



Research in brief

Views of PRISA-members on South African public relations: An exploration[☆]

Ben-Piet Venter

Human & Social Sciences, North-West University (Mafikeng Campus), North West Province, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 November 2009

Received in revised form 15 March 2010

Accepted 27 April 2010

Keywords:

Public relations

Marketing

Strategic management

Public relations education

Name change of public relations

Reputation of public relations

ABSTRACT

An exploratory study conducted in South Africa shows that members of the Public Relations Institute for Southern Africa (PRISA) experience the same frustration with the role of PR in the organisation, the bad name of PR, and its educational curriculum that are experienced in other countries. The article asks whether changing the name of PR to something else is sufficient to solve these problems, and argues that more than a cosmetic name change is required. PR should re-examine its role in the organisation, it should re-assert itself as a strategic partner to other business functions, and it should revisit its educational offering.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Public relations is a discipline under threat if current research has it right. Several books and articles identify a number of threats to the discipline and the profession:

Public relations is typically confused with marketing, and is trying to free itself from such confusion, as is testified by Rensburg and Cant (2003), Skinner, Von Essen, and Mersham (2004), and Newsom, Turck, and Kruckeberg (2004). This confusion mirrors a wider misunderstanding about the role of public relations in the organisation (Venter, 2004).

Public relations has developed an unsavoury reputation, and practitioners are frequently referred to as “spin doctors”. This unsavoury reputation is alluded to by public relations authors such as Steyn and Puth (2000). De Bussy and Wolf (2009) poignantly refer to public relations as “the profession that dare not speak its name” (p. 380).

People who practice public relations have in many cases received no or little relevant education. Newsom et al. (2004) point out that public relations functions are carried out by such diverse individuals as lawyers, media personnel or management-trained executives. That practitioners in public relations have qualifications other than public relations (from disciplines as diverse as finance, microbiology and even zoology) is also reported by Yeo and Sriramesh (2009).

The conclusion thus seems to be that public relations is a discipline that is confused, unsavoury, and ill-trained. This observation in itself is not new, since research persistently point to one or all three of these conclusions. It is surprising that few researchers try to find answers to these questions. In spite of the fact that authors such as De Bussy and Wolf (2009) and Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) bemoan a lack of theoretical cohesion in public relations, little seems to be done to help public relations consolidate its theoretical framework.

VanSlyke Turk (2006) makes the compelling argument that public relations education is in need of an overhaul and identifies an escalating need for public relations education. However, it seems as if in South Africa that such a call to action

[☆] Note: This article is based in part on research completed for the author's doctoral thesis.

E-mail address: ben-piet@hotmail.com.

(sic!) is as yet unheeded. A study about the role perceptions of public relations practitioners by Venter (2004) found that public relations practitioners are confused about their role in organisations, and are of the opinion that they lack knowledge and experience in areas such as strategy, business management, marketing, and (given divergent educational backgrounds) public relations itself. These divergent backgrounds are also found in Europe, where Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler, and Meckel (2009) reported on respondents with degrees in public relations, humanities, social sciences, media and communication studies, law, and business studies.

The implications are that public relations practitioners (at least in South Africa) receive a fragmented education that does not adequately prepare them for the challenges of the business world, leaving them in many cases at the mercy of managers (who themselves did not receive “proper” instruction in the role of public relations in the organisation), and who perceive this function to be a support to marketing where it obtains free publicity for new products/services or as a communication tool to be used to manipulate public opinion in such a manner as to create a more positive impression of the organisation.

De Bussy and Wolf (2009) do, however, point to some glimmer of hope when they report that, in Australia, younger public relations practitioners tend to enter the profession with a relevant qualification. However, this experience is not replicated in Singapore, where only five out of thirty-seven interviewees hold a bachelor’s degree related to communication (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

What is the case in South Africa?

1. Methodology

An exploratory study was conducted in 2008, and in spite of a low response rate it serves its purpose of shedding more light on the practice of public relations in South Africa on the one hand, while on the other it opens up new veins for future exploration.

The data for the survey was collected using an online instrument called SurveyMonkey during the period of April and May 2008. Members of the sample population were reminded on three different occasions to complete the online questionnaire. The sampling frame was the membership list of the Public Relations Institute for Southern Africa (PRISA). A total of 101 respondents completed the survey, representing a response rate of just more than 8%. This relatively low response rate, while within acceptable margins for mail surveys, will have its obvious impact on generalising, and further studies with higher response rates will be needed to further validate the data. It is suggested that a different research instrument (such as face-to-face interviews) also be used in such future studies. Respondents are all interested in public relations by virtue of being paid members of a professional organisation; they have shared experience in public relations (on average 12 years); and are mostly highly educated. A total of 60% of respondents hold degrees or post-graduate qualifications, while a further 28% of respondents hold a college or technikon diploma.

2. Findings and discussion

2.1. Role in the organisation

Regarding the role of public relations as functional department working in harmony with other departments, respondents felt, in the main, that they have good relationships with other line managers, and that they have a fairly good understanding of how other departments function. But this somewhat optimistic view is to an extent contradicted by respondents when they agree that other line managers do not understand the function of public relations, and when they strongly agree that public relations practitioners need more training in business functions.

If it were true that good relationships exist between public relations practitioners and functional managers, it may be concluded that those functional (line) managers may be more appreciative of the value that public relations adds to the organisation, since good relationships imply good exchange of information. Is it possible that public relations practitioners themselves are not capable of communicating their value to the organisation? Responses showed a clear dichotomy in the understanding of the role of public relations in the organisation. Respondents seem confused about whether public relations is a line function, or whether it is a staff function. This dichotomy is echoed by Rensburg and Cant (2003) who describe it as a staff function, and Skinner et al. (2004) who describe it as a line function.

The same kind of deductive reasoning could be followed regarding the understanding of public relations practitioners. If it were true that they understand how other business departments function, is it not by extension true that they will not express a strong desire to receive training in business-related fields of study? Respondents did, however, express such a desire, supporting the point that public relations practitioners in the sample are not all convinced that they are well-prepared to interact on equal footing with other business functions.

2.2. Reputation of public relations

Readers may be forgiven for wondering why a topic that has been extensively covered would enjoy renewed interest from a research perspective. They are reassured that this section does not want to, once more, “prove” that public relations has a bad reputation, although Bowen (2009) argues that the field of public relations is itself in need of public relations. This section

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/139683>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/139683>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)