

pr reporter

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27th Annual Survey of the Profession, Part I: PRACTITIONERS REPORT INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES, ONSLAUGHT OF NEW ACTIVISM & PLENTY OF ISSUES, ESPECIALLY ENVIRONMENTAL; BUT METHODS FOR DEALING WITH THESE OPPORTUNITIES SEEM STAGNANT

In apparent support of the Excellence Study (pr 6/17), and of ongoing complaints by CEOs & placement firms that strategic practitioners are hard to find, responses to the Annual Survey suggest the norms of public relations practice are stuck in techniques of the 50s & 60s.

Is this caused by practitioner risk-aversion to new methods? By management block? By insufficient education or training in new strategies & tactics? Survey findings offer suggestions for answering these key queries.

Yet opportunities abound -- and in **some** ways the field appears to be moving forward in spite of its old fashioned ways.

PR DEP'TS ARE BEING ASSIGNED NEW FUNCTIONS AT TWICE THE RATE THEY'RE LOSING OLD ONES

47% have added some new function in the past 2 years. Only 21% have lost some function -- so this is clearly a gain. But the **new assignments are mainly old stuff**, not steps forward into new domains (Table 1).

THE ACTIVISTS ARE BACK ...SO PR PROS ARE NEEDED

Almost half of all respondents say they are experiencing pressure from activist groups. Most all sectors are affected. **Environmentalism** is on the list for just about every sector -- an issue that no organization in any sector can avoid anymore. The related animal rights movement is making

TABLE 1: ASSIGNMENTS THEY GAINED & LOST
AS REPORTED BY 481 RESPONDENTS

	Added	Lost
Publications/Writing Work	47	18
Technology/Video/Desktop	35	3
Marketing	25	12
Government Relations/PA	23	3
Special Events	21	8
Issues Mgmt/Crisis Com'n	21	2
Community Relations	17	7
Internal Communications	17	4
Media Relations	17	7
Graphics	14	13
Fundraising or its support	12	2
Customer Relations	11	4
Advertising	11	6
Organizational Image/ID	10	-
Strategy/Policy Development	9	2
Management Functions	9	1
Investor/Financial Rels.	7	5
New Client Services	5	-
Research	4	4
Speakers Bureau	3	1
Donations/Philanthropy	3	1
Training	3	-
Other	13	8



waves inside a number of sectors as well. While issues disperse among sectors, no sector escapes controversy entirely. Therefore, practitioners must be well versed in the theory & practice of working with activists and issues.

----- **TABLE 2: MOST MENTIONED ACTIVISTS & CONCERNS BY SECTOR** -----

Industrial Companies	Environmentalism
Consumer Products	Environmentalism/animal rights/ labeling/product liability or abuse
Utilities	Environmentalism/nuclear power issues
Banks	Community reinvestment advocates
Insurance	Nat'l health insurance/consumer groups
Transportation	Environmentalism
Healthcare	Animal rights/abortion advocates (both sides)/aids activists/ union organizing/environmentalism
Higher Education	Animal rights/tax reform/minority concerns/child care/political correctness/employee concerns
Educators	Conservatives/religious right/parents for discipline/taxpayers
Schools	Anti-taxers/minority issues
Trade/Professional Assns....	Environmentalism/legislative control
Social Agencies	Animal rights/pro-life groups
Government (all levels)	Environmentalism/tax protesters
Retailers/Wholesalers	Environmentalism
Telecommunications	900-pay-per-call
PR Firms, etc	All of the above for a broad range of clients, with environmentalism at the top

**DIFFICULT ISSUES TO RESOLVE
ARE CITED BY EVERY SECTOR --
CALLING FOR PR STRATEGISTS**

Having said the pressure is from environmental & related forces, respondents do not rank it their top concern. Economic issues get that billing. But no. 2 is

credibility -- which has to be closely linked to environmental problems in that credible organizations can resolve them, those who have lost the trust of publics will find it far tougher.

Key point is that all the top issues require, for resolution, pr pros who are sitting **at the decisionmaking table**. And who are as capable at formulating **relationship strategies** as with nuts-&-bolts techniques. The list is thus one of profound opportunity.

**TABLE 3: "MOST IMPORTANT PR PROBLEMS
FACING YOUR ORG'N OR CLIENTS"**

	<u>Cited by</u>
1. Economic/Financial/Budgetary	35%
2. Credibility/Identity Building	31
3. Employee Morale/Communications	20
4. Environmental Issues	18
5. Appreciation, Understanding PR	16
6. Customer Focus	14
7. Legislative Issues	13
8. Media	12
9. Communications Overload	9
10. Competition/Pricing	9

TABLE 4: BOX SCORE ON EMPLOYEE PUB'NS	
Responsibility for:	
Yes	67%
No	31
No Response	2
If have responsibility:	
1 publication	39%
2 publications	25
3 publications	14
4 publications	6
5 - 10 publications	5
10 +	4
Other	1
No Response	7
Length considerations:	
Larger	29%
Smaller	12
Stayed same	55
No Response	4
Two-thirds are evaluated:	
Yes	66%
No	31
No Response	4
Most of those who evaluate their publications conduct research at least once/yr:	
Monthly	5%
Quarterly	4
Every 6 months	5
Yearly	47
2-3 years	11
Irregularly	10
Regularly (weekly)	4
No Response	14
Methodology for evaluating:	
Readership Surveys	61%
Focus Groups	11
Management Reaction	9
Advisory Board	9
Staff Reaction	11
Other	15
No Response	8

2/3rds DO EMPLOYEE PUBLICATIONS, BUT DIRECTION TAKEN RAISES QUESTIONS

There's strong agreement today internal publics are No.1. Respondents report picking up more responsibility for internal communications (Table 1), perhaps to deal with the issue of employee communications & morale (Table 3).

But publications may be the main way practitioners are seeking to meet this challenge -- since 67% say they are responsible for employee publications. **55% produce more than one publication** -- 29% of which are getting larger, not smaller.

Is this multitude of publications adding to information overload (Table 3)? Threatening, if not destroying, a "communication of record"? How do employees receiving 2, 3 or more publications know where to look for need-to-know information?

Answers to these strategic queries, and even whether publications are meeting the organization's needs, are not known by one-third of those who produce them: **31% do not evaluate them**. Of those who do, 39% are using subjective methods to gather objective information. Some rely on whether "top management" thinks it's good.

But 60% **are** using formal research (surveys) to evaluate their publications regularly -- and many are combining the formal research with more informal methods (advisory boards, focus groups, etc.) to strengthen feedback even further.

ONLY HALF RUN FEEDBACK SYSTEMS

Organizations with **formal feedback systems** in place (58%) use a variety of means -- tho the old-fashioned "suggestion box" tops the list. More sophisticated techniques are reported by small percentages, tho 20% do use meetings (Table 4).

But -- of those with a formal program in place in their organizations, only 50% of practitioners are involved in running it. Another opportunity area.

TABLE 5: SOME FEEDBACK METHODS USED

Employee Suggestion Box	21%
Meetings -- including	20
- "regular"	
- weekly	
- monthly	
- quarterly	
- "management"	
- "staff"	
- one-on-one	
Telephone Hotline	7
Focus Groups	6
Employee Newsletter	6
Employee Committee	5
Open Door Policy	4
Letter Response System	2
Q&A Publications	1

TABLE 6: CUTTING EDGE DEVELOPMENTS, THEORIES, INNOVATIONS CITED:

1. Information Technology (video/teleconferencing etc)	50%
2. Research Trends & Techniques	11
3. PR's Expanded Role	8
4. Customer Focus	7
5. Media Technology	6
6. Globalization of PR	6
7. Marketing PR	5
8. Behavioral Public Relations	5
8. Issues Management	5
9. Strategic PR	4
9. Rising Professionalism	4
9. Social Issues	4
10. Employee Relations	4

DESPITE THESE OPPORTUNITIES, NEW TECHNIQUES TO EXPLOIT THEM ARE NOT BEING FULLY EMBRACED; ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION REIGNS

In a day when leaders in the field call for strategic advice to management, negotiation & mediation, direct relationship-building, making pr everyone's job & other problem-solving efforts, the most common response to survey questions about trends in actual practice involves **information transfer** (e.g. Table 1).

This is verified by respondents' sense of what constitute "cutting edge developments, theories, innovations in the profession today" (Table 6). By a wide margin, info technology tops the chart. Research may be 2nd, but garners only 11% of responses, while strategic practice & behavioral focus between them get 9%. Training is at the bottom of the list in Table 1, tho policy development is mentioned.

MOST ARE INVOLVED IN CRISIS BUT TECHNIQUES SEEM ROUTINE

Practitioners are using a wide variety of techniques to anticipate issues for their organizations or clients. But reading publications is the primary source, used far more than direct external contacts (Table

7). Many say they rely on other executives to identify issues. (rather than taking the lead & alerting **them?**). However, **66% have a crisis communications plan.**

TABLE 7: ISSUE ANTICIPATION METHODS

Newspapers/Magazines	29%
Company executives	23
Professional publications	16
Research & analysis	13
Memberships/Networking	13
Feedback: Customer/Employee	10
Government reports	7
Personal radar	4
Outside counsel	3
Books	2
Community groups	2
Electronic media	2
None (no formal techniques)	1
Environmental scans/ Issues monitor	1

Note: Total exceeds 100% due to multiple response.

ONLY 23% REPORT HAVING RISK COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS ... OR DO THEY?

Those that are described sound more like crisis response plans than risk communications -- as the topics listed as "risk" at test. It appears the semantics of "risk" is

not universally understood: the question intended to discover whether programs are in place to **help publics gain a balanced understanding of risk** in various products or activities, such as Chemical Manufacturers Assn's "Responsible Care" program (pr 6/10).

Detailing the structure of their risk communication efforts, respondents refer to "shelf documents, ready to go" and "workbooks shared with key managers". Many utilize "teams" to create and respond to "crisis". One practitioner -- obviously aware of the **difference** -- cites "separate plans for crisis 'operational' and 'risk' hazardous materials inspection control -- but combined crisis communication plan."

Risk programs whose description sounds legitimate cluster, not unexpectedly, around **environmental & safety** topics.

SUCCESSION PLANNING IS WHY NEW DIRECTIONS ARE CRITICAL; ARE WE GROWING THEM RIGHT? CEOs DON'T THINK SO, BURSON FINDS

"The specific experience I want to relate has to do with filling the corporation's senior public relations position -- a vacancy that may have been created by retirement, resignation or otherwise.

"Most frequently, but not always, I have assumed succession would be "orderly" (a promotion from within) in the event of a vacancy at the top.

"That has added to my suprise when Mr. CEO's opening gambit has been: 'I need your help finding a replacement for George (the senior public relations officer about to retire or just resigned).'

In suggesting the long-standing #2 in the department (Charlie in this case), Harold Burson told the San Francisco Academy this has been the most common response:

TABLE 8: Most Respondents Feel CEOs Understand & Appreciate PR's Role in Organizations Today

Low	2%	
2	5	18% low
3	11	
4	19	19% medium
5	33	
6	16	58% high
High	9	
No Response	4	

"You don't understand what I have in mind -- or what's been bothering me about our public relations for a long time. Now I have an opportunity to fix it. Yes, I like Charlie a lot ... he's great when it comes to getting the news out. He works hard and gets along with people. But I don't really see him as being in the main management stream of this business. **I see him as more of a service unit, rather than as contributor to or a shaper of policy...** I think public relations is so important it ought to be represented on our Management Committee... You know those guys on the Management Committee. Can you see them accepting Charlie as an equal?"

SOME DATA TO SUGGEST WHY PRACTICE IS CONSERVATIVE IN ADOPTING NEW DIRECTIONS

etc? Perhaps the profile of practitioners responding suggests answers:

How explain that old methodologies are preferred by many, that issues are apt to be monitored by reading, that in a time of rank overcommunication publications are proliferating & often growing larger, that risk communication is misinterpreted etc

- 1) **38% worked as journalists** before entering pr, plus 4% in advertising -- 1-way communication bastions;
- 2) **education prepared them for 1-way modes:** 31% of bachelor degrees are in journalism & 12% in communication (+13% in English); 22% of masters degrees are in journalism + 20% in communications;
- 3) 60% are 40 or older, 25% over 50;
- 4) 47% have been in the field 15 years or longer, 39% over 20 years.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY PROGRAMS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT = SOLUTION?

numerous local & industry pr organizations. The *raison d'etre* of most is to help members develop professionally, yet there's apparently a disconnect somewhere. Systems for accreditation, maintenance of same, gathering senior practitioners into groups (Fellows etc), seminars, home study & similar clearly **have the potential** to help pros avoid being the Charlie in Harold Burson's example.

Respondents hold an average of 1.4 memberships in major professional societies -- plus

TABLE 9: PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS

PRSA	73%
IABC	18
CPRS	14
CASE	8
NSPRA	5
ASHCMPR	4
NIRI	4
IPRA	3
WICI	3
NAGC	1
SPJ	1

... plus 468 respondents named at least one or more local/regional or other organization that they belong to.

Note: Total exceeds 100% due to multiple response.

Part 2 will highlight data about individual practitioners & their organizational positions, including reporting relationship, earnings, budget, trends in title & name of department & similar. Where available, Annual Survey data will be compared to other current studies by pr societies or researchers. Response & validity tables will also be included.

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For additional detail or verbatims on any question in the Annual Survey, call or fax your requests.