

Domains of PR Practice

Keywords

Public Relations, Practice, domains, sectors, skills, descriptors

Abstract

This short paper describes research into the diversity of PR practice through a range of public representations and descriptors.

Using analysis of the job titles of members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, the names of special interest groups of PR associations and a review of features appearing in PR Week, the many domains of PR practice emerge.

Domains of PR Practice

Introduction.

There are many definitions of Public Relations. Rex Harlow (quoted in Wilcox et al 2003)ⁱ identified 472 definitions for public relations and Theakerⁱⁱ provides a guide to the main activities for public relations practice. An alternative view asks “how do practitioners describe their work and practice through the way they represent their professional interests and jobs”

In the joint report between the Institute of Public Relation and the UK Department of Trade and industry “Unlocking the Potential of Public Relations: Developing Good Practice” (CIPR 2003) Public Relations is defined as: “influencing behaviour to achieve objectives through the effective management of relationships and communications.”

This paper seeks to identify domains of practice from the perspective of practitioner self selection both in electing to join the major PR associations and from evidence of their perspectives of their role.

The methodology begins with data derived from research by the CIPR for its joint report with the UK Department of Trade and Industry. This invited practitioners to describe what they believed their role is.

Further analysis of specific interest of practitioners is analysis from the groups that they create as members of the PR institutions and the methodology compares these views with the titles that practitioners use to describe their work.

The methodology continues with a view of how interested external commentators see the roles of PR by examining domains of practice served by PR Week in the features it publishes.

Analysis of the outcomes from these perspective provides insights about PR practice on the ground.

How we wish others would see us

The analysis of the membership of the CIPR for the joint CIPR/Department of Trade and Industry report “Unlocking the Potential of Public Relations: Developing Good Practice” identified the work of practitioners from a surveys of the membership.

The findings, based on the research commissioned for the report declared that the areas of activity that practitioners consider to be their domain offer:

- Positive image in media
- Managing issues and crises
- Promoting mission & values externally
- Positive investors’ view
- Supporting products/ services
- Supporting community & social activities
- Building & maintaining corporate brand
- Staff feel valued & Involved

- Managing government relations
- Promoting mission & values internally
- Building & maintaining product/services brands
- Building & maintaining a positive image amongst suppliers
- Compiling info on social responsibility & environment

Source: CIPR web site

Other important purposes of PR specified by respondents:

- PR was seen to be an important contributor to building and maintaining internal relationships and partnerships.
- PR was also seen to have an important management role, including developing business strategy, supporting business decision-making and advising senior management.
- PR was seen as an important driver of change, communicating change, influencing and changing behaviour, changing culture and assisting adoption of best practices.
- In addition, PR was perceived to have an important role in supporting externally facing business processes such as staff recruitment.
- PR consultants gave a diverse range of responses when asked whether the PR industry should have other important purposes.
- As would be expected, these emphasised fulfilling the client's brief and advising management.

Achieving business objectives in terms of value and bottom line results were frequently mentioned, as were integration and co-ordination with regard to marketing and other communications.

PR consultants viewed ethics, honesty, integrity and transparency as important roles for PR. Creating a dialogue with various publics, building mutual understanding and improving relationships were also seen as central. In-house PR practitioners emphasised the contribution of PR to business ethics. PR was seen to be important for accountability and propriety, acting as the conscience of the organisation, playing a role in public accountability and organisational transparency.

PR practitioners also saw educating and explaining issues to stakeholders as a key part of the in-house role. PR enables understanding of complex issues and risks, and is also a means of encouraging democratic participation from different stakeholder groups.

Institutional support for the practice of PR

An examination of groupings of practitioners with a common practice and interest is available by examination of special interest groups within the Associations that represent PR practitioners. This identifies the extent to which the Associations both serve the ambitions of members and the extent to which these Associations can bring interested practitioners together in their own self interest.

Evidence of this support and enthusiasm for areas of PR practice can be garnered from a number of national public relations association web sites. They show that there are interest groups that focus on domains of PR practice.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations has groups representing:

- Construction & Property
- Consultancy
- Corporate + Financial
- CSR Network
- Fifth Estate - Voluntary sector
- Government Affairs (GAG)
- Health & Medical
- Internal Communication Alliance
- International Public Relations
- Local Government
- Marketing Communications
- Motor Industry
- Science Engineering and Technology Group (SET)

In the USA, the Public Relations Society of America has a different emphasis

- Association/Nonprofit
- Corporate
- Counselors to Higher Education
- Employee Communications
- Entertainment & Sports
- Environment
- Financial Communications
- Food and Beverage
- Health Academy
- International
- Military & Public Safety
- Multicultural Communications
- Public Affairs & Government
- Strategic Social Responsibility
- Technology
- Travel & Tourism

And in Germany the groups within Deutschen Public Relations Gesellschaft (DPRG) there are practitioner foci of a different slant with working groups dealing with:

- International PR
- Arbeitskreis "Krisenkommunikation/Issues management
- communication as creation of value
- financial communication
- internal communication
- Public Affairs

Sweden covers different ground among the members of the Swedish Public Relations Association (SPRA):

- Internal communications
- Public affairs

Public services
 Mass media relations
 Investor relations
 Market communications

What do they really do?

In examining the ambitions of the practitioners and the interests that they subscribe to through their professional Associations can be compared to how they can gain acceptance among the dominant coalition in job titles they are awarded. Here we can identify the range of actual job titles evident among the membership of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

An analysis of job titles of the 7000 members reveals a broad range of job titles among people who, through their membership, identify themselves as working in the PR arena and thus the self selecting definition would provides a further indication of what, in practice, comprise the practices of PR.

These descriptions are prefixed or suffixed to titles such as; director, manager, executive etc. With 75 distinct roles (excluding the academic organisation and student members) there would seem to be a diversity of practice forming nine tenths of the PR iceberg (source: CIPR Web site).

| | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Brand PR | Exhibitions | Pharma Communications |
| Campaigns | External Affairs | Policy |
| Campaigns & Projects | External Communications | Policy & Communications |
| Comms & Organisation | Fundraiser | Policy and Public Affairs |
| Development | Global Brands PR Manager | PR & Advertising |
| Communications | Government & Economic | Press & Communications |
| Communications & New | Relations | Press & Public Relations |
| Media | Human Resources & | Press Officer |
| Community Affairs | Communications | Press Relations |
| Community Relations | Influencer Relations | Product Communication & |
| Competition & Regulation | Information | Advocacy |
| Conference & Event | Information & Networker | Product PR Communications |
| Producer | Internal Communications | Public & Government |
| Consultation & Community | Investor Relations | Relations |
| Relations | Issues & Reputation | Public Affairs |
| Consumer PR | Management | Public Awareness |
| Corporate Affairs | Marketing | Public Information & |
| Corporate Communications | Marketing & Comms | Marketing |
| Corporate Policy & | Marketing & Development | Public Involvement |
| Communication | Marketing & Sales Support | Public Relations |
| Corporate PR | Marketing Communications | Publicity |
| Customer Relations | Marketing Services | Retail PR |
| Director of Information | Media & International | Sales & Marketing |
| Editor | Relations | Strategic Communications |
| Education & Learning | Media Monitoring | Strategy & Policy |
| Employee Communications | Media Relations | e-Media |
| eServices Manager | Media Trainer | Web Content |
| Event | News | Writer/Editor |

Serving the interests of practitioners

One may expect that the trade media would be very sensitive to the needs of readers. One method for identifying the realm of public relations is through analysis of specialist subjects that trade magazines cover. The media view of domains of practice are typified among editorial features that both serve the industry practitioners and suppliers offering specialist services. The leading PR magazine, PR Week from 2003 to 2005 identified in feature length a number of insights into their perception of the domains of PR practice.

These were;

Product & promotion

Crisis

Diversity

Public Affairs

New media

PR and the media

Marketing Management

Pharmaceutical

Multicultural campaign

Hi-Tech

Corporate Communications

Financial Communications

Internal Communications

Not for Profit

Internal Communications

Corporate Branding

Domains Perceived

In analysing the evidence about the realms of practice, I have de-duplicated domains of practice which provides a list view of practice.

By combining these lists, and de-duplication one identifies that the practice of Public Relations in broad categories, one gains an insight into the range of public relations practice. There seem to be four broad areas of interest. Groups of practitioners who come together because they have a sectoral interest; a range of PR practice; the skills that are deployed and then there is a rump of activity in the area of marketing promotion.

Sectoral Domains of Practice

There are 21 separate Industry Sector domains evident from the activities identified. PR Week recognises Hi Tech, Pharmaceuticals, Not for Profit and Higher education of special interest. There are some big omissions for the year when the UK is bidding for the Olympics and at a time when health spending is at an all time high. Quite noticeably, the different specialist contributions to industry sectors was not picked up in the CIPR/DTI research.

| Industry Sector Domains | CIPR Research | Special Interest groups | Job Titles | PR Week features |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------|
| Association/Nonprofit | | X | | |
| Construction & Property | | X | | |
| Education & Learning | | | X | |
| Environment | | X | | |
| Food and Beverage | | X | | |
| Health & Medical | | X | | |
| Hi-Tech | | | | X |
| Higher education | | | | X |
| Local Government | | X | | |
| Media Trainer | | | X | |
| Military | | X | | |
| Motor Industry | | X | | |
| Not for Profit | | | | X |
| Pharmaceutical | | | X | X |
| Public services | | X | | |
| Retail PR | | | X | |
| Science Engineering and technology | | X | | |
| Sport | | | | |
| Technology | | X | | |
| Travel & Tourism | | X | | |
| Voluntary sector | | X | | |

The practice of PR

Practice, as opposed to PR skills, is broadly represented. Noticeably it is diverse but only seven of the 40 practices are recognised by more than one of the sources offering descriptors of public relations. Is it that PR is not a cohesive profession or is it that it is sufficiently mature to have a range of practices that is important?

| PR Practice | CIPR | Special Interest groups | Job Titles | PR Week features |
|---|------|-------------------------|------------|------------------|
| Advising senior Management | X | | | |
| Building & maintaining a positive image amongst suppliers | X | | | |
| Business strategy Development | X | | | |
| Changing behaviours | X | | | |
| Changing Culture | X | | | |
| Communication as creation of value | | X | | |
| Community Affairs | X | | X | |
| Competition & Regulation | | | X | |
| Consultancy | | X | X | |
| Corporate Affairs | | X | X | |
| Corporate Branding | X | | | X |
| Corporate Policy | | | X | |
| Corporate PR | | | X | |
| CSR Network | | | | |
| Diversity | | | | X |
| Driver of change | X | | | |
| Economic Relations | | | X | |
| External Affairs | | | X | |
| External Communications | | X | X | |
| Financial Communications | | | | X |
| Global Brands PR Manager | | | X | |
| Government Affairs | | X | | |
| Government Relations | X | | X | |
| Human Resources & Communications | | | X | |
| Influencer Relations | | | X | |
| Internal relationships | X | | X | |
| International Public Relations | | X | | |
| Meeting client brief | X | | | |
| Organisation Development | | | X | |
| Policy | | | X | |
| Promoting mission & values externally | | | | |
| Public Affairs | | X | X | X |
| Public Awareness | | | X | |
| Public Relations | | | X | |
| Public Safety | | X | | |
| Reputation management | | | X | |
| Social responsibility | X | | | |
| Strategic Communications | | | X | |
| Strategic Social Responsibility | | X | | |
| Strategy & Policy | X | | X | |

Skill Domains

The 33 recognisable PR skills evident in the descriptors feature issues and crisis management, internal communication and investor relations of greatest note because they are more (but marginally) described from several sources.

| Skill Domains | CIPR Research | Special Interest groups | Job Titles | PR Week features |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|------------|---------------------|
| Aid adoption of best practice | X | | | |
| Campaigns & Projects | | | X | |
| Communicating Change | X | | | |
| Communications | | | X | |
| Conference management | | | X | |
| Corporate Communications | | | X | X |
| Crisis Management | X | X | | X |
| e-Media | | | X | |
| Editor | | | X | |
| Employee communications | | X | | |
| Entertainment | | | | |
| eServices Manager | | | X | |
| Events manager | | | X | |
| Exhibitions | | | X | |
| Fundraiser | | | X | |
| Information | | | X | |
| Internal communications | | X | X | X |
| Investor relations | X | X | X | |
| Issues management | X | X | X | |
| Mass media relations | | X | | |
| Media Monitoring | | | X | |
| Media Relations | X | | X | X |
| Mission Promotion | X | | | |
| Multicultural Communications | | X | | X |
| Networker | | | X | |
| New Media | | | X | |
| News | | | X | X |
| Press Relations | | | | |
| Product Advocacy | X | | | |
| Public Involvement | | | X | |
| Publicity | | | X | |
| Web Content | | | X | |
| Writer/Editor | | | X | |

Marketing PR

A feature of the descriptions of PR, so much associated with marketing support, is the narrowness of the descriptors for work in support of marketing.

| Marketing PR | CIPR Research | Special Interest groups | Job Titles | PR Week features |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------|------------------|
| Advertising | | | | |
| Brand PR | X | | | |
| Consumer PR | | | X | |
| Customer Relations | | | X | |
| Marketing | | | X | |
| Marketing & Development | | | | |
| Marketing & Sales Support | | | X | |
| Marketing Communications | | X | X | |
| Marketing Management | | | | X |
| Marketing Services | | | X | |
| Public Information & Marketing | | | X | |
| Product promotion | X | | | X |
| Sales and Marketing | | | X | |

Some inferences

This is not a survey of the work that practitioners do. It does not offer a view of how many people are involved in each area of activity. It is a reference to the diversity of work that is evident from analysis of what others think practitioners do although the CIPR/DTI research purports to show the role of PR.

The range of practices and skills in the PR sector is significant. The industry is well enough established and its practitioners sufficiently well established for diversity to be seen as a strength.

If underpinned by common standards of ethics, education and training, this is a considerable strength which may be a challenge for the people who represent this diversity through trade associations and institutions.

It will be interesting to follow up this research with a study that identify how many practitioners are involved in the different domains of PR practice and the domains of practice that fall outside the membership of the associations.

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