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Title: The Year Ahead in Public Relations: A Preview of What's in Store for 2005

Public Relations Tactics

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Summary: Ready or not, 2005 has arrived. What will the year hold for PR professionals? To find out, Tactics spoke with leaders of PRSA's Professional Interest Sections, who shared their thoughts on the most pressing issues, challenges and opportunities facing their areas of public relations. Here's a look at what's ahead.

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Here's a look at what's ahead:

Association/Nonprofit

In the association and nonprofit worlds, it continues to be an environment of "doing more with less," says Brigid O'Connor, strategist for At Ease LLC in Denver, and chair of PRSA's Association/Nonprofit Professional Interest Section.

The upside? With PR pros routinely expected to handle a wide range of communications, an association or nonprofit can be a great place to gain a well-rounded experience in public relations, even early in your career, O'Connor says. What's more, PR pros in this sector often enjoy a seat at the senior leadership table.

"The structure is often more flat in terms of hierarchy, and communications are central to what makes that association or nonprofit exist," she explains. "It's easier to have a seat at the table."

One of the biggest challenges for association and nonprofit PR practitioners is to cut through the clutter. Many associations position themselves as a sieve for delivering the most important information to members. They also need to communicate this information and the association's message through an increasingly noisy channel.

"The challenge is to be sure your audience can hear what you're saying to them," O'Connor says. "It's an ongoing battle."

Corporate

The challenge for corporate PR practitioners in 2005 is hardly a new one: proving the value of public relations to top management.

While the economy has gradually picked up, corporations are still cutting back on costs, and communications is still vulnerable to that, says Scott Mall, president of Mall Strategic Communications in Alpharetta, Ga., and chair of PRSA's Corporate Professional Interest Section.

"Most companies view communications as a cost," Mall explains. "We need to turn that around and show the value it brings to the organization and how we support the organization's goals and objectives."

That means PR professionals need to constantly look at ways to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns — far beyond the number of media clips. Measurement tools are much more sophisticated than they used to be, but there's room for growth, and PR practitioners need to more fully embrace them, he says. Another familiar challenge for 2005 is rebuilding trust in corporate America. "The corporate scandals don't seem to be going away," Mall says. "Every time [a scandal] happens, it besmirches everyone."

On the job front, look for more corporate PR pros to seek — and find — new employers as more jobs are created. "There's a lot of pent-up demand to further careers," he says. "This could be the year it actually gets to happen."

Counselors Academy

Many PR agencies are focused only on media relations and publicity — and that needs to change, says Deborah Radman, APR, Fellow PRSA.

“There has to be less emphasis on media relations,” says Radman, managing director of Stanton Communications in New York and chair of PRSA’s Counselors Academy. “We can’t survive as an industry if that’s all we do. There has to be a focus on the entire marketing mix to get a greater share of the budget.”

Media coverage isn’t always the best way for clients to build their reputations and reach their intended audiences, she explains, adding that there’s often fierce competition for companies to tell their stories. Instead, PR pros need to focus on the best way to build their clients’ reputations and support their business goals. This may include more grassroots, one-to-one and one-to-few communication approaches.

Another issue is hiring. The economy has improved, and many agencies, especially midsized ones, have job openings. But finding the right people to fill those positions is a challenge, Radman says. Middle managers are in the most demand, as are recent college graduates with solid writing skills.

“Finding good people who can write is a very difficult task right now,” she adds. “If you can’t write well, then you can’t communicate well.”

Educators Academy

The biggest issue facing PR educators isn’t a lack of students, but a lack of teachers.

“We’re not turning out many educators, and we’re going to have to find some way to deal with that,” says Bob “Pritch” Pritchard, APR, Fellow PRSA, chair of PRSA’s Educators Academy.

The problem? Many full-time faculty positions require a doctorate degree, an uncommon possession for most PR professionals. In addition, pay doesn’t match that of the private sector.

To fill positions, many schools have begun creating a third track for full-time faculty members from the professional ranks, says Pritchard, a retired U.S. Navy captain and assistant professor in the Department of Journalism’s PR Sequence at Ball State University. This third track emphasizes professional service in public relations as opposed to research, and usually requires a master’s degree, not a doctorate.

It’s also important for educators and professionals to forge closer relationships and set aside misperceptions, he adds. A recent PRSA-sponsored survey found that many PR educators underestimate how much practitioners value their work, and many practitioners worry they are not doing enough to support education.

Meanwhile, the quality of PR education is stronger than ever, Pritchard says, and he encourages other professionals to make the leap into teaching. “I love it. I can’t imagine doing anything else,” he says.

Employee Communications

What’s the best way to engage employees? How do you get them to not only understand the company’s business strategy, but to also buy into that strategy and feel good about it?

Answering those questions is the overriding challenge for today’s employee communicators, says Christina J. Moore, APR, director of global employee communications for Freescale Semiconductor (formerly Motorola) in Austin, Texas, and chair of PRSA’s Employee Communications Professional Interest Section.

“It’s not just about publishing articles,” Moore says. “You have to understand how you get an organization to change and to embrace change.”

Some large companies are latching onto the idea of embedded reporters — placing employee communications specialists within each individual business unit. While companies are continuing to integrate new technologies, such as blogging, into employee communications, it’s important to balance that with face-to-face approaches, she adds.

Another major issue is transparency and trust. For public companies, that means employee communicators need to be familiar with Sarbanes-Oxley and other disclosure regulations. And it sometimes means telling the bad news along with the good.

“We’re not here just to wear the rose-colored glasses,” Moore says. “We’re here to give a reality check: the good, the bad, the ugly. It’s all part of being more open about what’s going on.”

Environmental Public Relations

Environmental public relations is a growing field, but it's still a relatively new one, says Meredith Rouse Davis, senior manager of environmental communications for Lockheed Martin in Bethesda, Md., and 2004 chair of PRSA's Environmental Professional Interest Section.

"There are very few previously established prototypes or guidelines," Rouse Davis explains. "We're watched and scrutinized quite a bit from all levels and areas."

While that's a challenge, it's also an employment opportunity. With the environment gaining more attention, there's a greater need for environmental communicators. More jobs are available on the nonprofit and advocacy side, but there's also a need for more corporations to create environmental PR positions, she says.

A major issue these practitioners are confronting is the explosion of available information on the Internet. You constantly need to make sure your organization's side of an environmental story comes up in Web search results, Rouse Davis says. Otherwise, your publics' minds may be made up before you even talk to them.

And with environmental issues evoking a lot of emotion, PR practitioners need to keep a balanced perspective.

"We have to balance the personal needs of our publics, but we need to make sure that the business needs are addressed too," she says.

Financial Communications

Do your investors and employees trust you? That's the question that much of corporate America is grappling with, and financial communicators are at the center of the struggle.

Their task: Understand the complex rules of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which dictates how companies must disclose information, and figure out how to build trust with investors and employees in the wake of three years of corporate financial scandals.

"It's going to continue to be the top issue, this whole discussion about trust and what does trust mean and how do you communicate that to investors and employees," says Laurel O'Brien, APR, vice president of public relations for Nuveen Investments in Radnor, Pa., and chair of PRSA's Financial Communications Professional Interest Section.

It all translates into a strong employment picture for PR pros who specialize in financial communications, O'Brien says. With the final phases of Sarbanes-Oxley set to be implemented this year, public companies in particular have a need for communicators who are up to speed on the latest regulations.

Financial communicators have also found themselves working more closely with PR practitioners, and that trend will continue in 2005. "With audiences overlapping more, IR and PR have to be in sync," she explains. "In some cases, the departments are merging; in others there's just greater communication between the two."

Food and Beverage

Keeping up with consumers' fickle food and beverage preferences can be a dizzying task for PR pros, says Doc Lawrence, CEO and owner of Lehmann Desloge Media Inc. in Atlanta and chair of PRSA's Food and Beverage Professional Interest Section.

Taste trends are constantly changing, and companies that don't keep pace can fall behind quickly. "People are more food savvy now," Lawrence says. "There are more foreign visitors, and more people living here from other countries. It's a volatile market, but it's fun and challenging too."

In addition to an explosion of ethnic foods, nutrition and health have remained hot topics in the media. Low-carb options have proliferated on grocery shelves and on restaurant menus. And the problem of obesity is increasingly front-page news.

Indeed, obesity will be an ongoing issue throughout the industry as consumer awareness rises. "How do you [boost the sales of] a client who sells something fattening?" he says. "You can't just change the label. It's a challenge."

Health Care

"The health care industry has a reputation in the United States similar to [that of] the tobacco, firearms and oil

industries,” says Michael Roth, executive director, communications for Novartis Corporation in New York and chair of PRSA’s Health Academy. “Do we belong there? Not by a long shot.”

Rebuilding that reputation is job No. 1 this year for health care PR professionals. While people are understandably concerned about such issues as rising medical costs, Roth says there hasn’t been enough focus on the positive news, such as new research and treatments.

“In the past, we, as health care PR practitioners, have not done a good enough job communicating for the entire industry,” he explains. “We would all benefit a great deal if … we become stronger advocates for the health care industry.”

Certainly, there will be no shortage of issues in the news in 2005. Canadian drug reimportation, stem cell research and a proposed federal clinical trial database are just a few of the ongoing controversial items. In addition, the Medicare revisions passed in 2003 are set to take effect in 2006.

As a result, health care communications jobs are plentiful, although many companies and agencies are being more selective, Roth says.

“There is a greater need for communications professionals with experience across the stakeholder chain,” he says. “If you have dynamic experience and solid judgment, the opportunities are endless.”

Higher Education

For as long as Gene Sands, APR, can remember, PR pros in higher education have been striving to get a seat at the leadership table. And all that work has started to pay off.

“We’re becoming more successful at becoming direct reports to the senior leader, either the president or the chancellor,” says Sands, executive director of university relations at Louisiana State University and chair of PRSA’s Counselors to Higher Education Professional Interest Section.

With more university presidents recognizing the value of public relations, there are jobs available, but it’s also more competitive. “Institutions are becoming more precise about the kinds of people they hire,” Sands says.

Many are looking for practitioners who have worked in the corporate world, particularly in the area of branding. Crisis communications experience is also critical.

Despite the strides public relations has made, there’s still work to be done. PR pros in higher education need to more effectively explain what they do, and measure their results, he says. In addition, the PR plan needs to be closely aligned with the university’s strategic plan.

With state budget cuts and higher tuition costs, universities are also under increased public scrutiny. “They want to know what you’re doing and why you’re spending the dollars,” Sands says. “You need to be very accountable.”

Independent Practitioners Alliance

Harry Bosk, APR, never calls himself a freelancer. And he would advise other independent PR pros to avoid the term too.

“It’s important for independent practitioners to view themselves as small businesses practicing in the area of public relations,” says Bosk, president of Bosk Communications LLC in Baltimore and chair of PRSA’s Independent Practitioners Alliance. “That will raise the level of professional esteem we have with clients.”

How independents refer to themselves isn’t the only area that’s changing. Clients are increasingly reluctant to pay straight retainers, preferring more fixed budget costs. In turn, independents are experimenting with tiered fee structures that vary according to whether client work is strategic or tactical, Bosk says.

Independents are forming more alliances, too. Partnering with fellow independents who offer complementary services can help them win more lucrative contracts, he says. And practitioners with specific expertise are aligning with PR agencies, which view them as an extra member of the team, not a competitor.

More independents are also offering blogging expertise to clients or starting their own blogs. Meanwhile, with the number of solo practitioners continuing to grow, Bosk believes a natural shakeout is inevitable. However, there’s still opportunity.

“There are a lot of midsized businesses that don’t understand that public relations is affordable,” he says. “The

independent practitioner is the perfect professional for that niche.”

International Public Relations

“The world has really become a global village,” says Donn Tilson, Ph.D., associate professor of public relations at the University of Miami’s School of Communications and chair of PRSA’s International Professional Interest Section.

The result: More PR pros are under pressure to learn about international target audiences, media and cultures. They’re also increasingly dealing with a general mistrust of multinational corporations and growing anti-American sentiment, raising questions of whether you should promote or downplay a product’s American ties. Even smaller companies that do business abroad have found themselves in the midst of broader political debates about overseas job outsourcing and child labor, Tilson says.

All this translates into plenty of opportunity for PR practitioners with experience in international markets, especially if they’re multilingual. Two major growth areas are China and Eastern Europe.

U.S. PR pros are also increasingly partnering with practitioners in other countries, and more university PR programs are offering international exchanges to prepare students for global responsibilities. Indeed, PR pros are in a unique position to use their communication skills to help bridge divides between nations and cultures, he adds.

“We need to spotlight partnerships that bring people together,” Tilson says. “We’re trying to search for some solutions.”

Military and Public Safety

With continued military action in Iraq and Afghanistan and a continuing war against terrorism, it’s no surprise that there are plenty of PR jobs in the military and public safety arena.

“There’s a tremendous amount of growth in the field,” says Joe Trahan, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, chair of PRSA’s Military and Public Safety Professional Interest Section. “The growth is pretty much in every area — internal communications, community relations, media relations.”

One of the biggest centers for these job opportunities is the Department of Homeland Security, adds Trahan, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant and now president, CEO and international media trainer with Trahan & Associates in Covington, La. There’s also a big demand for public affairs professionals in the military, including the National Guard and U.S. Army Reserves.

Crisis communications is the top priority for public affairs pros in the military and public safety arena, which includes police and fire departments and other emergency organizations. “The challenge continues to be to ensure that people understand what to do in a crisis and to communicate that message,” he says.

Technologies — such as the Internet, Blackberry devices and satellite cell phones — can help communicate messages, but there’s a downside: Those same technologies can be used to quickly spread inaccurate information too.

“Rumors have more power than truth,” Trahan says. “It’s a big challenge for everybody.”

Multicultural Communications

Want to reach multicultural populations? The first step is to get out of the office.

“Most effective marketing in multicultural communications is face-to-face,” says Tony Timmons, senior communications liaison for Cox Communications in Las Vegas and chair of PRSA’s Multicultural Communications Professional Interest Section. That often means sponsoring community events, such as a Cinco de Mayo celebration, and being actively involved in schools, job fairs and other local endeavors.

“You have to constantly be in the community and find ways to better the community,” Timmons explains. “If they only see you one or two times a year, they’ll know you’re just trying to sell them something.”

This kind of grassroots community relations effort requires PR professionals to work more closely with marketing to create an integrated campaign and message. This can be a challenge, but also an opportunity for public relations to demonstrate its ability to drive sales and impact the bottom line.

Learning your audience’s native language is another key, he says. A second language will also make you more

marketable to potential employers, who are increasingly seeing the value of multicultural communications.

“Multicultural communications is becoming a specialty,” Timmons says. “It’s an early field, but I see it exploding in the next year.”

Public Affairs and Government

Attention public affairs practitioners: Get ready for a flurry of public policy initiatives in the next two years.

President Bush will want to push forward his legislative agenda in the first half of his term — before he is viewed as a lame duck, says Rick Callender, local and regional government affairs manager for the Santa Clara Valley Water District in San Jose, Calif., and 2004 treasurer for PRSA’s Public Affairs and Government Professional Interest Section.

“That effect will ripple out to the state and local arenas,” Callender says. “For PR professionals it means a lot more involvement in public policy.”

An important part of that involvement is building stakeholder support, often from the earliest planning stages of a project. Local stakeholders, such as religious groups, are becoming increasingly influential in forming public policy, he says.

For those in government affairs, the watchword for 2005 is transparency. As budgets tighten, there’s heightened scrutiny — and controversy — over how dollars are spent.

The upshot? Expect government agencies to bring more public relations functions in-house. “The internal opportunities will grow,” Callender says. “There’s increasing pressure to no longer contract out these functions.”

Strategic Social Responsibility

“There has been a collapse of the public trust in corporations, and the good corporations have taken a hit along with the bad ones,” says Mary Pieschek, president of Pieschek Public Relations Inc. in Green Bay, Wis., and chair of PRSA’s Strategic Social Responsibility Professional Interest Section.

To rebuild that image, many corporations are looking to show social responsibility or good corporate citizenship. The biggest area of growth is social responsibility reports, which measure an organization’s social and environmental impact. The goal is to show social responsibility, and, in turn, build shareholder confidence, create customer loyalty and attract and retain employees.

Most companies that have issued social responsibility reports have been large. However, small and midsized companies — as well as nonprofits and foundations — can also benefit from implementing and publicizing good citizenship practices, she says. Social reports aren’t the only vehicle to do so either. More companies are turning to cause-related marketing and partnering with a cause that fits with their brand identities.

PR pros play a central role in an organization’s social responsibility efforts. One of the biggest challenges is communicating a company’s not-so-stellar practices. Whitewashing a bad practice isn’t the solution, but you need to be careful.

“You leave yourself open to your detractors,” Pieschek says. “When disclosing some of the things you do, you have to be cautious if you have some problems.”

Technology

There’s growth again in the technology sector, but it’s no repeat of the dot-com days, says Heather Carle, director of communications for Afiliias, an Internet domain registry in Horsham, Pa., and chair of PRSA’s Technology Professional Interest Section.

“From the agency side, there’s still growth, but the growth is smaller in scale than it was a few years ago,” Carle explains. “You’re competing for a smaller piece of the pie.”

Technology publications continue to consolidate or disappear, resulting in more competition for media coverage. In the wake of corporate scandals, the press is also more skeptical of technology companies and their new products.

One area that’s generating a lot of interest is technology-related security and defense. “A lot of defense contractors are really technology companies,” she says. “There are also a lot of ways that technology companies can partner with local first responder groups or the military.”

Meanwhile, new technologies are impacting PR professionals in all industries. Case in point: PR pros need to find ways to integrate blogging into such areas as consumer marketing, employee communications and crisis communications.

“The news cycle is changing,” Carle says. “Who your intended audience is going to for opinions is changing. ... We need to embrace technologies and see how we can benefit from them.”

Travel and Tourism

There's plenty of reason to believe the new year will be a happy one for the travel and tourism industry.

The Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) predicts that spending by domestic and international visitors in the United States will climb 5.3 percent in 2005. More than two-thirds of respondents to a recent TIA member survey said business is back to pre-Sept. 11, 2001, levels, with 82 percent expecting business to increase in 2005.

That optimism is starting to show up in PR budgets. “You’re hearing about people doing press trips and events that cost a little bit more money,” says Mindy Bianca, PR coordinator for the Maryland Office of Tourism Development in Baltimore and chair of PRSA’s Travel and Tourism Professional Interest Section.

One trend from recent years that's still going strong is partnering with complementary destinations, even competitors. PR pros must also be increasingly Internet-savvy and keep pace with new travel trends, such as multigenerational travel and a desire for learning experiences.

A silver lining from the industry’s post-Sept. 11 troubles was that PR practitioners got a chance to prove their effectiveness, Bianca explains. The challenge now is to build on that reputation.

“It’s given us a chance to show our creativity and that we’re not just a fluff act,” she says. “We’re gearing up for a phenomenal year.”

Katie Sweeney is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

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Introducing: the Entertainment and Sports Professional Interest Section

PRSA recently announced the formation of the Entertainment and Sports Professional Interest Section.

Members of the Entertainment and Sports Professional Interest Section share a unique consumer and audience outcome — fun. PR professionals whose work involves entertaining audiences (whether it’s one person or millions at a time) will want to join this Section. Members of the 19th Professional Interest Section include communication professionals in amateur, collegiate and professional sports, those in film, television, radio, music, home entertainment, sports and entertainment publications, as well as those who service these industries.

Programs and services will target specific member interests, including the latest research findings, trends, communication techniques and keeping up with changing technologies. Benefits will also include access to an e-group and online membership directory, networking, notification of cross-promotional opportunities, teleseminars, professional development at the PRSA International Conference and more.

For information on the new Section, please contact James Abel at james.abel@prsa.org.