

# What is PR today?

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## **Official Statement on Public Relations**

*(Formally adopted by Public Relations Society of America Assembly, Nov. 6, 1982 and still posted on the [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org) web site.)*

*Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.*

*Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, schools, colleges and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders, and other institutions, and with society at large.*

*The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.*

*As a management function, public relations encompasses the following:*

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.*
- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action, and*
- Communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.*
- Researching, conducting, and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations, and other programs.*

- *Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.*
- *Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities — in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above.*
- *Examples of the knowledge that may be required in the professional practice of public relations include communication arts, psychology, social psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and the principles of management and ethics. Technical knowledge and skills are required for opinion research, public-issues analysis, media relations, direct mail, institutional advertising, publications, film/video productions, special events, speeches, and presentations.*

*In helping to define and implement policy, the public relations practitioner uses a variety of professional communication skills and plays an integrative role both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment. (Source: [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org) )*

## **Theory v. practice**

It is instructive to examine the theory of PR versus practice. The PRSA's official statement on public relations was published in 1982. That was before the web as we know it, before e-mail as a major business medium, before WiFi and WiMax, before CD-ROM players on personal computers, before blogs, before much if not most of the technology and media we use today. It was a time when the laser printer was new, the cell phone industry was just developing and the fax machine was dominant. The industry did not concern itself with rumors sweeping the online world and erupting into traditional media. Traditional media were the only media worth regarding. The idea that a blogger could start a crusade against your company and succeed was beyond imagination. The reality of a 24-hour news cycle was foreign. The idea of an incident in a distant place becoming a major issue globally was rare (It was two years before the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster.) The world of the 1982 statement was less complex and less connected. So a question one might ask is whether the PRSA's description of PR is still viable and if so, how.

## **A piece at a time**

Let's examine the statement a piece at a time in light of today's online world.

*Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.*

This was an aspirational statement then and is now. PR practitioners would like to help reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions, but that is not what most of them do. The largest job in PR today is marketing publicity – flacking products and services. There is no public or private policy. They are part of a company's sales arm and their job is to get impressions and awareness in traditional and online media. There is utility in this role of PR, but it hardly contributes to mutual understanding among groups and institutions.

Of course, there are PR practitioners who work at the cusp of their companies or organizations to bridge gaps between external and internal audiences, but these practitioners are not as many as one would think – or hope. However, in the online world, there is a huge demand for what PR is supposed to be doing through active representation of companies on web sites, in blogs and forums, through e-mail, online publications, online videos, podcasts, etc. In that light, today's PR practitioner should be working more online than anywhere else. Many appear to be, but their skills and tools are limited. Part of this deficiency comes from the fact that PR did not step up to the technical skills of the web when it was first developing in the early to mid 1990s. Technologists and marketers did, and PR was left outside looking in. PR practitioners run news pages on organizational web sites, but they often have no input into the rest of a site, even though a web site is the single largest information source that an organization has on a 24/7 basis.

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These goals haven't changed in the 25 years since the 1982 statement. However, it is harder to develop effective relationships with many different audiences now because audiences are so fractured and can strike back in more ways. CEOs, especially, have learned to their peril that their roles are limited as boards become more active. Boards have learned they are not free from the pressure of activists. Trade unions are fighting for their lives in a world of globalization and rise of offshore manufacturing. Government agencies are more transparent with their web sites carrying huge amounts of information. But, with transparency comes criticism that agencies aren't moving fast enough, aren't equitable in how they operate, aren't focused on the problems of constituencies. Voluntary associations and foundations have moved online because that is where their members are, but once there, they are fighting to be heard against millions of other web sites and causes. Hospitals, schools, colleges and religious institutions are all wired and accessible from anywhere by anyone but they are fighting concerns for privacy and security and protection of constituents.

*The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.*

This statement is as true as when it was written, but rather than their publics, managements today may face one individual such as the head of a hedge fund or an institutional investor who has taken a large position in a company's stock. Publics can be as diverse as a group of householders who protest power lines near their homes, the European Union opposing a company's business practices or a blogger on a crusade. In the early 1980s, we tended to think of homogeneous groups more than now, an era of [micro-trends](#). We know now one well-placed agitator can inflict pain on an institution through the web and that this happens constantly. We tend now to think of individuals, even if they group themselves in FaceBook or MySpace. Self-identification with a group varies from person to person, and there may not be a single reason why he or she chooses to be known as a friend. We also are in an era of faceless web sites that project messages but not identities of people behind them. We have entered a nearly infinite maze of mirrors on the Web in which what seems to be there often isn't and what is there may be distorted by its reflection back to us..

PR's opportunity to act as a counselor to management and as a mediator helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action is not so simple. In fact, public affairs professionals – aka lobbyists – are doing much of this work in Washington, DC and state capitals. Lobbyists tend to be lawyers. Within corporations, general counsel often weigh in on issues with greater credibility than PR practitioners. Investor relations counselors carry more weight in how a company presents itself than PR practitioners.

To become a credible voice in management, a PR practitioner has to combine talent and business sense that is valued, as the renowned Arthur Page (<http://www.awpagesociety.com/>) did. Few PR practitioners reach this level, and when they do, some no longer identify with PR or its principles.

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- *Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization.*

It is interesting that market researchers are still not valued in marketing management, (at least, if one believes **Advertising Age**), but a pollster heads one the of the largest PR firms at the time of writing. Understanding public opinion continues as a basic task of PR, but it is more automated now with online services that monitor news sources, blogs and forums, take polls and keep a

pulse on what is happening. The need for analysis remains strong, especially since audiences and interest groups are more fragmented. The question for PR practitioners is whether they will develop the skills and habits of audience monitoring beyond issues they are concerned about. For example, one can track daily changes of a technology but miss larger trends that will shape that technology three years from today and which might be coming from outside the field. Such a larger trend might be the amount of venture capital money being put into the technology or pending regulations that may change how a technology is used. By the nature of what PR practitioners do, they should be constantly thinking beyond immediate concerns. How many do?

- *Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action, and*

The need for management counseling will continue, if for no other reason that managers forget PR principles in the heat of battle. Their instincts do not serve them well when they try to hide rather than be transparent or assume their actions will be acceptable when they clearly will not be.

- *Communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.*

The need for communication advice will not change but the type of advice has changed greatly. Online strategies are the driving force behind much of communication now rather than traditional media.

- *Researching, conducting, and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations, and other programs.*

There should never be a cessation of researching, conducting and evaluating programs of action and communication. However, PR practitioners almost always lag in this regard. Technology runs well ahead of practitioners' understanding and there is no formalized body within PR today that exists to test technologies for communications effectiveness. As long as PR fails to keep up with changes in media, it will be relegated to secondary status. As written earlier, much of PR today is an adjunct to marketing and it is relegated to traditional media and extensions of traditional media. PR has a long way to go to break out of this ghetto.

- Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.

PR practitioners will continue to plan and implement but at the heart of their work will be online strategies because that is where their audiences are.

- *Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities — in short, managing the resources needed to perform all of the above.*

There will be a constant need for administration, particularly in larger PR departments and in operations where emphasis on measurable results is paramount.

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The broad reach of knowledge defined by this paragraph has not changed, PR crosses many disciplines. The technical knowledge of this paragraph is woefully inadequate because it was written 25 years ago and the world has changed since then. The PR practitioner today needs technical skills that are vastly different than they were in 1982. The sad fact is that working practitioners are largely behind in learning these skills. They do not have the attitude of lifelong learning, or they don't have access to it. This, however, is not new. It is an issue a number of practitioners have worked on for more than 25 years in the business, largely without success. PR practitioners have resisted new technologies, and as written above, they have no systematic ways of testing technologies to ascertain their relevance to PR work. At this juncture, it is unclear whether they ever will reach the point of continuous evaluation of new technology and media tools.

While the aspirations of PR remain high and on target, the reality of PR is less. That's a pity because in the new media world, there is a greater need than ever for PR's ability to monitor, evaluate and remediate public and private opinion. One would hope that PR would see the way but it hasn't been effective so far and if one can judge by the interests of its association, notably the PRSA, it isn't likely to reach for a higher plane.

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