

# STUDY OF THE PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH

## FINAL REPORT

This is the final report of the Study of the Priorities for Public Relations Research which has four objectives:

- 1) Identify the gaps between academic research and the industry's needs
- 2) Identify current and new trends in research from theorist and practitioner perspectives
- 3) Map out the best way for knowledge to be exchanged
- 4) Define the research areas for which funding can be sought

There were three rounds in this Delphi study (a qualitative study amongst a panel of experts) that involved respondents from five continents, representing academics, practitioners and senior executives of professional bodies. The study commenced in April 2007 and was completed in mid-July 2007. The first two rounds sought rankings of public relations research topics and the development of research questions. In the first round, there were 27 responses to a list of 26 topics and in the second round, 23 responses ranked 15 topics. In Round 3, respondents to the previous round were asked to comment on the research questions, as the rankings had stabilised after the first two rounds.

The largest regional grouping of responses came from Europe, followed by North America, Australasia, Asia and Africa. There were no responses from Central and South America. Practitioners made up nearly 40% of responses, with academics a third and chief executives of professional bodies slightly over 27%. The gender balance had a majority of females, which recognises the largely female employment in public relations.

<b>Region</b>	<b>Rounds 1 &amp; 2</b>
Europe	41.20%
North America	21.55%
Africa	3.95%
Asia	13.65%
Australasia	19.65%
<b>Work</b>	
Academic	33.35%
Practitioner	39.35%
Professional Body	27.30%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	51.15%
Male	48.85%

Participants in the study were asked to ranked topics in a priority order from 1 (top priority) to 10 (10<sup>th</sup> priority) in the first two rounds. Initially, 26 topics were offered in Round 1. This was reduced to 15 for Round 2. There was little change in priority between Rounds 1 and 2, other than the decline of Topic **F**: *International issues in*

*public relations; Intercultural public relations* which fell from 6<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> whilst topic **L: Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation** rose from 12<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>.

The mean ranking of the topics follows in ranking order, as at the end of Round 2.

**PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH TOPICS (RANKED BY MEAN)**

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>Mean priority (1 = top priority; 10 = 10<sup>th</sup> priority)</b>
A) Public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation and organisational functioning	2.37
B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital; managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage	3.43
C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online	4.17
D) Public relations as a fundamental management function	4.35
E) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education	4.68
G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners	5.90
L) Management of corporate reputation; measurement of reputation	6.00
H) Ethics in public relations	6.29
I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries	6.35
J) Management of relationships	6.69
<b>Topics ranked 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup></b>	
N) Client/employer understanding of public relations	6.71
K) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory	6.86
O) The role of PR in community/social responsibility programmes	7.00
F) International issues in public relations; Intercultural public relations	7.29
M) Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)	7.57

## **RANKED TOPICS - THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The outcome of this study is both the ranked, prioritised research topics and the related research questions. After three rounds of discussion, here follow the topics and questions that have evolved. They are presented in the ranking order of the topics. It is notable that measurement and evaluation, sometimes expressed as ‘proof’ or ‘value’, appears in several of them, as well as the dedicated topic **C** *The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online*.

### **A) Public relations’ contribution to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation, and efficient operation of organisations**

- How does public relations demonstrate its contribution to the formation of organisational strategy?
- Can public relations improve the quality of organisational decision and performance by practitioners acting as the link between the organisations and its stakeholders (i.e. as facilitators)?
- How can public relations leaders influence business decisions via timely involvement?
- Why do public relations practitioners get a seat at the “top table” in some organisations and not at others?

### **B) The value that public relations creates for organisations through building social capital and managing key relationships**

- What is “value” in public relations? Is there a universal rubric or is it situational?
- How can value be best demonstrated in non-financial terms? Can intangible value be translated into measurable “bottom-line” value?
- Can social capital be measured?
- Is there proof of the two-way symmetrical model in operation?

### **C) The measurement and evaluation of public relations both offline and online**

- Following the CIPR’s statement on measurement and evaluation in 2005 [[www.cipr.co.uk/research](http://www.cipr.co.uk/research)] and the range of papers published by the Institute for PR [[www.instituteforpr.org/research](http://www.instituteforpr.org/research)], can an international policy on evaluation be developed to aid practitioner education and introduce best practice?
- How can the effect of public relations activity on attitude formation and behaviour be modelled and measured?
- What are the factors that affect or aid the widespread adoption of public relations measurement and evaluation methods?
- How can highly targeted communication to special, highly protected audiences (such as legislators) be monitored and measured?

### **D) Public relations as a fundamental management function**

- How is public relations expressed as a management function? What is unique about it and what ‘fundamental’ contribution does it make?

- What is the theory and best practice in the structure and operation of public relations and communication operations?
- Management of the public relations function: What are the skills of senior PR managers? Are the working practices and long hours culture an excuse for poor management skills? Why are senior managers reluctant to undertake training?

E) Professional skills in public relations; analysis of the industry's need for education;

*Practitioner:*

- The creation of an international curricula and competency framework in professional and managerial skills for practitioners.
- What is the PR industry's commitment to the improvement of expertise?
- Should practitioner organisations and universities align educational qualifications to reduce confusion on competing qualifications or maintain separate educational routes for differing needs?

*Undergraduate:*

- What is the role of public relations education? Is it to prepare graduates for entry into the industry or to equip them to critique the industry and change it from within or both?
- What is the most appropriate model of academic:professional alignment in undergraduate courses to give students a broad academic and professional education that supports their entry into the industry as preferred employees?
- What is best practice in communicating the nature and content of public relations education to prospective employers?

G) Research into standards of performance among PR professionals; the licensing of practitioners

- What is the role of professional associations and governments in regulating practices and licensing practitioners? Are there benefits and disadvantages of licensing?
- Can standards of practice be developed in order to create a QA or management standard like that developed by the UK's Public Relations Consultants Association?
- Could best practice standards be introduced for crisis management, internal communications, issues management, media relations and stakeholder engagement?

L) Management of corporate reputation; management of reputation

- Can reputation be managed? If it can, is this a "job" for PR or a whole-of-organisation task?
- How can 'lost' or 'damaged' reputation be repaired? Is there a 'best practice' model that can be applied?
- Why do some organisations with a 'poor reputation' continue to thrive?
- There is much 'received wisdom' in reputation management – how can the links between a high-profile individual (e.g. a "superstar CEO") and the reputation of an organisation be proven?

#### H) Ethics in public relations

- Should a universal code of conduct for public relations practitioners be devised and implemented? How should the ethical behaviour of members be managed by professional bodies?
- How can ethics education of students be designed to aid their ethical practices when entering the workplace?
- How can public relations ethics change from an abstract concept to a daily habit? What are the barriers?
- How does public relations practice influence corporate governance? Or is it vice-versa?
- Ethics in online communication: What are the implications? Are new approaches needed?

#### I) Integration of public relations with other communication functions; the scope of public relations practice; discipline boundaries

- Is there a field of public relations and can it be defined? What is the purpose of public relations?
- Are the current boundaries untenable in the new communications environment?
- How does integrated communication work? Does it work (i.e. is it an effective strategic and tactical model)?
- How can public relations work with marketing for better results?
- How does public relations relate to human resources and change management?

#### J) Management of relationships

- Who is the 'owner' of the relationship: the PR professional or the business line? How can the "PR = relationship management" model be operationalised? Does current theory stand this test?
- How can the link between communication activity and intangibles such as relationship capital be measured?
- How can psychology and communication theory be integrated in implementing relationship management?
- What are the skills, competencies and attitudes needed to develop influence networks?

## Topics ranked 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>

### N) Understanding of public relations

#### *Client/employer*

- What are client or employer perceptions of public relations? Does it vary from country to country? What is the correlation with practitioner perceptions (as expressed by the practitioner to the client or employer)?
- Why do they use public relations services or employ public relations practitioners?
- Following on from DeSanto & Moss' study into the role of public relations managers, investigate – across a range of cultures – what senior (non-communications) managers want from them.
- How do they judge outcomes and quality of public relations activity?
- What factors do they consider to be important and valuable in their relationship with public relations advisers (in-house or consultancy)? How these compare with the factors regarded as important and valuable by those advisers?

#### *General*

- How does the practice's reputation, especially in the media, impact on practice?
- Why do some organisations with minimal formal public relations activity prosper?
- Is the manner in which PR is generally practiced limiting its scope to technical-level, one-way, media relations? [Is the industry getting the reputation it deserves?]
- How do employers' perceptions of public relations affect the practice of new entrants into public relations employment?

### K) The impact of technology on public relations practice and theory

- What will the impact of technology be on society in general and the positioning of organisations and what is public relations' role? How will it affect credibility, trust and relationships with the media and other stakeholders?
- How is technology affecting priorities (and budgets) for public relations?
- What alternative strategies will evolve from public relations campaigns undertaken online?
- What is the impact of 'astro-turfing' on blogs and social media sites like YouTube and MySpace? How will the public relations industry play an ethics management role to control its proliferation?
- What are the effects of Second Life and avatars, etc, in developing public relations strategies?
- How will citizen journalists and online communities, and other phenomena, affect public relations strategy and tactics?

O) The role of public relations in community/social responsibility programmes

- How does the introduction of CSR policies and programmes affect business performance?
- How can community and CSR programmes demonstrate value to their sponsoring organisations?

F) International issues in public relations; intercultural public relations

- Comparative studies in national, cross-border and transnational public relations activity
- New models of international public relations practice that are not based on Anglo-American norms.
- Why do European PR practitioners adopt American models?
- What are the basic principles that transcend cultural differences?

M) Political communication and advocacy (lobbying)

The main comments/proposed research questions linked political communication and lobbying with measurement (topic C) and ethical issues (topic H) were re-allocated to those headings.

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The detailed discussion of this Study was reported to participants as it progressed and includes their feedback on topics and the discussion that led to the formation of research questions. The study will be reported in academic journals in the coming years and on my blog, [www.dummypit.wordpress.com](http://www.dummypit.wordpress.com). If you would like copies of the earlier Rounds of the Study of the Priorities for Public Relations Research, please contact me at [twatson@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:twatson@bournemouth.ac.uk).



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