yee, 2008). Tourist arrivals to Penang in 2008 reached 6.31 million. This represents an increase of 21.6 percent compared to the same period in 2007. The breakdown of tourist arrivals from 2005-2008 is presented in Table 1.1 below:

Table 1.1: Domestic and International Tourist Arrivals in Penang

| Year | Domestic Tourists | International Tourists | Total | Percentage increase |
|-------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 2005 | 2,267,532 | 2,084,377 | 4,351,909 | - |
| 2006 | 2,562,978 | 2,125,526 | 4,688,504 | 7.7 |
| 2007 | 2,787,260 | 2,399,351 | 5,186,611 | 10.6 |
| 2008 | 3,496,293 | 2,811,175 | 6,307,468 | 21.6 |

Source: www.visitpenang.gov.my

According to the State Government, Penang is projected to receive 10.0 million tourists by 2014. To achieve a target of USD1 billion (approximately RM3 billion) of the country's USD14 billion (approximately RM48 billion) in tourism receipts, the State Government plans to introduce new tourism products and events in Penang. It has recently launched a three-year campaign and declared that 2010 – 2012 as Visit Penang Year (Law, 2010).

Penang's tourism industry had its humble beginnings in the nineteenth century. It attracted travellers from far and wide because it was prosperous and picturesque. As the tourist trade flourished so did the hotel industry. The hotel industry commenced when the Sarkies brothers built the island's first hotel, the Eastern Hotel facing the Esplanade in 1884 and the Oriental Hotel in 1885. The two hotels were later merged into the Eastern and Oriental Hotel (E&O Hotel). E&O Hotel was part of the chain of hotels operated by the Sarkies Brothers. Subsequently they opened the Crag Hotel on Penang Hill (Khoo and Wade, 2003). Author Somerset Maugham and the playwright Noel Coward were among the famous literary personalities who stayed at the E&O Hotel which today is one of the finest five-star hotels in Penang.

Other established hotels that were attracting tourists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included The International Hotel which later became the

Elysee Hotel after it changed hands, Australia Hotel on Penang Road and Runnymede Hotel on Northam Road (now known as Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah).

Today, Penang has 37 three-star, four-star and five-star hotels registered with the Malaysian Association of Hotels, Penang Chapter. Another seven hotels will be constructed on Penang Island between 2010 and 2014 to cater for the peak seasons. With the investment of under RM1 billion, the current 9,626 rooms will be increased to 13,000 rooms in 2014. The average occupancy rate of hotels in Penang in the past three years has been hovering around 65 per cent. The beach hotels recorded higher occupancy in 2009 compared to 2008 while the city hotels witnessed a two to three per cent drop (Battistotti, 2009).

In 2008, the average occupancy rate (AOR) for hotels in George Town was 74.6 per cent while the AOR for beach hotels was 60.5 per cent (www.hotels.org.my/statistics.phy). In terms of the number of hotel guests, Penang ranked fourth after Kuala Lumpur, Pahang and Sabah when it registered an increase of 10.6 per cent to 5.19 million guests in 2007 (<http://www.tourism.gov.my>).

1.3 Public Relations in Malaysia: History and Development

Public relations has been practised in Malaysia for more than half a century. Like most countries in Asia – India, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, the early years of public relations in Malaysia were characterised by government-run, nation building campaigns (Van Leuven, 1996).

According to Idid (2004), the development of public relations in the country can be attributed to many sources and each historical epoch marks yet another step in the development of the profession. Idid (1976) claimed that Malaysia is one of the countries that has a strong public relations practice. Nordin (1986) traced the genesis of public relations in Malaysia to the British government's initiatives that began after World War II in 1945. After liberating Malaysia from the Japanese, the British set up the Department of Publicity and Printing with film, broadcasting and information units to put down Communism by convincing Malaysians that it was the British not the Chinese Communist guerrillas (the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army) that eventually won World War II over Japan.

Hamdan (2004) pointed out that public relations practice was not introduced by any one government or civilization although it was popularly believed that it was the British who introduced the practice in Malaysia. According to him, there

were traces of effective public relations being practised in the earliest known kingdom of Langkasuka between the second and 14th century. He stated that the Malacca Sultanate (1402 – 1511) was adept at using public relations to strengthen trade relations with China.

Van Leuven (1996) and Idid (2004) categorised the development of public relations in several phases based on the history of Malaysia. According to Van Leuven, virtually all public relations work emanated from government information ministries. However, he noted that Malaysian public relations has shifted from a preoccupation with nation building by the government to a focus on market development and regional-interdependence which require public relations practitioners to develop the corporations' positions on international issues. Van Leuven's (1996) view that public relations in its early years was used "as a mechanism for achieving political stability and national unity" in the initial stages conformed to Pratt's (1985) observation that public relations served "as a conduit for communicating development news and for nurturing a development-oriented norm among audiences."

While Van Leuven (1996) opined that public relations in Malaysia began immediately after World War II when the British returned to Malaya in 1945, Idid (2004) argued that modern public relations was introduced to Malaysia in

1939 with the appointment of George L. Peet, a veteran journalist from Straits Times as the first Director of the Department of Information.

The Malaysian government had accepted and used public relations as a concept in its approach toward development and security (Idid, 1977). Idid (2004) identified five phases in the development of public relations in Malaysia. They are:

Phase I: Before World War II (1939)

Phase II: After World War II (1945 – 1957)

Phase III: Malaysia's Independence to the formation of Malaysia
(1957 – 1963)

Phase IV: The period after the formation of Malaysia (1963 – 1980)

Phase V: The Mahathir Era (1980 – the present)

Before World War II, the functions of the newly-established Department of Information and Publicity practiced Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public information model of public relations as its functions encompassed increasing general war publicity, releasing information and disseminating news.

After World War II, public relations was used as propaganda to rally support of the local population to further British interest. The British depended on effective

public relations and propaganda to instill in the minds of the people of Malaya that the British were not defeated during the World War II but instead withdrew to India. It was also during this time that public relations campaigns were organised to encourage the local people to grow rice and vegetables to overcome food shortage. This led to the development of the Department of Public Relations which was later renamed Department of Information Services.

During the Emergency (1948-1960), the British used public relations to mount a psychological warfare to win over the local people in their fight against militant communism.

According to Idid (2004), the role of public relations in the country witnessed a shift from propaganda to nation building with the Independence of Malaya from the British in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia with Sabah and Sarawak joining Peninsular Malaya and Singapore to form Malaysia in 1963. Public relations in the public sector was reinforced with the appointment of seven public relations officers with diploma in mass communication in 1978. This marked the entry of academically qualified practitioners into the industry in Malaysia.

The growth of local universities offering communication studies in the early 1970s influenced the development of public relations in the country. Universiti

Sains Malaysia took the lead by introducing communication studies under the School of Humanities in 1971 followed by Institut Teknologi MARA (1972), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Pertanian (now Putra) Malaysia (1976), Universiti Malaya (1977), the International Islamic University Malaysia (1990), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (1996), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (1997) and Universiti Utara Malaysia in 2002 (Idid, 2004).

With more academically qualified and trained public relations practitioners entering the industry, the government began to recruit press liaison officers for the ministries and press secretaries for the offices of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister but it was not until 1982 that the Public Service Department outlined 12 specific duties for public relations officers (Ibrahim, 1987). According to Goh (1986), the Information Officers were the pioneers of public relations in the country.

The establishment of the Federation of Malaya Institute of Public Relations in 1962 marked an important milestone in the development of public relations in Malaysia (Idid, 2004). The Federation of Malaya Institute of Public Relations which was known as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) after it was incorporated as a company in 1984 under the Companies Act 1965, helped nurture the growth of the public relations profession in the private sector.

Consultancies set up in mid-1960s and early 1970s also contributed to the development of public relations in the country. Consultancies offering clients expert advice on public relations issues encouraged Malaysians to venture into public relations and provided IPRM with a broader membership base which today stood at 500. Eric White Associates, an Australian company was said to be the first consultancy to set up an office in the country in 1965 (Idid, 2004).

According to Shahreen (1987), public relations consultancies mushroomed in the 1980s despite the country being hit by an economic crisis. More companies began to recognise the important role of public relations consultancies in building a good corporate image. Corporate image helps the company's stock and makes it a good investment. To the financial community, corporate image or reputation is as important as the company's performance (Shahreen, 1987; Hickson, 1994).

The multinational companies were among the first companies in the private sector to set up public relations units/departments and utilise the services of public relations consultancies (Idid, 2004). Among the companies were Lever Brothers, Malayan Tobacco Company, Dunlop, Shell and Esso. According to Muhamad Rosli (2002), the public relations profession in the private sector was pioneered by the petroleum companies operating in Sarawak. When Sarawak became part of Malaysia in 1963, public relations became more evident in the

private sector as it was used an effective tool in the implementation of corporate communication strategies.

The pace set by the multinational companies was fast as they recognised and accepted public relations as an important tool of management (Goh, 1986). Like most countries in the region, the service sector such as airline and shipping companies, hotels and public utilities began to recognise the importance of public relations as a tool for image building by employing public relations practitioners as they strongly believed that good corporate image contributed significantly to success (Ni Chen, 2004).

Public relations was given a further boost when the Malaysian economy recorded tremendous growth with rapid industrialisation and the introduction of the government's privatisation policy in the 1980s by then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Government agencies and statutory bodies such as Malaysia Airlines, Telekom Malaysia, Tenaga Nasional, Pos Malaysia, Kelang Container Terminal, Penang Port Commission and several others which were privatised or corporatised, realised that they had to re-orientate their services to be customer-centric in order for them to remain competitive and financially viable.

These government policies gave public relations an impetus as creation of the new corporatised and privatised entities directly strengthened public relations units which in turn helped to give a new approach to public relations. As Idid (2004) said, “instead of merely providing news and information, new public relations units were market-oriented as their success was measured by the bottom-line of the organisation.”

While public relations practitioners in Malaysia share many common interests and concerns with their counterparts in the United States, some distinct differences still exist. Taylor and Kent (1999) identified the three main differences as minimal power by the media, cultural and linguistic conditions and the lack of activism.

Unlike the media in the United States, the media in Malaysia practise developmental journalism rather than investigative reporting even though most of the media are privatised. Journalists in the country report pro-governmental and pro-business news and are not likely to challenge authority by uncovering potentially embarrassing stories. The placement of positive organisational information in the media is one of the key tasks of public relations practitioners in the country. Practitioners here often equate public relations success with favourable media coverage.

Public relations practitioners in the country face the challenge of language and culture of specific media outlets. Although Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of Malaysia, the Chinese and Indian press are equally active.

Public relations practice in the country is less crisis-driven than in the West due to the lack of activism because generally, the Malaysian public does not actively question organisational policy.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Role study has been a dominant feature in public relations research particularly in the West. Among the dimensions studied include role trends (Toth, Serini, Wright and Emig, 1998), role enactment (Moss, Warnaby and Newman, 2000, Kelleher, 2001), status and power of public relations in organisations (Genilo, Akther and Chowdhury, 2011; Hogg and Doolan, 1999) and the contribution of public relations to organisational effectiveness (Grunig, 2001).

On the local scene, research on public relations roles has not been extensive. This could possibly be due to the reason that public relations is a relatively new profession in this part of the world although its practice in various forms has been in existence for some time. Public relations was often associated with a beautiful smile, a warm handshake, wining and dining. In the 1970s and 1980s,

many people thought that the ticket to practise public relations is to win the beauty title (Wee, 1986).

Public relations gurus have advocated that public relations should be a management function (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006; Lattimore et al., 2004; Idid, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2009). In the West, public relations has been recognised as a management function as “employers have begun to realise that public relations adds value to an organisation because it helps to balance the self interest of the organisation with the interests of its publics – people who are affected by the organisation or who have the power to affect the organisation (Grunig, 2001).

Researchers have often questioned whether public relations is perceived as a management function and whether practitioners enact the manager or technician role in organisations. Different organisations in different parts of the world perceive public relations differently.

Practitioners in the country have been advocating for public relations to take on a new significance by enacting the management rather than the technical role. This was reflected in the findings of a survey conducted by the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) and Universiti Technology Mara (UiTM) among 123 corporations and public relations consultancies in the Klang Valley

(Lim, 2002). Survey results showed that 73 per cent of the respondents were keen to see public relations being legally recognised as a professional management role.

Whether public relations in the hotel industry is practised as a management function as advocated by Cutlip et al. (2006) remains a topic of interest. In the words of Wallis (1997), the role of hotel-based public relations practitioners has evolved and is continuing to evolve. This is because public relations practitioners in the industry are now operating within a more dynamic and highly competitive environment as hotels go global.

According to Wallis (1997), the hotel public relations practitioner in the 1970s took on the role of a glorified VIP guest relations officer performing technical tasks such as attending to important hotel guests and handling their complaints. The scenario was similar in Malaysia as hotel-based public relations practitioners took on a more technical than a managerial role (Wee, 1986).

Wallis (1997) cited the lack of understanding of the value of public relations by hotel general managers as a reason for practitioners to be perceived as guest relations officers. Both Huertas (2008) and Wallis (1997) attributed the lack of recognition of the value of public relations to the dominance of marketing in the

hotel industry. To the dominant coalition of the hotel, “the sales call was believed to be the single most effective means of filling a hotel” (Wallis, 1997).

Nevertheless, this scenario has changed in the West where hotels have established marketing departments and professionally trained public relations specialists by the 1990s. This study seeks to examine whether public relations is fully realised in hotels in Penang. Assessing the functions of practitioners and identifying the place of public relations within the organisations have been the basis for this study on practitioner roles. This study examines the roles played by public relations practitioners, the factors that influence their roles and status, the public relations models they adopt and the dominant coalition’s perception of the public relations.

1.5 Objectives of Study

According to Blaikie (2003), social research can pursue several objectives. It can explore, describe, understand, explain, predict, change, evaluate or assess aspects of social phenomena.

Literature reveals that little empirical research has been conducted to measure the role of public relations in the local hotel industry. Instead, public relations role research has been devoted largely to the government sector and other

corporations. This research which is motivated by the lack of information on the current roles of public relations practitioners in the local hotel industry has four objectives. The primary objective is to investigate the roles played by public relations practitioners in the hotel industry in Penang, one of the country's tourist destinations using Broom's role scales. The other objectives are:

- To identify the frequency of practitioner involvement in public relations work categories and in doing so, examine their core activities of the public relations practitioners.
- To examine the factors that determine the role type of the practitioner such as gender, age, educational background, professional experience and organisational context.
- To identify the position of public relations practitioners in the hierarchical structure of hotel organisations where public relations activities are prevalent but continue to be conceptually dominated by marketing (L'Etang, 2006; Wallis, 1997).
- To further research in public relations in the hotel industry, an industry which is a crucial component in Penang's economy.

1.6 Research Questions

Blaikie (2003) highlighted that all research projects are built on the foundation of research questions as they define the nature and scope of a research project.

According to Creswell (1994), research questions, objectives and hypotheses represent specific restatements of purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role public relations practitioners in hotels enact and the factors that influence the enactment. Research questions are used because the research is designed to answer the *what* questions of public relations roles.

Based on the conceptualisation of the roles of public relations practitioners developed by scholars, two research questions guided the study. The research questions posed in this study are:

Research Question 1: What roles do public relations practitioners in the hotel industry in Penang play?

This research question is formulated to establish the role-type predominantly played by practitioners in the hotels in Penang based on Broom and Smith's (1979) four-role typology of communication technician, expert prescriber, communication facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator and Dozier's (1992) two-role typology of manager and technician.

Research Question 2: What are the factors that influence the roles of public relations practitioners?

Past research indicates that several factors contribute to practitioner role enactment. Among the dominant ones are gender, age, educational background, professional experience, capability, organisational context, practitioner and management perception and expectation (Archarya, 1983 as cited in Hogg and Doolan, 1999; Dozier, 1983; Grunig et al., 2001; Grunig et al., 2002; Johnson and Archarya, 1982 as cited in Hogg and Doolan, 1999; Stokes, 2005; Toth, 1998). This study seeks to determine whether the roles enacted are influenced by such factors.

1.7 Significance of Study

Today, hotels operate in a highly competitive environment. With globalisation and the implementation of the Asean Free Trade Agreement on January 1, 2010, competition is no longer just limited to domestic competition. International competition has become a major concern in some markets (Barrows and Powers, 2009).

These coupled with the worldwide economic uncertainty, proliferation of hotels, fragmentation of market, escalating customer expectations and technological

revolution have made it necessary for hotels to develop sustainable competitive advantages in order to survive (Barrows and Powers, 2009; Siguaw and Wee, 2008).

As competing hotels become more like one another at a given price level, public relations tends to play a more significant role in helping promote the hotel's image and win over customers. This is because the crucial differentiation is service. Therefore, an awareness of how public relations is practised in hotels is essential if the practice is to be effective as specialisation at workplace has become higher and deep expert knowledge is required to be effective (Gratton, 2009).

While research on public relations roles is rather extensive in the West, it is still much lacking in the local scene. From the literature reviewed, it is found that there is still a scarcity of empirical evidence on public relations practices in the hotel industry per se although Grunig's four public relations models and Broom and Dozier's four public relations roles have been used as theoretical constructs in the study of public relations practice in other settings such as the government (Periasamy 2007) and corporations (Lim, 2002).

Although public relations features dominantly in the activities of hotels, there is still a lack of association between theory and practice in public relations in the